Silencio

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by Spacebattles Stories (DragoLord19D)

Summary

An AU - Taylor Hebert lost more than just some dignity when she was shoved in the locker. Infections hospitalised her and destroyed her vocal chords. In desperate need for people to pay attention, her powers developed rather differently. Mostly only T, but erring on the side of caution due to language and such. Posted w/permission from writer, DeviantD.
Danny Hebert stared at his daughter, tears running down his face as she scribbled on the note pad. His rage mostly drowned out by his sorrow. It was bad enough that she had been trapped in her school locker for most of a day, but for her to be so permanently scarred was more than he could handle.

-Its okay Dad. I'll survive.-

Her beautiful voice, permanently gone. Some kind of infection from the biohazard she had been shoved into had eaten away her vocal cords.

"Taylor, I'll be here for you. We'll get through this some way or another."

-Thanks-

Madison had a panic attack. She had gone along with all the bullying to stay in the good graces of Emma and Sophia. But she had to admit she enjoyed some of it. It made her feel powerful. Until the locker.

She had thought the idea of trapping Hebert in the locker for a few minutes would be hilarious. She did not plan on the tampons, but she went along with it. 'Pussying out' as Sophia would have called it would have done no good. They would go ahead without her and she didn't want to lose her 'friends'. She didn't know Taylor would be stuck in there, in that dark filthy space, for hours.

She hadn't really felt guilty for the pranks before, but catching a glimpse of the crazed filthy girl, obviously broken had cracked through the barrier of casual cruelty she had hid behind for over a year. Then she found out what happen to Taylor after they dragged her kicking and screaming out of the pungent mess. Three weeks in the hospital was too far. The barrier was strong though, and so it just barely held together.

Taylor came back to school, mute because of what they did. The barrier crumbled.

Hannah looked at the report in front of her. She had oscillated between horrified shock and furious anger several times since she had started reading it. Shadow Stalker had finally gone off the deep end. She looked up at the director and started to speak when she was cut off.

"I know what you are going to say, but this will remain quiet. The PR disaster this news would bring is something we can't afford." Emily Piggot had a scowl on her face, she didn't like this anymore than Miss Militia, but it had to be done. "Sophia will get all that is coming to her, but you are not to mention anything about this to the Hebert family."

"But its our failure. We owe it to the girl to make up for it somehow."

"No, Winslow holds responsibility in this case. They failed to notify us of any of the issues that had been reported to them. I suppose in some sort of effort to retain a Ward on site."

"Can we get Panacea to heal her up at least?"

"She's still in Canberra, patching up survivors and injured capes. That remains a priority. I'll put in a
request that she does this as soon as she gets back though."

"Very well." Miss Milita sighed, "I can't say that I'm happy though."

"Either am I, but at least she didn't kill someone."

"She might nearly have." Mumbled Hannah as she left the Director's office.

Emily typed out the request to New Wave for Panacea's assistance, stating it as a fairly high urgency when she returned. The e-mail sent, the matter was considered dealt with by Director Piggot.

A seemingly random software glitch sent the request into a junk mail box, the screening software no recognising the authority codes from the PRT office. And so, the e-mail languished out of sight for a week before it was automatically deleted.

The first few days back at school had been like a return to hell. Communication was awkward as I tried to write out responses quick enough. The teachers barely even tried. Sophia and Emma had picked up where they left off with their little pranks. Things went missing, and other subtle evils were performed. They were sneaky bitches like that.

I had lost the ability to speak, and they were still allowed to continue with this. My earlier complaints had been ignored, and once again the administration did nothing. I found myself getting angry though, rather than despondent. I had gained powers sometime during my ordeal, and it angered me that I couldn't use them on my bullies. I was angry at the school for letting this go on, I was angry at them for their pointless abuse, I was angry at myself for reigning in my vengeance, but mostly I was angry at the general system that would make me the villain if I lashed out at my tormentors.

And so, I seethed, keeping a calm, neutral expression on my face the entire time. Maybe if I looked calm, I could make myself believe I was calm.

I was surprised to find that Sophia hadn't come to school in a few days. No one said anything to me, but being a social nobody, I managed to overhead things about her transferring as I was ignored by the popular kids. Well thank God for small fucking mercies. It was a relief, and even Emma backed off of on her abuse, but I hadn't thought much more about it till I had computer class. Assignment finished I had trawled Parahumans Online, doing a bit more research, trying to figure out what sort of things my strange telekinesis could do.

That's when I stumbled across a news article from a few days back. Shadow Stalker had been transferred to another branch of the Wards. Huh. I hadn't heard about that and wasn't really familiar with the cape other than the name. I was prepared to write it off as unimportant till I scrolled down and got a picture. In it was Shadow Stalker, next to the rest of the Wards. I hadn't realised she was so short...

My mind made some connections but they weren't ready to be believed. I started tracking down more on Shadow Stalker, every picture I could get. A close up showed Her eyes. A snippet of camera phone footage showed a bit of dark skin through a torn costume. Every where was Her confident, intimidating posture.

A placid smile was on my face as inside, my faith in the PRT slowly shrivelled and died.
I hadn't told my Dad about my powers. While I knew he loved me, he couldn't really do anything to help me and frankly, with what I had learned about Sophia disappearing, I had little reason to join the Wards.

Still, I felt I had to do something, make the city a little better, balance out the shitty hand that had been dealt to me. As such, I found myself in the Docks, late on a Sunday night. My costume was something I had put together on a whim, and on the cheap, but still it would do its job of concealing my identity and that was enough for tonight.

I could hear movement up ahead as a congregation of figures crowded around a warehouse door, barely lit by the street lights further away and a sliver of moonlight. The little illumination available pick out the greens and red of the Azn Bad Boys, one of the more powerful gangs in the city, despite their tragic name. At the centre of the pack stood a taller man, bare chest, with an ornate steel mask covering his face. Lung was famous enough to pick out with just those details.

I was about to turn away, figuring this was too much of a fight for my first night out, but I heard something that turned my blood cold.

"...the children, just shoot. Doesn’t matter your aim, just shoot. You see one lying on the ground? Shoot the little bitch twice more to be sure. We give them no chances to be clever or lucky, understand?"

Well, that changed things. I couldn't just let that happen. Hell I'd likely die a horrible ignoble death, but I wouldn't let him kill some kids. With a surprising amount of resolve I marched towards my likely doom.

I had only got a dozen yards from them before Lung twisted his head my way.

"What the fuck do you want?" he snarled through the grill like opening of his mask.

I just smiled and waved at him. It wasn't like I could attempt witty one liners with him. Even if I could talk, I probably would have screwed it up anyway. Instead, I turned away from him and his gang and started struggling to move away from them. I heard shouts of surprise, most of the gang thrown flying through the air, barely visible in my peripheral vision. Lung however was barely knocked down, and he seemed to be growing in size already.

I stopped abruptly and turned back to him and his efforts to get back up were made easier. He stared at me, a mix of anger and confusion showing in his body language.

"What the fuck?" he asked in his slightly muffled, broken English.

As if to answer I leaned forward and grabbed something that wasn't there, first with one hand, then the other. More confusion evident as he tilted his head slightly, while approaching. It was then that I pulled back quickly and rotated to the right.

A surprised yelp sounded out as Lung flew through the air then abruptly swerved into the side of the warehouse, grinding against the brickwork and giving him a nasty rash before bouncing off again and flying past me and impacting the building behind me with a loud crunch.

I tilted my head, waiting for him to get back up. I jumped a little when his barely moving form was pounced on by a trio of gigantic beasts, some kind of horrify cross between hounds, rhinos and
something out of a John Carpenter movie. It kind of looked like there was someone riding one of them.

"Impressive work there. Really got to thank you for saving us the trouble."

I flinched and turned to find three people standing behind me. The one in the lead, who I assumed was the one who addressed me was wearing what was effectively a motorcycle outfit, with a stylised skull visor. He reached his hand out, but I was wary about shaking with someone who had surprised me so effectively. Instead I just tilted my head a bit with and lifted an eyebrow.

I wasn't sure if he was disappointed but he continued talking in his slightly echoing voice, "We head Lung was coming after us and were justifiably freaked, but figured we'd try to take some advantage by not being where he thought and surprise him."

"We scared off Oni Lee and some other flunkies, but didn't see Lung anywhere so we were wondering what happened. Looks like you happened." He chuckled, an oddly friendly sounding chuckle. He looked over at where the creatures had stopped clawing their new rag doll.

"That was surprisingly easy, what the fuck did you do to him?"

"Some kinda telekinesis flung him into that building before he could get up to full steam." The blond girl in the black and purple bodysuit said, a grin underneath her domino mask. "He got knocked unconscious when he hit the wall head first."

The man in black turned back to me. "Introduction, I'm Grue, that's Tattletale, the girl with the dogs." He pointed at the approaching rider with the cheap dog mask, flanked by her other two 'dogs', "Is Bitch, and the ren fair reject is Regent"

"Fuck you Grue", the third of the trio said, clearly amused despite his words. He did in fact look like a ren fair reject, either that or some drama student, with his Venetian looking mask and puffy shirt. "We're the Undersiders."

Grue looked at me for a few moments, probably waiting for me to say something, "Hey, you okay? You Hurt?" I would have thought the costume would tip him off.

"The reason she hasn't introduced herself isn't because she's hurt," Tattletale said from the side, leaning up against a broken street light. "She can't talk. She's also kind of shy."

Regent face palms, a glove rubbing against the mask. "Uh Duh, Mime."

I nod my head slightly, before pulling out a note pad and pen.

-You can call me Marceau-

Tattletale looked at it, looked back at me in my stark grease paint covered face, my striped shirt and beret and then cracked up laughing. The grin spread in a more mirthful way then before. Her grin then faded as a loud rumbling noise was approaching.

"I like your style, and wouldn't want you taken in by the PRT. Wanna come back to ours?"

I considered what that implied, these were likely villains, with all that entailed. But they seemed friendly and grateful. That and I couldn't help but believe the rumours about Sophia, it just made too much sense. So fuck the PRT and their corrupt bullshit. Fuck the government that allowed that sort of stuff to happen. Fuck the school for concealing it. I still kinda wanted to help people, but Super Villains didn't need to be monsters.
I nodded and accepted a lift up onto one of the dog creatures as we rode away into the night. I flicked out my wrist towards the comatose form of Lung and a fluttering piece of paper slowly wafted its way on to his chest.

Armsmaster looked around, noting the distinct lack of fire. He was almost ready to write the call about Lung off as a prank, until he saw the huge scrape along the warehouse wall. This led him to the brutalized still form of Lung, several large bite marks and mangled limbs clearly visible. But strangely prominent was the index card sitting on his chest, only slightly stained with blood.

-Ready for pick up, one Lung, partially mauled, no refunds-
-Care of Marceau and special guests The Undersiders-

He checked Lung's pulse, strangely relieved that it was present, before loading him up with tranquillisers. 'This does not bode well' he thought, considering the fact that a new cape was in town, and apparently good enough to take out Lung. That and the Undersiders were getting bolder. He phone into HQ for a containment crew and stared at the note as he waited.
The trip back to the Undersider's hide out was fairly short, but rather quiet. It was too bumpy for me to write legibly and I wasn't able to really hold up a conversation otherwise, so I guessed they felt a bit awkward. I was rather surprised at their laxity in precautions. They didn't even give me a blindfold or anything. This either meant they had a surprising amount of trust for someone they just meant, or figured they were good enough to end me if things got hairy. Given what little I'd seen of Tattletale's weird thinker abilities, I wouldn't be surprised if she knew I had no intention of getting into a fight with them.

We finally stopped at a door down a narrow alley between two warehouses elsewhere in the Docks, not too far from the Board Walk. The dog creatures already shrinking as we dismounted and I was lead through the door into a sparse large room, a loft visible above the empty space. The stairs lead up to what was nominally a lounge room. A fairly nice couch and a few chairs clustered around a large TV, a few doors leading off the open plan area. Obvious signs of living, in particular, pizza boxes, suggested that this was more than just a meeting area.

"Giving the dogs a walk." Bitch mumbled as she walked back out the door, the three dogs trailing behind. She certainly didn't seem happy I was here.

"So what do you think of our humble abode?" Asked Tattletale, gesturing around as if she were a real estate agent. I retrieved my notepad and scribbled my reply.

-Seems comfy-
-Not as Bond villain lair as expected-

That elicited another chuckle from the blond villainess. "Sorry, we're still on a waiting list for the pool filled with sharks and don't have a tinker for the 'frikin laser beams'."

"Help yourself to a coffee or tea." Grue said, pointing at the kitchenette in the corner, "I've just got to discuss some things with Tattletale. Make yourself comfortable."

Ah, plotting, I guess it had to happen at some point, given the limited opportunities earlier. I figured I was safe enough, they probably didn't want to provoke me and it would have been silly to invite me in if they wanted to fight. Might as well make myself some tea.

"So what's up with the mute thing?" Asked Regent as he plopped down on the couch with all the poise of a lazy cat. I held up a finger, indicating he should wait, while I poured the boiling water into a teabag laden mug. Placing the mug on the coffee table, I sank into the cushion beside him and wrote out my reply.

-Vocal cords wrecked during trigger-

"Huh, guess that makes sense and leads to your terrifying costume." I would have bet money on him grinning like an idiot under that mask of his.

-What's wrong with Mimes?-  

"Well they are creepy silent, and your wrecking of Lung sure didn't help matters". The mirth in his voice suggested a certain amount of mocking. "It could only be worse if you were a French Mime."

-What if I was?- I replied with an amused grin spreading across my face.
"Then I would have to shit my pants in terror and flee." He started laughing, to a joke I really didn't understand, but mimed laughing along with. Careful not to make the horrible wheezing noise that my laugh would come out as. That was the thing I missed more than being able to speak, I couldn't laugh properly any more and that was just depressing.

Tattletale and Grue returned from one of the side rooms and sat down on the chairs either side of the couch.

"We've been trying to recruit a new member for a while, but there haven't been any suitable matches around." Grue started. I forced my face to remain placid as he talked. I hadn't expected a recruitment pitch, but I didn't need to let them see my surprise. Though the smirk on Tattletale's face probably meant she knew anyway. "You seem capable, but we'd like to ask a few questions before we offer you a place."

I nodded, I wasn't exactly sure if I wanted to join them but I'd hear them out anyway.

"I get the feeling you aren't exactly a villain." Said Tattletale, "And yet here you are accepting invite from dastardly strangers back to their lair."

She was a perceptive one alright, dangerously so, and smug about it. I pondered wording for a moment before jotting down my response.

-Yeah, not really into hurting people.-
-I have a bit of a thing against Authority.-
-Pretty sure PRT corruption resulted in my getting powers.-

"Oh, if you don't mind elaborating, I'd love to hear this." I was pretty sure she was only saying this for her team member's benefit. That devious grin had grown larger and it made me think she knew way to much already.

-I'm fairly sure Shadow Stalker's civilian ID did this to me- I pointed to my throat as I held the notepad out with my other hand.

"Why does it not surprise me she's a psycho bitch out of costume too." Grue snarled. That caught me by surprise. I tilted my head with the 'raised eyebrow of curiosity' as I liked to think of it. It seemed my face was a bit more expressive than it had been before the loss of my voice. I wasn't sure if it was just my body compensating, or something to do with my power. Either was it was useful.

"She used a lethal bolt on Grue when we last encountered her. Seems she has some unexplained grudge against him, probably due to how their powers interact." explained Tattletale.

"Yeah, and he bled all over my new white couch. I loved that couch." Added Regent. "Fucking Shadow Stalker."

-That sounds like the vindictive bitch I know and loath.-
-I heard rumours that Shadow Stalker had transferred away.
-Same day she got transferred out of school.-
-Tracker back, first appearances matched when I first met her.-
-Figure, voice, skin, eyes match video/photos of SS-
-Still not sure why me, but explains way too much.-

"Well I can see why you wouldn't want to be in the Wards then, but why the switch to villainy?" Grue asked.
"That wouldn't be a problem. We avoid that anyway as it keeps a lot of heat off our heads."
Tattletale explained. "Think of it as a game of cops and robbers. As long as its only a bit of property and money, we get off lightly. Like Uber and Leet, how they only get held in low security and basically walk out of prison."

"If we started seriously hurting or killing people, it stops being a game and we get sent to the Bird Cage, or a kill order on our heads." Grue finished.

"Given that we don't run a gang and have kept a low profile, we can get away with a lot of things and earn some decent cash while doing it. You'd get a share of that if you joined us."
Tattletale continued, ramping up the sales pitch. "You'd get a retainer of two thousand a month. Our boss pays us to be available for jobs. You'd also get an equal share of pay for any jobs we do."

She had some fairly good points, or at least they made sense in my head, given what I had observed of Brockton Bay capes and general news on Parahumans Online. The money sounded great too, that was way more than Dad brought in, with the economy like it was. I'd have to find a way to disguise where the money was coming from if I wanted to use it at home. That was however a problem for later.

"So what do you think?" Asked Grue.

"Okay. Count me in."

"Bitch is probably going to be annoyed the money gets split, but she's always grumpy so whatever." Regent added.

"She'll get over it, we'll make more money in the long run." Tattletale said, before removing her domino mask. "Anyway, my name is Lisa, welcome to the Undersiders."

"I'm Brian." Said Grue, helmet now in the crook of his elbow. Showing a handsome face with smooth dark skin and neat cornrows running his scalp.

"Alec." Regent had slid his mask to the top of his head. His face was kind of feminine with slightly European features.

I couldn't exactly take of a mask, and the face paint would take too long to clean off, so instead I just smiled and held up the piece of paper.

-Taylor-
-Nice to meet you-
School had been dull and eventful, especially when compared to the night before. There was some serious mood whiplash between bored student to amateur super villain. The day couldn't end quick enough so I could get out of there and meet up with my new 'partners in crime'. I knocked, opened and had just walked through the door to their, no, our Lair, when I was bombarded with babbling from the loft.

"So, first of all, we're going to get you a mask. The grease paint won't quite cut it for keeping your identity secret." Said Lisa. I was a little thrown by her sudden comment. My confusion might not have been obvious, but with Lisa it didn't matter.

"Sorry, was just thinking of several things that would be a good idea for a more professional level costume. Primarily a mask." She clarified as I climbed up the stairs to the loft. "If we get you a full face mask, your features would be hidden, with less mess and trouble than grease paint. We can still give it the classic Marcel Marceau colouring if you like."

I pondered that for a moment. As was quickly becoming typical, she had some good ideas. It was probably a good thing it was so dark last night, otherwise it might have been a simple matter for the ABB to recognise me out of costume. So I nodded my agreement.

"I'll put an order in with the boss, and he should have it to us soon. Other than a fancy new phone, any other gear you'd like, weapons, other equipment?"

A few seconds of thought brought up something rather important. I had really been to blasé about the danger the gang members had posed. I wasn't exactly any tougher after my trigger, my powers only having external applications, and it was quite possible to get caught by surprise. With that in mind my pen scratched across paper.

-bullet proof vest?-  

"Your telekinesis can't do that? I thought you could have created walls or something like that."

-better safe then dead-

"That is a fair point. I'll see what he can get in your size. It will cost a fair chunk of your initial payment though, or more." I just nodded, figuring that it would be pricey, especially if there were tinker tech based options available.

"Also, I didn't mention it early, but I don't think you make as much sound as you should."

That definitely got my attention, I hadn't noticed anything like that. The look on my face prompted her to continue.

"Its likely that it only effects outside observers, and you still make some noise, just something like a tenth as much as you should. I hadn't really noticed it till you were leaving last night with how subtle it was."

Well that was some food for thought. A few seconds later I mimed a laugh as I realised just how strangely appropriate that was. Lisa joined me a second later, obviously picking up on the connection I had made. So it was a bit of a sight for Brian and Alec as they walked in with an order of hot drinks and doughnuts.
“What did we miss?” Asked Brian, a bemused look on his face.

“Ah, just noting that the universe has conspired to make mimes more terrifying to the world by making a super powered one.” She responded. I just rolled my eyes with melodramatic exasperation at the statement. I never really understood what was wrong with mimes, or clowns. People were weird.

“Oh no, the horror.” Brian dead-panned, matching my opinion of the statement.

“But don’t you see, the end is nigh? The world is not ready for the End Mimes!” Alec said, mock horror tinged his voice. He received a slap upside the head from Brian, to my amusement.

“That was a horrible pun.”

We sat down to drink and snack, sprawled around the lounge. After sipping some tea and taking a large bit out of a chocolate doughnut, I started writing out a question. The advantage of not being able to talk, is never having to worry about talking with your mouth full.

-So, power discussion time?-
-I think I know what Lisa and Rachel do-

They took in what I wrote, and Brian took the lead.

“I have darkness powers. More specifically I can black out an area, making it impossible to see and hear, as well as dampening radio and some powers. Part of the reason Shadow Stalker had a hate on for me.” He looked at Lisa with a chuckle, “Or at least that’s what she tells me.”

-Could you demonstrate?- 

“Sure.” And with that, I was enveloped in darkness. When I moved my arm through the air, it had a weird oily texture to it there and there was a strange resistance, as if I were in some kind of liquid. I experimentally clapped my hands, and heard nothing, only the muted vibration through my hands indicating anything had happened. I gave a thumbs up, hoping he could see it, and the darkness receded.

-Felt weird-

They nodded in agreement and he continued, "As you guessed, I can see and hear through it just fine, so it makes for a good advantage in a fight."

I nodded in agreement, I wouldn't want to get stuck in that with Grue not on my side. I would be hard pressed to fight in those conditions.

My hand pointed towards Alec, indicating his turn. 

"I mess with people's nervous system, like this." He said, snapping his fingers. Brian's hand, holding an éclair, jerked up to smeared cream on his face and prompting a surprised yelp.

"Alec, don't mess with the food." He growled, which only earned him a laugh.

"Its not the most dramatic power, but with timing its been rather useful. Tripping people up, throwing off aim, dropping things and so on.” Lisa added.

I nodded once again. It had potential, but overall seemed a bit limited compared to most powers I'd heard of.
Some excited barking from downstairs heralded the return of Rachel. Going off an earlier suggestion by Lisa, I prepared to get her attention. Waving as she came into view, I quickly pointed to me then to her dogs and made a vague patting gesture then held up a piece of paper

-?-

The grumpy look she had on her face as she realised I was here turned to slight confusion as I played charades. Then she brought up Judas and mumbled, "Okay, be careful."

I gently patted the big dog on the head and scratched behind his ears, which he seemed to appreciate. Rachel looked at me and nodded with tacit approval before moving away again and off to her room to feed the dogs.

Lisa smiled at me while Alec and Brian looked surprised.

-What?-

"Usually Rachel would be more aggressive around new people." Brian answered.

"I guess even she is afraid of mimes." Joked Alec.

I just put my face in my hand and shook it side to side.
I couldn't see a clock anywhere in the room, and noticing that the light from outside was starting to dim, I held up my left wrist and tapped on it.

"Almost five." Lisa said without looking anywhere. Her power must have supplied her with the answer. I tapped my chin in a pondering gesture.

"Somewhere to be?" Asked Brian.

-Home-
-Dad will worry-

"I can call him if you wanted to stick around and hang out. We have a spare cot." Lisa offered.

"We could get some pizza. Or judging by your looks, Chinese?" Alec suggested. The other three had looked unimpressed at his first idea. Not surprising with the pizza boxes everywhere.

"You wanna stick around?" Brain asked.

I felt pretty safe around them, and frankly I had been a bit deprived of friendly human contact over the last year and a half, even with the near cessation of bullying. So I thought fuck it, why not. The only problem was communicating this to Dad. I was going to need to convince him to get a mobile for texting as this sort of situation made communication... difficult. As much as they reminded me of Mum, I'd have to get over it sooner than later.

I nodded, wrote out my home number for Lisa, handed a slip with a request for lemon chicken to Brian and prepared to write out some responses for Dad's inevitable questions. Lisa dialled and put it on speaker phone.

"Hi is this Taylor's Dad?" She asked as soon as the phone picked up.

"...Yes, has something happened?" A slight tinge of worry already evident.

"No, no, nothing like that, my name's Lisa, I'm a friend of Taylor's. She's asked me to call you to see if she can stay the night. We're on speaker phone if you'd like to say hello."

"You there Taylor?"

I snapped my fingers twice near the speaker, a gesture I had been using to catch his attention since I lost my voice.

"I'd feel safer if you came home, you sure its alright to be out?" His concern was somewhat understandable, but he didn't exactly make it easy. I scribbled a suitable response for Lisa.

"She's written, I'll drop by on my way to school in the morning for a change of clothes, it will count as my morning run." "

"Oh, ok, that sounds alright. Be careful, I'll see you in the morning." He obviously didn't think it sounded alright, but couldn't really do anything about it, and my verbally challenged nature made any further discussion tedious.

"He sounded nervous." She said as she hung up, in a leading way. I sighed, or my best
approximation of one.

-Had a bullying problem.-
-From Sophia gone, less so.-

"Ah. That would explain things. Though probably shouldn't mention to anyone else Shadow Stalker's name. Bit of a violation of the unwritten rules and may get you in some trouble."

I blinked and slapped myself upside the head. That was kind of stupid of me. As much as I hated that bitch, her family probably didn't deserve any backlash of her being exposed. I made a mental note to be extra careful about that in the future.

We walked back over to the lounge area, where Brian had just finished ordering dinner from Lucky Chen's over on the Board Walk. He looked up as we approached.

"How about we take a walk to pick up the food? We can grab a few other items while the food is cooking."

Several affirmatives as we stood to leave, while Rachel just grumbled and stayed seated, playing with the dogs. I guessed she didn't like shopping much.

We wove our way through the alleys and streets of the Docks on our way to the shops, not really chatting much. The silence was reasonably comfortable though.

"So school huh?" Said Alec, breaking the silence. It might have been a bit less comfortable to people who weren't me. I simply nodded, then pointed at him quizzically.

"Nah, dropped out when I left home. Learned what I needed and I don't see myself doing anything legit." He shrugged as a weird sort of punctuation.

"I take online courses." Said Brian.


"And you didn't use your powers at all." The sarcasm positively dripped from Alec's tongue.

"I would have gone insane with boredom if I stayed in school." She added, a fair excuse if I ever heard one.

We walked a bit further in silence till we hit the Board Walk. Brian led us to an electronics store that had yet to close for the day and Lisa picked out a large touch screen with a slide out keyboard. I had thought that slightly defeated the point of having a touch screen but the keys would be a lot easier to type with at speed.

"This should make things a bit quicker than the pad once you get used to it. As well as you know, communicating." She smiled as she explained her choice, confirming my earlier thoughts. I mouthed the words 'thank you' and smiled.

"That's what friends are for." She smiled and hugged me, which surprised me a little. I had grown unused to contact since Mum died. While Dad would give me hugs he had grown somewhat distant since and Emma, well Emma stopped with the hugs when she became a traitorous bitch. Still, my tension eased out as she continued the hug a bit longer. I was starting to wonder if she had known I
needed one when she finally let go and we proceeded to the restaurant.

The trip back was mostly spent with Brian and Alec arguing over the finer points of some game I hadn't played, while Lisa added a bunch of numbers to my new phone/writing pad.

Dinner was fairly quiet, as we were all to busy stuffing our faces with delicious food that probably only vaguely matched actual Chinese recipes. Soon we had devoured most of the available cuisine and moved on to the slow process of overfilling our bellies with prawn crackers.

"So other than the voice thing, any reason for the mime theme?" Asked Brian, sounding genuinely interested.

I held up a finger as I pulled out the phone and stumbled through opening up a text box. I figured I had best get practising.

- The voice was one.
- I like mimes, unlike some.
- When I use powers, usually see invisible shapes.
- Need to interact with to use.
- So mime made sense to me.

"Wow, that is interesting. Rarely get to hear how other perceive their powers." He said.

"I'd say that was way too much of a coincidence, but powers are strange like that. Hell look at Glaistig Uaine, she for all appearance collects ghost of parahumans, that have their powers." Said Lisa. I wasn't sure I liked being compared to the Faerie Queen, but she did have a point. "Also I note you used the word 'usually'."

- Few more things I can do
- Still need to make gestures

"Like?" She asked. I was kind of surprised she couldn't tell, but I guess their were limits to even her power. Either that or felt like letting me explain.

- Volunteer? May hurt

"As long as it isn't permanent, sure." Brian offered.

I coughed into my left hand before making rasping breathing noises and held up my right in a claw. Brian made a choked gargling noise as some pressure was applied to his throat. I quickly released the pressure, having gotten the point across. Lisa started clapping, apparently amused at the connotations, and I did a quick little bow as Regent cracked up laughing.

"Fucking Vader?" Said Brian incredulously. I couldn't say I really blamed him. I was rather surprised when I found that out as I was haphazardly practising last month. I quickly tapped out something on my phone.

- I find your lack of faith disturbing

That started another bout of laughter, even from Brian. I was more and more feeling this team thing could work out well.
I awoke at 6:28 as usual. Even with out the usual sound cues from home, it was so ingrained. Initially I had a bout of panic as I stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling, before last night's decision came to me and realised I was in a camp bed in the spare room of the Undersider lair. My new phone decided it was 7 and started beeping insistantly. Reaching over, bleary eye I tried to shut up the unfamiliar device, taking several attempts to quiet its ear splitting noise.

I dragged myself out of bed and put my jacket and shoes back on, having left everything else on, not quite comfortable enough yet to sleep in less around my new team mates. Stumbling out of the room I waved sleepily at Brian, who had crashed on the couch for the night. He smiled and poured hot water into a mug and took a sip.

"Would you like some tea?" He asked gesturing at the stack of mugs. I nodded, thinking nothing would be better right at that moment. He grabbed a mug and dropped in a bag of Earl Grey. Not exactly perfect, but it would do. A quick pour and he held out the steaming drink for me to take.

I slowly drank down the tea, gradually feeling more aware than I had shortly before. Placing the mug down, I retrieved the phone from my pocked and started typing.

-I'll head home.-
-Want a shower before school.-
-Thanks for tea.-

"A good idea, and no problem. If you drop by this afternoon I'll have a spare key for you. You can come by and hang out whenever."

-Sweet.-
-Tell them I said hi.-

"Will do."

I waved goodbye as I headed out the door for a strange inverse of my morning run. The air was crisp, the sun only just starting to peek in between the various warehouses around the lair. I slowly ramped up my pace as I hit the Board Walk, getting my blood pumping, my breathing regular and my feet thumping along the streets towards home. It was a little thing really, but last night had improved my mood considerably compared to just a few days back. So long with out any friendship and suddenly I had 3 and a half. After all, I wasn't sure Bitch was my friend, so much as someone I had mutual tolerance of. But it was a good start, even if I was possibly deluding myself.

I arrived back home, having worked up quite a sweat, pushing myself a bit harder that usual. If I was going to be a cape, I should really try to be at peak fitness, and I'd only really be exhausted till I got some breakfast into my belly. As I opened up the front door, Dad came out from the kitchen.

"Hi Taylor, did you have fun?" He asked, trying to be supportive, but still clearly worried. I nodded and pulled out my note pad to 'talk'. I didn't want to freak him out about the phone so soon.

"I didn't realise you had made some new friends." He commented. I felt slightly insulted at the implications, even if they were entirely valid.

-I met them on one of my jogs.-
-Chatted a few times.-
-Thought we'd hang out.-

It wasn't entirely a lie, I had after all met them when I went jogging, just at night, in costume, after a cape fight.

"So what are they like?"

-They're nice.-
-Funny too.-

Well, to me anyway, I couldn't really tell them they were villains and had helped me wreak Lung.

"I'll get to meet them at some point?" He asked, almost pleadingly. He was obviously concerned that I might be involved with people I probably shouldn't. I would have to organise for Lisa at least to drop by some time. Not sure how he'd react to the rest.

-I'll see if they want to drop by some time-
-Need to shower & get ready.-

It was a slightly cruel trick to short cut the conversation like that, but I was starting to run a little late and didn't really know what else to tell him about my new crew. Especially when I still had lingering doubts about whether this was such a good idea.

"Oh, of course, don't want to be late. We can talk later."

I nodded and head upstairs to clean up.

Dad was able to drop me off at school on his way to work, which suited me just fine with my extra effort I had put in this morning. I had found myself dressing in a bit more color than usual, running off the advice Lisa gave me about the civilian/cape identity division. The less similarities between clothing and general appearance, the harder it would be to match up the two 'different' people. My hair was down as usual, unlike when I was in costume and I tucked it into a bun under my beret.

The main issue I had would be the identifying feature of not being able to talk. While it worked with the Mime theme, it was still atypical. As much as it pained me, I had to consider limiting my phone typing to cape/lair use and stick with the pad for when I was Taylor. That, was depressing. But at least for today, I would stick with the pad. Maybe I could get a less cool phone for every day use. Damn, I had forgot to mention phones to Dad.

I found myself struggling to pay attention in class, I hadn't even done much cape work, and already school seemed so mundane. Luckily, the teachers continued to play to type and ignored me. It was too much of a hassle for them to really engage me in questions when one of us had to approach the other to get my answer across. I should have been annoyed by yet another sign of an uncaring system, but it finally proved useful for once.

Third period was computer class with Ms Knott, and after finishing of the fairly simple assignment I dove into Parahumans Online to see if any gossip had spread about my exploits versus Lung. To say I was disappointed by the complete lack of news would be a vast understatement. Seriously, what the hell? I would have thought taking down one of the most powerful capes in the Bay would be enough to warrant a little attention. I could understand the ABB wanting to keep it quiet, but surely the PRT would be shouting it to the heavens that the guy who fought most of the local Protectorate to a stand still was captured?
My sour mood was not at all helped by Emma. I had walked out of class only to pass by her on the way to math with Mr Quinlan. She had been a bit quiet since Sophia disappeared and hardly tried anything after I came back from the hospital. Probably a bit shocked that there were repercussions for her actions. So it was somewhat surprising when she decided to return to her usual bitchy self.

"Don't even know why she bothers to come anyway?" She faux whispered as I walked by.

"Yeah, its not like she can talk to people or anything." said one of the random hangers on. I was slightly confused that I didn't see Madison around, maybe she had learned some common sense. More likely got bored.

"Its creepy how silent she is."

I thought about just walking on. They really weren't worth it. I should really move on. Fuck it. I stopped, pulled out my pad and started writing as I turned and walked back their way. It wasn't wise, it probably wouldn't achieve much, but it might just be fun.

-Sorry-
-Does the injury your lover gave me offend you?-
-Or are you cranky with no Sophia to cuddle?-

If this all went to hell, at least the look of shock on her face as she read the note would stick in my memory for some time to come. I started scribbling a response even as she blushed and sputtered, hoping I guessed right.

"What, no, you pervert. I'm not a dyke like you."

-Was she that better in bed than me?-

The girl next to her snorted, drawing an angry look from Emma. It didn't match quite right, but the speed gave the desired effect. I had asked Lisa the night before for some tips on embarrassing prissy bitch faced divas. For no reason in particular. Honest.

"Eeew no, its not like that."

-I'm sorry, but I have someone else now.-

I gave my best attempt at a pitying expression and then walked off to the next class, leaving her to defend herself to her new hangers on. Its not like I really had a reputation to maintain and being thought of as a lesbian wasn't really much of a change from the rumours that got spread around anyway. Not like any of the guys at school were worth a damn either. Otherwise they would have interfered in the bullying, or let me out of the locker, or not laughed along with the jokes at my expense. Still,that little pick me up managed to lift my spirits enough to stick around for the rest of the school day.
-Hi Dad,-  
-I've gone to go hang out with Lisa and Co.-  
-Should be back after dinner, otherwise I'll ask Lisa to call you.-  
-I know its been an issue since Mum died, and I don't really like it,-  
-but given my problem, we should get mobile phones.-  
-The texting thing could let us communicate without me needing others.-  
-Please consider it.-

I stared at the note for Dad before sticking it to the fridge and heading to the lair. It was another cowardly use of my speech issue, but I really didn't want to try and have the talk without giving him some time to think on it. Let him calm down before deciding, I hoped.

A short bus trip later, I was within walking distance of my new home away from home. I don't know what it said about me that I was more comfortable in a villain lair than I was in my own home. The strange detachment between Dad and I that had been their since the crash, and hadn't receded much even after the locker, with him trying harder to connect.

I heard an invitation at my knocking on the door and entered. Every one was already upstairs in the loft, which was a nice surprise.

"Taylor, perfect timing, we've just got a job request from the boss." said Brian. I tilted my head in question and Lisa answered.

"He wants us to do a bank job this Thursday."

That surprised me, would have thought that that would be a bit too ambitious for us, but I was intrigued. I pulled my phone out and tapped away.

-Isn't that risky?-  

"Yes, very." said Brian, clearly unimpressed at the whole idea.

Lisa stood near the TV, a phone in hand. I could only guess that it was our mysterious employer on the other end. The rest were lounging on the couch and seats.

"But its like an initiation into a life of villainy. Can't be a villain without a bank robbery." She said, obviously wanting us to go along with the idea.

"Still a bad idea. What's the average haul for a bank heist?"

"Maybe twenty kay?" She replied after a little thought.

"Yeah, not really that much considering that a bank in Brocton Bay will have even less cash on hand with all the villains around. So knock off another five thou and we end up with maybe three grand each. That's less than our other jobs."

"Three thousand in spending money could always help." Piped in Alec, the mention of money grabbing his attention.
"What is worth buying that we'd try to rob a bank with the hero presence in this city?" he asked, and Alec just shrugged.

"We've won plenty of fights, even before we got her." Said Rachel, finally joining the conversation, and nodded in my direction in a dismissive manner.

"Fights where we picked out battles, where we could move about, not trapped in a bank full of hostages."

General nods from the group, while I sat and took in the discussion.

"It will be harder to slip away, and if we want anything worth a damn we'll have to fight. Even with your power Lisa, it will take time to get through all the security and the capes will arrive in no time flat."

Alec grinned and said "But think of the rep we'd gain for getting away with it."

"He's right." said Bitch.

"And yet, not getting caught is better for our reputation long term."

"What do you think?" asked Lisa looking my way. I had gotten carried away observing. On the one hand it sounded like it could be fun, but I didn't really want to get arrested on my second outing as a cape.

-Rep would be good.-
-Doesn't sound worth the risk though.-

Alec rolled his eyes, while Rachel looked at the phone blankly. I looked at her for a moment, awaiting a snide comment, before something clicked. I face palmed and typed. I don't know why I didn't think of it before when I had researched her history.

-Can Rachel read?- 

"Shit." Said Brian, aptly summing up everyone's opinion on the matter.

"What?" Asked Rachel.

"You can't read?" Alec sounded disbelieving. I was kind of surprised this hadn't come up earlier.

"Only some words."

"Well as inconvenient as that is, I have some reasons to take this job." Said Lisa, quickly regaining out attention. "The boss wants a job done at a particular time, so I managed to wrangle some extra funding from him if we do the job."

"The bank is actually my idea and he liked it. The Protectorate have an event outside town on Thursday so they won't be able to respond in time. We hit Bay Central in downtown, Ward jurisdiction stops New Wave from coming in."

"So we are just attacking the bank with the heaviest security in the city with Arcadia nearby." Brian said, trying to wrap his head around the crazy.

"Yes, and the entire team can't all pop out of school without attracting the wrong sort of attention. So we'd be fighting a partial team of junior heroes, and they are down one Shadow Stalker. With me so
"Well that sounds a lot more doable. Still not really worth the money." He said, with less disagreement in his body language than earlier.

"Ah, but I got the boss to give us twice what we haul in. We take fifteen, we get payed an extra thirty. Or he brings us up to a minimum twenty five thou, whichever is more. So we all walk away with a minimum five kay each as long as we get away."

"Why the hell would he do that, it makes no sense." I had to agree with Brian on that point, tasty amounts of cash aside, that did seem suspicious.

"And hell cover costs for this job." She added, her mouth a huge grin.

I mimed out a confused Why? gesture. I hadn't even seen that much in a bank account, let alone in cash.

"One, he wants a team with a reputation on call. Two he must want this job done real bad."

-Distraction?- 

"Probably, but with the money we'd be getting that really isn't our concern."

"That's some nice incentive, but attacking one of the most secure buildings in the city and certain conflict with the Wards..."

"And Thursday afternoon will have the highest amount of cash, as the armoured cars will have made several drop offs by then. So we'd be looking at, at least thirty though, so we'd get ninety."

Brian just whistled. It looked like she'd hit the magic number. It was a very pretty number.

"Alright, I'm in."

"Finally, of course I'm in." said Alec.

Rachel just grunted in agreement.

They all looked at me. I was a bit nervous about the idea, but it would net me a bunch of cash and stick it to the PRT hard if we were successful. I should have been worried that one of my major motivations as a person lately has been vindictive spite. Just a shame I couldn't take it out on Sophia.

-So, what's the plan?-
-Still not convinced-

"Would you rather take a hit to your pride, or have your identity revealed?" Asked Lisa.

-Neither-
-You get away with a domino mask-

"Yes, but I take steps to change my appearance and body language, and we need to work twice as hard with your silence."

-But do we really need to do this?- 

"Yes, trust me. You'll thank me in the long run. Besides, the vest already flattens out your chest."

I sighed and caved into the un-winnable argument. As much as it hurt my pride, it worked surprisingly well. With the baggy pants, sensible running shoes the bullet proof vest underneath the roomy black and white striped shirt and my hair hidden under the red beret, I looked like a boy. My height and the concealment of my meagre feminine traits added together to give the completely wrong impression for my gender and the mask just made it all the more convincing. That stupid male mime face. But really, what did I expect when I named myself after the most famous of mimes. At least I could take small comfort in knowing it was an extra layer of disguise that most wouldn't notice.

In addition to getting my costume sorted, I had obtained a stun gun and stashed it in a belt pouch. A 'just in case' option, even though my power would likely work much more effectively. I had the boss send me a bicycle horn, to use as a quick way to grab attention. While I could have found something less obnoxious, it fit the theme too well.

-Well, let's get going then.-

We made out way to the side door of the bank, rain drizzling down on us as we walked through the alley. Bitch's dogs were already pretty large, like small mutant flesh ponies. Not as large as they were when they were mauling Lung though, lest they not fit through the door.

I kept an eye on the alley entrance, while Tattletale blathered on about security codes and special procedures behind me. I probably could have been paying more attention to what she said, but I was too amped up and paranoid about ambush. The door made a little chime noise and opened, letting us make a quiet entry inside. Once through the door, the dogs started growing more while the rest of us systematically checked the rooms we passed.

Grue held up a hand then flooded one of the rooms with darkness, returning shortly after with a man in a suit, steered via twisted arm. Right about now, the security guards would be calling in a villain attack, which should be directed to the Wards if all went according to plan. Regent came out of another pushing an older employee ahead of him. Both looking fearful. Probably ten minutes tops before the heroes arrived to 'save the day'.

As we entered the main lobby, Grue filled the outskirts of the room with darkness, sealing off the view from the outside and isolating everyone in the bank while Angelica Judas and Brutus grew extra large in a moment, charging into the room, spraying bloody chunks everywhere and they
increased to the size of cars.

"Down on the ground!" Shouted Grue, his voice a booming echo through the darkness around his mask. "Fifteen minutes of your cooperation, we'll be done and you can all go home safe. If you don't cooperate, the dogs will have new chew toys. Be quiet and still. Do not attempt to run or call for help, you'll only get someone hurt."

Tattletale, Grue and Bitch went over to the vault with Angelica, while Regent and I started zip cuffing the crowd. A girl with brown curly hair and freckles was glaring at us. I caught her eye and wagged my finger at her in case she was going to try something. She had the eyes of someone that needed watching. The vault was opened and Tattletale went over to the manager's office to monitor the security situation.

People were behaving fairly well, obviously terrified of the dogs. I was kind of feeling bad for helping scare the hell out of these people, but we hadn't harmed anyone and I wasn't planning on it. Angelica came out, laden with gym bags full of loot, and Brutus was called in. I just stood there, leaning on nothing, keeping my eyes on people I thought might be a threat. That girl had stopped staring directly at me at least.

Bored, I was tempted to start playing with an invisible bouncy ball, but was snapped out of it by Tattletale at the vault door.

"The white hats are here, and it doesn't look good."

We moved to the doors and peered out through gaps in the swirling darkness. outside stood a spread out line of six capes. I recognised five from their costumes after researching the wards. The sixth however was new to me. I tapped on Tattletale's shoulder and pointed at the muscled teen.

"Browbeat, a point blank telekinetic, don't let him hit you. He can also heal pretty fast." She explained quickly.

"So, why are there six out there when there were only supposed to be three or four?" Grue asked, quite pointedly.

"I'm guessing he just joined the Wards, probably to replace Shadow Stalker. Also there is a seventh on the roof." She replied.

"You really screwed the pooch here. If we get out of this, we're having a long chat."

"I can take them. Just let my dogs do their thing." Said Bitch, seemingly unconcerned.

"Nope, not risking killing anyone. We take the money, run for it like planned."

"Thats what they want." Said Tattletale shaking her head. "The way they're lined up, spread just enough to tempt us. The one on the roof would get in the way of the back. With Vista and outnumbering us, we'll have even more trouble fleeing."

"Fuck." Groaned Regent.

"Well we can't stay here, the Protectorate will eventually appear and we aren't likely to force them inside." Said Grue, pointing out the obvious.

"We have hostages." Bitch said, as if we had forgotten.

Honk
They all turned to look at me, bicycle horn in one hand, phone in the other.

-Expect us to run-
-Surprise attack them-

The doors slammed open and half of our hostages ran out of the bank

Aegis yelled out "Get down!" at the fleeing civilians just as another billowing cloud of pitch black enveloped them.

"Brutus, hurt!" Bitch told the dog at her side, pointing at Aegis past the darkness, and it leaped in to action, bounding toward the Wards leader.

Nestled behind a pillar and some residual darkness, Regent snapped out his arm, causing Kid Win to throw his aim and scatter shots meant for Brutus at Clockblocker's feet, causing him to dodge to the side. The dog's jaws missed Aegis by a few feet as the space warped around him. I had found my target.

Whirling my right arm around before making a skyward throwing gesture, I waited for a few seconds, following a non existent object into the air and down onto Vista. I could hear her surprised yelp as her arms snapped to her sides and I started hauling her up into the air. Grue assisted by creating a sphere around her, so she couldn't see anything.

The space warping around Aegis dropped, allowing the dogs teeth to snap around his arm and start shaking its massive head, tossing the hero around like a rag doll. I winced a bit as I saw blood flying around the place, but knew, at least intellectually, that he could take it. Tying off the invisible rope I had lassoed Vista with on one of the pillars. I took in the scene. Kid Win was taking erratic turns as Regent continued to troll him.

Gallant was throwing his emotion blasts around the place, trying to hit one of us in between all the barriers of darkness that had sprung up. He eventually manage to clip Bitch, who apparently got very angry, screaming and pointing at him. Judas took this as an order and pounced, knocking the silver armoured ward against a nearby wall, where he stopped movie. I had hoped he was only unconscious.

"Be right back, Marceau." said Tattletale with a grin before running back to the office. She turned before I could attempt to complain. So instead I turned back to the fight.

Kid win opened up with a spray of fire, clipping Bitch and flooring her, before he took a nose dive into the ground, courtesy of Regent. Angelica stood over her master and growled at the approaching Browbeat. Before I could do anything, he punched the dog, sending in flying back several yards. He had a few seconds to look down at the groaning Bitch, before he found one of his legs pulled out from under him as I pulled, then sent him flying of to the side and skidding a few times across the road.

Stepping back to the pillar, I mimed checking on the 'rope' I had 'tied' earlier. I didn't want Vista coming loose anytime soon. The fight out front was rather distracting, so much so that I almost missed the movement behind me. That girl with the dagger eyes had wrangled her phone out of her pocket, despite the zip ties and had pressed a few buttons. As I moved over to sort it out, a crash came from further down the room as a familiar white and gold dressed figure slammed into the lobby. Glory Girl. Fuck.

"Hey Sis," She said, looking at the girl at my feet, "You okay?"
Well that explained a lot. Well, not one to take the safe option apparently, I pushed her back down to the floor with one foot and squeezed my horn.

**Honk Honk**

Her face quickly turned into a snarl as she flew at me. I had just enough time to drop the horn and put my hands up, shoulder width apart. The look on Glory Girl's face when she slammed into an invisible wall was well worth waking up this morning. My hands shook a little with the imaginary shockwave. As she dropped back, a little stunned. I moved my hands over my shoulder, took a grip and swung hard, expecting it to bounce off her. Instead, it sent her flying into the wall behind her, screaming in pain before hitting the wall with a dull thump.

"Vicky? What did you do to her?" The girl who I realised was Panacea asked, sounding both very surprised a worried. She had her head to the side so she could look at her sister, and catch me in her peripheral vision. I tapped at my phone.

-I thought she was invincible?-

"Not exactly invincible." said Tattletale as she walked back into the lobby with a vulpine grin on her face. "Some kind of shield effect that has to regenerate. Looks like it was taken out when she crashed into your wall. Ah Panacea, didn't recognise you, did you do something with your hair?"

"Fucking psychos, let me heal her, she could be dying." Panacea pleaded.

"Oh don't worry, she's still breathing, she just got knocked out. Not used to pain I would guess. Anyway, time for us to head out. The Wards have been dealt with."

I stepped, off the healer, and kneeled down beside her as I typed out another message.

-Sorry.-
-She probably would have killed me.-
-Please wait a minute to heal her.-
-No hard feelings?- 

My fingers made scissoring motions and the cuffs came apart as my other hand picked up my horn. As we left through the front door, I turned back towards the slowly rising girl.

**Honk Honk**

Shrouded in darkness, we rode away from the pile of unconscious and or mauled heroes with around 40 grand in various denominations and bonds. All in all, a pretty fucking good haul. Bitch was still wincing in pain as we rode, Gallant's blast, and the laser pistol having bruised her good, and Grue had been clipped by a stray punch from Aegis before two of the dogs ganged up to play tug of war. Otherwise, we got away pretty much unscathed.

I still didn't know how to feel about Glory Girl. On the one hand I had hurt her pretty bad, which I didn't think was even possible. On the other, she had seemed like an arrogant bitch much like Sophia. My perspective may have been a bit skewed though, seeing as I was holding her sister hostage at the time.

We split up as planned. Dismounting and changing out of costume while still under cover of darkness, then pretending to be confused civilians when eh darkness passed by. Lisa and I along with Judas, just a couple of teenage girls walking a dog. No villains around, no sir.
Wards

The bruised and battered wards had staggered into the common room, having been chewed out by a disgruntled Director Piggot in the lobby. Aegis had gone to patch himself up, leaving the rest to debrief.

“So, not exactly the best start to your new career, huh?” Clockblocker turned to Browbeat.

“Fuck, I wouldn’t mind so much if I knew what happened,” Browbeat stretched, and his muscles began to dwindle in size, “At least then I could figure out what to do better next time. All I know is that I was suddenly blind and deaf, and when I tried to move, everything bent the wrong way. I get clear long enough to punch one of Hellhound’s dogs, she’s at my feet and then I feel a yank on my leg and I’m suddenly flying down the road. Going to need to replace half my costume with the gravel rash.”

“Hold that thought,” Gallant told their newest member, “Hey Clock, you don’t mind if I take point?”

“Go for it.” he said, rubbing the lump on the back of his head where something had clobbered him in Grue’s darkness, before he got tased.

"Thank you." he said as he moved over to the whiteboards. "First off, today was not a complete failure, as we now have some intel on the otherwise elusive Undersiders. Until now, hardly anyone has managed to even inconveniece them."

He turned and wrote the names Grue, Tattletale and Hellhound on one board and Regent on the second before pausing. "Do we know who the new cape was? The Mime?"

"I didn't hear him speak," Said Clockblocker, "and none of the hostages heard him either. He just stood there watching them silently, all creepy like while leaning on an invisible bench."

"Really? Damn, sounds like we've got a real character." said Kid Win. "I didn't get a good look at him, too busy having my aim or flight messed with."

"Lets call him Mime for now." He said, writing the name next to Regent's with a large question mark next to it.

“Grue’s power isn’t just darkness. The sound is gone and it feels strange too, like you’re moving though water,” Clockblocker spoke. "I reckon he isn't effected as I got whacked up side the head.”

“Good,” Gallant wrote that in Grue’s column, “Next?”

“The mutant dog things Hellhound makes? They’re trained,” Browbeat offered, “She tells them what to do with whistles, gestures. They tore Aegis apart, but only threw us around. Damn tough too. I punched at near full strength and it only flew a few feet back.”

"I thought that was the case, good to get confirmation." Gallant replied, writing more notes.

"Regent. He was snapping his arm around and each time he did it, my aim was thrown off." Said Kid Win.

"Yeah, you almost shot me." Clockblocker grumbled.
"Sorry about that. Then when I tried to charge into him, he made me crash into the ground. Barely had time to react before he stuck me with that sceptre. The thing had a taser in it." he sighed.

"What happened to you Vista? One moment we had the space warping, next I couldn't see you." Asked Gallant, the concern on his face giving Vista a few flutters in her stomach.

"I'm not even sure, I had stretched the space in front of Aegis, to stop him getting eaten, then my arms were locked around my waist. Felt like I was tied up or something. Then I got pulled into the air in a few rough jerks before everything was blocked out by that darkness till the fight was over."

"Damn, I think the mime is a telekinetic." Said Dennis, frustration in his voice.

"That would explain my unexpected flight time." grumbled Browbeat.

Carlos returned from the shower, wearing a new set of cloths and haphazardly stitched up, looked at the board and sighed. He didn't really have anything to add, having spend most of the fight being a chew toy.

The visitor alarm went off and everyone scrambled to get their faces covered before the entrance to the common room opened, revealing Armsmaster and Miss Militia.

"Armsmaster," Gallant stood up, "Good to see you, Sir. Miss Militia, always a pleasure."

"Ever the gentleman," Miss Militia’s eyes hinted at the smile behind her scarf, "We brought a guest."

Behind them was Panacea with a Guest ID pin to her white costume.

"She was kind enough to volunteer to come here and patch you guys up," Miss Militia told the young heroes, "Can’t send you home with horrible injuries, can we? That would give away the show."

"I wanted to thank you guys for coming to my rescue," Panacea spoke, shyly, "And for letting Glory Girl come with you."

Gallant smiled, then in a more concerned tone, he asked, "You two are okay?"

"No, not really." she sighed. "I wasn't hurt and I would have been here sooner, but she was pretty beat up. I healed her up, but she's sulking. Hasn't been seriously hurt before, so I think she's taking it harder. Marceau found some way past her invincibility."

"Wait, did you say Marceau?" asked Armsmaster, suddenly rather concerned.

"That's what Tattletale called the crazy mime guy that clobbered Glory Girl."

"Damn, looks like the new cape is a villain after all." He grumbled.

Gallant had crossed out 'Mime' and replaced it with 'Marceau' on the board, before he asked, "Name makes sense, famous French Mime. Care to explain sir?"

"It was kept fairly quite to avoid widespread gang conflict, but Lung was taken into custody Sunday night. He was mauled and unconscious when I arrived. A calling card was left, claiming 'Marceau' had left him as a 'gift' and claimed the Undersiders as 'special guests'."

"Shit, we just faced the guy who took down Lung? Why are we not broken and bleeding in the hospital right now?" asked Clockblocker with obvious concern, a shiver ran down his back, "I'm never going to look at mimes the same."
"I don't think he likes hurting people." spoke Panacea, "He apologised for hurting my Sis as they were leaving, apparently he was surprised as I was that he managed to hurt her."

"Wait, he spoke to you?" Asked Dennis.

"No, he used his phone and typed out messages. Seems to hardly make a noise at all. When he hit Vicky it didn't make a noise till she hit the wall." She shuddered as she remembered the crunching noise and her screams. "The only sound he ever made was with a little squeaky horn."

"Ok, I'm adding sound based stranger powers for now, possibly involuntary." said Gallant, amending the list. Then tapping the blank area under Tattletale's name, "Do we know anything about her? I don't think any of us ran into her."

"Hostages didn't have much to say other that she opened the vault." added Dennis.

"She seemed to know what happened with Vicky's invulnerability. So I guess she might be a thinker." said Panacea. "Other than that, I don't know."

Panacea was about to leave, having patched up the Wards, good as new, when Miss Militia caught her attention.

"Can I have a moment of you time?" she asked. Amy nodded.

"Thank you for your help today, but on another matter, I was wondering how healing Ms Hebert went."

"Who?" asked Amy a bewildered look on her face.

Hannah frowned behind her scarf. "We sent through a request a few months back to heal a girl that had a rather unfortunate thing happen to her. I had hoped it was sorted."

"I'll have to check with Brandish, but I don't recall anything like that. The name isn't familiar, what happened?"

"She had a severe infection due to the actions of malicious bullying, was hospitalised for weeks, lost her larynx and almost her life."

"Damn, I hope whoever was responsible was punished."

"Oh they were." The angry tone to her voice surprised Amy, she hadn't heard that much venom from Miss Militia before. "I'd consider it a favour if you could heal her."

"Okay. If you can give me her details I'll organise a time with her, assuming she wants it."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"Some people are weird like that, and I can only heal them with their permission." She sighed. "There was one guy who refused to have a leg regrown, rambling about the Devil's work, or something equally insane."

"Well that's all I can ask. Thank you. I'm going to go see what happened to the request." She said, and left the young healer to head back home.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, All_Seeing_Eye
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦ Topic: Bay Central Bank Heist
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America

Tattletale's_Throw_Away (Original Poster) (Unverified Cape)
Posted on April 14th, 2011:

For your viewing pleasure.

A highlight reel.

Love,
The Undersiders

(Showing page 35 of 42)

► Goldline
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
What the hell happened to Vista?

► HotterLass
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
Was that an invisible lasso?

► GoodGoo
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
Wow, look at Browbeat fly.

► Nyrus
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
I am now officially terrified of Mimes.

► Grapejoint
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
That guy took out GG in one hit? How crazy is that? I wonder what other crazy powers he has.

► Volan
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
Its kinda creepy how that mime was leaning on nothing and just staring at Panacea. I wonder if he's got a thing for her.
Day_Hunter
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
@ Nyrus: We should all be, I heard he's the reason Lung hasn't been seen in days. A friend in the ABB said a mime took out the boss and a good 20 gang members.

SpecificProtagonist
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
@Day_Hunter: Oh God! Just what we need, super powered mimes of DEATH!

Marceau (Unverified Cape)
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
*Honk* *Honk*

Palshife
Replied on April 14th, 2011:
OMG the mime is here! Run, run for your life.

End of Page. 1 --> 33, 34, 35, 36, 37 --> 42

♦ Topic: Undersiders In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay ► Teams ► Villains

BFG1104
(Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on March 29th, 2011:

The Undersiders are a new villain gang in the city consisting of:

Grue
• Motorcycle suit and skull faced helmet.
• Darkness powers.

Tattletale
• Domino mask, dark tight bodysuit, blond.
• Powers unknown, possibly thinker.

Regent
• Renaissance Fair Puffy shirt, tight pants, theatre mask and crown.
• Some kind of body control. *new info* Carries taser in sceptre.

Hellhound
• Cheap Dog mask, fur collar jacket.
• Big monster dog mutants.
• AKA Rachel Lindt, Bitch

Marceau-
He's a fucking stereotype Mime.
Crazy telekinesis or reality warping. Extent unknown.
Doesn't talk, just honks his horn.

(Showing page 9 of 9)

► Palshife  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
They've gotten a lot bolder in the last few weeks. Looks like they are trying to make a name for themselves finally.

► KnowMe  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
I must say, the Undersiders seem to have a bunch of hunks. Lucky Tattletale and Hellhound.

► Felony_Bath  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
Wow, with Grue's darkness and Marceau's invisible ropes. All the things that you could do with that. *Wink*

► Browbeat ( Verified Cape )  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
@Felony_Bath: You know that darkness is plain creepy. Just No. Not fun at all.

► SpecificProtagonist  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
I have a thing for mimes, so I might just let him tie me up.

► Marceau (Unverified Cape )  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 :  
*Honk*

► SpecificProtagonist  
Replied on April 14th, 2011 ::  
How about we move to PM quiet boy?

End of Page. 1, --> 7, 8, 9
Another dull school day, classes uninteresting, time flowed like molasses. I was bored. I had no friends in school to make things tolerable. As I had thought, the rumour mill was already shipping me with Emma as ex-lovers, which at least amused me a little. I may be a bit vindictive. The down side was, I was getting more strange looks than usual. Even Greg had stopped attempting his awkward flirting. That was actually more of an upside, come to think of it.

During computer class I once again trawled the relevant threads. Chatter related to us and our exploits had sky-rocketed. I still wasn't sure it was the best idea to taunt the Wards by posting that video, cut for maximum trolling, but it sure was satisfying. It was kind of creepy to see people on the internet lusting after my male alter ego. It was creepier when one of them wanted to cyber with me. Eeeew. Still I guess that's what happens when I try to troll them with a disposable prepaid. On the bright side, it was firmly entrenched that Marceau was a guy, even though it was slightly depressing how convincing I was.

When school was finally over, a short bus ride and a walk later and I was home. Rather I was at the lair. It had only been a few days and I was already thinking of it as home. I felt a twinge of guilt at that. Dad had been trying, but we had a bit of an argument over the issue of mobile phones. He had insisted a electro-larynx would be better. It would let me talk, albeit in a creepy robotic monotone, devoid of any inflection. Frankly I'd rather remain silent than sound like that.

My keys jingled in the lock as I made my way inside, only to find myself face to face with Lisa, who was looking cheerful.

"You are coming with us." she said. "We are going shopping."

I was about to protest when she cut me off, "No complaints."

"Yeah, you should probably dress more girly." Snarked Alec, drawing attention to him and Brian standing a few feet away. I eyed him with my most withering stare, which only drew more laughs from him.

"Shush now Alec, its a bad idea to taunt someone who can wreck you with ease." Brian chuckled, before I was dragged out the door by Lisa and we made out way to the Board Walk.

-No Rachel?-

"Alas, her face is publicly known, so her coming along would draw the wrong kind of attention on us." Lisa explained.

-That sucks-

"Indeed it does, but she'd probably go ballistic if she saw that tormented lap dog." Brian said, pointing at an intense looking lady with Chihuahua with a hat strapped to its head.

-She does seem protective of her dogs-

"Yep, more so than people. I think her powers messed with her head a bit. Doesn't seem to get along with people well." said Lisa.

"What do you think?" I turned to see Alec, holding a Kid Win shirt up to his chest. I snorted.
"I like it. Ironic." said Lisa, clearly amused.

-Here I was thinking Lisa was the Troll.-

"Anyway, I'm stealing you." Lisa said as she grabbed my arm leading me towards some boutique clothing store. She paused and turned to Brian and Alec "We'll meet you two at Fugly Bob's for dinner? Unless you want to come along and hold our bags?

"No, no, just go and hog the new girl to yourself." Brian sighed melodramatically "We'll just have to cope with being abandoned."

"Why did you want to stop in here?" Lisa asked, her curiosity getting the better of her as I made my way to a florist. I held up my phone to her.

-Kind of feel a little guilty over GG-

"Please," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "she would have left you with most of your bones broken if you hadn't taken her out."

-Still it did more damage that I was intending.-

-Also not a complete monster-

"Ha!", she mock laughed, "You do realise of course this will probably be misinterpreted as some kind of courtship. It would be a guy sending the flowers after all."

I pondered that for a moment, a slight blush on my face as the implications hit me. I really hadn't thought of that aspect. Though really, I still wanted to send them, and it might well reinforce the disguise. My mouth spread into a mischievous grin, not quite big enough to rival Lisa's.

-I have an idea.-

After about an hour of being dragged from shop to shop, trying on all sorts of dresses and other things I wouldn't normally wear, I realised two things. Shopping was tiring and I really wasn't a typical girly girl. Emma, Madison and their crew probably would have been all over this sort of thing. Huh, it occurred to me that I really hadn't seen Madison around for quite sometime. Not sure why I would care though. Any further progress down that chain of thought was broken as we arrived in the food hall. More importantly, in front of Fugly Bob's, the purveyor of all things tasty and artery hardening.

"Wow" said Brian, shortly echoed by Alec as they stared at me. I felt a little self conscious, the red dress I was wearing a huge departure from my usual style. It also felt a little too breezy compared to my typical jeans and t-shirt.

"So she does have some curves after all." Noted Alec, causing me to blush. I knew logically he was bullshitting me, but it still felt strangely nice to be complimented anyway.

"That dress does look good on you." Brain commented, doing a quick once over, "Lisa knows her stuff apparently."

"I'm glad someone appreciates my talents," she said wrly, "I had to force Taylor to try on so many things, but she capitulated in the end."

-Takes too long to argue via text-
"Nonsense, you just realised I was right." She grinned. I held up my finger for a second then dropped it, shaking my head as I realised it wasn't worth it.

-Lets just eat.-

We arrived back at the lair after a slow dawdle back, the delicious food making us a little sluggish. I was the last up the stairs, content to saunter along.

“Where’s Rachel?” Brian asked, as he returned from the other end of the loft, Brutus and Angelica trotting behind him, tails wagging. “Only two of her dogs are here.”

"We are a little late, maybe she went ahead?” Said Lisa.

"Well we should costume up," Brian said, "We're supposed to hand over the cash tonight. I'll call Rachel and see what's up."

I had just finished getting my mime on, when I noticed a box on my dresser. Under the box was a note.

-Saw this, seemed right for a belated welcome gift.-
-Brian-

Intrigued I opened the box, revealing a silver pendant. A stylised pair of comedy/tragedy masks, about an inch across. Thalia enamelled white and Melpomene enamelled black. It was very likely the nicest gift I had ever received.

I stepped out of my room, mask in hand and found Brian nearby. Typing would be too awkward, but this probably wasn't much better. I walked up to him and gave him a brief hug.

"I take it you liked your gift." he said, over my shoulder.

“Hey!” a voice from behind me startling me out of the hug, “No office romances!”

I blushed heavily as I turned to see Alec and Lisa grinning. In Lisa’s case, grinning more than usual.

"So any word from Rachel?” Asked Lisa, before I could embarrass myself further.

Brian frowned, “No. Her phone is out of service, which it shouldn’t be, since I was the one who turned it on, activated it and gave it to her earlier today.”

That was worrying, and from the expressions on everyone else's faces, they thought the same.

"We should check on the money." Brian said, "Now."
We descended into the maze of storage lockers, a twisty windy path of ten by ten boxes, all alike.

"We want thirteen-oh-six", said Grue, cutting through the quiet contemplative silence, but doing nothing to ease the tension that we had all been wearing, bearing down on us like a weight. He lead the way through the confusingly ordered lockers and eventually stopped in front of a door indistinguishable from the others, the tiny number to the side, mostly obscured by dirt, being the only identifying feature. The door was opened to reveal the complete absence of our money.

"Fuck." Regent grunted.

"I wouldn't have expected Bitch to do this," Grue started, "I mean she is a grumpy reckless idiot at times, but I don't think we've done anything to piss her off lately."

"Not her," said Tattletale, "The door wasn't forced, she would have used the dogs."

"Who then?" Asked Regent, clearly wanting someone to pay.

"A villain." Tattletale replied, as she looked around, "Villains. They're still here."

"Villains. They're still here." Said someone as they came around the corner, dressed in bright, predominantly, yellow clothes, a strange backwards bird mask on their head, a turtleneck covering the lower half of their face. From the corner of another storage locker came an atrocious parody, that I felt offended by to the core of my being. He was wearing an absurdly rounded pink and white, thing, overing his torso, white gloves and blue curl toed shoes, limbs covered in a white bodystocking. Weird blue hair sprouted either side of his head.

"Mister Mime." Said the atrocity against mimes.

"Oh, I was worried, but its only Über and Leet" Tattletale said as she took in the strange duo.

"Oh, I was worried, but its only Über and Leet" Mimicked the one in yellow.

"Oh that is going to get old quick." Regent sighed.

"Oh that is going to get old quick."

"Über and Leet are hopeless and fuck everything up." Said Tattletale, her vulpine grin returned. 

"..."

"Mr Mime!" The abomination said, clearly angry.

"Take em down quick." Growled Grue. "Keep one conscious."

"Take em down quick." Growled the one in yellow. "Keep one conscious."

"Leet is the pink and white one," Tattletale, continued, mirth in her voice, "Easier to contain."

Darkness bloomed between Über the yellow and Grue as he charged in. I stared at the hideous parody that was Leet pointed at him and...

honk
I returned my horn and held my hands up to my face, right on left, middle and ring finger together, the rest splayed out. I swung my right arm back as I charged forwards then stopped suddenly arm shooting forwards. Leet put his hands forward, palms towards me and a shimmering field sprung into view before it flickered as my invisible bowling ball hit it. That made me very angry. Not only was he a gross mirror of my style, he was mocking my gimmick.

I shook my finger at him, before I had both hands grip the air in front of me and pulled. Leet was pressed up against his own force field like a bug against a windshield, before it flickered out and he tumbled to the ground. I marched towards him, letting my displeasure at his antics infuse every movement. About three yards away he looked up at me and raised a hand in the air and I was startled as I raised up from the ground at a worrying speed.

"Mime!" Leet cheered. This would just not do. Grabbing at an invisible rope anchored to the ground with my left hand, I found myself hanging upside down in the air. I caught a glimpse of Uber flying out of a cloud of darkness, tripping as he tried to get back up, then get engulfed again. Regent and Grue seemed to be taking care of things over there. I refocused on Leet thinking of a way around this. Ah ha! I grabbed another rope with my right hand and let go with my left. The look on Leet's... face?... was priceless as we both started flying into the sky.

He panicked and turned off whatever he was using, causing him to fall badly on his ankle with a cry of pain. I made two fists on top of each other and slid the top one up before opening it and returning it to my side, holding and invisible bag. My fall slowed as large umbrella only I could see billowed open, gently dropping me on Leet's chest. Sick of his shenanigans, I pulled off his gloves in the hope that they controlled his tinker gained powers, before rolling him over roughly and zip cuffing his hands behind his back as he moaned in pain from his possibly broken ankle.

I looked up in time to see the darkness dissipate, leaving the unconscious yellow form of Uber still on the ground.

"Well, it looks like our publicity will jump again." Tattletale said as she arrived at my side and pointed at a floating camera, hovering to the side of a locker. "They were recording the whole thing."

I looked at it and by impulse pulled out my horn, waved at the camera and...

honk

"Now to find out where Bitch and the money is." Grue said as he dragged Uber over to us, flanked by Regent.

"They should be stashed around here somewhere." Regent said, as he gave a Leet a light kick to the side, "So, where are they?"

"Well that was disappointing." A mechanically distorted voice boomed out from the top of one of the storage lockers. A woman stood there in ABB colours with a weird gasmask, goggles with lenses of red covered the other half of her face. "I was hoping they'd take at least one of you out. Get what you pay for I guess."

She snapped her fingers and the doors on storage lockers all around opened up, between one and three people in red and green behind each, all armed.

"Since I'm in charge now, might as well take out the ones who got me my promotion." She chuckled. "Get them!"
"Grab hold." Grue growled as he snatched my hand. I reached towards Tattletale as darkness billowed around us. My hand was in oily limbo for a panicked second before her hand wrapped around mine. I felt pulling in the direction of Grue, so went with the flow. I could only hope that the darkness kept us from random weapon swings.

We had barely gone anywhere at all, or maybe yards, it was hard to tell, before the darkness was cast aside, sound returning, bringing with it pain, ringing ears and knocking us to the ground. I felt points of agony, where bits of metal stuck out of left my shoulder and leg. The darkness seemed to have muffled the blast, as I couldn't imagine I would have been so lightly injured otherwise.

The shreds of darkness remaining did little to hide the mutilated bodies of several gang members. Not all of them were in gang colours. I barely contained my dinner as I realised they looked like civilians. I heard cackling up where Bakuda had been standing. Turning to look, her grenade launcher was held with both hands, a slight wisp of smoke venting from the barrel.

The psycho had just bombed her own people to get to us. I believed the comment 'shit just got real' aptly covered the situation. Über and Leet didn't seem bloodied, but weren't moving and I couldn't spare the time to check on them without getting myself blown up.

She pointed the barrel down at us, cackling like a, well, clearly she was a mad woman. We started scrambling to our feet to get clear, Regent snapping out his hand and throwing her aim off. Another grenade went flying over head, imploding with a strange sucking noise as it tore the roof off a nearby locker. She must have a brought a bunch of her tinker tech bombs for the fight and I had no idea what to expect from her creations. And so the chase started.

We weaved between the lockers trying to keep out of the line of fire. We made it about 20 yards before a locker near us burst open, narrowly missing us as the area was filled with giant shards of ice.

"Shit, she's mined the area." Yelled Tattletale, trying to be heard over the sounds of explosions elsewhere in the storage yard. In response, Grue summoned up a cloud of darkness further to our right, to draw her off, hoping for the best. I had another idea though. Tapping Tattletale on the shoulder as we ran, I pointed to my self, then up then pointed my thumb back toward Bakuda. She seemed to disapprove, but nodded anyway.

"Marceau is going to try something, we'll keep moving." She said, filling in the others.

With that done, I ran off down a side row, put my right arm up and started climbing up a non existent staircase, the metal in my leg making my nerves scream. I hit the roof running at an angle to my team, with a slight limp, and spotted the psycho as she aimed at me. Fuck. A grenade came flying towards me and I wasn't sure if my wall could take it. So I improvised. My hands gripped nothing, spread apart as I focused on a shape in my mind, hoping I wasn't killing myself with stupidity.

I stepped to the side and spun around, twisting my arms as I turned, the grenade turning with me a few feet from my leading hand, running off vague memories of a PE lesson on lacrosse. I completed my turn after a 180 and the grenade was sent back towards Bakuda, who seemed rather surprised, before the grenade exploded half way between us.

A black void, filled with pinpricks of light formed in the space between us before winking out. Shit, she must have another way of detonating them. There was no way she'd let me catch another. Time for plan B. I spun my arm around twice before making a throwing gesture her way as she loaded the
next grenade. I could barely spare the second I needed as she lined up another shot. I pulled to my left and the launcher was yanked from her hands, flying over the edge of the second storage locker over. With that opening I ran towards her, ignoring the gaps as my arms were held out to the sides.

The locker to my left made a dull thumping noise and I tried to make a wall, but at least some of the invisible shockwave got through and I dropped to my knees in agony. I must have looked like I was having a fit as I twitched and collapsed onto my face. My world consisted of pain and Bakuda's laughter for what seemed like eternity. More explosions rang out around me as the pain subsided enough to get control of my body and lifted myself off the roof, turning my head towards the mad bomber.

I panicked somewhat when she started pulling a grenade from her belt and then sighed with relief as her arm twitched and threw it behind her. Glancing to the side I saw Regent give me a mock salute. Needing to disable her before she blew anything else up, I decided to pull out an old trick for my audience. Still on my knees and a locker's distance away, I thrust my right hand forward in a gesture recognised by film goers everywhere and lifted.

Bakuda's hands went to her throat as she was lifted off the ground, choking and gasping, the sounds magnified by her voice distorter. A sphere of inky black formed around her face.

Tattletale called up from the path to my right, "She has a dead man switch and can control the bombs with toe rings, right foot. Needs to look at them". I nodded, details clicking slowly clicking into place around the haze. Tattletale was so very handy like that. I pointed at her boot and made some shaky motions with my left hand, and she moved to comply. Regent gave her a lift up and she hopped onto the roof, pulling the boot off and removing the rings. She waved and the Darkness dropped as dragged the arms of the struggling Tinker behind her back and cuffed them, letting me finally stop choking the bitch and instead wallow in glory and pain.

"Parahuman Response Team. What is your emergency?" said the voice on the phone.

**Honk-Honk**

"Fuck! Right in my ear!" the man on the line said. "Is this that mime? It is, isn't it? Why the hell do you even have a cell phone, anyway!?"

"Sorry, had to get your attention." Said Tattletale, completely unrepentant. In the background Regent was laughing his ass off.

"Can't! Breathe! Hahahaha! Laughing! Toohard! Hahahaha!"

"Anyway," continued Tattletale, "Bakuda has been secured at the storage lockers down near the train yard, where all those explosions happened. She implanted explosives in a bunch of civilians, so I suggest a bomb squad and ambulances.

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I said to call the PRT." Grue mumbled at Regent, when the laughing still hadn't stopped.

"She's been trussed up near the entrance and is ready for pick up, Ciao". Tattletale hung up the phone as we limped away, dragging the two other capes with us.

By the time the PRT vans and Protectorate capes had arrived, we were well out of there. When Über and Leet were awake and realised Bakuda almost killed them, they were rather willing to show us where our money and team mate were stashed. The fact that we had them at our mercy and tonight's
episode of their live had already far exceeded previous ratings probably helped too.

So it was that by the end of the night, we had passed to money off to our bosses minions, which would net us a tidy sum of about one hundred and twenty thousand. It definitely felt like we earned it. Rachel was roughed up a bit and blindfolded when we found her, and the rest of us were battered bruised from the shock waves and occasional shrapnel. The buzzing pain from the weird bomb had mostly gone, but there was still enough to make me miserable. A trip to the underground doctor's office let us stitch up our wounds and got me a bottle of some good pain killers.

With all the wounds and bruising, we decided it would be best for me to crash at the lair for the night. I had given Dad the hint I might be staying over, so hopefully it wouldn't create too much drama. It was well past one when we stumbled up the stairs to the loft, exhausted by triumphant. Shutting the door to my room behind me, I stripped of my costume, downed some pills, crawled onto camp bed and became dead to the world.
Amy was just sitting down to dinner with her family when the doorbell rang. She thought it odd that people would visit this late at night, but didn't pay it much thought as Carol went to the door, stopping by the security monitor on the way. She returned with a bemused look on her face carrying a slightly excessive bouquet, a mixture of roses and violets along with a card.

"Apparently you have an admirer Victoria." She said as she handed over the card and went to retrieve a vase to place them in.

"Oh Gallant must be all guilty again or something like that." Said Victoria as she opened up the sealed envelope. She removed the note inside, handwritten on beautiful parchment like cardstock.

-Dearest Glory Girl-
-I must apologise for our unfortunate encounter.-
-Never did I intend to mar your beauty or cause you pain.-
-I trust your sweet sister corrected my indelicate touch.-
-Please find it in your heart to forgive a clumsy fool.-
-Yours,-
-Marceau-

"..." Victoria failed to say, her mouth agape in shock and confusion, a slight twitch in her left eye.

"What is it Vicky?" Amy asked, concerned at this break in her beloved sister's unflappable demeanour. Victoria for her part just handed the note over, mouth still open, staring into the middle distance. Amy read the note, before passing it on, thus the look of confusion spread like a miniature epidemic around the Dallon residence.

After a short while, Victoria simply asked, "What the fuck?"

"Ames." Victoria cried out to her sister, "You've got to see this."

Amy wandered over to her sister's room, slightly annoyed at the distraction from her bedtime routine.

"What is it sis?" She asked, "I was just heading to bed."

"The Undersiders are on Über and Leet's web show." Victoria replied, a hint of excitement in her voice. 'Well that was interesting’, Amy thought and stood over her sister's shoulder and looked at the computer monitor.

"Wow, he seems really angry at Leet." Victoria commented as Marceau challenged the other villain with a horn honk.

"Well, Mr Mime would be pretty offensive to a mime, I guess." Amy replied. She then gasped at the antics of the two villains. "That is some bullshit right there. Its like watching a cartoon."

"Heh, next we'll have a Bugs Bunny burrowing around town." Victoria giggled at the absurd idea. "Wait what, did he just mime Mary fucking Poppins?"
Amy, equally shocked, could only mutter a simple "Yes."

"Well that was over quick, but I guess it was Über and Leet, those two couldn't fight their way out of a... who's that?"

"Never seen her before." Amy answered. The cape on the building was obviously a member of the ABB and wasn't Oni Lee. She vaguely remembered a name starting with B. Her thoughts were derailed by the explosion that shook the camera, and the aftermath left them both speechless.

"What the fuck, she's crazy!" Victoria said, her eyes wide and disbelieving the scene in front of her. The camera view didn't show much other than the crazy bomb lady firing grenades and the Undersiders running though between the storage lockers, flashes and sounds coming from off panel for a minute or two. Then it panned and zoomed out slightly to capture movement from the right of the screen as Marceau came in to view in time to be shot at.

"Oh god." cried Amy as the grenade flew through the air at the mime, followed shortly by "How the?" as the grenade was thrown back, the camera flickering for a moment from the explosions effect, static between frames showing a starry void. Then the grenade launcher went flying from her hands.

A gasp came from Victoria as Marceau was caught in the blast of something and fell down spasming. More explosions came off panel for a while. Marceau began struggling to his knees, patches of red showing on the black and white stripes of his shirt, before the female cape for some reason threw a grenade behind her. Marceau seem to pause for a moment as if needing to gather his strength before he thrust his hand out and the woman was lifted to the air and grasping at her throat, before her head was concealed.

"Did he just go Vader on her?" Amy asked her sister, blinking at the absurdity of it all, "Wait, did she just say deadman switch?"

They watched in silence as the mad woman was disarmed and restrained and Marceau finally collapsed again on the roof of the storage locker. The feed then cut out in darkness.

"Wow. Just wow." Vicky said, her mind trying to process her new found admiration for the sheer determination of that bloody mime.

"Shit, I'm getting the feeling he was really holding back on you. Did I tell you he took out Lung?" Amy muttered.

"Oh that's what she meant when she was talking about promotion. The ABB have been wrecked by that guy."

"I find myself not really sympathising with the woman who just exploded her own gang."

"Yeah." Victoria said in perfect agreement.

Amy woke up late after a slightly fitful night, the images from last night replaying in her mind. The fact that she hadn't been called in meant they had likely either died, or were recovering well enough on their own. She checked her schedule for the day and, seeing it was fairly clear decided to get on with that favour for Miss Militia. While she would have happily taken a break from all the healing, Miss Militia was always kind to her, and she seemed rather concerned about this Taylor person. She brought up the details that were forwarded to her and rang the number.

"Hello Hebert residence, Danny speaking." A voice on the other end answered.
"Ah hi, Mr Hebert this is Panacea from New Wave, I've been asked to look in on your daughter. Something about a damaged larynx?"

"Wow, uh yes Taylor got a nasty infection a while back. I'm kind of surprised to hear from you frankly, the money from the school barely covered expenses. And well this is better than I could have hoped for."

"When would be a good time to drop by? Today is mostly free."

"Um, Taylor is off at a friend's place at the moment, can I get a number to call you on once I know when she'll be back?"

"Sure, though if it isn't today I may have more trouble with scheduling." She said and gave him a phone number to be directed through.

"Thank you, Ms Panacea."

Amy hung up the phone and went to find her sister, to see if there was something fun to do today. Maybe a day where she wasn't needed to heal people, where she could just relax.

Her phone rang. Looking at the number, she silently cursed her luck.
"Taylor."

_Huh? What was that?_

"Taylor?"

_Who, what?_

"Taylor!"

My eyes slowly peeled open to reveal a blurry pink and gold blob hovering over me. Why was a blob hovering over me?

'Go away blob', my lips said, with no sound.

"Whoa, how many of those did you take?" The blob asked. Staring at it, it was starting to look a bit more familiar but I couldn't say why, probably the noises it was making. I felt something touch my face and the blob resolved into a face I could recognise as my glasses settled into place. Lisa. I tried to lift myself out of bed and stopped when I felt stabbing in my shoulder and leg. That helped clear the fog from my mind somewhat. Oh yes, the bombs. I gestured a typing motion with a hand, and true to form, Lisa understood and passed me my phone, letting me type out a reply.

_-Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww-_ 

My thumb hadn't wanted to move for a bit there.

"Taylor, how many pills did you take?"

_-2?-_ 

"That can't be right, you shouldn't be this out of it from so little. Oh shit, those bombs must have worked you over harder than we thought."

I was confused for a bit, before I took in a small detail, the time in the top right corner of the phone. 12:53. Shit I had been asleep for half a day, a small mercy that is was a Saturday.

_-Shit-_ 

"So, we have some good news and some bad news, little miss coma. If you are awake enough?" Tattletale said, holding a newspaper in hand. I had a feeling I was not going to like this, but I nodded anyway. "Which would you like first?"

_-Bad-_ 

"Well, while we were off dealing with missing money and the mad bomber, Oni- Lee bust Lung out of his prison transport." She told me, a slight frown creeping in, trying to steal ground from the perpetual grin. That was all sorts of bad. Lung was probably going to want payback for my victory against him, and since we'd taken out one of his minions, megalomaniacal as she had been, that probably wouldn't help matters.

_-Yay.-_
"You mean we." Lisa snorted, before she continued on. "Good news is, with our little interrogation and the PRT actually doing their job, it looks like Bakuda's follow up surprises have been dealt with. Given what isn't said in the article, I'm going to guess they offered to not put her in the Bird Cage in exchange with assistance in finding and disarming a bunch of bombs."

-Well that's a relief.-

"I kind of lied though," she added, drawing a stern look from me, "there's a third bit of news, that is kind of good and bad." I just rotated my wrist to indicate she should get on with it.

"Well Uber and Leet's stream became very popular due to our exploits last night and a couple key points have come from that." She paused for a moment for presumably dramatic effect. And I though I was bad for that.

"One, Uber and Leet apologised on their stream for attacking us, saying they didn't know Bakuda was a psycho, and let it be known that we informed the PRT about the bomb situation. That means we have a bit more reputation as being villains with a conscience." Well that was good. I wasn't a monster, so having people realise that was useful.

"Two, that we are bad asses, you in particular, who can and will put down psychos who don't play by the rules." Also a handy thing, helps with our reputation. If we played by the unwritten rules, they were more likely to apply to us.

"Three, your Vader trick got people speculating that you can bypass the Manton Effect. I don't think you can strictly, but people are going to stop underestimating you real quick once that idea spreads."

I let that sink in for a moment. The implications that I was going to get priority target status was one of the first things that popped into my head. The second being that it was going to get harder to surprise people with my powers when they were expecting me to be around. That... complicated matters. I decided to respond in a simple manner that managed to encapsulate many of the thoughts running through my head.

-Damn-

"Yeah." Lisa agreed.

"Taylor" Lisa said, grabbing my attention as I came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a bathrobe and towelling my hair. I looked over at her and tilted my head.

"I called your Dad to say you'd be hanging around a bit longer, using you being in the shower as an excuse to cut down on the awkward." She sighed. "We may have a problem."

My eyebrow raised at that. What else could go wrong?

"Panacea called. Apparently someone asked her to heal you. I've got her contact details." My eyes went wide at that. Implications hammered my mind as those words were processed. Did the PRT finally have the balls to admit its fault? Did they somehow find out who I was. Was this just Panacea being self sacrificing as usual? My lips moved through the shapes of several obscenities as these questions looped around.

"Yeah, if what you told me is true, which I'm about ninety percent sure of, I wouldn't put it past them to get you healed to cover their own asses." Lisa said, latching on to one of my ideas. "I'm pretty sure
they don't know who you are yet, or they probably would have gotten your Dad in on bringing you in. Still, can't have you getting healed with all those wounds still fresh. We'll have to delay things somehow."

I held up a finger then moved to my room to get dressed and retrieve my phone, gestures weren't quite good enough for this conversation. I concentrated on the clothes, trying my hardest to suppress the panicked thoughts. Methodically putting on one of the new dresses we'd picked up I looked at myself in the mirror and concentrated on setting my face into a serene mask of calmness. Calm on the outside, calm on the inside. I was getting better at lying to myself.

Returning to the lounge, I pulled out my phone and tapped out a question.

-Game plan?-

"Well I see two options. Plan A, delay. Plan B, go to the hospital with extra wounds, claiming you got jumped by thugs on the way back home, help disguise the shrapnel wounds. Get Panacea to do a combo healing on you."

-Plan B sounds like a horrible plan-

"True, but it does have the advantage of getting Panacea to heal your voice while keeping suspicion low."

-Additional injuries is still a bad plan.-
-Dad would freak too.-

"It would only hurt till you got healed." Her vulpine grin had returned, clearly mocking me at this point. I chose to ignore it.

-How would we delay?-  
-Dad will get suspicious.-

"Fine, if you want to delay, you could try telling him you don't want to take up time that could be used to heal terminal patients. Swing it as you being compassionate rather than afraid of discovery. I don't think it will work and plan B would be more straightforward." I glared at her.

-Enough with the planned stabbings-

"How about tripping down some stairs?" Lisa chuckled.

Today was not going very well, and the headache was starting to return.
-I'll be at the Brockton Memorial Hospital till 4pm-
-Panacea-

-Ok, I'll see you there.-
-Thank you-
-Taylor-

I still couldn't believe I had agreed to this crazy ass plan. Note to future self, please don't listen to Lisa when possibly concussed and hopped up on pain killers. It had taken us a while to come up with a plan that I was even remotely willing to follow. The way Alec had perked up at that idea of stabbing was just a little disturbing. We had gone with a 'hit and run' instead the 'mugging' as I could claim I didn't see the car properly, rather than having to convince the police of the details of my 'assailant'. At least the shrapnel wounds had only been closed with butterfly sutures.

We had found a fairly quiet street, half way to the hospital, close enough that an ambulance wouldn't take long, but little enough traffic to avoid actual witnesses. Once in place, wearing a spare set of clothes, now ruined by dirt and fresh blood, I messaged Panacea again with my cheap brick phone.

-Car hit me-
-Cnr George & 4th-
-please send help-

It didn't take long for a reply.

-Ambulance on the way.-
-See you soon.-

And so, with a mix of relief, regret, and not a little pain, I found myself on a stretcher being loaded up on an ambulance. My wounds had been reopened and some broken bits of headlight and glass poking out of the holes to sell the story. I would have thought they'd hurt more than they did, but I guess with the residual opiates and all the other aches, they seemed less in comparison. Then the paramedics gave me a strange green whistle device to breath from and all the pain just floated away.

After giggling like a loon, or at least looking like I was, for who knows how long, I found myself in a place with white ceilings. My lips were moving but no sound came out. The lights are so bright, silly lights. I feel like I'm flying. Who are you? Oooh wow, you're really shiny in white. Can I have more green whistles? Oooh curtains!

"Taylor is it? I'm Panacea." The pretty lady in the white said as she looked down at my face. Oooh, Panacea! I know you. your dress is pretty. Cute freckles. I silently giggled and a grin spread on my lips."Do I have your permission to heal you?".

My head was too floppy to nod so my right hand popped up in the air, wobbling as I stuck my thumb up.

"Methoxyflurane?" She asked as she poked her head out of the curtains.
"Yes." I heard from behind them.

"Well that explains that." A small smirk on her face as she returned to my side. "Okay, if you can hold my hand, well get you sorted." She took my hand in hers, and I squeezed it a bit. Hee hee, pretty lady in white. She looked at me funny before closing her eyes and frowning in concentration.

My body felt warm and tingly. The wounds in my shoulder and thigh as well as my throat felt uncomfortable and much warmer. Unpleasant but not painful. Then the cheerful fog I was in lifted away, leaving me fully aware and cognisant of the fact that I had just gotten healed by Panacea, aka Amy Dallon, aka the girl I held hostage, aka the sister of Glory Girl, and she was holding my hand in a warm, tender grip. I found myself squeezing her hand again before I realised what I was doing and what I had been trying to say in my drug addled state.

I diverted my face away from her partially in embarrassment but mostly in guilt. Totally guilt, yes.

"Wow, you were pretty beat up, but you're all patched up now." She said. "Voice should work too." I looked back up to her, I had almost forgotten why I was here with all the other things going on in my head.

"Thank you." I said. I blinked a few times, surprised at how quiet that came out. She also looked a bit surprised. Was there still some damage, or some kind of mental block thingy? Oh, my sound dampening must be effecting it. I tried speaking a bit louder.

"Thank you." I said again, this time a bit more audibly, before continuing, trying to judge the effort I needed. "Sorry. Its been a few months, I must have forgot how to get the right volume."

"That's alright. Brains do funny things like that." she said with a weary smile. It was then that I noticed just how exhausted she looked. Shit, now I felt even more guilty, making her heal me when she looked like she hadn't had a decent night's rest in weeks. Did my actions at the bank cause that?

"Are you okay?" I asked nervously, "You look exhausted. Damn I'm sorry. Here I was, selfishly coming to get you to heal me when you need a good long rest."

"Huh. You're one of the few people to actually notice that." She said in a whisper. She squeezed my hand, reflexively squeezing back and drawing my attention to the fact that we hadn't let go. "Thank you." I glanced at our intertwined hands and blushed.

"No, I should be thanking you. You've let me talk again and you did it when you really didn't have to." I rambled, not quite meeting her eyes. "Thank you.

"Its alright." she said, with a small chuckle, trying to calm me down. "I wouldn't have even known you needed healing if Miss Militia didn't ask me." I looked up at her, stunned confusion spreading through my face. Surely I didn't hear that. I need to make sure.

"Huh?" I asked, my vocabulary failing me.

"Yeah I don't know why. She just seemed very angry at whoever did that to you." The concerned look on her face showed she had some idea. "Never seen her like that before."

I curled in on myself as I pondered the implications. My eyes, the traitorous bastards that they were, started glistening with tears. Damn it. I basically had confirmation that Sophia was Shadow Stalker from one of the most well know capes in the city. That should reaffirm my beliefs and yet it sounded like at least someone there was sympathetic. Damn, shit, fuck. Not what I needed to hear. I needed to remain calm. Needed to bottle it up and survive. Needed to -
"Are you okay?" She asked. "Did you want to talk about it?"

The question, asked so quietly and with obvious concern was the last straw. The mixture of grief, guilt, happiness and fear was too overwhelming. Tears flowing and sobbing, I started telling a stranger that I knew better than she thought, how three girls had made my life hell since the start of high school.

She stood there listening, comforting and still holding my hand.
"Sorry." I said, as I dried up my tears with some tissues. "Didn't mean to vent on you like that."

"Its alight." Amy said, a tired smile on her face. "I, well... I help people. You needed to vent and I was here. No harm done."

I could tell that she was feeling awkward about the whole thing, but she did seem to be trying to be supportive, so I guess that's what mattered.

"Well I owe you one. If you ever need to vent, let me know." I said, knowing it was probably a bad idea to continue associating with her. She just seemed so miserable, and I couldn't help but sympathize. She looked at me and sighed.

"I may just take you up on that one day." She looked at her watch before sighing again. "I better get back to it, they're probably starting to wonder where I am. Catch you around maybe?"

"Yeah," I answered, surprised that I meant it, "I'd like that."

The talk with the police didn't take very long. They apparently had more important things to deal with than a non-fatal hit and run, where the victim had no details. As such, when Lisa had arrived with a spare set of clothes, we left as soon as I changed.

"So, not quite what you expected eh?" Lisa said with a grin as we walked to the nearest bus stop.

"No, not really." I replied. Lisa's ability was damn annoying at times. Picking up on my mood, she just grinned harder, drawing a stare from me. I sighed. "Its good to talk again, but I have to put so much effort into it just to get the right fucking volume."

"And how was meeting Ms Dallon outside of business context?" She asked cryptically, in full fox grin mode.

"She's nice." I said, mumbling a bit. "And I feel even more guilty now. She helped me despite being exhausted."

"There's something else too, isn't there?" I looked at her, she seemed rather cheeky about it. I didn't like what she was implying.

"Get your mind out of the gutter." I said turning my gaze away. "Miss Militia told her about me, apparently all angry at the injustice of it or some such."

"And now you are wondering if you made the wrong choice?" Lisa asked, her tone shifting a little.

"Not exactly." I said. "I still think if the PRT weren't a bunch of corrupt bastards I would have got an apology from them, or even better, it never would have happened because they would have kept a better watch on the psycho bitch."

We walked on in silence for a bit longer and took a seat on the empty bus stop bench.

"I just don't know if I should be cynically suspecting Miss Militia of trying to hush things up, or whether I should be relieved there might actually be a decent human being in their ranks."
"Well we're villains with hearts of gold, so I guess its possible even heroes can be good people occasionally" She said with a small chuckle, and I couldn't help but smile with her.

"I should probably let Dad know." I said after a short while. "Do me the favor of coming along?"

"Well, I do kind of owe you for saving us last night." She replied.

"Dad? I'm home" I said, as loud as I could, which wasn't very. I guess I couldn't complain too hard that the crazy telekinesis came with some drawbacks. His head popped into the doorway to the kitchen, eyes wide as things fell into place.

"Taylor! You can talk!" He cried out as he came to me and pulled me into a hug. "I need to buy that girl some flowers or something."

"Can't... breath!" I squeaked, enveloped in a crushing embrace. He realized how hard he was hugging me and relaxed a bit. "Thanks"

"Hi, Mr Hebert" Lisa said, greeting from just outside the door.

"Come in, come in. Lisa was it?" He said, waving her inside.

"Correct." She confirmed as stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "Nice to finally meet you. Things have been a bit busy, or I would have tried sooner."

"Nice to meet you too, would you like something to drink?" He asked as he gestured to the couch and walked back into the kitchen.

"A coffee would be wonderful if I could?" She said, as we both took a seat on the couch.

"Tea please, Dad." I added.

"So Lisa, Taylor told me you had already finished high school." Dad said from the kitchen as he rummaged through the shelves.

"That's right. I do some free lance consultant work with various firms." She told him, using her cover identity. It was true, she did do a bit of work here and there. It just wasn't her primary source of income. She continued on with something we had discussed on the way over. "I've actually been wanting to get Taylor to assist me a little, in exchange for some spending money. If that's fine with you?"

"As long as it doesn't impact on her studies." He said, as he finished preparing our drinks. "What sort of things?"

"Oh, mostly just goffering and help with paperwork." She explained. "The occasional IT problem and so on."

"That sounds good." He said, a slightly suspicious look crossing his face. "As long as you aren't taking advantage of my daughter."

"Oh no, nothing like that." She said with a grin, just as I was taking a sip of my tea. "We're just good friends."
"Did you really have to embarrass me like that?" I asked, as we made our way back to the lair.

"It wasn't that bad." Lisa commented with a chuckle. "The tea washed out just fine."

I glared at her and we traveled in silence for a while longer.

"He's quite protective of you, you know?"

"Yeah, he is." I mumbled as I unlocked the door to the warehouse. "Occasionally hard to talk to though."

Which probably won't be helped by your comments, I added mentally.

"Heh, that's what parents are for." She grinned, but there was a slight bitterness to her voice. I was about to ask about it when I was distracted by the confetti flying into my face.

"Congratulations" Brian said as he threw more at me.

"So, speak." Alec said, also scattering colorful paper my way. "I want to hear how silly you sound."

"Oh hardy har har." I replied as I gave him a punch in the shoulder. "It wasn't enough that you get to shove glass in my wounds, you have to mock me too?"

"Well I do have to have see how well you snark back when you don't get to write." He replied, an amused smirk lifting the side of his mouth.

"I'll forgive you for now," I said, glaring at him, "because I am in a good mood. Even if I am shouting to talk at this level."

"Ouch, sound dampening power?" Asked Brian.

"Yes. First thing I said after I was healed came out as barely a whisper." I explained as we proceeded up stairs.

"So, pizza to celebrate?" Asked Alec, drawing groans.

"Thai." I suggested to more approval, though Alec huffed.

"I'll order." Said Brian, heading to the phone. I found Rachel off in the corner, giving Brutus a brush down.

"Hi Rachel." I said as I approached. She looked up at me and nodded, before returning her focus to the dog. She was still quiet as ever, but at least now I could communicate with her with more than gestures. A thought occurred to me. "Would he like a belly rub?"

She looked back up at me and stared for a moment and said. "Okay. Be careful. He likes it between his front legs." I kneeled down and started rubbing gently where she indicated, which earned me an appreciative whine from the dog and a nod from her.

"You like dogs?" She asked, a kind of wary cast to her brow.

"Yep. They're loyal." I said before voicing a darker thought that got be slight nod from Rachel. "They don't stab you in the back."
"Woah, someone's being melodramatic." Said Alec, apparently having overheard me from the couch.

"Yeah, been dwelling on the past a bit much today. We have a movie to watch or something to distract me?"

Alec suggested Heathers, but Lisa slapped him down and made us watch some brainless comedy instead. In hindsight, that was probably a good decision.
A weekend of relaxing and just hanging around with the gang did a lot to improve my mood. I could talk, but I still found myself falling back on non verbal communication a lot. I just really didn't feel like having to shout all the time. It left me drained, and a little frustrated, but I was coping. If only I could get a better handle on the strange passive sound dampening that had effected me since I got my powers. I guess if I ever had to change up my style, I could always be a ninja or something.

So it was that I found myself relatively happy when I returned to school on Monday. Not that school itself was responsible for my mood, just it didn't seem so daunting anymore. Getting partially blown up and saving perhaps hundreds of people apparently gives one new perspective on the importance of things. It barely even registered that I had a slight smile on my face until someone pointed it out.

"Fuck me sideways." A voice whispered from my left, drawing my attention to the girl sitting there. "First time I've seen you smile"

Apparently I had spaced out a bit while eating lunch and hadn't noticed her sitting down next to me. She looked a bit younger than me and so was probably in a lower grade, which could also explain why she didn't look particularly familiar. She was rather pretty and, well, curvier than me. Beautiful dark skin and hair was contrasted by the kind of trashy clothing she wore. I considered talking to her, but found myself not caring enough. I hadn't spoken to anyone at school today. No one expected me to, and I didn't really think any of them worth the effort. Instead, I flipped out my notepad and wrote a simple question.

-Do I know you?- 

"Don't think so," she said with a smile, "but I've seen you moping around the place. So when I saw you looking happy, it caught my attention. You get laid or something?"

I snorted at the idea, rather startled at the abruptness of the question and the complete lack of tact. It was like I was talking to a gender flipped Alec, only even more crass, as unlikely as that seemed. I was about to write a response when I thought, fuck it. At least she seems interesting.

"Or something. My weekend was pretty good is all." I said in a whisper. I didn't really know her, so no point going all out.

"Shit, you can talk?" Her eyes bulged a bit. I couldn't blame her really.

"I can now. Part of the cheeriness." I whispered.

"Well no fucking wonder." She laughed, "Praise the lord, its a miracle"

"Don't go spreading it around." I said, as a smirk formed. "I might actually have to talk people."

She laughed a bit drawing a stare from someone walking by, before she gave him the finger and he stopped looking.

"So why haven't I seen you before?" I asked. Surely I would have noticed such a boisterous girl around.

"Eh, hardly come to school, boring as shit." She said. "Had nothing better to do today is all."

"Yeah, I can relate to that." I looked at her for a moment, before adding, "I'm Taylor."
"Aisha." She replied with a cheeky grin.

Aside from the strange new person I found myself sharing my lunch times with, the next few days passed in a blur of mediocrity. Dad had been wanting us to spend a little more time together, so I only had an hour or two to hang out with the rest of the Undersiders. Instead, we shared awkward family dinners and the occasional TV show, when I wasn't avoiding him with 'homework'. I didn't have to heart to tell him I was bored out of my skull. The rest of the team were still recovering, having to heal the old fashioned way, so no jobs had been planned either.

By Thursday I was getting to the end of my rope and had left a note for him after school and headed to the lair. It was deserted apart from Rachel and her dogs. I wasn't expecting much in the way of conversation, so I was surprised when she came up to talk to me after our perfunctory greetings.

"So, you like dogs right?" She asked warily.

"Yes, dogs are good." I responded, somewhat bluntly, not that she seemed to notice.

"Want to help me save some?" That made me pay more attention. Rachel asking for help was something I don't think I had experienced before.

"What do I need to do?" I asked, curious as to what she planned.

"Skin heads have a dog fighting ring. Sick fuckers make the dogs fight and die for fun." Rachel explained. "Can do it myself, but you'd be handy."

"Sounds good." I said, pondering for a moment. "But with the rest of the team, we could do it better. Safer for the dogs and screw the Empire more."

She looked at me for a while, considering my points. I think what swayed her most was the safety of the dogs.

"Fine." She said finally.

"So, the idea is we free the dogs, trash the building and run off with their cash." I told the rest of the team. "Rachel is happy, dogs are happy, our rep increases and we make money."

"So where is this place?" Asked Brian.


"So well in Empire territory." Lisa added before grinning. "They aren't likely to expect an attack there. If we attack during the day, less people and the dogs should all be locked up right?"

"Yeah, they keep most on site." Rachel said, "About twenty."

"We'd get the most cash a night though, right?" Alec asked, clearly not that fussed about the dogs.

"Yeah, but we're more likely to have to deal with Hookwolf or one of his minions." Lisa pointed out.

"You'd do this with out our help any way, wouldn't you?" Brian asked, staring at Rachel.

"Yeah." She replied.
"I've already agreed to help." I added. I guess I still had a weakness for 'moral' actions, and getting to bloody the noses of a bunch of racist douche bags while doing it appealed to me.

"Still not sold on the idea." Alec said.

"Think of it this way, we get to flip the bird to the entire Empire with this. Why stop with the ABB?" I said with a smile.

"Tempting, but no."

"Fine, you three can have my share of the cash." Rachel said, surprising all but me. I had let her know earlier that that might be necessary.

"Ok, sold." Alec said after a moment. "But don't expect me to clean up after the dogs or anything."

Brian and Lisa both pondered for a bit, before nodding in agreement.

"Well, we better start planning then." Said Brian as he pulled up a map of the area on a laptop. "We want this to be as clean as possible."
Friday afternoon found us loaded up in a pair nondescript white delivery vans, a block away from the factory where the dogs were held. Tattletale was in the driver's seat chatting on a phone and Bitch was in the back with her partially enlarged dogs, repeating the trick from the bank job to lessen the stress on them. Grue and Regent were with the other empty one, space enough for the dogs we were expecting.

I was wearing the new costume I ordered through the boss a week ago. It made a sizeable dent in my funds, but I still didn't have a good way use the money for my civilian life with out attracting attention, so I didn't mind. The mask was plain white with a neutral expression on it, but waving my new gloves over it would change it between neutral (left), happy (up), sad (down) and, at significant additional cost, troll face (right). The gloves were made of Kevlar, armoured plated on the back and had limited stun gun functionality. Underneath it all was an armoured body suit to help absorb a few extra hits. I had learned my lesson from Bakuda and intended to avoid injuries of that level again.

"Okay, we're clear to go." Tattletale said as she hung up her phone. While we weren't getting any bonus cash, the Boss had agreed to provide a little surveillance assistance free of charge. Apparently it suited his plans for us to embarrass the E88, or perhaps it would work as a distraction for something else. Either way it seemed Hookwolf had left the site an hour earlier after making a short stop by, so that was one less thing to potentially deal with. Tattletale adjusted the new addition to her costume, a fancy looking hair clip, nearly unidentifiable for what it was, a miniature camera. The plan being to allow for some extra humiliation for the E88 and good PR for us if all went well.

"Move out." Grue said over the radio and we drove up to the back of the office section of the factory before jumping out and running the last few feet to the entry. As I ran, I reached out and gripped my hands shoulder width apart, before spinning, extending my arms out and sliding my hands together. The front door splintered and flew off its hinges as an imaginary, cartoon-ish sledge hammer impacted with it at full spin.

The door collided with a very surprised skinhead before carrying them both to the ground. The other three inside were to shocked to react as three shoulder height dogs leapt through the doorway, knocking them to the ground. Regent strolled in, taking down the three with his sceptre as they were pinned by the slobbering beasts, gnashing teeth a few scant inches from their faces.

"Dog cages are this way" Tattletale said, directing us through a door to our left into what was once a staff cafeteria. Cages lined the walls of the large room, easily enough to store a hundred canine champions. Though most were empty, there were still a few more than the twenty odd we had expected and many not in great condition. I waved my hand down my face for sadness while Tattletale glanced around before adding, "Fuck, there are forty two of them."

"That complicates things" Grue growled, the plan having been derailed in under 3 minutes.

"I'll run my dogs, fit more in my van." Bitch said bluntly, not even considering leaving any behind. She moved up to the first set of cages, unlatching them and the rest of us soon joined her Regent kept watch. About half of the dogs were loaded up before things went awry. With all the barking, whimpering and occasional grown from the swarm of dogs, some of them only puppies, we didn't hear the approach of reinforcements till they came through one of the side doors. With the door slammed open, we could clearly see that we had a bit more trouble on our hands. Five more mooks as well as Cricket and Stormtiger made this cake walk into more of a challenge.

"Take em out, no one messes with the Empire." Shouted Stormtiger as he and Cricket literally leaped
into action, fucking acrobatic villains. The rest of the skin heads were more sedate about it, instead pulling out weapons and pressing forward, only to be engulfed by darkness. Stormtiger's landing was less than graceful, as Regent twitched his leg. A clanging noise echoed through the room as he face planted, his metal mask hitting concrete. It didn't take long for him to recover, launching himself to his feet with a gust of wind, before a whistle sounded and one of the monster dogs tackled him from the side, sending them tumbling to the floor in a tangle of flesh.

Cricket had landed right in front of me. She paused for a second looking confused before swinging one of her blades at me. I had no idea why, but it gave me enough time to make a wall, causing the blade to glance off thin air. My hands still pressed palms towards her, I pushed. She stumbled back, slightly started before she recovered and bounced to the side to avoid being squished against the empty cages. I dropped the wall, reaching out with my right hand and pulling, spinning Cricket end over end as I pulled on a leg.

The agile bitch landed gracefully on the wall before jumping towards Tattletale instead. The blond dived out of the way, but still caught the tip of one of Cricket's blades across her side, causing her to yelp in pain as she rolled along the floor landing face up. Cricket had followed up, dodging leaping dog monsters as she chased her new prey. Everything I knew of Cricket said she had amazing reflexes, and her motions backed that up. Which is why it surprised me that she hadn't dodged my fairly clumsy attempt at distracting her from my team mate. What I felt should have been a sickening crunch didn't sound out, as Cricket went flying to the side, my invisible baseball bat having connected with some ribs. I leaned over Tattletale, my mask still a frown as I helped her up with my right hand.

"She can't hear you." Tattletale laughed before grimacing at the pain that caused. "She uses sonar."

Well that explained some things, and with a quick wave to my right, my face matched my thoughts as she regained her feet. Turning I saw Grue step out of the dissipating darkness as it slowly revealed a quintet of battered thugs. He marched towards us before a big dog went flying through the space between us, a strange growling Doppler effect adding a bit more to the surreal scene. A bellowing Stormtiger stomped into view pointing our way with one of his aero-kinetic claws.

"You'll pay for th-urk" He started to say before convulsing and dropping to the floor, revealing a jaunty looking Regent behind him, twirling his sceptre.

"I would have thought he'd have better spatial awareness." Regent said as he leaned down and gave him another prod to be sure. "I guess he was to hopped up on Eye of the Tiger."

A chorus of groans ensued.

I was sitting in the passenger seat of the van as we pulled into the building we had found to store all the rescued dogs, a cute little Staffordshire terrier puppy in my lap. I had picked him up when I noticed him taking a leak on one of the unconscious thugs while we were loading up the second van, instantly gaining my admiration. Rachel had agreed with my choice, even if it did possibly speak of poor house training. We had zip tied the E88 thugs as well as the two capes before we called in the PRT. I wondered how they would react to the almost PETA like anti animal abuse graffiti we had left on the scene.

Rachel had made her way separately and would be meeting up with us later, in the mean time, we had very clear and simple instructions from her to lead the dogs into the makeshift kennel and pour out some more food for them, the previous amount being inadequate.

The cash on site was a bit less than we had hoped, probably because of Hookwolf's earlier visit. We
came away with a bit over six grand, but given how 'happy' Rachel had looked as we finished loading up the dogs, I didn't mind and Brian had been happy enough at taking the racist bastards down a few pegs. Lisa still needed a bit more attention to her wound, so she and Brian were off to see our doctor friend while I started seeing to the dogs and Alec wandered off to do his own thing, somewhat grumpy at the shoddy pay off.

Alone bar a cluster of canines, I had a lot of time to think on things. Namely that I had royally pissed off some of the more powerful capes in the city, and once the footage was suitably edited and posted online, we were probably going to earn even more fame, in a very dangerous way. I found myself relishing the idea though. A shrink would probably call it an unhealthy attention seeking compulsion or something. They would probably be right, but here I was, fighting back against people who were basically bullies, just on a larger scale. As such, it felt right and almost just, even if I was doing it in a... less than legal manner.

So it was that Rachel found me, a mirthful grin plastered on my face, playing with a couple of puppies and quietly laughing. A small nod from her head suggested she approved.
Another night spent at the loft and the new bed I had put in was a fair bit more comfortable than the inflatable camp bed I had been using earlier. Dragging myself out of bed to go for my morning run had been a bit more difficult. I hadn't thought I'd exerted myself that badly yesterday, but I guess hauling dogs around, as well as big bags of dry food for a good chunk of the evening could do that. Still, no sense in getting soft, so I forced myself out of the door and ran a loop through the Board Walk.

When I returned about a half hour later, I was displeased to discover that the hot water had been depleted by my team mates in a most villainous manner, so rather than a relaxing hot soak, I was startled into hyper awake mode by ice water. So it was that, mostly dry and slightly shivering in my bath robe, I passed through the lounge room.

"So, I need a hand with assembling some furniture in my apartment." Brian said, clearly fishing for volunteers. Rachel was off at our makeshift dog shelter, leaving Lisa, Alec and myself as targets.

"Nope, busy." Alec said as he continued to play some kind of military game on the lounge room TV. I was not at all surprised by his lack of effort in making a convincing alibi.

"Sorry Brian," Lisa said, "I've got to see to a couple of things for my civilian job that I've let pile up. TPS reports and such. Also, the wound is limiting my movement somewhat."

As she was walking off to her room/office she gave me a wink. Was she letting me in on a joke or something? If so I couldn't see it.

"I guess I can give you a hand." I offered, in a barely audible whisper. "I have nothing better to do, and I'll finally get to see this fancy apartment of yours."

"Thanks. I need to have it all ready for an inspection early next week." He said. "Luckily things have been quiet enough to let me do it early."

"Hey!" Shouted Alec from the couch, "No Jinxing us."

"He has a point." I said with a chuckle, "Let me just get dressed and we can go."

Scanning through the small wardrobe I had available, I needed clothes a bit more suitable for manual labour than a sundress like I had been wear a lot of lately, so chose a pair of jeans, a short sleeve top in red and a white hoodie. Not as fancy as some of my other clothes, but still colourful and a lot more practical. With both of us ready we left the lair to catch a bus towards Brian's abode. As the bus rolled on towards Downtown, I noticed something I wasn't quite expecting, E88 gang signs. I turned to him, seated next to me.

"We're heading toward Empire territory?" I whispered into his ear.

"Yeah, it's near the border." He replied, somewhat resigned. "Only place I could get that was affordable and decent. Haven't had much trouble though."

I looked at him and yeah, with his height, his muscles, those abs. I shook my head. I could see that he wouldn't be considered an 'easy' target. Still, it kind of worried me that our fearless leader may get
jumped on his way to the supermarket or something similarly mundane. But he had been doing this for a few years now, he probably knew what he was doing. So instead of worrying I sat in comfortable silence along side him... and stared out of the window to hide my blush, somewhat flustered by the closeness.

A few stops later and we were in front of an apartment building. Relatively swanky looking, considering the area, about ten stories tall and made of stone, glass fronted balconies on the upper levels. He lead the way through the front giving me quite the view along the way. Damn it, without other people around to distract me, I found my eyes wandering, downwards. The close proximity as we took the lift to the fourth floor didn't help much either. I made a conscious decision to avoid staring as we went to his door, which I didn't quite succeed at.

With the door open, I could see an open space, with a loft style bedroom above and open plan design with kitchen and living room only really divided by a counter. A few doors lead off from the main area. Soft colours were everywhere, something I wouldn't have linked with what I knew of Brian. But I guess I had mostly seen him through the lens of 'Grue' and hadn't really seen much of him outside of that. It was, pleasant, if a bit muted, and I couldn't really fault his taste. I was starting to get envious, this apartment was impressive.

Footwear was discarded at the door on his cue and we made our way to a large stack of cardboard boxes. One had been partially opened, a few pieces scattered around and an instruction guide on top of the pile.

"Would you like some tea or a bite to eat before we get started?" He asked as he moved over to the kitchen.

"Some tea would be great, thank you." I answered, not quite hungry as yet, though looking at the stack of furniture, that would soon change.

Aisha pulled the key out of her pocket and checked the number against the apartment in front of her to make sure she was in the right place. She still felt a little flush of happiness every time she looked at the key--her brother might be a bit of a fuddy-duddy, but it was cool that he trusted her with something like this. Not that she would ever say as much to him, of course.

She slid the key into the lock but then hesitated when she heard voices through the door.

"Stop! It isn't going to fit."

A woman's voice. It sounded familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. She leaned closer, ear against the door to more effectively eavesdrop.

"Don't worry, it will be fine."

That was definitely Brian. He sounded frustrated.

"Are you kidding? Look at the size of that thing! If you just force it in you're going to break something."

Aisha flinched back, then caught herself. A wicked grin spread across her face as she realized the opportunity she was facing. She'd have material for the next year with situation like this. She was already imaging the hilariously flustered expression he'd make at the mention of 'ruining her innocence'.

"It just looks that way from your angle. Once we get the tip in, the rest of it will just slide into place."
Aisha shook her head. Smooth, Brian, real smooth.

"Really?"

"Trust me, I've done this before."

Aisha decided she wouldn't get a better moment and in one motion she unlocked the door and flung it open, throwing her arms up dramatically as she spoke.

"Oh, my virgin eyes! I'll never-"

She stopped as she took in the scene before her. Brian was holding a table leg in his hand. Crouched on the floor with her back to Aisha, a girl was holding a tabletop steady. Both of them were fully clothed.

"Huh," she said, scratching the back of her head. "This is a lot more G-rated than I expected."

We were startled from our assembly of a particularly stubborn coffee table by the arrival of an unexpected, but familiar sounding guest. I adjusted my position to get a better view. The door had opened to reveal someone I hadn't expected, but in hindsight really should have.

"So Big Bro, who's the gi.... Taylor?" Said the now slightly confused girl.

"Aisha? Bro? Wait what?" I said as my brain caught up to what she had said.

"Hello sis. You know each other I take it?" Brian asked, a bemused grin on his face.

"School." I said simply, still trying to process this new information. I had heard Brian mention a sister, but a name hadn't been used so it hadn't occurred to me that the girl from school had anything to do with my partner in crime. It was then that what Aisha had said clicked, and it occurred to me what our conversation must have sounded like. I tried and apparently failed to hide the blush of embarrassment that formed on my cheeks. She looked at me with a smirk and latched on to a new source of 'comedy'.

"You know, it totally sounded like you were banging from outside." She said, reinforcing my guess, and clearly amused at my discomfort. "So imagine my surprise when my brother is making in-your-end-o with my jailbait lesbian school friend."

"Its innuendo Aisha, and no, its not like that." Brian said with a stern voice, trying to calm her down, which from what little I knew of her, probably wouldn't work. "We're just friends and your mind is in the gutter."

While that was true and I hadn't expressed any feelings towards him, hell, I had hardly even though about it myself, it still felt a bit painful hearing that. The tone he used suggested that the idea wasn't even on the table. A little, bitter part of me thought of course not, you're not exactly a looker. I tried to block that out and take a more active role in the conversation. I didn't really get a chance.

He looked back at me with a knowing grin, "Though that would explain Lisa's teasing after your visit to the hospital."

Oh, and now he thought I was gay too. Yay, for backfiring plans. Another reason to slap Lisa upside the head. I was about to correct him, but once again Aisha got in ahead of me.

"Well its a relief my brother isn't going after the young ones like some cradle snatching dirty old
man.” She said with a chuckle. "Can't be my guardian if you're in jail."

Brian groaned. It was after all the only logical response to anything Aisha said, and he had to be used to it. Suddenly, Aisha’s grin dropped and she looked over at me, her intense staring further derailed my train of thought.

"Wait, 'work' friends?" She asked with quotation finger movements, drawing a surprised look from me. She switched her glance between us a few more times, before fixing her gaze on me, with a confused tilt to her head. "No, that can't be right."

"Aisha." Brian growled. Shit had Brian told his sister about his powers?

"Holeeeeee Shit. You're the Mime?" She said, eyes wide with the sudden Eureka moment. Brian just smacked his face into his hand and groaned. "That makes so much sense."

"Brian?" I asked, slightly panicked at the idea she had guessed and hurriedly tried to get out of it. "What's she going on about?"

"No need to play dumb, HAH, get it?" She said before continuing, "I know you must be on the team. Brian doesn't have any other friends."

"Damn it Aisha." Brian said, clearly having to restrain himself from yelling. "What did I fucking tell you?"

"Not to discuss cape stuff with people... Which obviously doesn't apply when they are obviously your fucking team mates." Aisha replied, full of her usual irreverent tone.

I, for my part, decided to say nothing more and moved to the fridge. Tuning out the argument behind me I opened the door, pulled out a soda and proceeded to take a seat on the counter, slowly sipping it to calm my nerves. Is this how my identity was going to be revealed, because of a silly sibling spat? Looking back over at them, I pondered a course of action. I sighed in exasperation put down the can and walked back over to them. A hand clasped on a shoulder each, my fingers digging in a bit harder than I had intended, I said a single word.

"Silence!" It was not very loud, much to my disappointment. Also to my slight disappointment I hadn't magically silenced them when I held them, but at least they had stopped their yammering and looked at me. My face wasn't quite the serene mask of calm I was originally trying for, instead quite a bit of my anger over this debacle was leaking through.

"Brian. I am disappointed that your indiscretion has led to someone else knowing. But, She is your sister. So, I, can, forgive, that." I said through my teeth at a level only barely audible, efforts to keep myself calm and force out the words were restraining my voice to a furious whisper. "Aisha, you will not speak a word of this to anyone. You were insanely lucky that you were right. If you weren't you could have got him and yourself killed. Think about that."

I continued to glare at her for what felt like hours before adding "Understood?"

"Yes." She replied, looking almost timid. A look I had never expected to see on her.

"Good." I said, releasing them both and went to retrieve my drink. "So... furniture."

"Yes, furniture." Brian concurred and went back to work on the wardrobe.

"Shit," Aisha mumbled, as she moved to help, "I thought you were scary when you were silent."
In blessed quiet, the wardrobe and a bookshelf were finished. The awkwardness had mostly seemed to pass. Perhaps this could all be left behind as something never mentioned again.

"So Taylor," Aisha spoke, breaking the golden silence, "do you pack when you cross dress?"

Or not.
It wasn't until I had returned home that night that I realized I hadn't cleared up the misunderstanding with Brian and Aisha. It didn't really matter what they thought at school and Aisha didn't seem to care one way or the other. Brian was a different matter. I wasn't sure if I had any romantic feelings as such, but at the very least, I found him attractive. Him thinking I was batting for the other team probably didn't help my chances if I wanted to pursue a relationship with him. Though from his earlier comments, I had a feeling he probably only thought of me as a team mate, or maybe another little sister to protect.

I'd hardly even given much thought to romance before now, so I wasn't even sure why it was bothering me so much. Maybe I was afraid I couldn't manage a serious relationship outside of the gang. The stress of maintaining a secret identity, the excuses and lies to explain away absences. It was bad enough having to do that with Dad, let alone someone I was supposed to be intimate with. If I was stuck with an 'office romance', the other three members of the gang were, for various reasons, not good options.

Alec, while not that bad looking, wasn't my cup of tea. The sadistic streak he showed when 'assisting me' for the Panacea trip was a definite turn off. Lisa, while nice and friendly had that thing going on with her powers. Getting too much information being a turn off or something like that. Oh, and of course she was a girl. Maybe I was getting more desperate than I thought. Apparently two years of social isolation will do that. Then there was Rachel...No, just no.

"-alt?" Said my Dad.

"Sorry, what was that Dad?" I asked, I must have completely tuned him out.

"Could you pass the salt?" He repeated, a concerned look on his face. "Are you alright Taylor?"

"Yeah, just thinking about stuff." I said, trying to deflect the question.

"School hasn't been a problem has it?" He asked, leaping to the most obvious source of trouble.

"No, things have calmed down a lot lately. Just some rumours getting spread around." I sighed. I thought it better to try and reassure him, than have it fester and get him worried. " I did make a... I guess you could call her a friend."

I wasn't really sure what to make of Aisha, she was friendly enough, in a crude slightly obnoxious way, and she was the only one at school who actually seemed to give a damn that I was there. Her being Brian's sister still felt really odd, and I had a feeling Monday's lunch break was going to be awkward, assuming she didn't skip classes again. Glancing up, I noticed Dad had an odd expression on his face.

"So a, different sort of friend to Lisa?" He asked, slightly hesitantly. What was up with him? Was he surprised I actually had to capacity to make friends? I guess the past two years would indicate that befriending Lisa and the others was a fluke. That was a depressing thought.

"Lisa and I have a lot of shared interests." I said, trying to get the point across with out revealing anything. "Aisha, she's... different."

Shit, how was I supposed to actually describe her to Dad without making her sound like some horrible bad influence. I needed to make sure they never met, Dad would be mortified by her
behaviour.

"Oh." Dad said, sounding slightly embarrassed. "Well, that's, ok."

I looked up at my now flustered Father with confusion.

"You know I love you, and... I support your choices." He said, fumbling out the words. Oh for fuck's sake not him too.

"God damn it." I failed to yell, slamming my head into the table as I turned red. "One joke and now everyone thinks I'm gay."

"Joke? What?" He said, clearly confused. "Oh, so you aren't dating this Aisha girl?"

"God no! I was just trying to say she's weird. Friendly but weird." I said, my forehead bouncing off the table again as I mumbled. "Damn it, do I jam people's gaydar or something?"

Dad, diplomatically treated my question as a rhetorical one and chose to stay silent for the rest of dinner. Damn, could this get any more awkward?

As if the universe was mocking me, my phone rang, drawing a sad look from Dad. While he knew I had one for 'work with Lisa', he still wasn't very happy to see them. I excused myself, happy to find a distraction from the conversation, and pressed the receive call button as I went out to the lounge.

"Hello?" I answered, raising my voice a little.

"Taylor? Its Amy. Panacea." Said the voice on the other end. Even through the phone she sounded obviously upset. "Sorry to call you so late, but is that offer still available?"
Amy

Amy lay on her bed, failing to tune out the yelling of her sister. The bedroom door did little to reduce the volume.

"Damn it Dean!" Victoria shouted. "No! And you wonder why I get angry with you? Gah!"

Even in her room with her head under a pillow, she heard the crunch of another phone being wrecked as Glory Girl's anger exceeded her self control. A knock on her door was followed by a voice that always gave her heart a tug.

"Ames?" Victoria called out through the door.

"Come in." Amy invited, a slight sigh passing her lips. She put on a caring smile for her sister's sake.

Victoria usually radiated confidence. Instead she looked fragile, silently weeping. Amy felt a wave of pity and love as Vicky sat down next to her and started sobbing.

"It'll be alright sis." She said as she wrapped her arms around Victoria and brought the crying girl's head to her shoulder. "I'm here for you."

Amy hugged her, concerned with how distraught she seemed. Lately things had been particularly vitriolic between Vicky and Dean, though she wasn't sure why.

"What did he do this time?" Amy asked. She barely manage to suppress her growing anger at Gallant. Be angry later. She thought.Vicky needs me to be calm and supportive right now.

"H-he doesn't even care." She started, before her words dissolved into more sobs.

"Then he's a fool who doesn't know how luck he was to have you." Amy said, barely holding back a spiteful tone.

*Damn him,* she thought. *Where does he get off making her miserable?* Amy hugged Victoria tighter as her shoulder became damp. *I don't think I can forgive him.*

---

**Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.**

You are currently logged in, Glory_Girl (VerifiedCape)

You are viewing:
- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed.
- Ten posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history.
- Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦ *Topic: Dog Rescue*

In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America
We objected to the E88 abusing dogs by making them fight.

We did something about it.

FOR GREAT JUSTICE!

Love,

The Undersiders

P.S.
We have a bunch of unfortunate doggies looking for a caring home.
If you think you have what it takes to provide a caring home for an abused dog and not piss off Bitch, PM me. :)

----

*Marceau (Unverified Cape)* Replied on April 21st, 2011:

Honk

*Pets rescued puppy*

Honk

* Nyrus
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
Yo Marceau, is that the one that pissed on Stormtiger?

* HotterLass
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
That little guy is adorable.

* Marceau (Unverified Cape)* Replied on April 21st, 2011:
@Nyrus

Honk

*Nods & Pets brave puppy*

*Names puppy Chips*

*GoodGoo
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
Hah! Cricket got knocked for a six.

*Nyrus
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
Oh wow, a dog that fought Nazis, nice!

* Grapejoint Replied on April 21st, 2011:
@GoodGoo
Is that some kind of British joke?

► Volan
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
Oh, I hope Tattletale is ok. That looked painful.

► Day_Hunter
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
@Volan
Dude, she's a villain.

@Nyrus
Italian Fascists, not Nazis. Did you even read the article?

► Volan
Replied on April 21st, 2011:
@Day_Hunter
But they are rescuing puppies!

Surely that makes them heroes?

End of Page. 1 --> 16, 17, 18

♦ Private message from Marceau:

Marceau:
We rescued a puppy,
It reminds me of you.
It humiliates Nazis,
'Tis adorable too.

Glory_Girl:

Amy looked over her sister's shoulder with an expression of utter bafflement. The contents of the screen clashed with her world view in a stunning display of cognitive dissonance. Her sister appeared to have the same problem.

"I really don't know how to respond to this." Victoria told Amy, hands above the keyboard, cursor flashing in the private message field.

"So let me get this straight, Gallant, the hero is being a jerk and Marceau the villain, rescues puppies and is sending you romantic notes." Amy said, repeating the obvious to herself, hoping it might make more sense that way.

"That... seems to be the case." Victoria replied.

Another Saturday, another shift at the hospital. Amy was drained, emotionally and physically from the past few days. Vicky and Dean still weren't speaking to each other, Marceau was being Marceau and there seemed to be no end to the sick and injured.

"There you go little guy." She said, releasing the child's hand.
"Thank you," Said the child's mother, "this means so much to us."

She left the child with his parents, having just cured him of leukaemia. They were happy and sure they thanked Amy for her help, but it seemed only empty platitudes, as if they expected nothing less, as if they were entitled to the healing. Amy thought that maybe she was just tired and being cynical, but a small part of her couldn't help but resent them.

She had just ensured their happy family continued on being happy, while her home life was pretty miserable. Carol was being distant as usual, Mark tried, but there was only so much he could do when he wasn't much better off in the happiness department. Vicky was, not as cheerful as usual. The one shining beacon in the fog of depression and obligation that was her life wasn't shining so bright lately. She knew the reason why. Dean.

Amy washed her hands. While she could kill any bacteria with her power, it helped with everyone's peace of mind and it was a habit that she took a small amount of comfort in. A small little routine that helped her feel clean. Helped her feel like she was doing the right thing. That she was, paradoxically, not just going through the motions. Her phone chirped, she answered.

"Panacea," Said the voice on the other end, it sounded like Aegis "we have an emergency, several injured. We need you the Protectorate HQ as soon as possible."

"Ok, but Glory Girl is off doing patrols, can I get a lift from Brockton Memorial?" Amy replied.

"Shit. I'll come pick you up. Be there soon." Aegis said, hanging up.

Amy stared at her phone with a growing sense of dread. Aegis had sounded rattled, and he swore, which was never a good sign. In the time she'd known the current leader of the Wards, she'd heard him sound like that only once. The time she'd had to heal a critically injured Triumph.

A few minutes later and she was picked up from the front of the hospital, Aegis holding her in a slightly embarrassing bridal carry.

"What's the situation?" She asked him as they flew towards HQ.

"The Empire attacked the convoy transporting Stormtiger and Cricket. Kaiser, Hookwolf, Fenja and Menja were there, probably as some kind of statement." Aegis explained, sighing before he continued. "Gallant's armor had blades grown inside it by Kaiser, Clockblocker has him on stasis now, but its a close thing. Battery took a nasty hit from Menja's spear and Assault has some wounds from Hookwolf's blades."

Amy took in the news. It had been a while since things had gone that bad. The bank job had left the wards a bit bruised, but no one had been seriously injured, Aegis' mauling aside.

"Why would Kaiser take out Gallant like that?" She asked. The Leader of the E88 was a racist bastard, but he always seemed... civil about it.

"I think Gallant hit him with some anger." Aegis said. "Given how pissed off they were to begin with, I can only guess that tipped him over the edge."

Amy contemplated the idea. From what she had heard of the bank debrief, something similar had happened when he had blasted Hellhound and he'd taken a battering then.

After a few more minutes of silence, they arrived at the HQ and rushed to the infirmary where a grim scene was waiting for them.
Gallant lay perfectly still, Clockblocker's hand placed on his exposed face, ready to freeze him the instant the stasis dropped. Blood caked the once shining armour, having leaked through both tears and seams. Battery was on a gurney on the other side of the young time stopper, a dark stain spread from a large gash in her side. Amy guessed her condition had deteriorated during the flight over. Assault stood at her side, holding her currently immobile hand, blood soaked bandages wrapped around him as a stop gap measure.

"How long since they were frozen?" Panacea asked, already into the rhythm of triage.

"I had just had to refreeze Gallant a moment ago," Said Clockblocker, all of his usual joking manner gone. "So Battery should be popping out before he does."

"Ok, Assault, give me your hand, I'll treat your wounds while we wait." She said.

"I'm fine, you need to be ready for Puppy." He said looking down at the woman by his side. Concerned enough that he was slipping into his pet name for her.

"She'll be fine, she's still frozen and you're bleeding," Panacea told him sternly, "just give me your damn hand."

"Fine." He said and stuck out his hand which was soon grabbed by Panacea. While she would usually ask for permission, her frustration and the history of healing the snarky cape made her bypass that.

She closed her eyes and focused. Lacerations over torso, left arm and leg. Heavy bleeding, some internal. Minor ligament damage. Narrowly missed femoral artery. She set his wounds to regenerate, sealing flesh, rebuilding muscle and ramping up blood production to replace the significant loss.

Amy opened her eyes. One down two to go. Neither of her other patients had dropped out of stasis, so she positioned herself between them and waited. A gasp followed by a wet cough to her side drew her attention to the now unfrozen Battery. Panacea quickly moved a hand to the nearest bit of exposed flesh she could see, the wound. Broken rib, massive blood loss, torn kidney and lung. Liver damage. Intestinal tract intact. Not enough material to work with safely.

"I need some blood here." She yelled. A nurse rushed to comply.

Concentrating, she numbed the pain and worked on the lung and ruptured vessels first, getting the tissues of the lungs to absorb the blood that had filled the lower right side. Assault could see the flesh knitting together as she worked. The nurse returned with an IV stand and dark red bag trailing a tube, which she immediately connected to Battery's arm. Panacea quickly moved a hand to the nearest bit of exposed flesh she could see, the wound. Broken rib, massive blood loss, torn kidney and lung. Liver damage. Intestinal tract intact. Not enough material to work with safely.

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Four minutes after she started healing, Battery was almost as good as new. Her energy stores were at an almost unsafe level, cannibalised to repair the damage to her thoracic musculature. She would probably look malnourished for a few days till she could replace the body fat.

Amy had just enough time to breath a sigh of relief before Gallant dropped out of stasis, a disturbing gurgling noise resonating though his armour's voice amplifier. She rushed over and placed a hand on his face. Major damage to lungs, both kidneys, liver, large intestine. Foreign objects still in place. Blood loss approaching critical levels. She deadened the nerves around the wounds and started sealing off the ruptured blood vessels and regenerating what she could.
"He needs lots of blood and I can only do so much while this armour is on. There are four blades in
the way." She shouted.

Feeling him this close to death was startling. He'd been around for what felt like years, the dates with
her sister, the fights, the break ups, the make ups, repeat. It would be a lot of work to fix him up and
she felt so exhausted.

It would be so easy to just let him drift away. Victoria would get over it and would be happier in the
long run. No. She suppressed that vicious little part of her that wanted to punish him. He had hurt
Vicky so many times. No, I can't do that. It would be so easy, and then maybe they'd expect less of
her. Lessen the weight of responsibility that was constantly grinding her down.

She stood there in a bit of a daze, barely keeping him alive as technicians came in to remove the
armour. I can't do that. A hand shielded her face as a friction cutter went to work on a piece that
couldn't be shifted, a blade protruding from it. I need to rest. Another piece was removed, trailing
blood from the four inch spike grown from its inner surface. Vicky would hate me. IV feeds were
inserted into his arm. I would be a monster. The last piece of metal impaling Gallant was removed. I
can't be a villain.

Tears running down her face, she started regenerating his organs, no longer impeded by the sharp
metal. Tissues were repaired, gaping wounds closed as cells divided to replace the dead. Intestines
were resealed, immune system over charged to clean up the sepsis. Skin sealed over, leaving him
healthy and restored.

Job done, Panacea turned and walked away, mumbling replies to the thanks that she was given. She
stopped long enough to wash the blood off her hands, a simple thing, routine even, before continuing
on her way.

"Are you ok?" Asked Aegis as he caught up to her.

"I'm fine." She lied. "Just tired. I need some time alone."

"You need a lift anywhere?" He offered.

"If you could drop me home. That would be good." She said hoarsely.

Amy half heartedly waved goodbye to Aegis as he flew off before ducking inside. Carol hadn't
really acknowledged her presence and Mark was in his own little world, blankly staring at the TV.
She quickly changed out of her costume and into some street clothes and head back outside.

She needed to get away from everyone for a while. They wouldn't understand why she was upset
and she couldn't tell them what she had almost done. She walked to a nearby cafe, open in the
evenings for the local businessmen and later for the night scene. Taking a seat in a corner booth, face
partially hidden in a hoodie, she sipped at a cappuccino and played with her phone, trying to find
something to distract her. She came across a number and a memory came to the forefront of her
mind.

Well I owe you one. If you ever need to vent, let me know.

It probably wasn't the best idea, but Amy was fresh out of better ones. It was risky, but a small
callous part of her mind thought I can always claim she is a psycho fan girl if she tells anyone. She
dialled the number listed under Taylor Hebert.

"Hello?" Answered a quiet voice on the other end.
“Taylor?” Amy asked. “It's Amy. Panacea. Sorry to call you so late, but is that offer still available?”
"Dad, I'll be heading out for a bit." I said as I walked towards the door.

"Where are you going at this time of night?" He asked.

"Panacea asked to talk," I told him, "and well I do owe her a lot."

I hoped the combination of name drop and guilt would convince him.

"Well." He said as he thought about it. "Try not to stay out late."

He didn't seem terribly happy with the idea of me going out late, but I guessed the guilt won out.

"Don't worry, I shouldn't be long and I've got my pepper spray just in case." I said as I left the house and headed towards the cafe.

"So, umm. Vent away." I said nervously.

I sat across the table from one of the more famous capes in the county, wondering how my life had gotten this complicated. We were nestled into a corner booth, mostly screened from the rest of the cafe. It looked like she had gone through a few coffees in the time it took me to get here.

"I'm not even sure where to start." Amy sighed. "But I need you to not tell a single soul what I tell you."

I looked at her face. The serious but slightly sad expression she wore told me this was a big deal for her. My paranoia kicked in and I let my gaze dart around the booth and what I could see of the cafe.

"Would it be better to talk elsewhere?" I asked, concerned about eavesdroppers.

She noted my twitching and seemed to ponder for a moment.

"Yeah." She said. "We should probably take a walk."

We left the cafe and headed down the street, Amy leading the way.

"There's a park up this way, should be pretty quiet at this time of night." She told me. "It's in one of the safer parts of town."

I just nodded and let her guide us. My mind bounced between all sorts of unlikely scenarios including her knowing that I was a cape. But given the lack of other heroes, I figured she just needed someone to bitch about work too. I could imagine that doing all the healing she did must be tiring.

It wasn't long before I found myself on a path through pleasant greenery, trees spread far and wide, with the occasional flower bed to break up the fields of well maintained grass. I realised belatedly that I hadn't been to this park since I was a kid. A few memories flashed through the back of my mind, reminding me of happier times. I shunted them aside to concentrate on the girl at my side. Amy looked around and found us a bench in a well lit part of the park, a few hundred feet from the fence line. We sat down and I waited somewhat impatiently for her to start.
"I really need you to not tell anyone." She repeated.

"You gave me my voice back." I said. "I'm not going to use it to betray your trust."

She looked at me for a moment as she seemed to consider my words. She let out a resigned sigh and dropped her gaze to the path at our feet.

"I'm not sure I can do this anymore." She said, just barely audible.

My mind froze in panic at that statement. What did she mean? Healing? Being a cape? Living? I had on my worst days contemplated ending it all, but hearing something like that from a celebrity cape was jarring. I reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder, grabbing her attention.

"Pana- Amy, what's wrong?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened at the worried tone of my voice. She must have realised where my mind jumped to.

"No, not suicidal." She said

The tension that had built up in my shoulders released a bit at that. I was not equipped to deal with a suicidal hero, as guilty as that thought made me.

"It's just I, I'm so tired." She continued. "I spend more time at the hospital that most of the staff. When I can't sleep, I head over there and heal a few more people. But it never ends."

I sat there, hand still on her shoulder as I absorbed what she was saying.

"There is so much pressure on me, to heal more people." She told me. "Even if I never slept, I still couldn't heal everyone."

Amy paused for a moment, another sigh breaking the silence before she continued.

"I sometimes think that maybe if I made a mistake, maybe they wouldn't expect so much of me." She said as she looked at me. I just nodded slightly for her go on, my expression neutral. "Maybe then I could get some rest. I feel so selfish."

"You need to take a break." I said. "Otherwise you'll burn out."

It never occurred to me that she would be this stressed. Tired sure, but this was a whole other level. She looked away from me, as if ashamed and stared into her lap for a while. I couldn't think of anything to say, so just rubbed her shoulder in a hopefully supportive manner. After a minute or two she whispered something that I almost missed.

"I almost let someone die."

I wasn't sure I heard it right. It clashed with everything I thought I knew of her. I almost screamed out 'why?' before I heard her sniffle. Instead I took a deep breath and calmly asked.

"What happened?"

She looked up at me and in the light from the lamps along the path glittered off the tears starting the well in her eyes. It was obvious that this was tearing her up inside. The only experience I had with this sort of thing was from the other point of view and so long ago. So with a bit of hesitation, I tried to do my best impersonation of my mother. I pulled the crying girl at my side into a loose hug.
"It's alright." I said. "You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

We sat like that for some time. To my over active mind it felt like it was an hour. The miracle healer of Brockton Bay was crying on my shoulder and I had no idea what was going on. I had trouble reconciling the fact that the girl that had seemed so defiant when I took her hostage was now a sobbing mess in my arms. A fair amount of guilt had built up over the bank incident and it made sure to slap my conscience upside the head.

"It'll be ok." I told her, though it rang hollow to my ears.

Eventually the sobbing subsided and her breathing slowed as she took in some deep breaths. I loosened the hug and she brought herself back to her previous spot on the bench.

"Gallant and Glory Girl have been dating." She told me, almost mumbling. I thought I might have heard a rumour along those lines, or read something on PHO, but having confirmation was surreal.

"They had another fight and broke up for the hundredth time." She said, taking another deep breath and moment to compose herself.

"I was angry at him for making my sister cry again." She explained. "Then tonight I had to heal him and a couple others the Empire had hurt."

I could already see where this would lead, but let her tell me in her own time.

"Gallant. He." She started, but was interrupted by another sob. A few seconds later she continued. "He was almost dead when I got there. Frozen by Clockblocker to keep him stable." The tears were still running down her face. "I healed the others while he was frozen then moved on to him. I was so tired and he was so close to slipping away and... And... And I almost let him."

She started crying again and so going with what had worked, dragged her back into my arms. My mind reeled at the implications of this. I guessed that he was alive by the words she used, but damn, the guilt that she must have felt. The girl in my arms seemed more human then than I had ever thought before. When she was Panacea, she had that separation that celebrity brings. Sobbing in my arms, drenching my hoodie, she was just a hurt teenage girl.

"But you healed him right?" I asked.

She nodded against my shoulder, shifting the wet fabric around.

"Then you did the right thing." I told her. "Even if you hated him, you still healed him. Because you are a good person."

It seemed the right thing to say. I was noting some eerie parallels to my train of thought when I first got my powers. I had been so tempted to hurt my bullies, make them pay. Make them suffer like I did. I guessed I wasn't the only one who had thoughts like that.

"I don't know if I can keep being good" She whispered between sobs. "It's so hard."

"Yes it is." I said quietly in agreement. She looked up at me, a little confused. Shit, I thought as I realised I had slipped up and said that out loud. After a few moments I thought of a way out.

"I almost did some bad things to the bullies." I said, trying to be as vague as possible. "I could have
hurt them. Got some revenge."

"Why didn't you?" She asked, curiosity visible through the sorrow on her face.

"I wanted to be better than them." I said. "I needed to not stoop to their level."

I hadn't really achieved quite what I wanted in that regard, but I at least tried. I still considered myself a good person, even if technically I had broken several laws.

"I'm not sure I'm strong enough." She mumbled.

"Then find something worth being good for. A person, a goal." I said, before quietly chuckling. "Hell I only did it out of a strange sense of pride."

I thought about it for a little longer as she looked at me curiously.

"Having friends helps," I added. "I probably would still be in a bad place if not for my friends."

"I... I only have my sister." She told me quietly.

"Surely a nice girl like you should have more friends?" I asked. I was frankly surprised. She seemed rather popular from what little I had seen.

"No. Everyone else just sees me as the healer" She said. "Only want me around when they are hurt. Only Vicky seems to care."

It was kind of shocking to realise that Amy was almost as socially isolated as I had been. It just didn't make any sense to me. My guilty conscience decided it was the perfect time to remind me I had beat up her sister and only friend. I was apparently very bad at being villainous. A stupid idea came to mind. It was a very bad idea but I would feel like scum if I didn't follow through.

"I can't promise that I'll be around all the time," I said, "but if you want another friend, we could hang out sometime. Do some stuff."

She stared at me for a moment like I had grown another head or something. She nodded and a smile started to shine through the sadness.

"That." She said. "That would be nice."

I smiled back and wondered how to explain this to Lisa and the gang. As we got up to leave, the tight hug Amy gave me caught me a bit by surprise.

"Thank you." She whispered in my ear.
The walk back toward the cafe was fairly quiet. We both seemed to enjoy the silence as a respite from the heavy conversation just a moment earlier. Still it wasn't too awkward.

"Well goodnight Amy," I said as we parted ways. "Be strong."

"I'll try." She replied. "Catch you later."

It was an innocent comment. The other meaning still sent a slight shiver down my spine. So it was that my unexpected liaison with Panacea came to a close, leaving me with a dull bus ride home to think about everything.

"Dad, I'm home." I called out as I made my way inside, locking the kitchen door behind me.

"Welcome back Taylor," He said, his words coming from upstairs. "How was it?"

I went upstairs, figuring he must have been getting ready for bed. I found him stepping out of his bedroom, clad in pyjamas.

"It was..." I started, before pausing to consider. "Well, she needed someone to talk to about stuff."

He looked at me, obviously curious. I had said I wouldn't tell anyone, so what was one more secret from Dad.

"Private stuff." I said. "But I think I've made a new friend."

"Hmm, well that's good." He said, faintly surprised. It was a fairly unlikely prospect, so I couldn't really blame him for his reaction. Before I met her, I never thought I would ever be friends with someone as famous as Amy.

"Anyway, I'm heading to bed." My Dad told me. "We can talk more in the morning if you like. You should probably get some sleep too kiddo."

"Good idea." I replied.

A quick shower later and I found myself staring at my ceiling, contemplating the events of the night. I had a new friend and she was a hero. I would need to be even more careful with my identities, lest I slip up around her. That would likely end poorly.

One last thought stuck with me as I drifted off. Perhaps I should stop trolling her sister.

The next day I travelled to the lair, figuring some more time with the gang would be fun. That and I probably should give them a heads up about last nights complication. How strange had my life become that it would have been more convenient to not have been healed?

Unlocking the door to the lair, I made my way up the stairs to the loft and found the gang all there. Rachel was just relaxing on a bean bag in the far corner, Angelica's head resting on her lap. She
looked fairly tired, so I guessed she must have just came back from the shelter. Hopefully we would find homes for more of the dogs, the amount of care required for so many was phenomenal, but at least Rachel seemed content.

Alec and Brian were busy playing some kind of video game. Wasn't sure but it appeared to be one of those Medal of Warfare games, or whatever they were called. Lots of shooting at people in the desert. I didn't really see the appeal.

Lisa had just returned from her room and our eyes met and we stared at each other for a moment, her left eye twitched slightly. I was about to open my mouth to speak when she promptly started laughing like a madwoman. This of course caught everyone's attention.

"Wow, now you just need Laserdream to complete the set." She said after a moment to catch her breath. She looked at my face again as I blinked in confusion before what she was saying dawned on me. This set her off again. I had never seen anyone actually roll on the floor while laughing before this.

"Is someone going to let us in on the joke?" Alec asked, clearly amused at the proceedings. Brian joined Alec in slightly baffled amusement while Rachel had disregarded us as obviously insane, her attention returning to her dog. Looking between the two curious boys and the delirious thinker, I figured I should just break the news.

"Apparently Taylor Hebert is now friends with Amy Dallon." I said, scratching the back of my head in a nervous manner.

The looks on their faces were like very confused puppies for a few seconds. Eventually what I said trickled past their utter disbelief.

"Oh this is rich." Alec said, chuckling. "So teasing Glory Girl wasn't enough. Wanted some three-way sister action?"

Brian for his part slapped him up side the head before turning back to me.

"Care to explain?" He asked.

"She asked to talk about stuff and well I couldn't really refuse without looking suspicious and she really needed a friend and I felt kind of guilty about the bank and she's like a hurt puppy that needed some attention." I said before realising I needed to breathe. The last part caught Rachel's attention and an odd look from her before she shrugged and gave Angelica a scratch behind her ears.

"Taylor," He began, ignoring Alec and Lisa's continued tittering. "I really need you to not get all romantic with members of New Wave."

"What, no! Why does everyone think I'm a lesbian?" I asked. "It was just a joke. Lisa back me up here?"

She looked up at me from the floor, looked at me serious for all of three seconds before bursting out in another bout of uncontrollable laughter. Feeling slightly betrayed I stomped off to my room in a huff.

"Fine, be that way." I not quite yelled before slamming the door. So much for clearing up the misconception.
"I'm sorry Taylor," Lisa said, sounding almost contrite. Almost. "It's just that from a certain point of view, your life is turning into a love tesseract."

I just stared up at her from my bed, my gaze meeting hers over the book in my hands as she stood in my doorway.

"Love... Tesseract." I said, unimpressed.

"Or love Klein surface if you prefer." She said, that smug grin plastered on her face. "Either way we're getting into non-Euclidean romance geometry here."

"Can you at least explain to Brian that the whole lesbian rumour was a joke that you advised?" I asked.

"Nope." She said, clearly enjoying my suffering. "I'm staying out of that mess, don't want to get tangled up in your relationship kudzu."

There were moments I wished I had laser eye beams, this was one of them. My stare was trying its best to emulate it though.

"Fine, fine. I'll help you clear it up." She relented. "You're no fun."

I got up to follow her out to the lounge when she reached into her pocket and answered her phone after the first ring.

"Hello Boss." She said before her grin slipped into a confused frown. She waved for me to follow her out. "Alec switch to channel twelve. The Boss wants us to see something."
Coil

"Chance that Marceau is responsible for my death?" Coil asked.

"Ninety-seven point five one percent." Said the girl in the room. That did not fill him with confidence. He considered whether she was making up the numbers for a moment, but no her powers didn't work like that. Scenario one was a write off unless he could remove the mime from the picture. It would make things easier if he could get Dinah on a drug dependency leash, so the mime had to go.

"Scenario two, chance of success?" He asked

"Eighty-nine point seven three five nine." The girl said shortly after. Well those numbers sounded much better. He could be rid of the mime. It would be a shame to lose such a powerful cape, but he couldn't leave threats alive.

"Scenario two, chance I survive the next month?"

"Zero point zero zero zero one." She answered.

"What? How?"

"Please don't make me look for a picture." She asked timidly.

"I need to know, tell me." He said sternly.

"I. You are screaming and die painfully, but I can't see anyone else nearby." She croaks out before curling up in a ball of pain.

He considered this for a moment before deciding, perhaps he needed to find another way around the problem. The idea of a painful and untimely death did not fit with his plans.

Coil paced back and forth in a sparse room underground. The only other occupant was the young girl. In another version of the room, he was asking questions of her.

"Scenario five, chance of success?" He asked

"Forty-three point three one percent " The girl said shortly after.

"Scenario five, chance of my death in the next month?" He asked, a worried tone in his voice.

"Eighty-seven point nine seven percent " She answered.

His face covering mask disguised his expression, but the cast of his shoulders showed growing frustration.

"Scenario six, chance of success?"

"Seventy-one point four five" She said before adding. "I'm getting a headache."
"Ok one more question my pet." He said, the higher numbers grabbing his full attention. "Scenario six, chance of my death in the next month?"

"Twelve point five one. Oww." She said cradling her head and grabbing some pills from a bottle on her side table.

Coil looked at Dinah, the young precog he had acquired. Those were the best numbers he had so far, with every other plan leading to greater than sixty percent chance of death. He sighed. Scenario six was fairly low on the desired outcome list, but he could work with that. He would have to work with that if he wanted continued living.

In the other timeline, Coil stopped pacing and turned to Dinah. He figured he should check his last scenario before continuing.

"Dinah." He said, grabbing the girl's attention. "Scenario seven, chance of success?"

"Zero point zero two." She told him.

He looked at her for a moment. He really didn't think that the plan was that bad, but he had to trust Dinah's power. He sighed once again before forcing the next question out.

"Scenario seven, chance of my death in the next month?"

"Ninety-nine point three six."

Coil was silent for a moment. He made a mental note to stay well away from that plan. But it did confirm that his least favourite plan was his best chance of getting what he wanted, just not quite the way he wanted. Still, power was power and some was better than none. He collapsed the split, keeping the one with a less taxed Dinah and leaving the mostly quiet girl in the room he provided.

Without the drug addiction he had to be more miserly with his questioning.

He arrived at his office and sat down in front of his computer. Emails were sent to agents around the city. Moles in all sorts of government and commercial organisations started working towards this new goal. Calls were made, bribes were paid and evidence planted without him even needing to leave his seat. Phone in hand, he made a particularly important and costly call.

"Number Man?" He said when the other end picked up. "I need you to create some data trails."

Everything needed had been put into place. His sources informed him that 'Scenario Six' would reach stage five today. Some of the ground work had been surprisingly easy, as if the universe conspired towards this goal. Other things had cost him quite a sum with all of the work Number Man had to do to make it look convincing, especially as a rush job. But he could always make more money provided he continued to breathe.

He looked at the clock on his computer screen. It was almost time. He picked up his phone and called his operative.

"Tattletale. You will want to watch the news on channel twelve." He told her. "This has been planned out for the best chance of succeeding with my plans. Make sure to play along."
We were all a bit curious as to why the Boss would want us to watch something, but it was an easy enough job. The game was paused and the TV flicked through channels on the way to Twelve. We caught a snip of some soap opera and a couple of strange advertisements before we settled on the right one.

I blinked, watching as the “Breaking News” logo for Brockton Bay's local station flashed across the screen with a visual shot of the bank we'd robbed. Of course, we'd all seen the fairly high-profile news coverage that came with the boost in our reputation, though it had been more than a week ago that we'd pulled the heist, so I wondered exactly why it was 'breaking news'...

“...so, as we all know, Brockton Bay Central Bank was robbed by the now- notorious parahuman criminal gang known as the Undersiders. However, the ongoing investigation into the crime itself has led to an interesting and surprising series of revelations regarding how exactly the city's largest bank conducted it's business until recently,” the female anchor explained.

I blinked and traded a confused glance with Brian.

“Too right Diane,” the male anchor nodded. “This morning Bay Central Bank's president was taken into custody regarding charges of tax evasion, money laundering, misuse of company property and customer funds, and a slew of other crimes he is alleged to have committed during his tenure as the head of the bank.”

“You're leaving out the best part Mark,” Diane said jokingly. “In addition to the bank president himself, several Brockton Bay notables were taken into custody as well on similar charges. According to our sources, a fair number of the city's wealthiest have been allegedly using Brockton Bay Central Bank and it's president to avoid paying taxes on numerous local and international properties for years, if not decades.”

“And you might be surprised who we have to thank for discovering this corruption,” Mark took over as a series of five photographs rolled across the screen.

Five very familiar photographs. I felt my jaw hang loose.

“That's right, the Undersiders,” Mark continued. “While our newest local parahuman criminals did rob the local bank, the ensuing investigation and audit of the funds and accounts led authorities straight to another group of villains who have never bothered to wear masks or costumes.”

Diane grinned slightly as she took up the conversation. “We here at Brockton Bay Studio Six have uncovered some interesting evidence of our own that casts doubt on whether or not the Undersiders are as they appear. To report on this startling case, we have special reporter April Gonzales. April?”

The screen shifted even as my friends exchanged confused and worried looks. Lisa's expression was particularly curious, bearing all the hallmarks of strangled laughter, incredulous disbelief, and stunned awe at a particularly amazing example of stupidity.

“Thanks Diane, Mark,” the third correspondent nodded from where she stood outside a local flower shop...my stomach sank into a pit of despair as I recognised it. “Now, we've all seen our fair share of villains, here in Brockton Bay, so many in fact that we've almost forgotten to ask the most important question: Why?”

She paused here, smiling.
“Why do criminals commit crimes? Is it greed? Is it sociopathy? Are they sick or just 'bad to the bone?'” She smirked slightly at the song reference. “The Undersiders are an interesting case. Even a quick look through their police records shows that they aren't your normal criminals. They've gone to great pains to avoid injuring bystanders, conducted themselves with admirable restraint, and exposed a number of other criminal operations here in the city.”

I blinked, turning to Brian with a raised eyebrow. He frowned and shook his head.

April continued, “For those of you who haven't been following our expose on the Undersiders, they've led quite the profitable and successful career in what little time they've been active. The Undersider's modus operandi is a quick, quiet, and competent heist. During the year they've been in operation they've hit five software companies, an illegal casino, and numerous holdings of local gangs, namely the Asian Bad Boys, the Empire Eighty-Eight, and the Merchants. Now, many of us were ready to discard these activities as those of normal in-fighting between gangs, but recent going-on have cast doubt on the accuracy of those assumptions.”

An image appeared on the screen. Another familiar one, though for different reasons.

“The recent apprehension of wanted parahuman gang-lord Lung was originally credited to the head of the local Protectorate Armsmaster. While it is true, the actual 'take-down' of the infamous criminal was actually the work of another familiar group. As an unidentified source in the PRT has informed us, a calling card was left at the scene of the crime, crediting the capture to Marceau and Special Guests the Undersiders.”

“But of course, it would be remiss of us to not address the other crimes the Undersiders have committed. Of the software companies they stole from, three have been implicated in funneling money to criminal interests in Boston, another was discovered to have been housing a hidden meth lab in the basement, and the last was running a range of internet-based scams in their off hours. Currently, the owners and staff of all these businesses are in police custody and have either been formally charged or are awaiting trial.” Here she paused again, even as I developed a slight twitch in my left eye.

“It's a fascinating trend to note: that the Undersiders have only 'hit' business or organisations which, themselves, have been fronts for criminal activity. This trend forces us to question whether or not the Undersiders truly are 'villains' in any real sense of the word. Are these teens merely heroes of another breed? Perhaps they've been misunderstood by society, perhaps they've lost faith in authority, perhaps they feel that the crimes they've committed have been necessary to reveal the larger corruption they've discovered. Regardless, it is clearly evident that there is much we don't understand about these teens...and that's what brings us to this flower shop, to speak with it's owner: Mr. Gunn. Mr. Gunn, I believe you had a strange order come in recently?”

The slightly potbellied man who owned the store smiled weakly as he stepped into the shot. “Ah, yes, well...whoever it was left me a note and paid in cash...I never saw them, you understand, but when I placed the card onto the flower arrangement they ordered, well...”

April smiled tolerantly, “Yes Mr. Gunn, what did the card say?”

“Well, it was addressed to 'My Dearest Glory Girl,’” He explained, an embarrassed flush on his face. “I wouldn't have read it, you understand, but whoever left the note forgot to tell me where to send the flowers and I hoped it would give me a hint in the note.”

I applied palm to face with violent force. The sound was loud in the near-silent Undersider's lair. I glanced over at Lisa, noticing the side of her grin twitching, her phone still clenched in her hand.
“And who sent the arrangement?” April asked intently.

“Ah, it was...it was addressed from Marceau, the uh...the new mime cape with those Undersiders, saying how sorry he was for being so...'indelicate,' I think he wrote, with Glory Girl at the bank,” Mr. Gunn explained finally.

My face was hot as my friends stared at me.

“What kind of villain would include so heartfelt a note of apology?” April asked the viewers, pressing her advantage. “That's what we at Studio Six wanted to know. Glory Girl was unavailable while the PRT and Protectorate have declined to comment, stating that the investigation into the Undersiders is ongoing and assuring us that all avenues will be explored. Now, as we go back to Diane and Mark, I believe they're ready for a much more in-depth look at the known backgrounds of these 'villains' and their accomplishments to date. I believe we're going to start with Hellhound, Mark?”

The picture shifted to a bisected view of the anchors at their desk and the on-the-spot reporter.

“Just so, April,” Mark nodded, his face grim. “Now, this is a story that would bring tears to even the hardest heart among us. Hellhound's original crime which put her on the run was the murder of her former caretaker and guardian, yes, but a second look shows us that the young girl once known as Rachel may not have been wholly or even partly to blame. Join us for a series of interviews concerning her past and the abuse she suffered as a child next, after this short break.”

Alec clicked the TV off.

There was silence.

Rachel's body was stiff, tense, as she scratched Angelica behind the ears. Brian's face was a twisted mix of incomprehension and disbelief. Lisa was glaring at the black television screen as if someone or something was behind a cosmic joke, with her as the punch line. Alec's face was a rictus of contained amusement, seemingly looking at the irreverent and humorous side of the problem...like always.

“So...” Brian broke the tableau, rubbing at his jaw. “What the hell?”

I couldn't help myself. “And here I was, thinking I'd joined a vicious and brutal gang of super villains? Where, oh where, did I go so right?”

"Apparently the boss wants us to be heroes now." Lisa said, face cradled in her hands. A small resigned chuckle followed. "He... somehow planned this. This..."

She threw her hands up in the air, clearly unable to thing of a sufficient description for the weirdness we had just been subjected to.

Alec cracked up, almost falling of the couch with laughter before he managed to choke out, “Oh, who the hell is going to believe this bullshit? I mean, come on! How could they actually think we're heroes?! Ha!”

Lisa massaged her temples. “Oh, I'm sure there are plenty of idiots who are willing to believe we're 'undercover heroes' or something stupid like that...Skidmark, Squeeler, Lung, Uber and Leet, a good third of the E88 parahumans, even if Kaiser doesn't buy it...”

Brian facepalmed as Alec's laughter died down.
I think I summed up everyone's thoughts nicely, “Well, shit.”

Who would have thought you could accidentally become a hero by doing your best to be a villain?
"Well the boss wants to pay us to be heroes." Alec said with a laugh. "So lets play the big damn heroes. Hell, we did just rescue a bunch of puppies."

"I really have no idea how we are supposed to swing that. I mean we did maul the Wards pretty bad." Brian added.

"Good point." I said, nodding. "Surely the PRT are unlikely to buy the bullshit being fed to them by the media."

"Yeah, they are likely to have a neutral stance towards us." Lisa said. "Actively hunting us down would be bad PR right now, but there is no way they are going to announce any support for us."

"So what are we going to do?" I asked my team mates. "I guess we're now stuck attacking gangs and other obviously 'evil' targets?"

There was a slightly exasperated sigh from Lisa at my use of air quotes.

"Leaving aside that I don't know how much of that was legitimate and not frame jobs, we're going to have to be a lot more careful." She said with a slight frown. "All of the other factions in town now have an extra reason to take us out and we'll want to avoid antagonising the PRT any further."

Damn, how many innocent people had been framed up for this? I had trouble believing our boss had the power to arrange for that much. A lot of them had to be legitimate criminals right? It was something I would have to contemplate later.

"So we continue our hit and run style, just with less hitting of the Wards and Protectorate?" Brian asked.

"Pretty much. I reckon if we do another job soon, it should be something against the Merchants." Lisa said. "It will help reinforce our vigilante rep and if we don't poke the Empire or the ABB for a bit, they might calm down a little."

"Merchants will be low profit though." Brian said. "I mean, I assume we want to stay away from captured drugs as an income source?"

"Ah shit." Alec grumbled. "Being a hero already sucks."

I pondered that for a moment. Selling stolen drugs hadn't even occurred to me. I guess I was kind of a lousy villain.

"Well we can't make a profit, but can we destroy the drugs in such a way as to be obvious on camera?" I asked. "If we can swing a little more PR from it, maybe we can wrangle a little bonus cash out of our oh so considerate Boss?"

My sarcasm seemed to match the overall opinion of our employer. I can't say I was that unhappy with the prospect of being a hero. But it definitely made things more complicated, just when I was starting to get used to things.

"I'll give him a call later to ask about it." Lisa said with another frustrated sigh. "Are we all good to do this crazy ass plan?"
"As long as I keep getting money and support for my sister it's just another pay check." Brian said with a shrug. "I guess so."

"He's paying us to be heroes? Fine, but it doesn't mean I'm going to be all Gallant about it." Alec said, laughing at his own joke. No one joined him.

"It's money, whatever." Rachel said, clearly unhappy at the paradigm shift. She got up and Angelica joined her. "I'm taking her for a walk. I'll check on the other dogs."

Lisa, Brian and Alec all looked at me after I hadn't said anything for a while. I looked back and them and chuckled.

"Another way of rubbing the PRT's nose in its own incompetence?" I said with what was likely a malicious grin. "That sounds... fun!"

Damn it, I thought as I woke up the next morning. In all the confusion from our media coverage I had completely forgotten to get Lisa to clear up the misconception that had been haunting me lately. I considered dropping by on my morning run, but realised it would take a bit too long. Things would be so much more convenient if I didn't have to go to school. Perhaps I could test out or something. Thinking over my options, I got ready for my morning routine.

I hated Mondays. It was such an obvious thing, but it only really made itself know when I returned to school. Emma seemed to be actively avoiding me of late, but that didn't make the experience any less dull. I tried to pay more attention in classes and get my grades back up, but it all felt so pointless. As it was I had good enough marks to pass and that was... sufficient.

Lunch time came around and it was time for some likely very awkward conversations with Aisha. Sitting in my usual spot, munching on a sandwich, I wondered how to broach the topic. My thoughts were quickly derailed.

"Yo Taylor." Aisha said from just behind my shoulder, causing me to jump a little.

"Damn it, don't do that." I said, trying to get my heart rate under control.

"So, with you guys going legit, you going after Glory Girl?" She said, wearing a cheeky grin.

Any hopes of a serious conversation had just nose dived as the realisation that she had seen the news and jumped to yet more conclusions dawned on me.

"About that." I said. "Not actually a lesbian."

"Serious?" She asked, mock shocked expression. "You like the dudes?"

"Serious." I confirmed in a deadpan tone as I stared at her.

"Well that would explain the looks you were giving my brother." She nodded sagely.

"What?" I said. My eye twitched a little in a way I was starting to think of as a symptom of Aisha.
"Saw you checking out Brian when we were putting furniture together." She explained. "I thought I was just seeing things."

My response was to just continue staring at her, my eye still twitching. I took a drink from my water bottle.

"Soooooo, you want into his pants or what?" She asked before she shifted to the side to avoid the water that flew from my mouth as I coughed. It took a few moments before I recovered enough to talk.

"Well he's good looking and nice." I said sheepishly. "I guess I'd be interested in pursuing a relationship."

"When he hits eighteen, you'd be officially jail bait." She said mockingly.

"I cared about the law when?" I asked. The look on her face was priceless.

"Point." She said after a while. "I can ask him all subtle like if you want?"

"You, subtle?" I asked, getting me a faux pained look from her. "Ok if you can test the waters, maybe actually explain I'm not gay? That would be good."

"No promises. He might like the older ladies." Aisha said. She stared at me for a bit before adding. "Are you sure you don't want Glory Girl? She's damn fit."

The only adequate response was to bury my face in a hand, using the other to give her the finger.

A few hours after school and I was surrounded by my team mates. We were clustered around the coffee table in the loft as we went to work planning.

"So the idea is to hit this warehouse." Brian said as he pointed to a structure on the map rolled out in front of us. "Merchants keep a lot of their stock here."

"Its likely that a large amount of money will also be kept on site." Lisa added. "However, we're likely to encounter at least two capes and a bunch of druggies with guns.

"Don't the Merchants only have three capes?" I asked.

"From our most recent intel, yes." She answered. "But as this is one of their bigger holdings, its likely to have most of them present."

"We talking handguns or machine guns?" Alec asked, beating me to my next question.

"Mostly hand guns, maybe a few with AKs and uzis." Lisa said.

"What do we know about the capes?" Brian asked.

"Skidmark can make zones that propel things in a particular direction. He can stack the effects over time to increase the push." Lisa explained. "Squealer is a Tinker, makes big, loud vehicles mostly. Mush can create a kind of armour around him by using whatever junk is lying around. Mud, trash, dirt and such."

"So if we can catch them off guard they shouldn't pose too much of a threat." Brian Asked.
"The only reasons they are still around is they haven't pushed to hard and they have a lot of the drug traffic covered." She said. "Otherwise one of the other gangs would have crushed them by now."

"So, we hit them Wednesday night?" He asked looking around.

A series of nods answered him.
The warehouse sat before us, the light glimmering through broken windows strangely menacing in the darkness. We had agreed to attack late in the evening. Though this would likely lead to more people present, they had a higher likelihood of being less than lucid from their own products. Not being silhouetted while attacking a building full of guns was also a selling point. Any streetlights that would have illuminated us were broken the night before.

I found myself nervous about this raid. While the Merchants had few capes with arguably weak powers compared to the other factions, a bunch of drugged up loonies with automatic weapons seemed much more likely to get us killed if we slipped up.

And yet, I was excited. Thrilled by the challenge set before me. Something I could do and do well, despite the risk. Cape work made me feel alive after so much time spent just enduring.

"Ok, lets go." Grue said, breaking me out of my reverie.

We moved in towards the western side of the warehouse, hidden with a combination of the darkness of night and many small bursts of Grue's power. As Grue and I took up our positions either side of an open loading bay I readied our little surprise. It had taken a day for the boss to deliver the parts, but I hoped it would work as planned.

Inside the warehouse, I caught a glimpse of four Merchants with rifles lazily 'guarding' the area while about a dozen were lounging around a cluster of couches in front of a likely stolen wide-screen. From our intel, there should have been at least another ten, so I guessed they were in the office section past the door at the back of the large room. I glanced at Grue for a 'go ahead' and he nodded.

Holding the bundle of canisters in my hands, I lifted them up, pushed my hands forwards then dropped them down a little as I stepped to the side. I had to make this quick, hoping I didn't stand out too much in the doorway. I stepped back a few paces and let go of the bundle, a small cord still attached to my wrist. There was a very faint series of popping sounds as several pins came free and the package arced through the air towards the clustered Merchants.

I quickly stepped over to Grue's side, placing up a barrier between us and the building and facing away as his power shrouded us and the doorway in darkness. Inside the swirling oily void I waited.

After what seemed minutes but must have been seconds, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A sign that the combined bundle of flash bangs and stinger grenades had gone off, pelting them with rubber balls, light and sound. The darkness swirled away from us but still covered the doorway, providing a target.

A harsh staccato of automatic weapon fire filled the air as a few lucky guards emptied their weapons into the shadows to our left, while cries of pain and panic came from the others. The gunfire soon died down.

On cue, three car sized dogs leaped through the windows on the northern side of the building. Shattered glass littered the floor as the monstrous beasts landed next to the blind and deaf druggies. Bitch, Regent and Tattletale came through the door on that side and we moved in.

The two guards that hadn't been close enough or facing the bundle were busy trying to reload when their hands suddenly twitched, forcing them to drop the guns. I lassoed the rifles, flinging them off into a corner while a shadow clad Grue moved to deal with the confused sentries. The other three waded into the seething mass of stunned and drugged up Merchants, applying the tender mercy of
stun guns to those who were still lively enough to resist.

"That's this lot down." Regent said as he pulled a zip lock tight around the wrists of a moaning meth head.

"Rest are probably through there." Tattletale said. "Though the lack of gaudy vehicle would suggest Squealer isn't here."

"Marceau," Grue said, "with me."

We moved up to the door and I set up a wall just a fraction smaller than the doorway. Familiar darkness shrouded us and I felt a push on my shoulder a moment later as he steered us through the door. I was mildly surprised by my vision returning only a short moment later.

"Huh, no one else is here." Grue said, surprised audible through the eerie echo of his voice.

"Well then, let us make the most of this opportunity." Tattletale said as she joined us.

I nodded in agreement, though I was slightly paranoid at how easy this was. But I figured we might as well get started while we waited for the other shoe to drop.

The office was fairly open plan, a few trashed cubicles with mattresses lining the floors and a separate office that had been reinforced with a haphazard covering of sheet metal. The door was locked with a chunky padlock. Tattletale started digging through a pouch for I assumed some lock picks when I held up my hand, she looked at me and nodded.

I moved toward the padlock arms bent and spread out in front of me, mostly closed fists rotated at an angle from each other. While I was testing my powers, I had tried something similar, but I wasn't totally sure I could apply enough force. Figuring it was worth a shot, I strained a little as I moved my fists together above the padlock. With an almost inaudible clink, the loop was sheared apart by a non-existent pair of bolt cutters. Underneath my mask I smiled a smug smile. With a wave of my hand my mask smiled too as I turned back to my team mates.

The armoured room was more full than I had been expecting. Numerous blocks of white powder wrapped in plastic covered a table. Baggies of crystals filled a 44 gallon drum in a corner. Another was filed with baggies of what I assumed was weed. A bench to the side had some residue of a 'product test' and some Tupperware containers filled with pills. A safe stood against a wall next to a re-purposed bookshelf lined with bottles of rot gut whiskey.

"This is more than I was expecting" Tattletale said, her grin wide in delight as she moved to the safe. "This is going to hit them hard. Probably several hundred thousand worth."

As she started messing around with the keypad, Grue and I set out our other surprise for the night. While the money from the drugs would have been nice, I was happier to have it destroyed. I'd seen a few of the people the Merchants had hooked and I'd be glad to know they'd struggle to do the same to others for a while. With a clank, the door to the safe swung open and Tattletale started loading the stacks of bills into a duffel bag.

Simple incendiary devices, set to a remote detonator, were spread around the room to burn up the stock pile. We'd want to be out of the office when it went up to avoid the fumes, but a call to the fire department and PRT should see to it that the fire wouldn't spread.

As we walked out of the office section, Grue pressed a button and a low woof noise and a brief flash informed us that the stockpile was cooking.
"That'll keep the streets clean for a while," Grue said as he face Tattletale, clearly trying to get into the swing of heroic one liners. She just grinned and let her camera record the ham.

"We're done." Tattletale announced to Regent and Bitch, who had since finished restraining the Merchants. A few small fire extinguishers were placed near them, just in case. While they were depraved drug addicted assholes, we didn't want them to burn to death or anything. She pulled her phone out of a pouch, hit speed dial and held it to her head.

"PRT? Undersiders here." She said to the person on the other line.

Honk! I added.

"Warehouse near the Graveyard, Johnson Street. Sixteen restrained Merchants and the burning remains of around six hundred thou of drugs. Might want a fire truck just in case." She hung up before the person could respond. "Ok lets get out of here."

Mounting up on the dogs, we rode out through the western loading bay and found ourselves staring at the unholy offspring of a carnival and a road train. Gaudy lights flashing and neon glow from the undercarriage back lit some very unimpressed and dishevelled gang lords.

"What the fuck were you cunt-biscuits doing in there?" Skidmark asked with the eloquence of a jack hammer.

It appeared that the other shoe had finally decided to drop.
Rather than answering with words, Grue's reply was with a wave of cloying darkness. Inky black clouds engulfed Skidmark and someone I assumed was Mush before billowing out to cover the tinker vehicle.

"South!" Grue yelled and with a whistle from Bitch we turned to our left and the dogs started their strange loping gait.

We had only got halfway to the end of the building when a bright flash threw harsh shadows in front of us. A glance over my shoulder showed a startling absence of Grue's darkness and road train mounted floodlights slowly dimming. I felt Grue turn to look as well.

"How the hell?" Asked Grue, even more surprised than I was.

"Fucking Tinkers." He mumbled as he turned back to guide Judas onwards while I noticed bits of trash had gathered around Mush as his armour began to coalesce. I turned back in time to see a strange purple-blue band appear on the ground before us. The previous speed we had bled off near instantly as we passed over it, causing the dogs to stumble a little when they landed. Another glance back showed Mush advancing toward us, his amorphous cladding of garbage complete and a large turret emerging from the roof of Squealer's ride.

**Honk!**

I caught the attention of my team before quickly raising my left hand up, making a barrier to protect us. Being on the back of a monster dog made things tricky for positioning and it took a lot of my focus to create and maintain the wide sloped barrier while my right hand held on to one of Judas' spines.

"Oh *Fuck!*"

The surprised cursing from Regent was only barely heard over the hellish barking of a machine gun as the turret fired upon us. Dozens of impacts vibrated my wall, tingling the hand against it. Bullets squashed against thin air or ricocheted upwards as the Squealer strafed us. The force of the impacts increased as Skidmark created another band of purple to blue gradient between the tinker tank-train and us, blue side facing our way. A small part of my mind considered that it must be speeding up the bullets while the rest focused on keeping us lead free. I felt heavier vibrations through my arm and the beginnings of a headache as he overlaid several more applications of his power in quick succession, boosting the speed of the bullets further.

Another cloud of darkness manifested between us, engulfing Mush and blocking sight through the alley. The dogs shifted to the side in an attempt to move out of the gunfire. Concentrating as I was, I was shocked by the sudden lurch as Judas leaped up to the roof of the building across from the warehouse. That combined with the jolt of landing made me drop the barrier. A glance down at the street showed our original path had a much more intense band of force blocking our way. Given the trouble we had going through the first one, I guessed it would have been impassable.

The darkness once again was washed away by the powerful lights on the Merchant vehicle, the glare only slightly blocked by the material of my mask and leaving spots in my eyes. The turret panned towards us again and I threw up another wall in panic. I needn't have bothered as the dogs quickly bounded over the other side of the building. Even on the other side of the building, the roaring of the engine of that abomination against automobiles could be heard. The Doof Doof 'music' that followed
vibrated my chest and made me cringe in disgust. The whining from our rides showed they were similarly distressed.

In a not-quite-gallop, our canine steeds carried us down the side streets as the all too audible Merchants gave chase. The echoing of the noise pollution through abandoned factories and warehouses made it difficult to tell just where it was in relation to us. Grue said something, but I couldn't make it out despite him being right in front of me. When he gestured to the right, creating a swirl of inky dark before guiding Judas to our left I figured it must have been something about a distraction.

I was starting to think we were free and clear as the thumping beats faded behind us. That hope was shot down as I noticed the growl of a different vehicle. A large tinker made motorcycle rounded the corner ahead of us. The sight of its power armoured rider and camouflage wearing passenger sent a chill of worry down my spine. Armsmaster and Miss Militia had either responded quicker than expected or we were weathering the barrage from the turret longer than I had thought. I glanced around to see if any other Protectorate members were with them but didn't see any. Our forward movement halted and we were about to turn down another street when a voice boomed out from the bike.

"Stop." Said Armsmaster.

"Sorry, but we'd rather not get shot at by Squealer's tank again." Grue said.

"You will come with us for questioning." He said in response, his tone full of arrogance. It was almost as if he expected us to obey him. I almost laughed, but bit down the urge in case his fancy helmet had enhance hearing or some other tinker bullshit.

"Don't think so. We can't really trust you to not lock us up for our independent activity against criminals." Tattletale replied before her grin reached full fox mode. "Not that your track record for keeping hold of the villains we've delivered to you is intimidating."

"And I suppose you want us to deal with the Merchants now that you've stirred them up?" Miss Militia asked, talking over Armsmaster's indignant growl.

"Oh they'll calm down soon enough." Tattletale said. "But you might want to make sure the incinerated drugs don't cause any further issues."

"That is already being dealt with." Armsmaster said.

I guessed that the PRT or some other Protectorate capes must have gone ahead to the warehouse. That meant we probably wanted to be away from the two in front of us before reinforcements arrived. I figured I should probably interrupt Tattletale's stream of talking lest we get bogged down.

Honk!

Everyone looked at me. I looked at Tattletale and made a zipped lips gesture followed by pointing my thumb over my shoulder. She nodded in response.

"Well, we should get going. Ciao." She told the heroes and we turned the dogs to head off.

We were interrupted by the sound of screeching brakes and squealing tyres. The crossroad behind us was filled with a now music-free Merchant vehicle, sandwiching us between them and the Protectorate capes. Its turret moved to target us.

As yet another shoe dropped, it appeared that Murphy had quite the selection of footwear for us
tonight.
I didn't have much time to act, so I did the first thing that had come to my mind when I worked out how they were counteracting Grue's darkness. Dropping off the side of the dog, I held my left hand up as if holding something and my right hand gripped near it before pulling down and letting go. My left arm leveled out with my shoulder as my right hand gripped something else. My index finger pulled while I prayed it would work.

One by one the floodlights shattered as I imagined bullets firing from some kind of automatic rifle from that game Brian and Alec played. I jostled my body, as a proper machine gun should have recoil. I made a few quick sweeps as I stepped towards the vehicle, glass shattering in silence.

With a loud hammering from behind me, several tires burst. A quick glance over my shoulder showed that my team mates and the heroes were roughly behind me. Miss Militia had her weapon levelled at the now destroyed tires, strangely matching the imaginary one in my hands.

I 'dropped' the gun and thrust my hands forward as the turret finished its turn towards us.

"Grue, darkness!" I heard Tattletale yell.

The street between the Merchant vehicle and I was filled with a swirling cloud a second before I felt the first impacts on my wall. Not twisting to get the correct angle or bouncing around on Judas helped with my focus and the impacts didn't vibrate my hands nearly as much as they had. Though if this went on too long and Skidmark did his thing, that would soon change. That the darkness hadn't been banished gave me a bit of hope, even as the lead piled up at my feet.

Realising that my wall was of course invisible to the others, I jerked my head right twice in the hopes that that would get the point across. The sound of Tattletale talking was mostly obscured by the muffled clacking of the turreted gun. I found myself wondering why Grue hadn't fully enveloped the vehicle too, also why the Merchants would waste ammo rather than change tactics. I didn't get far before I had to refocus as the impacts began feeling more and more powerful by the second.

Three large shapes passed through my peripheral vision and into the darkness. The dogs had been sent to play. Suddenly, not shrouding the vehicle made a bit more sense.

I heard a dull thump and felt the series of impacts rise along my wall then cease, before a screeching crash reverberated through the street. The sound barely dampened by the partially intervening cloud of darkness. The inky barrier swirled away into nothingness, revealing the underside of the mutant road train, one of the dogs chewing on a tyre. Grue stood to the side, while Bitch was still on Brutus and the other two were dismounting from Angelica.

Dropping my wall, I glanced back at the heroes and waved a 'come along' gesture at them before I jogged towards the flipped vehicle while keeping an eye out for surprises. I didn't notice said surprise till a dumpster went flying across my vision, narrowly missing Brutus and Bitch. You wouldn't think a twelve foot tall garbage monster could be stealthy.

Mush rounded the corner, having apparently been dropped off earlier. The extra bulk he had gathered must have been most of the trash in the area. I had to give the Merchants credit, maybe they did have some modicum of tactical planning after all. Angelica and Judas pounced and latched onto the garbage man, followed shortly after by Brutus once Bitch jumped off.

I caught up to them just as Regent shoved his sceptre through a broken window. I thought I heard
some swearing, but wasn't sure over the sounds of battle. The sound of more gunfire filled the air as Miss Militia added a few precise shots from her now-a-sniper-rifle, taking out the knees of Mush's construct. A few moments of mauling later and the armour of debris fell apart, a now unconscious Mush riding a wave of filth to the street.

Not bad for a single night. I thought. The entirety of the merchants leadership taken out. A quick wave of my hand and my mask matched my mood as I saw Skidmark and Squealer dragged from the upturned tinker vehicle.

"Well here are the Merchants for you." Grue said as he turned towards the approaching heroes.

"Try to keep hold of these." Tattletale said with her trademark grin. "You keep losing all our other presents."

"There's still the matter of you coming in for questioning." Armsmaster said. I was kind of surprised just how stubborn he was about that.

"Are you really going to make the horrible mistake of trying to bring in the helpful vigilantes?" Tattletale asked as she stared at him, grin still on her face. "Is your ego so important that you'd risk your reputation over it?"

"You assaulted our Wards while robbing a bank, that's hardly vigilante behaviour." He replied.

"None of them were seriously injured and we even freed Panacea to help you as soon as we were done exposing their corruption." She explained.

"That's beside the point." He said.

I had a feeling this was going to go for a while, so I pulled out my phone, a pen, a notepad and my horn.

"Oh come on. Miss Militia, back me up here." Tattletale pleaded ever so mockingly. "You know this is a bad PR move even if you don't believe we're dashing rogish heroes. We've just prevented the Merchants from gunning you down and delivered them to you on a silver platter."

Typing out a message, I walked towards the heroes.

"Need I point out that they were only going to shoot at us because of your actions?" Miss Militia said calmly. I swear she would have a sarcastic smirk if I could see past that scarf.

"That's beside the point." Tattletale said in a gruff impersonation of Armsmaster. "And now we've stopped the crazy drugged up capes with guns from hurting people. Isn't that more important."

_Honk_

It was only a little squeeze given my proximity, but it got their attention. I held up my phone to Miss Militia.

_-Can I have your Autograph?-  
_-I'm a big fan.-_

I then held out the pen and pad, my mask still on Happy mode. A few seconds of surprised look from her was followed by a brief chuckle. Armsmaster let out a disapproving growl, but she took the pad, somewhat diffusing the tension. She quickly scribbled something down before returning me the closed notepad and pen.
"Let's deal with the Merchants." She said to Armsmaster. He looked like he was going to protest, but she just shook her head slightly before turning back to us. "You have a zero tolerance policy with us. Any more attacks on civilian targets and you will be dealt with harshly. In the mean time, be good."

They moved over to where the Merchants were lined up and cuffed, while we remounted and trotted off. Our trail was masked with darkness till we were well away. After a while, Grue turned back.

"Really, a signature?" He asked. I nodded and opened up the note pad to where she had written.

-Marceau.-
-You would be safer in the Ward program.-
-I think you could do a lot of good there.-
-Miss Militia-
-P.S. Stop stealing my gimmick.-

I looked at the note and couldn't restrain myself from laughing.
Para-Humans Online

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Marceau (Verified Cape)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

◆ Topic: Merchants - Closed for Business
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America

Tattletale's_Throw_Away (Original Poster) (Unverified Cape)
Posted on April 27th, 2011:

The Merchants have been a plague on the City for too long.
Not Anymore!
Includes a guest appearance from some of Brockton Bay 's finest.
Love,
The Undersiders

(Showing page 6 of 8)

► Nalta
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
Damn, did Marceau just hit on MM?

► Sakin
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Nalta:
I know, what a player. GG has got to be feeling jilted.

► Marceau (Verified Cape) Replied on April 27th, 2011:
*Honk*
*Admires Autograph*

► SeaGatherer
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Marceau:
So you didn't get her number?
Oh and grats on getting verified.

► **HotterLass** (Veteran Member)
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@SeaGatherer:
Don't you know? A gentlemime never speaks of his romantic conquests.

*USER HAS RECEIVED A WARNING FOR THIS POST*

► **Grapejoint** (Veteran Member)
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@HotterLass:
Dude, imply Miss Militia is a cougar is offensive. Besides, Marceau X GG OTP.

► **RoboLincoln**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
But dude, imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. He did an invisible gun version of her power. He totally likes MM.

► **FelonyBath**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@ RoboLincoln:
Dude, what's more important is he CAN MIME GUNS! What sort of limit does he have? Oh god invisible bazooka?

► **Sunerva**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@FelonyBath: Fucking Trumps!
With no one to break them out (unlike Lung, Cricket and Stormtiger), it looks like the Merchants are done for good.

► **Tin_Mother** (Moderator)
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
Suggesting a prominent Hero has had illicit activities with a minor is uncalled for. Please avoid any further comments like that.

End of Page. 1 --> 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

♦ **Topic: Undersiders**

In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton_Bay ► Teams ► Villains

**BFG1104**
(Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on March 29th, 2011:
The Undersiders are a new villain Hero? gang in the city consisting of:

**Grue**
- Motorcycle suit and skull faced helmet.
· Darkness powers.

**Tattletale**
· Domino mask, dark tight bodysuit, blond.
· Powers unknown, possibly thinker.

**Regent**
· Renaissance Fair Puffy shirt, tight pants, theatre mask and crown.
· Some kind of body control. *new info* Carries taser in sceptre.

**Hellhound**
· Cheap Dog mask, fur collar jacket.
· Big monster dog mutants.
· AKA Rachel Lindt, Bitch

*EDIT* - New Member as of April 14th*

**Marceau**
· He's a fucking stereotype Mime.
· Crazy telekinesis or reality warping. Extent unknown.
· Doesn't talk, just honks his horn.
· CAN MIME GUNS! *Added 27th April- see link.

*EDIT* - Possible status change as of April 24th*

Recent news reports suggest that this group may be performing vigilante acts against corrupt organisations. Evidence suggest all of their targets have been linked with criminal activities.

*EDIT* - Undersiders and Protectorate team up vs Merchants April 27th*

Recent Undersider video shows them teaming up to capture all three of the Merchant's cape leaders. This lends further credence to their Hero status. Marceau appears to ask Miss Militia for an autograph. *Edit* 'confirmed' by Marceau.

(Showing page 53 of 54)

**EspressoBot** Replied on April 27th, 2011:
So is it just me, or is Regent a bit femmy?

**Beauty_Five**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@EspressoBot
Oh, Regent is totally a cross dressing girl, I mean look at the way 'he' flounces about. Oh and that luxurious hair? You can't tell me any guy takes care of it that well.

**Cute_Frog**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
True he does look a bit girly. But if he's cross dressing, what about Grue and Marceau?

**Cloudtree**
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Cute_Frog
Well Grue does have some very concealing bulky clothes, but he's pretty tall so I wouldn't think so.
Marceau is such a damn playa, there's no way he isn't 100 Proof testosterone.

► SpecificProtagonist
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
Oh Marceau is a man alright, just look at the way he holds himself.

► Stalking_Tanuki
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
He is such a bad man, leading on all those poor ladies.

► Diamondegg
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Cloudtree
It's a shame that. It would be great if we could have a all girl team in BB.

► Killer_Smith
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Diamondegg
Yeah that would rock. I guess we'll just have to dream.

► CavalryLord2
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Cute_Frog
Eh, if we didn't know better I'd say Hellhound was butch enough to be a dude.
Still, I think you have something with Grue.

End of Page. 1, ---> 52, 53, 54

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► Day_Hunter
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
So the point was brought up earlier in the latest video thread. What do you reckon the biggest gun he can mime would be?

► KnowMe
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Day_Hunter
I'm afraid that he doesn't have a limit. What if he's like a scary silent Eidolon, with nothing he can't do?

► Felony_Bath
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
Well he cut through those chains, so I imagine it would be easy for him to cut up anything else.

► Celebratory_Cheer
Replied on April 27th, 2011:
@Felony_Bath:
Oh God, Jack Slash vs Marceau - Invisible Ranged Knife fight!

► SpecificProtagonist
Replied on April 27th, 2011 :
@Celebratory_Cheer
That is terrifying. I don't want my favourite mime cut up.

► Kraken
Replied on April 27th, 2011 :
@SpecificProtagonist
Yes, we know about your lust for tall dark and silent.

Moving on, was it just me or was he holding on a bit too tightly to Grue?

► SpecificProtagonist
Replied on April 27th, 2011 :
@Kraken:
Don't be ridiculous, he obviously likes the ladies.
*Silently hopes to be his*

► Wrath
Replied on April 27th, 2011 :
I wonder why he didn't ask Armsmaster for an autograph too?

Has anyone else noticed that most of this thread is about Marceau shipping?

► HotterLass
Replied on April 27th, 2011 :
@Wrath
He's obviously hitting on her.

That and from what I've heard, Armsmaster is a bit socially inept. I mean, did you hear him when he did that charity gig last year?

End of Page. 1, --> 52, 53, 54

♦ Private messages from Tin_Mother (Moderator):
24th April 2011

Tin_Mother:
Marceau
If you would like to verify cape status, please follow these instructions:

1. Take a photo of yourself in costume near a Brockton Bay landmark with a current newspaper.
2. Upload photo and send to Tin_Mother@PHO.com

27th April 2011

Marceau:
*Honk*
*Sends Link*
Tin_Mother:
Thank you for your cooperation, status upgraded.
Please continue to follow PHO posting guidelines.
P.S. Clever usage of your powers in the photo. I must admit it got a laugh from me.

♦ Private messages from Glory_Girl (VerifiedCape):
21st April 2011

Marceau:
We rescued a puppy,
It reminds me of you.
It humiliates Nazis,
'Tis adorable too.

Glory_Girl:
Umm, thanks I guess.

I'm still mad at you for holding my sister hostage.

Marceau:
I deeply regret that.

She seems like such a nice girl and I never wanted to cause the two of you distress.

23rd April 2011

Glory_Girl:
Heroes? Seriously? What?

Marceau:
Well the cat is out of the bag now.
Alas we couldn't trust a corrupted system to clean up the hidden crime of the city, so had to take justice into our own hands.
If you see the wards, can you pass on our apologies?
We would have preferred to avoid clashing with those hard working, if ill informed, heroes.

Glory_Girl:
I'll let them know.
Miss Militia

Hannah was unimpressed, to put it lightly. A Ward in her city being responsible for such a travesty was unforgivable. Sophia hadn't even shown any remorse for the girl she had tortured for the last two years. While in the grand scheme of things Hannah herself had been subjected to worse, she still felt a pang of sympathy for the victim and righteous anger at the so called hero. Abusing power was one of the things she could not abide.

Still, Sophia had been carted off to juvenile detention since the discussion with Director Piggot. Hannah was damn certain she wouldn't have her in her city when she was out in another two years, even if she did join the Protectorate.

She hoped that Panacea could help the young Ms Hebert when she got back from Canberra. The girl shouldn't have to suffer because of a failure on the PRT's part.

"Director?"

Emily Piggot looked up from her desk at the waiting Miss Militia.

"Yes?"

"I've just had an interesting discussion with Panacea. Apparently she hadn't heard anything about the Hebert case we requested she help with."

Director Piggot sighed as she went through her e-mails. Hannah got the distinct impression that the Director thought this was a waste of her time. She avoiding making a comment to that regard.

"Well the request was sent on my end. It must have gotten screened out by New Wave's junk screening or something."

"Hmm, very well. I've asked her in person if she can deal with the matter. I don't like leaving loose ends like this, when we're partially to blame."

"If that is all?" The Director was clearly dismissing her.

"Yes Director." Hannah said as she left the office. There are days where I really wish we had a more caring boss. She thought, before quickly disregarding the idea. Director Piggot was generally effective at her job, despite her personal lack of empathy and this recent lapse.

-I've patched up Taylor. Poor girl got hit by a car on the way to see me.-
-Not sure what your investment was, but those bullies really did a number on her.-
-I hope they got their deserved punishment.-
-Panacea-

Hannah looked at the text she had just received and a sad but relieved smile came to her lips. Her scarf of course hid it from the others in the room.
"So Bakuda. You are going to tell us where all your bombs are and how to diffuse them."
Armsmaster stood over the bomb-tinker, arms folded. "Unless you feel like a trip to the Bird Cage of course."

"It would be in your best interest to cooperate." Miss Militia added, taking up the good cop role.
"Lung isn't going to help you after what you did to his gang."

She trained her gun on Stormtiger and put a .308 round through his left knee. Othala could heal him up later, but it slowed him and the rest of the Empire down. With the extra caution they would need to take with his destroyed knee and Cricket's broken arm it would free up her team mates to extract the wounded.

She longed to put an armour piercing round through Kaiser's skull, but that wouldn't help Gallant now. His only hope was that they could get him back to Clockblocker while they waited on Panacea. Her rifle morphed into a LAW and she fired off a rocket at Fenja. The giant took it on her shield, knocking her back into her sister. Not soon enough to save Battery from Menja's spear though. Miss Militia swore under her breath. This was becoming an A grade clusterfuck, like her father's stories of 'Nam.

Another flash of green and she was holding an M60, shooting a hail of bullets at the twins to pin them down and giving Assault a chance to extract his partner. The call came through to withdraw. The wounded had been recovered and they were in no condition to pursue the villains.

The Empire was getting way too cocky of late, and the Undersider's raid had shown them how vulnerable they were. It was to be expected that they'd lash out, but Miss Militia was still shocked that they would go this far. Something had to be done about them and soon.

"Heroes? You've got to be shitting me." Dennis' disbelief echoed the feelings of the other Wards.

"I don't believe it myself, but alas we are slaves to PR." Hannah let out a resigned sigh. "We are to ask them to come in for questioning, but not 'initiate hostilities'."

"So they tear us a new one and get away with it? That's bullshit." He said.

"I have to agree with you on that." Carlos was clearly unimpressed. "Even if I'm all healed up now, being a chew toy sucked hard."

"I don't like it any more than you do. But we are outnumbered by villains, even with Bakuda locked up. The think tank is saying that the Undersiders are likely to play ball with avoiding further conflict if we don't start it."

"I still say this is crazy." Chris added. "I mean look at Hellhound, she's got a murder charge."

"And that Marceau guy is a menace."

The Wards looked at Dean, his arms crossed and slouching on the couch.

"Just because he's trying to woo Glory Girl." Dennis snarked. He held his hands up in a placating
gesture as Dean threw him an angry stare. "I kid, I kid. But in all serious that Mime is terrifying. I'm already dreading the prospect of getting force choked. Shit, remind me not to 'doubt his power'."

"But, it looks like that murder charge might get dropped." Missy said, which drew everyone's attention. "I heard on the news that there were 'extenuating circumstances'. Triggered while being abused or some such."

"I feel like the world has just flipped upside down." Dennis added as he grabbed a soda from the fridge. "What kind of bizzaro world lets Villains become heroes?"

"Probably the same one where our heroes bully school girls.” Mumbled Missy, but not quiet enough.

"Thanks, I had almost stopped thinking of that." Moaned Chris as he flicked through some posts on PHO.

The contemplative silence was broken when Chris started cackling like a madman drawing everyone's attention. Hannah in particular was curious what had made the tinker react so.

"What is it?"

"Can't... breath." Was the reply she received.

They moved up to look over his shoulder at the page on the screen. A mixture of stunned looks and giggles followed shortly after.

"Ok. The world has officially gone insane." Dennis' voice was robbed of most of his typical jovial tone. "I never even met Tattletale and I'm being shipped with her. What the hell?"

"What, Hellhound is hot for me?" Carlos asked. "Ta-sun-der? What does that even mean?"

Hannah stood there, wondering when her life became so strange. It wasn't like this when she was a Ward. She longed for the days when things made sense.

Miss Militia's eyes widened as the floodlights exploded from what seemed to be about 5.56 rounds.

That cheeky bastard. I'll show him shooting.

A flash of green and she was holding a SCAR-L. A few short bursts and the tyres on the vehicle were gone. The young mime stepped in front of them and put up his hands as the turret fired.

He has no real reason to but he's still shielding us. Interesting.

Miss Militia found herself rather surprised by the sudden turn of events. She had been asked for her autograph on countless occasions, but never by someone she had thought of as a villain. Well he did protect us and they have just handed us the Merchants. Why not?

She took the offered notepad and pen. I wonder if I could get them to join up with us? Armsmaster's approach sure as hell won't work.

She scribbled down a message and paused before adding an extra comment and handing the pad
"Lets deal with the Merchants." She said to Armsmaster.

She gave him a quick shake of her head, cutting off his objection. He wouldn't like it, but it was for the best. She turned back to the Undersiders.

"You have a zero tolerance policy with us. Any more attacks on civilian targets and you will be dealt with harshly. In the mean time, be good."

She and Armsmaster walked over to the unconscious Merchants to ensure they were properly restrained.

"I know you wanted to take them in." She whispered through the subvocal microphone at her neck. "But all it would do is get us in a pointless fight and alienate some kids that might eventually join us."

"I don't like this, but I'm willing to go along for now." Armsmaster replied quietly. "I'll be there to take them in as soon as they show their true colours."

"I hope it won't be necessary, but that is sensible."

"Hah! Get a load of this."

Hannah turned to see what the commotion was. The Wards were once again clustered around a computer terminal and viewing the PHO forums.

"Ok. What is it this time?"

"They're discussing the idea that Marceau got himself a harem of female capes, with the Undersiders all being girls." Dennis was having trouble controlling his laugh.

"What?" Hannah's mind was derailed by the concept.

"Yeah, I know right. They're speculating that Grue and Regent are cross dressed girls." Added Chris.

"But. They have male voices." She pointed out the obvious flaw in the idea. "And I'm pretty sure with that loose shirt Regent wears you would notice if he was a she."

"Yep, and yet they're arguing about binding and other silly stuff and..." Missy started before going quiet.

"What?"

"Umm, never mind." Missy said, now blushing.

"Tell me." Hannah was not impressed by the haphazard efforts towards secrecy.

Missy just pointed to a highlighted section of text. Hannah read it. Then reread it. A third time to make sure her perfect memory wasn't failing.
"What?"

Once more she wondered what she had done to warrant the strangeness that had filled her life of late. She was starting to regret that autograph.

She thought about the earlier silliness and had a strange thought. Why hadn't anyone suggested Marceau might be a girl? It made about as much sense as the other random theories, he didn't even talk.

**Wait, no talking... Taylor Hebert?**

She pondered the idea for a moment before disregarding it. First, the dates didn't really match up. Second, he seemed too masculine and confident to be a shy bullied girl. Thirdly, Panacea would have noticed if the girl was Marceau after their encounter at the bank. Finally, with how capable Marceau was, it was unlikely he'd get hit by a car. She smiled and shook her head, wondering how she'd even thought it possible.

*I swear, PHO rots the brain.*
Saturday morning, I arrived at the lair after my morning run. The lounge was empty so I guessed everyone else was still asleep. I made my way to the shower to clean off the sweat I had worked up on the way over. By the time I had finished and got changed into some fresh clothes, Lisa had dragged herself out of bed and was nursing a mug of coffee.

"I was heading out to the mall to pick up some things soon." She said sleepily. "Wanna come with?"

"Sure." I said. "There are a few things I was wanting anyway."

"Finally going to spend some of your ill gotten gains?" Lisa asked, to which I nodded. "Good. Once I've got this caffeine in my system, I'll get dressed and we can go."

"Sounds good."

"So, where to first?" I asked as we passed through the sliding doors into the mall. It was a fairly large complex, multistorey with a selection of special interest stores as well as the big name chains.

"I need to get myself another laptop. Last one fizzled out when Judas knocked my coffee mug over and soaked it." She explained. "While I can get one through 'work' connections cheaper, I like to check out the feel in person."

"Actually, I have been meaning to get one as well." I said with smirk. "Then I don't have to keep borrowing yours."

"That would be good, yes." She said, eyes rolling.

Fifteen minutes later we had decided on laptop models for the Boss to order for us. I had gone for a fairly small and simple design for net browsing while Lisa had gone for something more extravagant, with all the bells and whistles.

"I need a few more clothes with summer coming." I told her, a wry smile on my face. "And I know how much you like picking them for me."

"Of course. Otherwise you'd make horrible decisions."

Her playful mocking would have bugged me not that long ago, but I had to admit she did have pretty good taste. I was starting to like dresses a lot more. That of course was to make the separation between Taylor and Marceau more solid, and not at all because they were pretty. Honest.

"Yo Taylor." Said a familiar voice behind me.

When I turned around my suspicions were confirmed and Aisha was walking towards us.

"Hi Aisha."

"Who's the leggy blonde?" She asked. "New girlfriend?"
"Hah hah no." I deadpanned. "This is my friend Lisa. Lisa, Aisha from school."

"Oh, pleasure to meet you at last."

I noticed that Lisa was grinning widely. Aisha stared at Lisa for a moment, looked back at me then back to Lisa.

"Likewise." She said with a smile of her own.

The way they were staring at each other gave me a bad feeling.

"Yes." Lisa said to Aisha.

Aisha just nodded and smiled wider.

"So much for secrets." I muttered.

"So, why don't you join us and help me make up for Taylor's lack of fashion sense."

"Sounds fun."

I wasn't sure Aisha was a particularly good judge of that, but I didn't mind her hanging out with us. I realised that other than that one time at Brian's, I hadn't really hung out with the girl outside of school.

"As long as I don't have to wear a micro skirt like Ms Laborn here." I snarked.

"Nah girl, you gotta have a figure to pull this off."

"Touché" I grumbled.

At least an hour passed going through various outlets and trying on all sorts of things. I found my wallet lighter but my arms several dresses heavier.

"Still reckon you should have grabbed the pink one." Aisha said.

"I told you, no frilly prissy stuff." I said. While I was enjoying dresses, I had to put my foot down on the really girly lacy things.

"It would have looked good on you." Lisa said with undisguised mirth.

"If I wanted to look like a Disney princess, sure." I replied before changing the topic. "Anyway, I'm getting hungry."

"Yeah, I could down a burger." Aisha said. Lisa just nodded and we made out way to the food court.

A good chunk of the day had passed in a haze of shopping. We were loaded up with bags of clothes and other items and about to head home.

"Just a moment." Aisha said. "Little girl's room."
"Fine." I said as we followed her off to the nearest restroom.

While she found a stall and Lisa was rummaging through one of her bags, I checked myself in the mirror. It was still kind of strange seeing a smile on my face. I guess having friends again helped with that. Despite all the complications of my life as a cape, think I could say that I was happy again.

The door swung open and I heard a voice I hadn't heard in quite a while.

"Taylor, is that you?" Asked Madison.

*Good things never last.* I thought as I turned to look at one of my former tormentors.

A certain amount of confusion flicked through my mind as I tried to match the girl in front of me with the cutesy bitch from months back. She, well she wasn't as neatly dressed as usual for one thing. Not filthy or anything, just a bit wrinkled like when the clean laundry was thrown on a pile rather than hung. She frankly looked like she hadn't had much sleep lately, with bags visible under her eyes. Compared to the always perfect looking princess I was used to, something had clearly happened to her.

"Can. Can we talk?"
Madison

"I'm all for the pranks and stuff, but that's just gross." Madison said to her friends. "I mean a locker sure, that's kind of funny but tampons? Eeww."

"Don't be such a pussy, this'll be hilarious." Sophia laughed as she heaped another gloved handful into the bag.

Madison thought of objecting further but the way Emma was glaring at her stopped her in her tracks. She didn't really understand why her friends had such an obsession over Taylor. *I means she's an easy target sure, but this is crazy.*

Still, these were her only friends and it wouldn't do to lose them. She was afraid of what would happen if they turned on her like they did Taylor. *Would I end up just as pathetic?* Best to go along with things and never have to find out.

Madison stood off to the side as Taylor opened up her locker. The look on the girl's face before she bent over retching struck a nerve, but Madison couldn't do anything. Rather she wouldn't do anything, lest the next target be her.

She flinched when Sophia pushed Taylor inside and locked the door. *It's not me, it's fine. She'll be fine, its only some filth.* She thought trying to not show her distress lest the other two catch on.

"Help! Let me out. Please Emma. Don't do this."

She tried to block out the cries as the other two laughed and forced out a laugh of her own to fit in.

"We'll let her out soon right?" She asked Emma as they walked away from the locker.

"Sure, I'll come back in a moment. We'll just let her stew for a moment."

*Well, that shouldn't be too bad.* Madison told herself. *A couple minutes is nasty but she'll live, right?*

Shortly after her second class for the day began, Madison noticed that Taylor wasn't in it. They shared this double period for Math with Mr Quinlan, so her absence was conspicuous.

*I wonder if Emma let her out. Shit, what if she's still in there? No she wouldn't be that cruel. Taylor's probably just gone home or to the nurses office to change some clothes.*

Sophia sitting to her left, looked completely calm. That reassured her somewhat. After all, no one could look that calm if they'd left someone in a locker full of rotting tampons for an hour. She tried to focus on Mr Quinlan talking about algebra.

As she made her way out of the room with the rest of the class, she heard a bit of a commotion from down the hall. The hallway was crowded with students that had finished lessons in nearby rooms. *Oh they must have found the tampons.*
She tried to get a better view, her shortish stature working against her. Finally she managed to squeeze in and get a view, just in time to see the janitor with a pair of bolt cutters shear through the lock.

The locker door swung open. An avalanche of filth fell to the floor and Taylor fell on the janitor, clawing and screaming like some feral beast. Madison's jaw dropped at the sight. Oh god, what have we done?

It was dark and tight and reeked of death. She could barely move, trapped with no light to see by. Her fingers were bleeding from trying to claw her way out, but she couldn't tell if she was making any progress. She couldn't even tell if she was facing the right way. All she could hear were the maniacal giggling of demons. They tormented her through their inaction, their passive presence. Nothing but endless gleeful laughter at her suffering.

"Let me out. Please?" She cried. "I don't want to be in here any more."

The voices continue their tittering, clearly amused by her pleading.

"Help! Anyone?"

Light filled her vision and her prison was washed away.

"Madison sweetie? Are you alright."

She sat bolt upright in her bed, covered in sweat and blinking against the glare of the light. She turned towards the voice to find her mother standing there.

"Another nightmare?" Her mother asked as she sat on the bed next to her, dragging Madison into a hug.

"Yeah."

"Poor dear. Don't worry you're safe. No one would want to hurt such a sweet girl."

If only you knew, Mom.

"Hey Mads what's up? You don't look well."

She turned to face Emma as she grabbed some books from her locker.

"Had trouble sleeping." She mumbled before turning back to her task.

"You should get some pills for that. You're looking a bit haggard."

"Yeah, I'll ask Dad to get some on the way home." She closed the locker and started heading towards home room, Emma walking alongside.

"Did you hear? Taylor's finally back from her stay at the funny farm."
The amused tone Emma had twisted the knife of guilt in her gut just a little more.

"Oh." Madison said in a flat tone. *It's been what three weeks?*

"What's the matter? I thought you'd be thrilled."

*Thrilled?* She thought. *Why the hell would I be thrilled?*

"Yeah, just. Feeling a bit ill." She said instead of what was running through her mind.

"Maybe you should head off to the nurse then."

"Good idea."

*Fuck, I can't keep doing this.* She thought as she wandered off to the nurse's office. On the way she picked up slivers of conversation and rumour mongering. She had a lot of practice picking up those little details. After all, she needed to if she wanted to stay at the top of the school like she had.

"...Totally mute."

"Infection.."

"...she anorexic or something?"

With each piece of information she picked up along the way, the picture became more grim. Then she caught a glimpse of the victim of her weakness. Taylor stood there with a pad writing out messages to a teacher. She looked haggard and even thinner than usual, like she hadn't eaten anything in her time away.

Madison ducked into the nurses office before Taylor could notice her. *What have I done?*

"Ms Blackwell?"

The principal looked over at Madison, standing on the other side of the desk.

"Yes? Ms Clements was it?" She asked, sounding somewhat disinterested.

"I know who put Taylor in the locker." She said, tears already welling in her eyes.

The principal's earlier disinterest vanished as the incident that had drained a chuck of the year's discretionary budget was mentioned.

"Who?" Asked the principal, her tone gaining a cold edge.

"Sophia Hess." Madison told her. "But, I'm scared of what she'll do when she finds out."

"Why is that?"

Madison noticed a very curious tone in Ms Blackwell's voice. Kind of like when people were trying to hide things, but she figured she was being paranoid. *Just the sleep deprivation.*
"I think she's, well." She paused for a moment, trying to think of the right word. "Twisted"

The principal sat there looking at Madison for a little while, before picking up the phone.

"Please wait a moment." She told the girl, before dialling a number. She seemed to be reading it off of her computer screen.

"Hello? This is Principal Blackwell from Winslow. Yes, it is about Sophia. I believe we have a problem."

Sophia was gone. It had been quiet, but something had happened and Madison was glad. However, it didn't stop the restless nights. Every time she saw Taylor having to 'talk' with a notepad, the way Emma was flat out ignoring her, everything was a reminder of what she had done. She hadn't been punished for the locker and she wasn't sure why. Sophia was dealt with quickly and nothing seem to have happened to Emma other than her friend disappearing.

Why do I still feel so damn guilty? She wondered. She had got the responsible party punished, or so it seemed. She had lost the only friends she had, surely that was enough? No, I've been torturing her for over a year with my 'friends', and I've hardly been punished.

She found herself dwelling more and more on what she could have done differently. If I'd noticed the signs earlier, I could have stopped it and let her out. If I hadn't been such a clueless bitch I would have stopped with the pranks. I was too much of a weakening to stop them. Weak like Taylor and still too much of a coward to tell them everything.

She contemplated apologising to Taylor, but dismissed it as impossible. There's no way she want me even talking to her.

That incessant giggling filled her ears. It wasn't dark or confined, instead she was in a crowd. Surrounded by hundreds, all passing this way and that. The people weren't giggling, but it sounded like hundreds were laughing at her. She looked down at her hands, stained red. Madison panicked, not knowing if it was her blood or another's. She tried to yell for help but no sound came out. She waved her bloody hands, to no avail. Everyone of the hundreds of people passing by ignored her like she wasn't there.

Her eyes snapped open to reveal the glowing numbers of her alarm clock.

-2:13-

Another nightmare, another restless night.

"Get well soon sweetie."

Madison croaked an affirmative to her mother from beneath the bed covers. When she heard the front door closing she crawled out of bed and turned on her computer. She couldn't bring herself to go to school today. I'll need to go later in the week. Running out of sick days.

She checked the social media sites that all the popular kids at school used. Status updates popped up frequently despite school hours. It didn't take long before she saw something that caught her attention. A lesbian, really? Her ex? That could explain Emma's behaviour a bit. Sophia a crazy
jealous lover? That can't be right... On second thought. Fuck, this was all over a lover's tiff? I helped torment Emma's ex? Damn it.

She just stared at the screen, wondering what the hell to do.

"Madison dear. You need to get out of the house, it's not healthy spending all your time at that computer." Said her father. "Here, have some spending money and head to the mall. Buy yourself something nice."

She couldn't tell them she kept inside because she had no friends. Didn't want to go to school because she couldn't face Taylor. Couldn't tell them their sweet daughter was a monster. It would break their hearts.

"Thanks Dad." She said, faking a cheerful smile for him. She didn't want to go outside, but her parents were getting worried. Might as well get some fresh air and maybe some ice cream or something.

Madison was about to head home. She'd sat around after grabbing some lunch and checked the status updates on her phone. Nothing new, other then some commentary on the recent cape fights. The Undersiders had apparently made another splash in the news, and people were still talking about it.

She glanced up while she was waiting for one last page to load and caught sight of a person she'd been avoiding too long as she slipped into the ladies room. At least she was fairly sure, but she couldn't remember Taylor ever wearing a dress like that. She considered just walking away and heading home. No. I need to do this. If it's her, I need to apologise. I need to not be weak. I need to say this to her, even if she can't talk back. Even though she must hate me. She'll blame me, probably slap me and then maybe I can stop feeling so god damn guilty.

She got up and jogged over to the restroom, opening up the door. She saw the brunette standing at the sink, smiling at the mirror. She was a little stunned at that, but quickly recovered.

"Taylor, is that you?"

The smile faded as the girl turned to face her. It was definitely Taylor, the wary expression she'd seen so many times.

"Can. Can we talk?"

Taylor gestured to get on with it, an impatient look on her face. The blond behind her had a disconcerting grin as she turned towards Madison. Is this her girlfriend? Not important, focus.

"I. I'm sorry Taylor." She squeaked out as her thumb rubbed nervously on the side of her phone.

She blinked a few times before an incredulous expression settled on her face.

"I... I was a bitch to you and well." She started saying before she paused. "The locker thing was. Sick. I realised Sophia was... twisted. I was to afraid to stop them."

She continued to stare at her, an eyebrow raised at the awkwardly stuttering Madison.
"I told the principal what happened." She cast her gaze back to the ground. "I don't expect forgiveness, but I thought I should tell you. I should have done something sooner."

She glanced back up as she heard the blonde step up and whisper into Taylor's ear. Taylor turned to the girl with a surprised look on her face before turning back to face Madison.

"Well thanks for finally growing a conscience, I guess." She chuckled.

Madison's eyes went wide. What? She can talk? When? What? She's fine and has a friend. I've been feeling guilty all this time over, what?

"You, you..."

I have no friends. I'm an outcast. A shut in. I've... become Taylor.

Two vast shapes moved though a glimmering void.

A pair, alike but different. Mates?

Fractal crystals, organic curves, size beyond reckoning. All these things and more.

Destination

Agreement
"Can. Can we talk?"

I just twirled my hand a bit for her to hurry up, wondering why she'd talk to me after all this time. I guess the only reason I was putting up with it was she had caught me in a good mood.

"I. I'm sorry Taylor." She said quietly.

I blinked a few times in surprise. I honestly had never expected those words to come from her lips. She was fidgeting a bit, a phone held tightly in her hand.

"I... I was a bitch to you and well." She started saying before she paused. "The locker thing was. Sick. I realised Sophia was... twisted. I was to afraid to stop them."

I continued to stare at her, an eyebrow raised at the awkwardly stuttering girl before me. It was hard to believe that this was Madison and not some body snatched double. Though I guess I hadn't really seen her much lately. She hadn't done anything since the locker and I barely noticed her in class.

"I told the principal what happened." She cast her gaze back to the ground. "I don't expect forgiveness, but I thought I should tell you. I should have done something sooner."

While I stood there in shock at this Twilight Zone Madison, Lisa leaned closer.

"I'm kind of surprised. She actually means that." She whispered in my ear "Ooh, she must be the reason Sophia disappeared."

I turned to look at my cheerful friend for confirmation, my eyes wide and she just nodded and grinned. She was right, I didn't forgive her. She had a hand in making my life hell for over a year. But it was a step in the right direction and well, I guess I had her to thank for the end of my bullying problems. Still, she didn't really give me much reason to be civil. Frankly the entire situation felt absurd to me.

"Well thanks for finally growing a conscience, I guess." A dismissive chuckle left my lips. For her part, her eyes widened in shock. *Oh right, the talking.*

"You, you..."She stuttered.

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"Yo Taylor. You okay?"

I opened my eyes and found Aisha hovering over me. *What happened? I feel like I've forgotten something.* There was something cold and hard against my back and something warm and heavy was on my belly. *Bathroom floor.* I tilted my head up to find an unconscious Lisa draped over me.

"What?" I asked, trying to work out why I was on the floor and why she was using me as a pillow.

A groan came from the Lisa as she brought her gaze up to mine.

"What was that?" She moaned.
"Don't know, but you Taylor and the other girl all fell to the floor. Heard the thump from the stall."

I turned over to see Madison picking herself up from the floor, a panicked expression already showing on her face. She looked up and saw us in a tangle with Aisha standing over us.

"What happened?" She nervously asked. "I saw something weird and then I was on the floor."

Lisa stared up at Aisha. "You weren't affected?"

"Nope."

She pondered the answer for a moment, flicking her gaze between Aisha, Madison and I while she dragged herself to her feet.

"Well shit."

She grabbed my hand and helped me up. When I was up on my feet she leaned in close.

"The girl just triggered." She whispered in my ear.

"Oh you have got to be fucking kidding." I said through clenched teeth.

_I get powers after getting locked in with biological waste. She gets them from apologising? That's just unfair._

"What do we do with Madison?" I asked her, keeping my voice low. This was frankly outside my expertise so I hoped Lisa had a plan.

"Recruit her."

I moved back a bit, my brows furrowed in confusion. She looked at me with a grin on my face.

"Say that again?" Surely I didn't hear that right. I noticed the other two staring at me. I must have spoken up a bit louder than I thought.

"What's wrong?" Madison asked, she was clearly uncomfortable with the whole scenario. A little part of me enjoyed that.

"Shush now." Aisha told her wagging her finger. "The big girls are talking."

Madison just stared at her with incomprehension. Lisa leaned back to my ear.

"She's fragile." She continued. "Kind of like you when we met. Likely to fall apart without help. She could be useful and if all else fails we know who she is."

I took a bit of offence at being compared to Madison. I didn't want anything more to do with her, but thinking back to the state of mind I was in when we met... _Shit._ The night I would have committed suicide by cape if I hadn't got lucky.
"What do you mean useful?"

I looked over at where Madison stood, wary and frightened. *She had heard that?* With a sigh, I came to a decision that I felt I would probably regret.

"If you would do the honors." I said to Lisa and buried my face in my hand. *Just when I was getting used to things.*

"Madison was it?" Lisa asked as she moved toward the girl, grin spreading ear to ear. "There's a time in one's life when you undergo some changes."

Madison just stared at her.

"Why are you talking about puberty?"

Lisa blinked and chuckled.

"That was the joke, yes. But what I'm trying to tell you is you have super powers."

"You're kidding right?"

"Well you heard us whispering from over there right?"

"You were whispering?" The surprised look on her face said it all.

"I'm guessing you have super hearing of some sort, maybe other senses." Lisa explained to the stunned girl. "You might have more, but I'm not sure what else."

"So what happens now?"

"Well, we'll go for a walk to somewhere less public and discuss options. But how would you like to be a hero?"

"So how long have you been able to talk?"

"About a two weeks." Madison looked at me confusion clear on her face. "Panacea."

"Oh." She returned to her previous contemplative silence.

I couldn't really blame her, she did just find out she had powers. If my experience was anything to go by, she would probably be like that for a while. We continued to walk through the mall, saving further parahuman discussion till we were somewhere safer.

Madison stopped suddenly as we passed an electronics store. I turned to look and she just stood there staring blankly for a second before a smile bloomed on her face and she marched in with renewed purpose. We had to hustle to keep up with her.

She flitted between the shelves of computer gadgets, portable devices and components before she finally settled on her purchase. A cheap webcam, a remote control helicopter and a prepaid mobile phone. Lisa looked at the basket of goodies and with a vulpine grin offered to pay for some of the items.
While I didn't have Lisa's intuition, I wasn't stupid and jumped to the obvious conclusion. We finally had a 'fucking tinker' of our own.
Madison sat on the picnic table bench opposite Lisa and I. Aisha perched on the table itself, legs swinging idly.

"So...you want me to join the Wards?"

Her incredulous tone suggested she didn't think this was the case.

"Hah hah no." Lisa's laughter echoed around the gazebo. "You've already worked out we aren't Wards. What you didn't know is that Sophia is."

Her expression confirmed Lisa's guess and told a tale of disgust. While I was surprised Lisa would mention it given the unwritten rules, I couldn't argue with its effect.

"I. I think Principal Blackwell must have known."

I looked at her and nodded. It made sense.

"Probably why the three of you got away with it for so long."

She winced at that, but didn't object.

"Wait. Do you think Emma knew? She always seemed crazy obsessed with..."

She left the rest unsaid, but I knew what she meant. *If Emma knew as I had suspected.*

"It could explain why she dropped me for Sophia so suddenly."

Madison had one of those smug looks on her face that practically screamed 'I knew it.'

"So you *were* a couple."

Aisha and Lisa started giggling maniacally at what was becoming a frequent in joke.

"What? No. That was a joke to get her to back off."

"Oh? Oh." A flustered look with matching blush, soon found its way to her cheeks. "I only read it on MyFace. I. I haven't talked to Emma since you came back to school."

That caught my attention and my gaze settled on her eyes as I tilted my head questioningly.

"I didn't really want to hang around her anymore and she shunned me anyway, after she found out." Her eyes dropped from mine. "I don't have any friends anymore and Emma's made sure no one else at school will even talk to me."

Part of me wanted to laugh in her face and ask her how it felt to be like me. It took more effort than I was comfortable with to suppress that urge. I breathed in deeply to calm myself and focus on the fact that she had basically killed her social life. All to try and make up for what she had a part in. Despite my feelings towards her and the sense of schadenfreude that our reversal of fortunes brought, I had to
admire that kind of dedication.

"Anyway." Lisa interrupted, finally controlling her laughter. "We'll need to take a vote on the matter, but we might have a place for someone who wants to redeem themselves."

I glanced over at Lisa. **Really subtle.** But it did seem to fit the information we had.

"So, you aren't the wards and you said heroes. While you're blonde, you definitely aren't Victoria Dallon."

Lisa just smiled as she waited for Madison to finish her deductions.

"That must make you the Undersiders. So you must be Tattletale." Lisa's smile morphed into a grin. "And that must make you... Regent."

I blinked a few times in confusion as the other two resumed their laughter. My mouth moved a few times but no word came as I stared at her in utter bafflement.

"Well Regent is so femmy in the vids you posted, and you both have curly darkish hair and well." Madison made vague gestures with her hands in the shape furthest from hourglass possible. My head connected with wood, creating a dull thump as I grumbled into the picnic table.

"I swear I have a power to make people have misconceptions or something."

"You're not Regent? But you aren't tall or buff enough to be Grue and you aren't Rachel Lindt..." She stared at me then, eyes growing wide. "No."

Lisa suddenly stopped laughing as she looked at Madison.

"Really? Oh wow, that is too rich." Her cackling resumed and as I stared up, a blush came to the girls face.

"Let me guess, you have a crush on Marceau too?"

Her silence was damning.

"Damn Taylor, you sure this wasn't all a plan to get yourself a honey?"

I poked Aisha's shoulder and glared at her. It seemed unlikely that she would ever let that joke go.

"But Marceau seemed so masculine and nice and so strong and sile..." Madison smacked herself upside the head. "I'm an idiot."

"Yes. But I won't hold that against you." Lisa chuckled. "With the way the PHO forums have been lately, you aren't the only one. Wait? Really? Specific Protagonist?"

The blush on Madison's face deepened as I tried to work out why that name sounded familiar. It finally clicked and so I thumped my forehead against the table again in exasperation.

"Yep, superpower." My voice reverberated from the table that was still against my forehead. "Can we get back to the matter at hand? Let's do a conference call or something a get a vote happening before this gets any more awkward."
"So, we have a prospective member that triggered in front of us." Lisa explained over the phone. "She looks to be a tinker with a surveillance specialisation. Plus some enhanced senses."

"A tinker? You have my vote." The excitement in Brian's voice was palpable. It was no secret he had wanted to get one for quite some time. That desire had only increased since Squealer's display of bullshit tinker powers.

"Yeah whatever. It'll help us get jobs done easier." Alec was a blasé as usual.

"Don't like it." Rachel's hesitance was expected. It would effect the pay split and well new people tended to put her on edge. Lisa and I had planned accordingly.

"She's like a battered dog. Needs a good home. She also put Stalker away." I had gotten used to talking 'Rachelese' to a certain extent since I'd gotten to know her. Sure I felt a little bad pushing her buttons, but sadly it was the only way to get through to her. There was a long pause from Rachel, though I could hear appreciative noises from the others.

"As long as she knows her place and doesn't try anything."

And with that, we had the closest thing to approval we'd get from her.

"Ok, so we good to meet at the loft right?" Lisa urged. The weather was starting to look suspicious, so I could understand her hurry. I couldn't well use my power to stay dry while not in costume. That would be just a little too obvious.

"Sure, I'll be there in thirty or forty. Just need to finish off something at my apartment."

"Yeah I'll just be chillin'."

"Fine."

The call came to an end and it looked like we had a new member. Lisa and I walked back to where Aisha was occupying Madison. She turned as we approached.

"You do realise I could hear that entire conversation."

"Yeah, I guessed that would be the case. But it served as a useful test of your abilities and honesty." Lisa's grin had returned to it standard fox setting. "So we'll be heading to our secret base."

I pulled Madison aside as we walked out of the park and towards the nearest bus stop.

"Madison. You've tried to make up for things, so I'm giving you a chance here." I paused for a moment to make sure I was calm before continuing. "You may have realised by now that I could have gone all Carrie at school. I didn't because I didn't want to sink to the level of a bully. I'm happy these days because of my friends. If you do anything to fuck that up, I will not be happy. Do we have an understanding?"

She looked suitably ashamed and contrite. Especially at my none too subtle jab.

"Yes." The earnest expression on her face as she said that put my heart at ease, if only a little.
"Then welcome to the Undersiders. Maybe one day we can be friends."
Aisha had gone off to do her own thing and so we had parted ways at the second bus transfer. While I was fine with her seeing the lair, she figured Brian would be in protective brother mode and 'spaz out'. I turned to Madison, seated between Lisa and I.

"Do you like dogs?"

"Um yeah, they're fine."

"Good. That'll help with Rachel. It would probably help to not show your teeth when you smile."

She looked at me with no small amount of confusion before Lisa elaborated.

"She has some issues with body language. Try to be straightforward but not threatening."

"Oh and ask if you can pet her dogs. That helped when I did it. Don't do it without permission though."

Uncertainty still showed on her face, but she nodded at our advice. I imagined there might be some friction between the formerly popular girl and our resident asocial. Hopefully our advice would help smooth things over.

"Welcome to our lair."

I swept my arm across the loft as if I were a real estate agent while Lisa walked off to her room to grab something.

"That sounds a little villainous."

I gave Madison a look.

"Nonsense, lair is a morally neutral term. Besides, headquarters sounds too official."

"It looks rather. Normal."

Alec stood up from his seat on the couch as he paused the game he was playing and turned towards our new member.

"Geez dork. What, did you expect? A helicopter pad? Supercomputers?"

"Kinda."

"Heh, though supercomputers would rock."

I just shook my head with a slight chuckle and started the introductions.

"Madison Alec. Alec Madison. Rachel around?"
"Nice to meet you and no she went to take the dogs for a walk."

A sigh left my lips, I was hoping to get everyone together at once to make things a bit quicker. As it was Brian hadn't arrived yet so it was just the four of us. Lisa returned with mobile phone, which she handed to Madison.

"This is for you so we can keep in touch. I've already loaded up team numbers under initials. Don't use it for civilian calls if you can help it."

She looked a bit surprised but grateful at the offering. I guessed it was a repurposed back up.

"Wow, thanks."

"Oh and Regent, you owe me a hundred."

"What? Why?"

"Our bet. Madison here thought Taylor was you."

"Hah hah hah what the fuck? No way." Amused laughter filled the room as he turned to our new recruit. "Seriously?"

Madison just turned beet red and muttered.

"The hair."

"But mine isn't even that curly. Or brown." He continued to laugh until he was interrupted by a voice from the stairs.

"What did I miss?"

Brian stood there, shopping bag in hand, a bemused smirk on his lips. Lisa turned towards him.

"Oh just Madison here dying from embarrassment. Madison, this is Brian."

"Oh, you must be Grue then." She smiled at our de facto leader, possibly a little too eagerly and stuck out her hand. "So PHO was completely wrong then."

"Nice to meet you, and yes. They are hilariously wrong." His smirk and turned into a good natured smile as he shook her hand, before presenting the bag. "Oh and I picked up some tools on the way. Hope this will help."

"Ooh thank you." She immediately dove into the bag with an excited grin. "Yes this will work nicely. Is there somewhere I can do stuff?"

"The rooms are all taken at the moment, but we can set up a work bench downstairs. We'll need to work out how to set up some space for you if you need to crash. In the meantime make yourself at home."

She smiled and took a seat on the couch, emptying out the bag and her own earlier purchases on the coffee table. A squee escaped her lips as she unboxed a soldering iron and plugged it into a power board. The rest of the items were soon unwrapped and she was tearing apart the helicopter chassis
like a hyperactive five year old. I could only stare with wonder.

"Well I guess she got inspired."

Brian nodded in agreement.

"I had heard tinkers could get into creative mode. But seeing it is something else completely."

I turned to Lisa as I remembered something.

"So, you had a bet about me?"

"Oh yeah. Remember all that speculation about female Undersiders? I said if you were revealed as one of us, they'd guess you were Regent before Marceau. He thought otherwise."

I blinked at that. There wasn't really much to say.

"Yeah, yeah. I should stop betting against you." Alec sounded more amused than disappointed. "Anyway I'm hungry. I'll order some pizza?"

It had been a while since the last time so there was general agreement. Madison did so with a quick thumbs up before unspooling some wire and stripping off the insulation with some kind of tool.

The boys returned with a greasy, cheese laden bounty, Rachel following soon after. Her dogs growled a bit at Madison before she put out her hand for them to sniff. Rachel nodded in approval but still eyed off the new girl warily before wandering off into the corner with a plate full of pizza slices.

"So, what you making there?" Alec asked between mouthfuls. Madison had paused her construction to eat with the rest of us and so it was probably to best time to get a non distracted answer.

"I had the idea of a remote control spy drone with real time video and audio feed so I needed to grease up the rotors a bit more and I'll want to add some more baffling to reduce noise and I need to bump up the capabilities of the microphone that came with the webcam but I think I can get it to a range of a couple hundred feet with a control radius of about five miles."

We all just stared at her for a bit, surprised she had managed to say all that with nary a breath taken. Brian was the first to speak, clearly impressed.

"Nice. How many do you think you could control?"

"I have a feeling that I could monitor a fair few with no problem. Not sure what my limit would be though." She seemed to ponder something for a moment. "I was originally going to run them through a mobile phone but I'll need a laptop for more that three feeds."

"We'll see about getting some more components once you finish that one and test it out. Real time reconnaissance would be damn handy."

I had to agree on that. We could have avoided a lot of trouble if we had better situational awareness when out doing cape stuff. The thing with the Merchants being a perfect example. Come to think of it, the Empire had also caught us by surprise.
"Oh damn." Madison looked like she had just remembered something important. "I haven't called my Parents to tell them I'd be late."

Lisa shared a look with Brian before she turned to Madison.

"You can crash here for the night if you like."

"If. If that wouldn't be a problem?"

She had turned to look at me when she asked that. I sighed. I had planned to stay the night anyway and figured there were things we should discuss if I we were going to be working together. Try to clear the air and all that.

"No, that'll be fine. We should probably have a chat about things anyway."

"Oh ok. I'll see if I can stay then."

She pulled out her phone to make the call.
"Um yeah they said it was fine. They were... rather happy that I was staying over." She sighed before continuing. "I guess I have been a bit of a shut in lately."

Brian, who had a contemplative look during the phone call finally decided to speak.

"So you already knew Taylor then?"

Madison's eyes darted to Brian then to the floor before timidly answering.

"Yes."

This got a raised eyebrow from Brian while Alec and Rachel seemed rather disinterested and continued to munch on their pizza. Eventually a look of understanding came to his face and he just nodded and smiled.

"Oh, right."

His tone confused me somewhat, surely he should have been less amused that our new team members was one of the bullies from school. Lisa was wearing an amused grin, but that was normal so I paid it no mind.

"So other than the spy drone, any other ideas popped up?"

She looked back up at me before answering.

"Well I have some ideas for interfering with other cameras to avoid detection and I've got plans to make a stealth suit but I'm not sure if I can get the materials. Oh and an integrated communications system so everyone can talk to each other with sub-vocal microphones. Quieter that way"  

Alex perked up at the conversation and decided to take part.

"Anything offensive?"

"Umm, not really. I mean I might be able to put a stun gun on a remote control car and run it into people. Maybe a handgun on a drone but I'm not sure how to prevent it from being knocked off course by the recoil, nothing is really popping to mind for that." She tapped her chin for a moment. "I could make flying flash bangs, or something like that. Turn smaller helicopters into steerable magnesium flares and noise makers."

"So a swarm of drones buzzing around annoying people? I can dig that. Maybe put one of Marceau's horns on a couple to mess with people."

"Oh great, so then we can have people ignoring the horn when I need to grab attention." I rolled my eyes. It was actually a pretty funny idea, but I really didn't want Madison stealing my gimmick.

Alec just chuckled at my complaints.

"We could get you an air horn for when you really need to get attention. Then you can be the loudest
I had to laugh a little at that. It was an absurd mental image after all.

Madison continued soldering wires into her spy drone thing after we were done eating while Brian and Alec played one of their shooter games. Rachel was brushing down her dogs and checking them for pests. Lisa was off in her room doing who knows what while I started shifting aside some of the defunct equipment downstairs with my powers.

A few gentle lassos later and I had freed up a sizeable area that with some furniture would make a suitable work area. The sweeping I would leave to Madison of course. It would do her good to actually do some hard work and I sure as hell didn't feel like getting any more dirty. I wandered back up stairs.

"Space is cleared. But you'll want to clean it up and get some benches or something."

She looked up at me from the mostly assembled drone a smile on her face.

"Thank you Taylor. I really appreciated it."

She sounded sincere, so I nodded and head off to the bathroom to wash off the little bit of dust that had I had got on myself. As I finished drying off my hands I heard a phone ringing. I walked out of the bathroom into a worrying scene. Brian's smile had melted away to be replaced by a fearful grimace.

"Aisha's in trouble."

We moved quickly, grabbing one of the vans we had used earlier and stored in a building down the street. Lisa drove while the rest of us got changed into costumes. From what little Brian had heard from his sister before the connection cut out, she was being chased by some skin heads from the Empire and was holed up in a building. As such we were going to come down like the fist of an angry god on those Neo-Nazi bastards.

The drive was stressful as we couldn't do anything to make it pass quicker. None of us talked, too wrapped up in our own imaginations. Regent seemed his usual non-plussed self though and I envied him his calm. Madison sat next to me, a balaclava over her head and the mostly functional drone on her lap as she finished messing with the control interface on her phone. Grue was hunched over, his smoke already wisping from him.

Bitch had grown the dogs only a small amount due to the cramped space and she had a faint air of worry. She didn't know Aisha but was aware of her connection to Grue, so I guessed she might have included her as a de facto pack member. The dogs seemed to be agitated, picking up on their master's mood.

We arrived at the building and poured out of the van, spreading out to find her. With a faint buzz the drone took to the air and Madison followed close behind me. As we came round the corner of the building we found a group of skin head kicking at a figure on the ground and I think we all kind of snapped.

*Please don't hurt me.*

With a pull, one of the thugs went flying through the air before skidding along the road. The three
dogs increased in size and pounced with a whistle from Bitch. The remaining thugs were swallowed by darkness as Grue charged in, with a feral yell. I moved up to support him and check on the woman curled up on the ground while Madison stood there, stunned and looking at her phone. I wasn’t surprised she panicked.

Just ignore me.
One of the thugs stumbled out of the cloud of darkness only take an invisible bat to the stomach and crumple to the ground. Another tripped up and knocked himself out on the curb.

Please don’t hurt me.
I reached the curled up lady, I didn’t recognize her. Why were we even here and why did I feel so angry? Guess I was just sick of the Empire bastards beating people up.

Just ignore me.
The darkness dissipated and Grue stalked up to me.

Please don’t hurt me.
"Not that I mind beating up this scum, but what were we doing here?"

Just ignore me.
I shrugged. It did seem a bit odd for us to go patrolling, but we were heroes now after all.

Please don’t hurt me.
Bitch walked up to us with her dogs, satisfied that she had incapacitated her share of thugs.

Just ignore me.
"Its good to hurt the Empire."

Please don’t hurt me.
Grue nodded, his helmet bobbing slightly. He looked down at the woman on the ground.

Just ignore me.
"Hmm, good thing we were wandering by. Are you okay miss?"

Please don’t hurt me.
The lady uncurled from the fetal position and looked up at us before glancing around at the unconscious skin heads. Bruises were already forming on her face.

Just ignore me.
"I'm sore all over, but I'll live. Should see a doctor just in case. Thank you."

Please don’t hurt me.
"We can give you a lift if you like. Or we can call in the police if you would prefer."

Just ignore me.
I turned to see Tattletale join us. She must have quickly slipped into her costume while we fought. She moved over to one of the battered goons and zip locked his hands together and we were soon following suit.

Please don’t hurt me.
"I can wait for the police, I should be fine and I'll need to make a report anyway. I probably would have be hospitalised by these racist fucks if it weren't for you."

Just ignore me.
Tattletale nodded, and I was somewhat relieved. We'd have a bit of trouble fitting someone else in the van, though I guess there was a passenger seat if we wanted to stay cramped in the back.

Please don’t hurt me.
"Um guys?" We turned to look at Madison and she waved us over. Despite her balaclava, she still managed to look puzzled. When we came closer, she pointed over to where her drone was hovering and whispered to us.

Just ignore me.
"Why is Aisha curled up over there and why can't I see her with my eyes?"

Please don’t hurt me.
Aisha

Aisha found herself actually enjoying school for the first time in ages. Sure the classes were still pretty dull and she barely paid attention, instead quietly chatting with her friends. But Taylor was fun to tease during lunchtimes. Hell, she was even good for the occasional conversation about random things and getting the cape gossip from her on the down low. All in all things were kind of fun.

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"Outta the way bitch."

Aisha ducked to the side a group of students pushed through the hallway. The bastards seemed to be normal teenagers but the signs were there if you knew where to look. A few items in red and black, surreptitious figure eights or a repeated letter E stitched in to cloth. The signs of wannabe skinheads. Unblooded Empire gang members.

"Nazi fucks." She grumbled after they passed by.

There was of course a downside to being at school more. Winslow was full of idiots from the E88 or the ABB, so she had to keep more of an eye out and watch her back. But she could handle it, she was used to dealing with her Mom's boyfriends after all.

She walked past a few teenagers as she entered the mall. She carefully avoided staring at them. They were obviously newbie Nazis, so best not to attract their attention.

"Fucking niggers." One of the muttered as she passed by, but she just ignored it, pretending she hadn't heard.

She saw a familiar face up ahead walking with a pretty blonde girl. Ah Taylor, you make this too easy. She picked up her pace to catch up with the girl, a smile already on her face as she thought up a suitable joke.

"Yo Taylor."

Aisha had been listening in to the drama laden conversation with a certain amount of voyeuristic glee, especially at Taylor's back handed comment. As such, she was startled by the thumping sounds from the other side of the stall door. Hiking up her panties she opened the door to find her two shopping companions and a somewhat familiar brown haired girl on the bathroom floor. She snickered a bit at the compromising position Taylor and Lisa were in and took a quick snapshot on her phone before checking on them.

"Yo Taylor. You okay?"

The trip back home had been quiet, bereft of the company of Taylor and her cape buddies. Still, she had an amused grin on her face the entire journey as she went over the awkward hilarity of their discussions. She made a note to see if she could meet this Regent character at some point to see the
look on his face when told about the mistake. Hell, she knew three out of five members of the Undersiders already and it looked like it was soon to be four of six.

"Mom. I'm back."

As she came through the door, her amusement faded. Her mother was passed out on the couch again. A bottle of bourbon and some white residue on the coffee table told her she'd be that way for a while. She looked around the apartment and noted that at least her latest boyfriend wasn't around.

She sat around bored for a while before deciding that it was a Saturday night and there was no point spending it at home with a drugged out mother. She grabbed a bit of spare cash from her mom's purse and dialled one of the contacts on her phone.

"Yo Steph. Wanna hang out?"

"Sorry Aisha. Dad grounded me over that thing with Ben."

"Ooh that sucks. Guess I'll find something else to do then."

"Catch you Monday?"

"Sure. See you then."

_Damn_, she thought. _What the hell am I gonna do now?_

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So it was that she found herself sitting through a crappy movie at the local cinema complex. She really didn't get the hype over these emotionless, sparkly pretty boys but she did at least find some of it funny. I mean sitting and watching people sleep, what the hell? These Earth Aleph films were strange.

Aisha left the complex and head home. The area she was in should be fairly safe as it was outside of the Empire's territory and the Merchants weren't going to be out in force after what the Undersiders did. She smiled a bit at the thought. Her brother and her friend were pretty awesome and Lisa didn't seem too bad either, if a little too smug.

"You know it's probably not safe to walk alone at night."

Aisha jumped a little as she turned to find the source of the voice. She breathed a sigh of relief as her eyes met those of a kindly Slavic woman. She looked a bit familiar. _Oh she's from Brian's apartment. What was her name again? Brendski?, Bobski?. Ah Brodsky._

"Hey there Ms Brodsky. How's it going?"

"Not bad. I was just walking home. If you'd like, we could head back together."

"Yeah, that would be cool. I can say hi to my bro when he gets back."

The pair chatted about this and that, not realising that the Empire were eyeing off this area for expansion.
"Oh if it isn't the nigger dyke. Looks like she's got a filthy slav friend too."

Aisha turned to find another, less welcome, familiar face. It was one of the rookie Empire thugs from school.

"What the fuck do you want James?"

"Oh I was thinking my friends and I could teach an uppity coon a lesson."

At that point Aisha realised her mistake as seven more skin heads materialised from a nearby alley. She looked at Ms Brodsky and told her of her plans.

"Run."

They turned to flee from the thugs and ran towards the apartment block. Aisha knocked over a garbage can as they ran past, hoping to delay their pursuers. A crashing sound told her she was at least partially successful but couldn't risk looking back. Another few bins were tipped to impede the skin heads but it sounded like they had wised up and took their time.

As they came round another corner, Aisha and Ms Bordsky ducked into a corner shop and bent low behind one of the aisles. Aisha pulled out her phone and picked out her brother's number. A few rings and it was answered.

"Aisha?"

"Need help. Skin heads are chasing us. Near your place. Hiding in the corner deli."

She was going to say more but she heard some noise from nearby and hung up so the sound wouldn't alert them. A few moments passed in tension before it appeared they goons had moved on. She turned to the older woman.

"We should probably wait here for a moment."

"Yes. I hope it will be safe here with security cameras."

Aisha took in her surroundings, noticing all the drinks in the fridge nearby. She became aware of the thirst that she had been ignoring since back in the cinema. Glancing over the aisle, she couldn't see anyone other than the confused looking clerk.

Sighing with relief she grabbed a cola and wandered over to the counter to pay for it.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, just some racist bastards looking for an easy target."

"Oh my. You weren't hurt were you."

She shook her head and wiped a bit of sweat from her brow, before handing over some cash.

"Nah, just ran a block though. Could do with a drink and place to lay low for a bit."

He took the money and rang up the sale, handing over a few coins in change.
"No problem."

*I hope I didn't panic Brian over nothing.* She took a swig of her drink and sat down on one of the seats usually used by the lottery junkies, just out of sight of the doorway.

Her pulse had just returned to its normal sedate pace when the door chime went off. She glanced around the wall support and saw several of the thugs from earlier coming through the door. *Well fuck, I jinxed that didn't I?*

She cast her gaze around for a way out, or something useful. Just about everything was out of reach except for the mostly full Coke in her hands. She started shaking the bottle as she once again turned to Ms Brodsky and whispered to her.

"We're going to have to make a break for it."

The lady nodded and eased herself of her stool, Aisha doing like wise as she got ready to do something risky. *I hope those lessons with Dad make a difference.* Holding the bottle with both hands she ducked past one of the Aisles and stalked towards one of the lone thugs.

His eyes caught her movement just in time to get a face full of acidic sugary goodness before a follow up kick to the groin. *Take that James you Nazi fuck.*

With all hopes of stealth dashed to the wind they ran from the store, and right into an ambush of the remaining skinheads. Aisha ducked under a swinging bat but caught another on her shoulder knocking her spinning to the ground. The other two thugs intercepted Ms Brodsky before she could get much further.

Fuck, I always wanted attention and now I've got too much. It was an odd thing to go through her mind, but it was there none the less. Aisha backed up against the wall of the store as the skinheads surrounded her. *If only they would ignore me like Mom. Please don't hurt me. Just ignore me.*

"Please don't hurt me."

She curled up into a ball awaiting the inevitable.

There were sounds. Cries of pain.

She felt like she had forgotten something. But she knew she wasn’t getting hurt. She hoped they'd keep ignoring her.

There were more noises but she paid them no mind. She wasn’t being beaten

*Please don't hurt me...*

*Just ignore me...*

"... Aisha curled up over there and why can't I see her with my eyes?"

The voice sounded familiar. That other girl she met today. She peeked through the arms guarding her
head and saw the Undersiders crowded around a girl in a balaclava, holding a smart phone. She glanced around and saw the unmoving forms of the skinheads and a battered Ms Brodsky. A strange toy thing buzzed above her head, with a camera facing her. They came.

She uncurled herself and shakily walked over to her brother and his team.

"Thanks for the rescue."

No one but the balaclava girl Madison reacted.

"I think she's trying to talk to us, but I didn't get the microphone finished before we left."

"Who are you talking about?"

Aisha looked at Grue and then to the rest of them. No one was looking at her, even Madison seemed engrossed in her phone. Tattletale's gaze darted around the place.

"I think we have a Stranger nearby. Something is off."

"Guys, its Aisha."

Grue looked at the girl, a confused tilt to his helmet.

"What about Aisha?"

_They can't see me or hear me?_ She looked up a the helicopter thing then back to Madison. _Except tinker girl._ She pondered this for a moment and then proceeded to slap her brother upside his helmeted head.

"What the hell was that?"

As amusing as this all was, once again she was being ignored when she didn't want to. _People stopped paying attention when I wanted to be ignored, maybe I need to think happy thoughts or something?_ She concentrated on being seen and heard, focusing all the frustration she had felt when Mom ignored her.

The Undersiders suddenly reacted to her presence.

"Well whoopdey fucking doo. I guess I'm a cape."
"What the hell are you doing here?"

I looked up from my lunch to see Emma standing there, an incredulous look on her face. She mostly seemed to be staring at Madison who was seated to my left. Oddly enough she didn't have her usual hangers on.

"Eating lunch with my friends obviously."

To say Emma was surprised would be an understatement. She blinked several times, her gaze flickering over Madison, Aisha and I as if trying to comprehend something much more complex. While I wasn't totally sold on Madison being a friend yet, I figured I might as well run with it. She had latched on to Aisha and I as people to hang around with at school, so that's what we appeared to be.

"Friends? You can talk? Madison? What?"

I put on a placid smile and summoned all the condescension I could muster.

"Its really quite simple Emma. I have friends, and I am eating lunch with them. I would have thought you were familiar with the concept." I savoured the look on her face for a moment. "Oh that's right, you do have some difficulty with the concept of friendship."

She seemed to reel a bit from that comment, and so she should. I still had little idea what had caused her to betray me and join up with Sophia. Was she really so shallow just to drop a friendship of several years just to be buddies with a Ward? It wasn't really important any more. She finally recovered.

"Since when could you talk?"

I considered teasing her and pretend she was just going crazy. I was sure my two team mates would back me up on it, but it seemed pointless. Instead I stuck with the friendship angle that seemed to be bothering her. I told myself I wasn't just being petty by rubbing it in her face.

"My friend Amy was a dear and patched me up." At her continued looks of confusion, I elaborated. "What, you don't know Panacea?"

I felt a little bad at using my connection with Amy for something like this. The rapidly changing expressions on Emma's face made it feel justified though. At this point my lunchtime companions decided to get in on the game rather than just snickering.

"So Red, did you need something? Or are you gonna just stand there staring like a love sick puppy?"

She looked at Aisha before she quickly shook her head. It seemed I could rely on the girl to run with any jokes about my overblown yet non existent love life.

"What no. Just wondering why the Dork suddenly has groupies."

"Oh that's because she's much cooler than you Ems."
Her gaze snapped back to Madison who was smiling her cutesy smile. Those were words I had never expected to hear in my life. Apparently Emma thought likewise.

"Whatever. I'll leave you losers to your lunch. I don't have time to waste on you."

She stalked off, apparently having regained enough presence of mind to realise her usual tricks wouldn't work today.

"Well that was fun. You want me to mess with her? I could totally get her freaking out by the end of the day?"

"I appreciate the thought Aisha, but she's not worth the risk of getting caught."

Still, I did let my imagination play out several scenarios of 'haunting' that Emma could be plagued with. Having a little back up made all the difference it seemed.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

Brian was looking at us from the kitchenette of the Loft as Madison and I came up the stairs. He had a steaming mug in hand and a friendly smile upon his face, which I returned.

"It was a pretty good day."

"Nice to hear. We're just waiting on Alec and Lisa to return from the shops and Aisha to get here, then we can start planning our next target."

I nodded and moved to make myself a cup of tea while Madison took a seat on the sofa.

"Way to make a girl feel wanted Bro. Its like I'm invisible or something."

I looked back and Aisha was sitting next to her. I blinked for a moment before realising she must have slipped into using her powers for a bit there. That was going to take a while to get used to, though at least her tone indicated she was finding this more amusing than hurtful. It had only been a day and a half and she was coping with it a lot better than I had.

Madison too seemed to be dealing well with things. I could pass off Aisha as one of those second generation capes with their easy triggers. But Madison's trigger event still seemed too easy, even after she'd explained how she'd been feeling the last couple of months. I wondered if one of her parents was secretly a cape.

Lost in my thoughts, the time passed quickly and the remaining team members returned triumphantly carrying dinner. The Chinese food was distributed and was devoured quickly. I wasn't sure how I managed to eat so much so fast, but the food seemed to just vanish from my plate. I must have been distractedly shovelling it in as I thought about things. Strange that I didn't feel that full.

When we were finished Lisa grabbed our attention with a small cough.

"Given Saturday's events, it seems the Empire are moving into former Merchant and current ABB territory."
"Well I'm all for taking them down a peg."

Aisha’s comment was understandable and backed with nods of agreement from the rest of the team. I found the idea appealing, as I was still incensed at them trying to hurt one of my friends. The fact that they were scum also helped. I was curious as to what Lisa had planned.

"Do we have a particular target in mind?"

"Well patrolling isn't really our thing. So instead of trying to stop them taking territory directly, we distract them by hitting existing holdings. We have some info about one of their store houses. From what I've been able to piece together, they have a stockpile of cash, weapons and some drugs stored there."

I cupped my chin as I pondered. That did sound like a priority target. Which of course would mean priority defence by the Empire. Brian got to the question before me.

"How much security? Try not to underestimate this time."

While his tone had a ring of levity, I still don't think he had quite forgiven Tattletale for the mistake at the bank.

"Probably several capes and quite a few thugs. If not on site, very nearby. I'd expect reinforcements to be quick to arrive given the importance of the building, so we'd want to be in and out quickly." She looked over to Madison. "If you can finish off a few more drones and that surveillance jamming device you mentioned, we can have you and Aisha do some reconnaissance to ensure it runs smoother."

"I can probably have the jammer done by the end of tonight and now that I have the design finalised I reckon I can make a drone a day with little trouble given the right supplies."

"As long as we beat up some Empire and get some money." Rachel grumbled. She did always prefer the direct approach over the cloak and dagger that the team seemed to be leaning towards. Brian cut in, his voice stern.

"Yes Rachel, we will hurt some Empire. But Aisha, you will be careful. Don't take any risks."

"Don't worry so much. No one will even know I was there."

The rest of the conversation was derailed by Brian and Aisha arguing but we finally decided to hit the storehouse on Thursday night. Plans settled, I started the journey home.

The plan left me with a fairly open schedule for the rest of the week. Thinking back on my earlier encounter with Emma, I realised I hadn't spoken with Panacea for a while. The poor girl was probably running herself ragged again. As I waited for a bus to arrive, I pulled out my civilian phone and dialled.

"Hey Amy. You wanna hang out tomorrow?"
Emma had avoided us all of Tuesday, which was fine by me. Having someone I at least marginally trusted in class was also nice, if kind of strange. Another fairly uneventful school day passed by and I had gone home, promising to drop by the lair later if time permitted.

So it was that I found myself getting ready to go out. The weather had been unseasonably warm lately, so I decided to wear one of the items I'd picked up on Saturday. A red short sleeved, knee length shift dress that Lisa had practically forced me to buy. While I still was under no delusions of beauty, I had to admit the dress looked good. The way the skirt flared out made it look like I actually had a figure. I guess if the style worked for Twiggy, it worked for me. My pendant sat nicely in the neck line.

"You're looking particularly pretty today kiddo. Do you have a date or something?"

To my surprise, Dad was standing in the kitchen doorway, an amused smirk on his face. I had kind of hoped to head out before he came home and hadn't heard the door opening.

"No, just going to hang out with Amy. Haven't seen her in a while and figured she needed a bit of a break."

"Oh, that's sweet of you. Pass on my thanks if you hadn't already. She has to be at least partially responsible for the return of my happy daughter."

A smile formed on my face, mostly for his benefit. I couldn't really tell him the full reasons for my general cheeriness. So somewhat guiltily, I let him believe he was on the right track.

"Will do. I shouldn't be out too late, school night and all."

"Have fun."

A short bus trip later and I had arrived at the Boardwalk. We had agreed to grab some dinner at a local Italian restaurant that Amy had recommended. A quick internet search after the call last night showed near unanimous positive reviews of the place, so I figured it had to be good.

I found the place easily enough and walked through the door. My attention was quickly grabbed by Amy waving me over to an unexpectedly occupied table for four. Amy, a boy and another girl I recognised all to well sat there as I approached nervously. I didn't recognise the blonde boy sitting next to Victoria Dallon, but he gave me a slightly surprised look. Maybe I had met him somewhere before and had forgotten. Come to think of it, Victoria looked a little surprised too. How odd. Having dinner with Glory Girl at the table was going to be awkward. I tried my best to hide my discomfort behind a cheery smile as I took the empty seat.

"Hi Amy, I didn't realise we'd have company."

"Taylor. You probably recognise my sister Victoria and this is her boyfriend Dean. They kind of invited themselves."

I was worried for a second before realising she must have been referring to her popularity rather than
the bank. There was a slight hint of resignation at her introduction though, so I figured she wasn't particularly happy to have them along. *Wait a minute, Boyfriend.* I looked at her and my eyebrow raised before I could stop it. *Is that Gallant or a new boyfriend? Did she just accidentally out Gallant to me?* *Shit, he has emotion sense doesn't he? Need an excuse for my worry.*

"Nice to meet you. I must admit, it's a little intimidating to meet such a famous cape." I paused as I realised what I had just implied. "Not to say that Amy isn't famous, so much as, well. Please ignore what I just said."

My face felt warm as I blushed with embarrassment. *How absurd is my life that social situations are more difficult than cape fights?* Victoria just giggled at my discomfort.

"Don't worry about it, I have that effect on people. You've managed to get my sister to take some time off so I felt I needed to meet and thank you."

Glory Girl, the one I had hurt pretty badly and had trolled for a while was thanking me. This was getting surreal.

"Umm, you're welcome."

"So how'd you two meet anyway?"

I glanced over at Maybe-Gallant. *Would he be able to pick up deceit? Does he know about the locker?* I decided to go with something vague but correct just to be safe.

"Amy patched me up after some things happened and we started talking."

"If by things you mean a car, then yes."

Amy had an amused grin as she shook her head. It was possible that the Wards knew who I was after what Sophia did, but I was glad she hadn't mentioned the voice thing. The less said about that, the better. In turn, I thought it best not to mention our venting arrangement. Especially with how it was possibly related the boy in front of me.

"Anyway, she looked like she needed a bit of a rest, so I decided to pester her into relaxing a little more."

"You'll have to tell me your secret. I've been trying for ages."

Damn. If every other sentence was going to sound like it was related to my cape life, this night was going to suck. I shrugged and gave her a smile.

"Not really sure myself. Guess I was just lucky."

Amy came to my rescue with a handy topic change.

"We should probably order our food."

After a quick flick through the menu, I had settled on Tortellini alla Panna. While was tempted by the Puttanesca, I figured garlic and anchovy breath probably wasn't polite. The waiter came by to take our orders and we were soon back to awkward conversation time.
My resentment towards Victoria and Dean for making this awkward was probably getting picked up, but I didn't really care. If they were going to invite themselves, he could feel just as uncomfortable as I.

"So Amy. Have you been taking breaks like I said, or is the first one?"

"It was only like a week ago."

She had glanced downwards and spoke quietly. I didn't really want to put her on the spot, but I wasn't sure what else to talk about. It did however look like I'd have to more proactive at getting her to relax. I chuckled lightly and patted her on the shoulder, a smile on my face.

"Well it's a start anyway."

"So I don't think I've seen you at school. You don't go to Arcadia do you?"

I turned to Victoria. It was a fairly sensible question, but I thought I heard a faint hint of disapproval. I may have snorted in my amusement.

"I wish. No, instead I'm stuck at the wretched hive of scum and villainy known as Winslow."

"Surely its not that bad?"

Victoria seemed incredulous at my description of the place. I noted Dean's look at my and Victoria's comments. Was that a bit of discomfort, or guilt? I must have been feeling a little vindictive as I pressed home my point.

"Well, its full of gang members and the faculty are either incompetent or corrupt. They tend to turn a blind eye to bullying if the person doing it is popular or important."

Victoria looked surprised while Dean had paled a bit. Bingo. I decided to relent.

"But enough about that place. How's the hero biz?"

Victoria seemed to light up a little at the topic change.

"Oh yeah, Empire Eighty Eight have been more actively lately so we've been getting into some fights with their goons lately. The Undersiders really shook things up when they took out the Merchants."

I nodded. Yeah we had messed with the status quo a bit. Curiosity got the better of me.

"What do you think of the Undersiders anyway?"

"I'm not sure what to think. I mean they did rob the bank and Marceau hurt me and held Amy hostage. But then he immediately apologised and they've been only targeting villains since. They seem to be doing good and have gotten some good press, but I'm still suspicious of them."

I had figured that might be the case. My head dipped in 'agreement' of her views.

"Understandable."
"They seem like a menace."

I turned towards Dean with an eyebrow raised. _Oh really? I wonder why you think that?_ Taking my cue, he continued.

"If they were really heroes, they wouldn't have fought the Wards. Even if the bank had links to criminal activities it's still a crime to rob one."

I laughed a little inside at that. _Yes, because Shadow Stalker was totally a hero._

"So not a fan of the fighting against corruption theory?"

I took a sip of my drink. He looked like he was about to reply when Amy interrupted.

"I think he's just jealous of Marceau."

I barely avoided a spit take, having just swallowed some lemonade. Still I managed to sputter some what at the comment.

"Sorry what?"

"Ames."

Victoria seemed unimpressed at her sister's theory. I was probably responsible for that. Amy seemed unconcerned. I guessed she was still kind of angry at Gallant. The tag along probably didn't help matters.

"All those rumours of him courting Glory Girl. Bound to be threatened."

I blinked a few times as I looked at Amy. My trolling must have been a bit too effective.

"I thought that flower thing was just an overly florid apology or something." I turned to Victoria. "He's really hitting on you?"

"I don't even know. He might be."

The slight smirk on her face gave me a horrible sense of dread. Luckily a waiter had returned with our dishes, giving us a perfect excuse not to talk for a while. After all, talking with your mouth full would be rude.

Meals finished, Victoria and Dean had made excuses and headed off somewhere. Amy and I were finally free from the awkwardness of their company. We went for a stroll down the Boardwalk, the warm weather not quite balancing out the cool wind from the sea. Finally she spoke, breaking the comfortable silence.

"I'm sorry about that. She wouldn't take no for an answer."

"It's alright, but I'm kind of glad they're gone. I was feeling a bit uncomfortable there. Though a lot of that might be my fault."

"Oh?"
I really needed to watch what I said around Amy.

"Well I did bring up the worst topics possible, especially with how annoyed you seemed with Dean."

She nodded and then her eyes went wide. I guessed she had realised her earlier mistake.

"Oh shit."

"Yeah, don't worry. I won't tell anyone. Not that it's hard to work out anyway. Especially with how he was reacting."

"What?"

I might have said a bit too much there. Amy was a nice girl and would likely keep things quiet, so I debated explaining further. On the one hand it was approaching the borders of the unwritten rules. On the other hand, it was Sophia.

"Oh just how guilty he looked when I was talking about Winslow."

"He did look a bit pale, what was that about?"

I checked that no one was nearby and leaned in to whisper.

"I didn't tell you earlier because I'd only just met you. I know the reason Miss Militia asked you to heal me."

She looked stunned.

"You know how Shadow Stalker got transferred a little while ago?"

"Yeah?"

"Sometime before an angry Miss Militia requested your aid in healing some random teenager of no importance?"

She was silent for a moment as she considered that. Her long drawn out curse was the first time I had heard her swear.

"Fuck."

"Yep. It looks like he's aware of what happened. At least he seems to be suitably guilty about it."

"You didn't press charges?"

I chuckled a sad laugh.

"Didn't have any proof and we aren't exactly swimming in money. So it looks like the PRT hushed it up. For all I know, if it wasn't for someone else stepping up and reporting her, she might have still been tormenting me."

"Miss Militia did say something about the person responsible being punished."
I thought back to meeting her the other week.

"Well *she* at least seems to be a reasonable person. Shame no one told me about it."

Amy just nodded in agreement.

"It's probably better if you don't mention this to anyone. Don't know what the PRT would do if they knew."

"You've kept my secrets, I'll keep yours. What are friends for?"

She smiled. It was good to see her smiling. She gave me a hug, hooking her arm under mine. It was a warm and comforting thing, which is just what I needed right now.

"Thanks Amy."
"If you're not in a hurry, we could probably catch a movie. My treat, to make up for my sister tagging along."

I glanced down at the girl walking beside me. It would give us a bit more time together without the awkwardness. While I had originally been planning to drop by the lair on the way home, I'd see the gang tomorrow anyway.

"Ok, I'll just let Dad know."

We arrived at the cinema complex, a few blocks along the Boardwalk from the restaurant. It was a fairly small one in the scheme of things, only six theatres. The marquee showed a variety of films, most of them already started. Only one film was ready. I turned to Amy.

"Well, looks like we don't have much choice without waiting an hour or so."

"Paranormal Activity 3? I wonder if we'd be missing something by not seeing the others."

"From what I've heard its some series of silly horror movies from Earth Aleph. It shouldn't make much of a difference."

"Well I guess I'm game if you are."

Amy paid for the tickets, but I insisted on buying the drinks and a tub of popcorn for us to share. I had done my part in making the night awkward after all. We found some seats in the fairly sparsely populated theatre just as the lights went down and the previews started.

"Michelle Thomas is a strong and daring navigator from Ireland. Her life was going nowhere until she met Rachel Wilson, a shy woman with a passion for cooking."

A bunch of scenes flashed by for some inane romantic comedy.

"But Michelle, how am I going to go on without you?"

My time with the Undersiders had warped my view somewhat and I found myself overlaying Bitch onto the character. I grinned as the silly image came to mind of Rachel being shy or that curvey, let alone cooking. Movement in my peripheral vision made me turn my head to see Amy looking at me, a curious expression on her face.

"Oh, just a funny thought. Nevermind."

She just nodded and turned back to the screen

"Along came Rachel. Coming soon."

The film was pretty dull so far. I took a few sips of my soda and reached into the tub. Instead I encountered a warm hand. I turned with an amused smile on my face, thinking I probably should
have gotten a larger tub. Amy gave me an embarrassed smile as she retrieved some popcorn. She
timidly ate some and turned back to the screen.

"Eeep."

Amy jumped at the sudden flash of ghostly images and orchestral sting, burying her face in my
shoulder. Apparently it was a bad idea to pick a horror movie after all. I wrapped my arm around her
shoulder as she blocked out the movie. Amy was a lot jumpier than I expected. Then again, maybe I
had overdosed on bad horror movies as I grew up. While Mom preferred books or films with an
actual plot, Dad had insisted on educating me in classic horror movies. Amy probably wasn't able to
see jump scares coming a mile off. I leaned close and whispered.

"Don't worry it's over. I'll point out the scary bits if you like."

She nodded against my shoulder and then peered back up to the screen. She didn't leave my arm.
She did seem to be very huggy, having given her sister a big hug when we'd parted earlier. That and
the time at the park.

"Another jump scare's coming."

I could feel her tense up a bit in preparation. A crash, some static and a woman was pulled through a
door.

"Eeep."

Apparently not prepared enough.

The movie had ended rather disappointingly. They just didn't make horror movies quite like the old
days. As we left the cinema I turned to Amy.

"So, no more horror movies then?"

She looked at me sheepishly.

"It, wasn't that bad. I just startle easily."

"Then I think I need to educate you on horror movies. The jump scares become predictable pretty
quick."

She gave me a friendly smile.

"That could be fun."

We walked a back along the Boardwalk, heading towards the bus. I stopped for a moment and
turned my head to look at a interesting item in a shop window. When I turned back to Amy, I found
her looking at my chest. I followed her gaze down to the pendant hanging around my neck.

"Do you like it?"

She looked up a bit startled.
"Uh, yes its quite pretty. Where did you get it?"

"It was a present from a while back. Thought it matched the outfit so decided to wear it."

"What is it? looks like some faces."

I looped it around my hand and brought it up for her to get a better look.

"The white one is Thalia the Muse of comedy. The black is Melpomene, Muse of tragedy."

"I see you know your mythology."

"I was taught a lot by... Mom."

Thoughts of Mom brought with them a flash of sadness. It must have shown on my face as Amy gathered me into hug as few tears rolled from my eyes.

"Sorry, I didn't know."

She held me for moment longer before letting go.

"Thanks. Sometime I still get a bit upset."

I caught a glimpse of movement and red hair in the corner of my eye, but when I turned I didn't see anyone.

"What is it?"

"Thought I saw something, but must be imagining things."

We continued down the street for a while before the sound of a phone broke the silence. Amy pulled a fancy smart phone from her pocket.

"Hello Sis. Do I want a pick up?"

She turned to me.

"I should be heading home anyway."

She nodded and turned to look at the shop next to us.

"Yeah, a pick up should be fine. On the Boardwalk. In front of that ice cream parlour. You know the one? Okay, see you soon."

She hung up the phone and turned back to me, a cheerful smile on her face..

"Well I had fun. Thanks for dragging me out."

"You're welcome. I had fun too, even if it was a little strange to start with."

We both chuckled a little at that. Hopefully Victoria didn't invite herself to further outings.
"You'll be fine getting home?"

"Yeah, the bus route practically runs past my house."

"Well good night Taylor."

"Night Amy."

She stepped forward, hesitated for a moment and then gave me a big hug which I returned. I wasn't really surprised given how touchy feely she had been the last couple times we'd met. I hadn't really had many hugs since Mom passed away. The team were fairly standoffish about that sort of thing and Dad had been distant, so it felt nice. It possibly went on a little long, but oh well.

We finally separated and I waved goodbye as I walked the last block to the bus stop. The streets were fairly empty, just a few people coming out of restaurants and someone walking a dog on the other side of the street.

The bus ride seemed to pass quickly with so little traffic on the road. I was a bit later getting home than I was expecting at the start of the night, but it was nice to hang out with another friend.
Glory Girl & Gallant

Victoria saw her sister heading towards the door, dressed a little nicer than usual. Sure she was still in a pants and shirt, but at least they were nice dress pants and a flattering blue blouse shirt. This of course piqued her curiosity. *What is she up to?*

"Where you going Ames?"

Amy turned sheepishly towards her.

"Um, just going to go have dinner with my friend Taylor."

Victoria smiled. *Ah, she's got a date finally.*

"Oh, someone's convinced you to relax. I'll grab Dean and we can have dinner together."

She looked a little disappointed at the offer.

"Um, I'd rather just hang out-"

"Nonsense, I want to meet and thank your new friend."

Her sister sighed.

"Fine, but please don't make things weird, ok?"

Victoria was a little confused by the comment, but she assumed it was Amy just being grumpy from too much hospital work. Her sister really needed to relax.

Victoria's eyes were drawn to the person Amy was waving at. A slim young girl, with dark brown curls running past her shoulders and wearing a quite nice little red dress. Otherwise, she seemed a little plain. *Wait, is this Taylor? I thought she meant a boy. Oh, is this what she meant by weird.* She watched the girl's approach slow as she noticed herself and Dean. With a cautious looking smile, the girl spoke.

"Hi Amy, I didn't realise we'd have company."

She and Dean were about to depart. She turned back to her sister and her... girlfriend?

"Well we have to get going. Nice to meet you Taylor. I'll see you later Sis."

Her sister still looked a little annoyed.

"Sure Vicky. Bye for now."

"Bye."
The girl, Taylor waved at them as they left. Victoria wasn't really happy with how the night turned out. The girl seemed a bit odd, and didn't really have much tact, but what could she really expect from a Winslow student. Especially with what the girl had been saying. It sounded pretty bad and Victoria was glad she could go to Arcadia.

"Well that was, uncomfortable."

She looked at Dean, an eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, I really didn't expect her to bring a girl. Oh and sorry for her bringing up the Marceau thing again."

"Its fine. Though it would be nice if you weren't so smug about the fact that you have another admirer. I do wonder if Taylor has a bit of, appreciation for Marceau though."

That got her attention.

"Oh, why do you say that?"

"Well she seemed to be, I guess concerned at the idea of Marceau chasing after you. I didn't quite get a clear read on it though so it might be something else. Though that mask pendant she was wearing suggests she's a fan girl."

Victoria thought about this for a moment, she hadn't really paid attention to the pendant hanging down the neckline of the girl's dress.

"Wait, why were you staring down there?"

"What? It was shiny and caught my attention. Besides, its not like she had anything to ogle."

"So you did look."

While she was mostly teasing him, she wasn't sure if he realised that as he buried his face in his hand.

"Victoria my dear, I'm not ogling at other girls. They don't hold a candle to you."

She preened at the compliment and figured he'd suffered enough for now.

"Don't worry, just teasing you Dean."

A faint buzzing noise could be heard before he pulled a phone from his pants.

"Damn, almost time for my shift to start. I should head over to the HQ."

She was disappointed that the night had to end so early, especially after the uncomfortable dinner, but that was the trouble with dating a ward.

"I can give you a lift if you like."

"That would be lovely."
Dean walked through one of the secret entrances and made his way through security on his way to his quarters to change. It wasn't long till he was in his costume and through the door to the common room.

Arrayed before him were several of the Wards in costume, but without masks for comfort's sake. Dennis turned his head towards him as he entered.

"So, how was the date?"

Dean took a seat on the couch opposite Dennis. He sighed and rested his chin in one hand, elbow propped up on a knee.

"It was incredibly awkward."

A chuckle came from Dennis at that. The amusement obvious by his laughter and the emotions pouring off of him. Dean frowned a little.

"No, not like that. I met Taylor Hebert."

Dean had decided earlier that this was something that they needed to know.

"Wait what?"

Missy whipped her head around at the mention of Sophia's victim. She hopped off the seat where she was doing some homework and joined them, sitting next to Dean. He could feel the waves of concern, mixed with a bit of appreciation at being near.

"I gotta go with Missy here, how did that happen?"

"Well Vicky dragged us out to a double date with Amy."

Before he could continue Dennis jumped to the obvious conclusion.

"Oh, huh. Didn't realise she swung that way."

"Was a bit of a surprise to me as well. But she did seem to have a bit of affection for the girl, as well as being frustrated that Vicky had brought me along."

"So you got all flustered because of some real life yuri?"

The space between the couches warped as Missy slapped Dennis upside the head before it returned to normal in an instant.

"Quit being a perv." She huffed.

"No, something bigger than that. I think she knows Sophia was Shadow Stalker."

There were a few choice words said as the implications were pondered.

"What's all the swearing about?"

Dean turned his head towards the doorway where Carlos stood, a curious look on his face.
"Ah, glad you're here chief, we may have a problem. I was just saying I think Taylor knows about Sophia being a Ward."

More profanity came as the leader of the Wards caught up. After a moment he looked at Dean.

"Are you sure?"

"When we met, she was emotionally conflicted about meeting a hero, then later settled into resentment at our presence. I dismissed it at the time as an influence of Vicky's aura coupled with how we'd kind of invited ourselves along. More directed at Vicky than me. But then certain subjects of conversation came up that gave things away, starting with Vicky asking what school Taylor went to."

"Winslow right?"

"Or as she described it, a *wretched hive of scum and villainy*. She did also mention the faculty turning a blind eye to bullying by *important* people. I could feel her disdain and anger as she spoke."

Dennis whistled. He felt conflicted impressions of admiration and anger.

"Props for the Star Wars reference, but *damn*.

Carlos nodded. Resignation and disappointment shrouded him.

"I told the Director we should have come clean."

Dean tilted his head in agreement.

"It gets even better though."

Dennis laughed

"Oh I can't wait."

"When the topic of cape life came up, the Undersiders were mentioned. I. Well I did express my ill opinion of them, in particular their fight with us as a reason."

He sighed a little, prompting Missy to speak.

"Wait, she doesn't blame *us*, does she?"

"While she didn't smile or laugh, I was basically drowning in amused contempt."

There was a moment of silence as they considered this. Dennis finally broke the silence. "This can't get any wors- I've just jinxed us haven't I?"

Dean nodded.

"Yep. I probably reacted visibly when she was talking about Winslow as I felt a bit of satisfaction from her. She was confused when Amy mentioned that I was Vicky's boyfriend, and throughout the double date she was guarded with her emotions. I'm not sure how strong it would have felt if she
wasn't."

"Damn. Sophia is still screwing things up."

Missy curled up into the couch a bit more, a glum expression matching the emotions emanating from her.

"Also, I think she's a fan of Marceau."

Everyone stared at him for a moment, not speaking.

"I could see that happening with everything going on, but what gave you that idea?"

"Well she seemed amused by the bank fight where Marceau took several of us out and she had a pendant with theatre masks on it. She also seemed somewhat concerned about the idea of Him hitting on Glory Girl."

There was more silence as they thought on this. Carlos spoke up.

"So wait, was she jealous? I thought she was on a date with Amy."

He shook his head.

"It didn't feel like jealousy. I mean I didn't really feel tonnes of affection from her towards Amy, but it was buried under a lot of discomfort at our presence and the general contempt towards the Wards. So it could just be I didn't get a good read on her. She might have a crush on him. But it could just as easily be that she care's for Amy and doesn't want her sister getting wrapped up in it."

He paused for a moment.

"Teenage girls are confusing."

And for that he got a poke in the ribs from Missy.

"So, the girl who knows our dirty laundry and your civilian identity is not only dating Amy but seems happy for us to get our arse handed to us. This can't possibly go wrong."

The sarcasm dripping from Dennis' words made emotion reading redundant. Carlos nodded.

"Well, we need to do something about this. As much of a bitch as Sophia was, we're still partially responsible for this. God knows how to fix this though."

The Wards sat there, somewhat depressed as they tried to think of something to address the situation.

Victoria swooped down to her sister, standing there with a contented smile on her face. She soon had a grin to match Amy's. Apparently things went well.

"So, you had a good night then?"

"Yeah it was fun."
Victoria thought that sounded a bit non committal. She picked up her sister to fly back home like normal.

"So, you like girls?"

Amy was a little quiet as she responded.

"Yeah."

"Like-like?"

Amy just glared at her and they flew in awkward silence for a block or two.

"So you like Taylor then?"

"She's been a good friend."

Victoria picked up something in her tone. Ah hah!

"You like-like her."

Amy continued to glare at her and Vicky matched it with a smug look. Amy finally broke eye contact.

"Yeah."

Something about the way she said that caught Victoria's attention.

"Why am I waiting for a but?"

"She didn't seem to pick up my signals."

Victoria smiled a knowing smile.

"What sort of signals did you send?"

"Well, there was a bit of hand touching and smiles and hugs."

It sounded like Taylor had a case of Nervousness or perhaps the much more serious condition of Obliviousness.

"Well did she seem uncomfortable when they happened?"

"Well, no. She hugged me back just as strong and smiled when our hands met in the popcorn tub. She hugged me when I got scared in the movie. Umm, she was also grinning when they had a preview for a lesbian romantic comedy."

"Ah, she must just be waiting for you to take the initiative. You do come across as rather shy my dear sister."

Amy was quiet for a moment, a slight smile on her lips before she turned to look Victoria in the face.
"You seem to be handling this well."

Victoria laughed, making the smile on her sister's face grow.

"I was a bit surprised, but it would explain why I had trouble setting you up with boys. So I take it you didn't kiss?"

"Vicky!"

Amy looked indignant for a moment before finally answering quietly.

"No. I kinda chickened out."

"Well that'll give you a definite answer. Though you might want to ask her if she has a crush on Marceau first."

Amy blinked a few times.

"What, why?"

"Dean seemed to think she was concerned when the topic of him hitting on me came up. That and the pendant. She's probably just worried about her girlfriend's sister though."

Amy seemed to think about something for a while. Eventually she broke the silence.

"That makes sense, but I'll ask her when I see her next."

"And teach her some French."

Her eyebrows waggled a little.

"Vicky!"

She smiled at Amy's continued embarrassment.

"What? Just trying to help my dear sister with her love life."
Interlude

Amy

"I can't promise that I'll be around all the time, but if you want another friend, we could hang out sometime. Do some stuff."

Amy stared at Taylor for a moment. She had not really expected the sudden offer of friendship. She wondered if she was just doing what was expected. No, she understood me, comforted me. I think she means it. Eventually she nodded, a smile coming to her face.

"That. That would be nice."

Taylor smiled back at her and they both got up from the bench to leave the park. Amy looked at the girl next to her and made a decision. She gave her another tight hug. Taylor jumped a little but quickly returned it. Amy whispered to her.

"Thank you."

As they walked back toward the cafe Amy was lost in thought. This girl was one of the few people to actually give her a hug, or listen to her worries in a long time. Carol was always distant. Mark tried to be a good father when he wasn't in one of his phases, but even then he rarely initiated any contact. Victoria still shared hugs, but they'd been less frequent of late and mostly given by Amy when Vicky was crying over Dean.

Really, she didn't seem to have much in the way of social interaction. While she got along fairly well with the doctors and nurses, it was more of a work colleague arrangement, where one might bitch over some patient's manner. Or perhaps share quiet laughs at something bizarre in the ER room. That one time with the guy and desk lamp was burnt into her memory.

Basically, what it all boiled down to was the only person she had that she was close to for years was her sister. It was hardly any wonder she had feelings for her. Perverted feelings, she reminded herself. Maybe an actual friend might lessen that dependence. Make her less lustful towards her own sister.

It wasn't too long before they arrived back at the cafe, not a word having passed between them. She was beginning to wonder if Taylor had been weirded out by the silence. The smile on her face quickly banished that idea.

"Well goodnight Amy. Be strong."

Amy smiled at her new friend.

"I'll try. Catch you later."

Amy was bored one night, several days later. It was known that boredom in teenagers often resulted in internet browsing. This was one of those cases as Amy scrolled through a few pages on the PHO forums, noting the latest escapades of the Undersiders. A new link had been posted with a video.

Amy sighed as she watched them show boating as they raided a Merchant base. It was a fairly well
executed raid from what little she knew of that sort of thing. Then the gunfire started.

Her eyes went wide as the Merchants tried to gun them down. Thousands of bullets impacting against nothing as Marceau had put himself in front of his team mates. She gave a little sigh of relief as they escaped. She wasn't sure she had forgiven them for the bank incident, but that didn't mean she wanted them gunned down. Marceau had at least seemed apologetic over the whole thing. She wasn't particularly impressed by the flowers and his apparent affections towards Her sister. No! Need to stop thinking like that.

She was a little surprised by the meeting with Armsmaster and Miss Militia. It was fairly obvious a bit of footage had been cut, but she was quickly distracted by the return of the Merchants. Once again Marceau seemed to be selflessly putting himself in front of everyone, including the two Protectorate capes. Huh, interesting. He does seem to be acting heroic at least.

Given their previous record, she wasn't surprised at the quick victory, but Marceau getting an autograph threw her preconceptions for a spin. What is up with that mime?

The video ended, she was at a bit of a loss and in a odd moment of curiosity thought she'd see if Taylor had a MyFace account. That way they could keep in contact a bit easier. While she hadn't found an account per say, she did come across something just as interesting. Several students at Winslow had public accounts. She'd scoff at their lack a sense for security, but it ended up to her benefit here. It seemed that Taylor was mentioned here and there. Talk of her 'falling out' with her ex-girlfriend, Emma. That name sounds familiar. She gasped as she realised where the name was last used. She's been bullied by her ex.

Wrapped up in feelings of sympathy and growing ideas, Amy didn't consider that she really shouldn't trust things she read on the internet.

Her phone rang. She excused herself from a conversation with some nurses and brought the phone up to her ear.

"Hey Amy. You wanna hang out tomorrow?"

She smiled as she hear the friendly voice. She hadn't had a chance to ring her with all the stuff going on at the hospital and so was glad that Taylor had called.

"Sure, what did you have in mind?"

"I thought we could perhaps grab dinner, maybe do something afterward. Do you know any good restaurants?"

She pondered this for a moment, there were several good restaurants that she could think of. Fugly Bob's, Riccardo's, The Bay Gril- Did she just ask me out to dinner? She panicked a little.

"Um, just give me a moment."

"Okay."

Did Taylor just ask me out on a date? Would I want it to be a date? She decided to just go with it and see what happened.
"San Giorgio, it's a really good Italian restaurant on the Boardwalk. I can make bookings if you like."

"That sounds great. See you there at six?"

"Sure. See you then."

She ended the call and leaned against the wall behind her. *She's interested in girls. Is she interested in me? Does she just want to be friends? Do I actually like her that way? I should give it a chance. Then I might stop pining after Victoria.*

Amy let the ideas bounce around her head as she went back to healing people. There were still a lot suffering from withdrawal with the Merchants falling apart. While she could clean up their systems, she couldn't do much for the addiction. She wouldn't, couldn't do brains.

She sat there at the table, annoyed at her sister and her boyfriend. They were going to make this awkward by their very presence. Dean was probably picking up her grumpy mood, *well screw him.* She had hoped to get some time alone with Taylor to see how things developed, but this just made things difficult. *I hope she doesn't freak out. What if she likes my sister more than me. I mean Vicky's so pretty and strong and- Stop that.*

She saw Taylor walk through the door. She wasn't as shapely as Victoria but she had a very fit physique, that of a runner or maybe a catwalk model. The red dress looked good on her and her hair caught the light from the setting sun. Amy stood up and waved her over.

Amy had never liked Shadow Stalker, and what she had just heard reinforced that opinion several times over. That she was one of the bullies made all to much sense in hindsight. The way Miss Militia had acted and the request to heal her. Shadow Stalker's general bitchiness. Her mind briefly flashed back to the MyFace page she had read. That she and Taylor's ex had done so much to the poor girl was unforgivable. *I wonder if she'd even want to be in a relationship again.*

"It's probably better if you don't mention this to anyone. Don't know what the PRT would do if they knew."

"You've kept my secrets, I'll keep yours. What are friends for?"

She did wonder if Dean had worked it out though. Amy had little doubt the emotions had been pouring off Taylor during the dinner.

"Eeep."

She buried her face in Taylor's shoulder. While she was startled, it was also a good excuse to test the waters. She wasn't sure if she was imagining things with the popcorn. An arm wrapped around her and she relaxed a bit. *This is a good sign.*

*I shouldn't be staring. She's not as big as Victoria. I should stop comparing her to my sister. I should stop staring.*

"Do you like it?"
Damn I've been caught, wait, she meant the pendant.

"Uh, yes its quite pretty. Where did you get it?"

"Night Amy."

Amy stepped forward to give her a kiss. No wait, that's too forward, what if I'm mistaken and scare her off? She instead went for a hug, seeing as Taylor had seemed to be into those at least. She felt Taylor squeeze her just as tightly and she felt warm and tingly. This is nice.

"You seem to be handling this well."

She had never really hinted to her sister that she might like girls. Admittedly, until recently she didn't have anyone else to really compare to Victoria. As such it was kind of a surprise to herself.

Victoria laughed, and the melodious sound brought a smile to Amy's lips without her even thinking about it.

"I was a bit surprised, but it would explain why I had trouble setting you up with boys. So I take it you didn't kiss?"

"Vicky!"

Well mostly its because I was too focused on you, but yeah. She contemplated the question though and the answer was clear in her mind.

"No. I kinda chickened out."

"Well that'll give you a definite answer. Though you might want to ask her if she has a crush on Marceau first."

Amy blinked a few times.

"What, why?"

"Dean seemed to think she was concerned when the topic of him hitting on me came up. That and the pendant. She's probably just worried about her girlfriend's sister though."

Amy considered what she had found out that night. It wouldn't surprise her that Taylor appreciated the mime's work. He had after all beat up the Wards who had seemingly stood by while she was bullied. Marceau had rescued puppies and fought bravely against the so many villains. For someone who hadn't been held hostage by him, what wasn't to like? Wait, if she has a crush on Marceau, does that mean she's Bi? Or does she just admire him. She cleared her mind and answered her sister.

"That makes sense, but I'll ask her when I see her next."

"And teach her some French."

"Vicky!"
Victoria kept smiling while Amy blushed in embarrassment and started having thoughts along those very lines.

"What? Just trying to help my dear sister with her love life."

As she lay in bed that night a strange thought came to her tired mind.

_Am I in a love triangle, with my own sister and Marceau? Hmm, not enough sides._

She didn't get much further in her pondering before she drifted off to sleep.
We crouched behind a parked car, just a little bit down the street from our target. The storehouse was a much more upscale building than the previous two locations we had hit. Apparently we were moving up in the world. Instead of hitting warehouse dives, we'd upgraded to raiding crack den apartment buildings. Imp had done a quick scout the day before, carefully avoiding any of the cameras.

"Approach is clear, free to proceed."

Intel's masked voice came in clearly over the new ear buds she had provided us. Already they were proving useful.

"Guards are taking a nap."

Imp's commentary threw me for a moment. That's right, she was taking the front door guards. That was going to take a while to get used to. At least I hoped I could get used to it. While I couldn't argue the effectiveness of her power, it was occasionally inconvenient.

Tattletale, Regent and I moved up to the lobby entrance. Just past the double doors were four unconscious guards, already zip cuffed in a... compromising position. It had to be Imp's work. A flicker of movement passed through my limited peripheral vision and I looked up to find one of Intel's drones hovering there. I waved to its mounted camera.

"Team A is inside. Team B, clear to go."

We were joined shortly after by Grue and Bitch. The dogs were only the size of small ponies at this point. While I would have loved to be backed up by car sized beasties, the narrow hallways of the building would have made that untenable. Another drone hovered in behind them.

Grue moved towards the left side staircase with Bitch and the dogs while Tattletale, Regent and I moved to the right. I just hoped Imp was somewhere nearby. Unfortunately, while it would have been nice to move in one group, the stash had been sub divided into several rooms in some annoying attempt at reducing risk. So while we could have sent Imp in to grab things, the risk was too high and she didn't have the expertise to crack the mechanical keypad locks that had been installed. Or at least bypass them in any reasonable time frame.

As such, the plan involved me escorting Tattletale around to the locked rooms, with Regent and maybe Imp as back up and loot mules. Grue and Bitch were on their way to one of the larger populated areas to hit some of the other targets and cause a distraction with their dog assisted 'unlocking'. Intel's drone would give us a heads up for when back up would almost inevitably arrive.

One of the drones flew ahead a bit before I lost sight of it around a corner. She had done well in making her little spies silent, as I only barely heard it as it zoomed past my head. A few more turns and we were at the first door. A drone was hovering next to a security camera.

"The feed has been looped, safe to approach."

We moved up to the door, keeping guard while Tattletale looked at the keypad for a moment. She tried a combination, tested the door and failed to open it. A small sound of annoyance passed her lips
and she unlocked it on the second go. With a push, the door swung open as she stepped to the side and I pulled up a wall in case of gunfire.

Inside were a few skin heads gathered around a table playing cards, another watched a security screen that showed an empty hallway. They all turned their heads at the sound of the door opening, surprise showing on their faces at the sudden company. They started to stand, intent on teaching us a lesson for intruding.

The one by the monitor started twitching, slumping to the floor. Imp. I rushed forwards, dropping my wall to thump one of the thugs with an invisible bat. He curled up around the impact to his belly, the wind and the fight knocked out of him. Another tried pulling a gun, only for him to shoot his own leg as his finger twitched involuntarily. He dropped spasming shortly after. I pulled as I stepped to the right, hurling the last gang member over the table and into a stack of crates.

Tattletale moved into the room and looked at the incapacitated thugs. Regent had already moved to cuff one and when I looked back, cuffs had appeared on another. I moved to the doorway to stand guard.

"First room cleared. Proceeding to loot."

She soon had the nearby safe unlocked and she and Regent began shovelling the stacks of cash into an unfolded duffel bag.

"Well that was easy. We've got a room of thugs down and a fat stack of cash here."

Grue's voice carried surprise even with the echo of his power and the slight static of the comm system. I had to agree with him though, we had lucked out so far. I hope he didn't just jinx us.

"We're done in storeroom one, moving to next."

Tattletale tapped me on the shoulder to get me to take point again, while the spy drone went on its way ahead of us. Tattletale strode a few steps behind me while Regent brought up the rear, the bag of cash slung over his shoulder.

We soon came to another door and Tattletale bypassed this one on the first attempt. She chuckled a little.

"Why have separate rooms with keypads if the codes are all the same?"

I almost laughed at how silly that was. We had expected a bit better from the E88 when we were planning, but I wasn't about to complain about their insufficient paranoia.

This room was devoid of guards, but had another safe and a wall full of weapons. I was starting to get a bit anxious. So far this had been way too easy and I didn't want a repeat of the Merchant raid.

I pointed to the guns and Tattletale shrugged.

"I'll let you handle that with that invisible Swiss army knife of yours."

I made a gesture of mock indignation and moved to the stockpile of assault rifles and other nasty things. I stroked the chin of my mask for a moment then waved my hand over the mask to get the appropriate expression for what I was about to attempt. I turned back to my team and the drone, troll-
face on and a thumb up before turning back to the task at hand. *I'll show you a Swiss army knife.*

I pulled nothing out of my pocket and held it up in the air before proceeded to unfold it in numerous and arcane ways. Eventually I placed my left hand, gripping the air. My right hand moved to take hold of something near the other before pulling back. I shook my left hand around a bit before repeating the action another two times. My right hand gripped perpendicular to the left and I got to work. It might not have been the best tool for the job, but damn if it wasn't the coolest.

I pressed toward the rack mounted weapons, which jittered as I started cutting through them. I had kind of expected sparks, but I guess I wasn't using a *metal* chainsaw. Still, it was kind of disappointing. *Oh well, I guess I'll just have to deal with having an invisible, weightless and silent fold-out chainsaw.* Behind the mask, a gleeful grin had spread across my face as the guns came apart with ease.

My arms shook with feedback as I cut through them. I wasn't sure exactly how I managed some of these things, but the clearer the image in my head, the better things worked.

The weapon stockpile quickly became a pile of stocks and other gun parts. Finally finished with my task I turned to find my team mates staring at me. Regent just shook his head.

"You know, your power is pretty bullshit."

My mask was set to 'happy' mode as my hand passed over it in an exaggerated shrug, head tilted to the side. As we were moving to the doorway, another bag of cash heavier, Intel called out over the comms.

"Hate to interrupt the comedy, but we have three incoming capes. Hookwolf, Stormtiger and Cricket."

Tattletale shared an annoyed look with me. She was about to say something when Grue's voice preempted her.

"How were they alerted? I thought communications were jammed?"

"I didn't pick up any transmissions from the building, there must be a timed check in or an outside observer."

"Damn. Outside, now."

We didn't have time to get to the roof, and the building was a bit too much taller than its neighbours to make even monster dog leaping a good idea. So we moved towards the lobby and prepared to fight our way out if need be. But I didn't see much of an issue dealing with those three. We'd taken two out easily before and I figured I had ways to deal with Hookwolf.

We exited the lobby in time to see a few more red and black clothed villains emerge from the shuttered up store across from us. The cloaked girl had to be Rune, the stereotype Nazi was Krieg and judging by the paper white skin the other one was Alabaster.

I realised then why things had been too easy, we had walked right into a trap.
Three spheres of metal emerged from Rune's cloak and began spinning around her. The other two capes started to move towards us. We couldn't afford to be delayed here while the other villains arrived.

I pulled another handful of nothing from behind me, my right hand curled around nothing spherical. My left moved up to it, a finger curled around and I pulled. The panic evident in the Empire capes despite their masks as I made a throwing motion was immensely satisfying. They dove back into the store in an attempt to avoid the explosion.

A grin spread across my lips. I didn't have to make things I mimed, but they didn't know that.

The store front was immediately covered in darkness as we started mounting up on the now much larger dogs. A crash came from the side of the store and a flash of metal whizzed by my head. A dull *thunk* from behind when it hit the building behind me. Apparently they didn't feel like messing around.

I could see Rune leaning around the corner of the building, two sphere still orbiting her. Tattletale and Grue were up on Brutus, Bitch on Angelica and Regent had just finished clipping on the duffel bag to Judas. I prepared to set up a wall if more projectiles came my way.

Rune was suddenly silhouetted by a bright flash and masculine yet girly screams echoed around the corner. A drone buzzed back towards us from behind the building. It appeared Intel's flare idea had worked a treat. Rune lobbed another projectile at the drone, narrowly missing it while the other would have caved in my chest if it weren't for my barrier. While I had the idea of hitting them back to her, I figured it would only end up with me getting hit instead given how fast they moved.

Suddenly agony blossomed in my back and I stumbled forwards, dropping my wall.

"Shit, she's still got control of the balls."

Tattletales's voice lanced through my disorientation. If I wasn't in a lot of pain I would have smacked myself for underestimating Rune. The telekinetic fell to the ground as her legs buckled and was immediately covered in darkness. I felt hands pull me up from the ground. The pain redoubled as I moved, but I bit down on a whimper. An echoing voice called out to me.

"Don't worry, I've got you."

Grue dragged me up onto one of the dogs, I wasn't sure which. Slumped over its back, I caught a glimpse of pure white flesh moving around the darkness. I tried to reach out to pull at him, but the gun he was aiming swung skywards as he fired, filling the street with a harsh chattering. Then he started twitching and fell to the ground. I sighed in relief then winced at the pain it brought. My relief was short lived though as Alabaster got up a couple seconds later. It was surreal watching as he tried to bring up his gun only to go down twitching again. I heard Tattletale speak over the comms.

"You'll need to restrain him, his body resets every 4.3 seconds."

I blinked a few times and when I could see again I saw he was struggling to move, his limbs in a tangle.
"Ok, the party's gathered, get going."

*What? Oh, Intel must see Imp with us,* I thought. I felt a hand grab my arm firmly, then my world was pain as the dogs started galloping.

"Flashed them... delayed... No pursuit."

My eyes fluttered open, seeing the road flicker by a few feet from my face. *What was happening? Did I black out?*

The lurching stopped and the pain subsided, at least until I was lifted off the dog and laid out in the van with Intel.

"Shit, you okay?"

Her voice lacked the distortion that was present on the comms and I could hear the obvious concern. One of my hands raised shakily up to my maks and slid down to set it to 'frown' mode. I wasn't sure how badly I had been hurt, but the fact that I could feel my legs was a good sign. Still, if I had blacked out for a moment there and it hurt to breath, it was probably serious. Tattletale joined us in the back of the van.

"We'll get you to the doctor we saw after Bakuda, he can check you out."

I nodded at her, and immediately regretted it.

"You just keep still. It looks like we'll have to use some of our haul to patch you up. Luckily it looks like we have enough to spare. They may have laid a trap, but they went overboard in baiting it."

Another voice cackled in my ear, carrying Regent's mocking tone.

"Yeah, you should stop being all heroic and self sacrificing dork. You're wasting money."

I smiled a little at that, making a note to be a bit more careful. I had been overconfident and suffered for it.

A couple hours later, we were back at the lair. I was a few thousand dollars richer, minus medical expenses, and my system was flooded with those lovely painkillers from last time. The vest had absorbed a lot of the impact but I still had a cracked rib and my back was already an abstract painting of blues and purples. I was laying back in a recliner, a mug of hot tea in my hands and trying to be as still as possible to avoid aggravating things.

The rest of the gang were lounging about, discussing how things could have gone better and such, but it mostly just faded into background noise for me.

"Why don't you just get your girlfriend to heal you?"

Rachel's confused voice cut through my daze and completely matched my mind set.

"What?" I croaked.
"You know, Panacea. Girl you were hugging on your date Wednesday? I saw you while I was walking Brutus."

My mind lurched, wondering what the hell was she talking about? *It wasn't a date. Was it?*

"It was totally a date."

I looked at the grinning blond standing over me. My brain was too fuzzy for this kind of thing.

"Et tu Lisa?"

"What's this about a date?"

I groaned as Alec joined in. The rest of the team were soon huddled around me, a mixture of curiosity and amusement on their faces.

"Taylor went out on a date with Amy Wednesday night."

"It was just hanging out."

"And pray tell, what did you do that night as you hung out?"

I didn't like the smug tone she had, but it was basically standard issue for her.

"We had dinner at San Giorgio, but it was weird because Victoria and her boyfriend came along to thank me for getting her to relax."

She nodded knowingly.

"So you had a double date dinner at a fancy restaurant, check."

"What no. It wa-"

"And you went out after. Movies right? Yes, and oh. How are you this oblivious?"

"What?"

A chorus of query from my 'friends' as they tried to work out what Lisa was talking about.

"She nestled in your shoulder right, oh and hugs. Lots of hugs."

"Wow Taylor, you are so in denial."

I looked at Aisha, unimpressed.

"Not gay."

"Come on Taylor, we all know you were with Emma."

Oh great, now Madison was in on it.
"We. Were. Never. Together."

"I know you're trying to move past her betrayal, but you can't just pretend it never happened."

Groaning in frustration my gaze flicked back to Lisa.

"But you know that was a joke. Just to get back at Emma. You suggested it."

"So you keep saying."

Alec just smirked as I tried to incinerate him with a glare.

"But, but, Aisha?"

Aisha leaned in a whispered in my ear.

"Hate to break it to ya, but Brian's not interested. So you should totally go play doctor."

I just slumped at that, that one fucking joke ruined everything. Not that I had really expected anything to happen with Brian. Lisa chuckled at my misery, drawing a lot of confused stares from the others, particularly Brian.

"What was that?"

Lisa waved him off.

"Never mind, not important. What is important is that Amy seems to have the hots for you. Also important is that in your denial, you've led her on. So you better decide what to do very soon."

Rachel poked me to get my attention.

"Don't see what the big deal is. Just sleep with her. I mean we're heroes now right?"

I stared blankly at her for quite some time. My words failed to form and my mouth just opened and closed a few times. Eventually I could articulate a response.

"Everyone just shut up and let me think." I snapped out, before continuing in a grumble, "Unfair ganging up on me when I'm injured."

Lisa just patted me gently on the shoulder

"We just want what's best for you."

"That and it's hilarious."

Noooope, still couldn't make Alec burst into flames.
"My brain is too fuzzy and I'm in too much pain to deal with this right now. I'll be in my room. I need some time alone."

I carefully got out of the recliner and made my way to my room.

"Alone time eh?"

"Shut up Aisha."

My voice was a bit snappier than it should have been, but to say I was in a bad mood didn't quite cover it. The pain certainly wasn't helping things, but the sheer bloody minded refusal of my friends to believe me was grating.

As I entered my room, I may have shut the door a bit harder than I should have. Slowly and cautiously I lowered myself to the bed, curled up on my left side to minimize contact with the bruising.

I would have to basically do nothing for a couple of days while I healed up and I wasn't sure how to avoid letting Dad know. He'd just worry for no good reason. Okay, maybe he has a good reason. This was the second time I'd been seriously injured on the job, so his fears wouldn't be unfounded. At first I had kept my cape activities a secret because of villainy, then it became a combination of momentum and trying not to have him worry. That and he'd try to ground me and prevent me from doing cape work.

I sighed a little as I realised how much easier things would be if I could get Amy to heal me. That of course brought other issues up. Now that we were friends. Or more? I shook my head a little at the thought. No, if I were to go to her for healing, I'd have just as much trouble explaining things as with Dad. What was I supposed to say? That I had fallen down some stairs onto something? Hit by a cyclist? Random gang violence? Slipped on a banana?

I snorted at the absurd ideas bouncing through my head before they settled on another topic I didn't know how to deal with. Amy. As much as I wanted to believe they were teasing me, or rather that it was only teasing, Lisa was likely right about it. While I had just assumed she was a bit huggy, looking back on the so called date shone a new light on her actions. How much was her just being supportive or scared? I refused to believe she was doing it purely out of some strange lust, she just didn't seem capable of it.

She was a sweet but damaged girl who just needed a friend to support her. Just like me. Was that why I just assumed the entire thing was platonic? Why I was trying so hard to be her friend? Lisa had been wrong before, it was entirely possible that Amy just wanted to be friends and nothing more. Damn it Lisa, now I'm getting paranoid.

I kept running through that night in my drug addled head. The painkillers were probably not conducive to logical thinking, but they were better than the agony I'd be in without them. She had dressed fairly nice, but so had I. She hadn't invited Victoria and Dean, so it could be they just assumed. Oh great, now Glory Girl and Gallant probably think I'm gay. I sighed in frustration.

It was a fancy restaurant, but that didn't mean much. She did seem rather eager to go to the movies
though. The movie was a bit harder to rationalise away. She'd immediately cowered into me and hadn't let up till the movie was over. I couldn't be sure my view wasn't tainted by implications from my oh so helpful team mates, but in hindsight that did seem a bit devious.

Pondering the rest of the night made things worse, there was basically a lot of touching. It all seemed natural at the time, but now I was suspicious. A particularly salient point came to mind. I had assumed she was looking at my pendant with that slightly entranced look on her face. Had she in fact been staring at my boobs? I really wasn't sure how to feel about that. If she was ogling my chest, should I be offended or pleased?

I felt conflicted about the whole thing. I wasn't sure what I felt about the idea of her being attracted to me, other than the hugs were nice.

My eyes were having trouble staying open. That was to be expected from a busy day and painkillers. *I'll just rest them for a moment, then I'll get changed for bed.*

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*Mmmm, warm. Hugs are nice. Wait, you're squeezing a bit hard. My back is hurting.*

My eyes opened slowly as I became aware of my surroundings. I wasn't being hugged. Instead, I was staring at the ceiling and there was a dull ache all down my back. A blanket was covering me, which seemed normal until I realised I still had my clothes on. I didn't remember getting a blanket last night.

I turned my head to look at the alarm clock. It read 11:23 and it was a school day. *Shit. Did I sleep through it?* It didn't really matter as I really didn't feel up to going anyway. Slowly I dragged myself from bed, grabbing my glasses from the side table that I hadn't placed them on. I ponderously made my way to the kitchen where an all too cheerful Lisa stood, frying up something that smelt suspiciously of bacon.

"Morning, barely. When you didn't come back out last night, I came in to check on you. You really shouldn't have slept in your clothes. Oh, and I turned off your alarm so you could rest."

That explained things.

"Mrrmr." I agreed.

"I'll have this ready for you in a moment. I figured you'd be up shortly and you need to recover your strength."

"Thanks."

"So, pleasant dreams?"

I glared at her before moving past to make some tea. There were days that her grin was infuriating, this was one of them. So was yesterday come to think of it. She was blissfully silent as I prepared my drink. I hobbled over to the table and took a seat, hunched over to avoid the chair back from rubbing against the bruises.

She placed a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me, followed shortly after with some toast. Given how crap I felt, this almost made up for last night.
"Thank you."

She sat down opposite me, staring at me with a grin as she watched me eat. It was kind of unnerving. She occasionally took sips from her coffee but otherwise remained silent. I tried to ignore it as I dug into my brunch. About halfway through, I couldn't take it anymore.

"What?"

"Did you think about what I said?"

I sighed and ate a few more mouthfuls before I answered.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I decided anything. I was pretty doped up on painkillers."

"Aannnnnd?"

The cheerful way she dragged that out and her smug face did not help at all.

"Yeah, it was probably a date."

She just nodded in confirmation and took another sip.

"How do you feel about that?"

"I. I'm not sure. Kind of flattered that someone finds me attractive. Weirded out that it's Panacea of all people. It's all a bit too much for me at the moment, like everything has been turned upside down."

I ate a few more mouthfuls.

"So, what would you do if she kissed you?"

It was a close call, but I managed to avoid choking to death on some bacon. Once I had settled down, I pondered the question.

"I don't really know."

She gave me a knowing smile.

"Ah, you haven't had anything to compare it too."

I glared at her. She was right of course. I hadn't had a proper kiss. The closest thing was when Emma and I... My face met my hand. Was it any wonder that rumour had spread so easily? Not that I had a clear memory of what it felt like, besides that was something silly we did when we were kids to see what all the fuss was about.

Lisa quietly chuckled at my misfortune. Apparently I was a rich vein of schadenfreude for her.

"I know you're tired and in pain, but you shouldn't put off coming to a decision for long. I really wouldn't be surprised if she's waiting for you to call her up for another date."

Today seemed a day that would be full of me sighing, I'd already lost count.
"How the hell am I supposed to explain my back? That sort of thing is going to draw attention. Hell, even if I want to get into a relationship, what am I supposed to do about my cape identity? I doubt I could keep it secret for long."

"Does she seem like the kind of person to keep secrets? I thought I got a little bit of that when I saw her in the bank."

I thought back to the date and the time we met before that. She seemed to be able to hide from the world that she had almost broken down.

"Yeah, I just don't know how she'd react, after all I did hold her hostage and hurt Victoria pretty bad." My face dropped even further as another memory came to the forefront of my thoughts. "Oh god, she thinks Marceau is hitting on her sister."

She chuckled lightly at the frankly quite obvious in hindsight consequences of those flowers.

"Given how oblivious you've been, you could always explain it away as a misguided attempt to apologise and cheer her up."

"You do realise most of this is your fault right? The joke at Emma was your idea, the wording of the note was your idea."

"Yep, but snagging Amy as a girlfriend is all your work."

I moaned as she continued grinning like a loon. She was probably right but I was still sure I should be blaming her for some part of that. I just didn't know how it was her fault.

"Are you seriously suggesting I tell Panacea that I'm a cape before my Dad?"

"Why not? You've already told six other people before him. Though you might want to get around to that soon." She paused for a moment before continuing.

"Admittedly I'm the last person to talk to about healthy parental relationships."

I raised my eyebrow at that, she hadn't ever discussed her past in detail.

"Oh?"

"Let's just say there's a reason I never talked about them and leave it at that."

"Seems unfair that everyone gets to pry into my life but I don't get the same privilege."

She sighed, her grin evaporating. We remained silent for a little while before she spoke.

"I ran away from home after they starting using me to further their business aims. It's like they stopped seeing me as a daughter and more of a tool. I'd rather not talk about it further because it still hurts to think about."

I felt a little guilty for that, but I basically knew nothing of her past. I probably should have guess it was painful.
"Oh, well I'm sorry for bringing it up then."

"It's alright, you had a point. Just don't talk about it with the others please. It kind of ruins my mystique."

I snorted at that and she matched my smirk with a sad smile of her own.

"Anyway, I need to head out for a bit. Think on what we discussed."

I nodded and continued on what was left of the plate in front of me while she got up and left. It wasn't until I heard the door close downstairs that I realised she didn't answer my earlier question. How the hell would I explain my injury without revealing my identity.

"Damn it Lisa."
I sat alone at the table for a while longer, trying to come to some kind of decision on how to proceed. The Lair was eerily quiet without any of my team mates around. Madison and Aisha must be at school, Rachel was probably over at the shelter while Alec and Brian were doing who knows what.

I couldn't really do much till after school hours, Amy would be at Arcadia after all and it would be suspicious dropping by unannounced. Better to call her afterwards. I was a little worried how easily I was considering taking advantage of her powers. She would probably be spending a couple hours healing people who hadn't gotten themselves injured with their own stupidity. What right did I have to get in the way of that just because it was inconvenient?

No, I should contact her to discuss our potential crossed wires. If she happens to notice I'm in a tonne of pain and feels like healing me, that would be a bonus. And with that bit of self justification sorted and having a couple of hours to kill I went to have a shower and then maybe get on the internet.

So it turns out that crack ribs take several weeks to heal, who knew? A lot of my reluctance to ask for help had evaporated by the time I was done with my research. The doctor had be vague about how long it would take to recover. Either that or I had been vague from the pain and drugs when he had explained.

The internet was also handy for all sort of other information, like what frequent causes of cracked ribs were. I'd already discarded the idea of faking another car accident, that would be suspicious. So I was left with gang violence or clumsiness. An accident won out if only because I wouldn't need to involve the cops. While I could tell Amy the truth, I wasn't quite ready to trust her with that just yet.

Another hour or so was killed checking the PHO forums and alternatively laughing, and thus causing myself pain, or weeping at the comments related to our actions as the Undersiders.

It was kind of reassuring to see so many people willing to believe we were doing good work. Even if I thought they were perhaps a little gullible and trusting of the media. I had considered logging in as Marceau and clearing things up with Glory Girl, but it would be unwise to do so from the Lair and I had no idea how to go about that.

Eventually the time came for me to ring Amy. I stared at my phone trying to muster up the courage, going over my cover story in my head. I continued to stare at my phone. Still staring at my ph-

I was startled by said phone ringing. A second of confusion passed before I reached out and answered it.

"Hi Taylor."

The universe seemed to have a sense of humour.

"Hi Amy, how are you?"

"Pretty good, I was wondering if you wanted to hang out? There aren't any critical patients at the moment and both you and Vicky have been nagging me to take a break..."
And sometimes the universe cut you a break.

"Um sure, when did you want to meet?"

"I'm free now if you like. I'm guessing you just got off school too?"

"Yeah, I'm free. I was thinking of heading over to the Boardwalk to grab some things. Did you want to meet there?"

"Sure, I can be there in about twenty minutes."

I did some mental math about travel times with my current condition and getting changed. It wouldn't be too hard to get there in time.

"Sounds good. How about that cafe next to the ice cream place?"

"Okay, catch you there."

The call ended and I stared at my phone for a moment. That was remarkably easy. I immediately started waiting for the other shoe to drop as I got ready to go out. She had sounded fairly eager after all.

I had popped a few more pills to make the journey more manageable, but it still hurt like a bitch to walk that far at a reasonable pace. I had been careful to check that the bruising wasn't visible, as that sort of thing would attract the wrong sort of attention. The black dress helped, even if it was perhaps a little too light to block out the chill sea breeze.

After ordering a hot chocolate to warm myself up, I took a seat at one of the booths. Just the right sort of seclusion to talk in comfortably. Assuming one was quiet of course. A few minutes later I heard another chime from the front door and leaned out carefully to check. Amy stood just past the doorway, scanning the room till her eyes fell on me. She smiled and walked over.

"Hello again, did you want me to order you something?"

She shook her head as she took the opposite seat.

"No thanks, trying to cut back on the caffeine."

I briefly wondered just how much coffee she had been drinking to need to cut back. All those late nights at the hospital must have required a fair amount. She must have been mainlining the stuff to do the hours she had. The guilt about getting her to heal me had returned.

"Taylor?"

I must have spaced out a bit while I was on that mental tangent. Those drugs didn't really help my focus. I shook my head and chuckled a little.

"Sorry, was just thinking and got caught in a loop. Things haven't been awkward with Victoria and Dean because of the other night have they?"

"Not really, no. I haven't seen Dean since, but Vicky apologised for butting in."
I smiled, mostly at the idea of Glory Girl apologising.

"That's good. Didn't want to cause any drama for you."

"Yeah, it turned out pretty well really."

The way she smiled made me slightly suspicious of what she was talking about. I had my guesses.

"Since I've finished my drink and you weren't having one. Shall we go for a walk?"

"Sure."

I eased myself out of the booth, hardly wincing at all. Amy didn't seem to notice though and I felt irrationally annoyed by that. I quickly dismissed the thought and we slowly walked out of the cafe and up towards some of the specialty stores. We didn't get very far though as Amy stopped at the next store along.

"Did you want some ice cream?"

A quick glance over their flavour selection gave me my answer.

"Yes, that's a wonderful idea."

I figured the sugar might help a little and 'Mocha Almond Fudge' sounded too tasty to pass up. And so, cones in hands, we continued along the Boardwalk. I was getting used to the rhythm of dull pain that walking produced, but I was hardly doing anything strenuous. The ice cream was also helping distract me. Just hanging out like this was nice, even with the uncertainty hanging over my head.

"...Marceau."

My brain screeched to a halt. I tried to calm my face before I turned to Amy.

"Sorry what?"
"I was wondering what you thought of Marceau?"

I relaxed a bit as I realised she hadn't called me by my cape name.

"Why do you ask?"

"Something Vicky said. She thinks you've got a crush on him."

I blinked a few times and then cracked up laughing. That was certainly better than the other possibilities.

"No, no, no. Not my type."

She smiled, and I tried to keep my face placid as I realised what I'd just implied.

"But you admire him?"

I sighed a little. This was getting into a minefield of half truths.
"Well, I like what he and the Undersiders are doing against the gangs. That they roughed up the Wards felt justified to me, but my perception may be skewed on that point."

She nodded grimly.

"I don't like what he did to you and Vicky though. So I kind of feel guilty liking the other stuff when you were on the receiving end of some of it."

I tried to console myself that it wasn't technically a lie, so much as the pronouns were wrong. Figuring the topic was already in the open, I asked an important question.

"What do you think of him?"

"I'm not sure. I was angry for a while. While Vicky didn't get hurt all that bad in the grand scheme of things, she's still my sister. That he let me go to heal her and the concern he showed after has dulled the anger. Now he seems to rescue puppies and fights villains. Helped put the Merchants out of business. Did I tell you about all the addicts I cleaned up? So many people got a second chance because of the Undersiders."

It was about the best I could expect really. I would have been incredulous if she was fawning over my alter ego. Hearing that we had done more good did lift my spirits. It was about that point that we arrived at the shoe store I was looking for.

"Just need to grab something from in here."

"Looking for some heels?"

I turned to Amy, an amused smile on my face.

"Wouldn't even know how to walk in them. I need to replace my running shoes, I've been wearing through them a bit lately."

"With legs like that I'm not surprised you're a runner. But I reckon you'd look good in heels."

I blushed slightly at the compliment. Damn it. I was procrastinating on addressing the attraction issue, but it was nice to be appreciated. I picked out a style of shoe I liked the look of and approached a clerk.

"Can I try these in a nine?"

"Ooh and these too."

I turned to see Amy standing beside me with a sample shoe. A red pump with a two inch heel. An eyebrow raised at the idea that I'd be able to walk in a pair of them.

"Back in a moment."

And with that the clerk went to retrieve the shoes before I could argue.

"I'm likely to break an ankle with those."

"Well, I like what he and the Undersiders are doing against the gangs. That they roughed up the Wards felt justified to me, but my perception may be skewed on that point."

She nodded grimly.

"I don't like what he did to you and Vicky though. So I kind of feel guilty liking the other stuff when you were on the receiving end of some of it."

I tried to console myself that it wasn't technically a lie, so much as the pronouns were wrong. Figuring the topic was already in the open, I asked an important question.

"What do you think of him?"

"I'm not sure. I was angry for a while. While Vicky didn't get hurt all that bad in the grand scheme of things, she's still my sister. That he let me go to heal her and the concern he showed after has dulled the anger. Now he seems to rescue puppies and fights villains. Helped put the Merchants out of business. Did I tell you about all the addicts I cleaned up? So many people got a second chance because of the Undersiders."

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"I'm likely to break an ankle with those."
"Don't worry, you'll be fine."

I was suspicious about her motivations for seeing me in heels. That they matched the dress I wore on our 'date' did not escape my notice. The clerk returned with the two boxes. I tried on the sneakers first to test their fit. With a short walk around the shop floor, I didn't notice any pinching. Admittedly I couldn't test them as thoroughly as I'd like given my condition, but they seemed fine.

Then came the stilettos. With an encouraging grin from Amy, my resistance broke and I tried them on. Even sitting down, with my legs stretched out it felt like I was standing on my tip toes. I lifted myself up and managed to stand.

"Wow."

I had to agree with her, though probably for different reasons. I kind of liked towering over people. The heels brought me up to around six foot and the clerk was probably only about five eight. I was almost a head above Amy, who I guessed was around five five. Now if only I actually felt stable.

"So going to take a walk?"

I looked down at Amy, who I felt was smiling way too eagerly. Was she trying to get me to try things that suited me like Lisa or just trying to perv on me?

"I'm not particularly confident that I won't face plant."

"I'll catch you if you fall."

I sighed. I've faced down several of the biggest villains in the city, what was a little walking in heels by comparison? I placed a foot forwards tentatively before shifting my weight to it. It felt unnatural moving around like this and my next step was closer to my usual gait.

Suddenly I lurched to the side as the shoe tilted over and I fell.

Into a waiting pair of arms.

While Amy was surprisingly strong and halted my fall, it jarred my back and I hissed in pain. I turned my head to face her, only to see her eyes wide in surprise. Her expression a mixture of anger and worry.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me you had a cracked rib?"
I stared up at her face, surprised at the outburst of emotion.

"Umm, I didn't think it was that bad and didn't want to bother you. You're supposed to be taking a break and I didn't want you thinking I was only your friend to take advantage of you."

She looked bemused by my answer for a moment, standing there holding me before her expression shifted to a smile.

"Taylor. You are an idiot, and that quite is possibly the dumbest and sweetest thing I've had said to me."

She chuckled a little as she helped me back onto the seat, sitting next to me. She sighed a little.

"Is that why you've been so distant this whole time?"

I blinked in surprise. Oh damn. I must have been unconsciously avoiding her because of what Lisa had said and made Amy worry. That just made me feel worse. I noticed that the clerk was obviously eavesdropping, having been intrigued by Amy's outburst.

"Perhaps we should talk about this in private?"

She followed my gaze to the clerk and nodded.

"Ok, but first you need some healing. Then you are going to tell me how the hell you got that injury."

I sighed and nodded. A warm flush and a tingling sensation swept over me as she took my hand. She whispered in my ear.

"You should really cut back on the codeine, or you'll develop an addiction."

She was probably right about that. I was too easily falling back on the pills when things got rough. A few more seconds of warmth and the pain was wiped away, leaving me feeling as good as new.

"Thank you. I'll just pay for the sneakers and we can find somewhere to talk."

She nodded as I slipped out of the heels and back into my flats. Money was exchanged and we left the store. Amy seemed disappointed that I hadn't bought the heels, but I was hesitant to go near those things again. I led her towards the beach, where the open space and wind would make it easier to avoid people listening in.

"So?"

I glanced over at Amy as we strolled along and took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. It was pleasantly painless, which was the opposite of what I was expecting this conversation to be.

"Things have been brought to my attention, namely that you seem to have a thing for me."
She suddenly looked rather worried. *Oh good move Taylor.*

"Um yes? Is? Are you?"

I held up my hand to stop and allow be to finish.

"I'm frankly confused as hell. I had thought we were just being friends until someone pointed out that we had gone on a date rather than just hanging out. I'm not sure how I actually feel about that."

"So that's why you were avoiding contact."

She looked rather sad, which in turn made me a little sad and a lot guilty.

"Sorry about that, a combination of not wanting to take advantage of you and well... I've never really had umm, admirers before so I'm having trouble coping with the sudden attention. Not to mention uncertainty whether I'm even in to girls."

She looked surprised at that.

"But, you and Emma..."

I blinked, what?

"Where did you hear? You know what, never mind. I swear the entire world's probably heard by now."

I sighed heavily. At least I had confirmation that Lisa was responsible for this.

"So, you don't like me like that?"

The sad tone in her voice made me feel like I'd kicked a puppy.

"I don't know. I like hanging out with you and, well the hugs have been nice. It's just that I was under the impression that I'm straight so I really don't know how to feel about this whole thing. I haven't really had any intimate relationships to compare with."

"So the movies and the hugging and..."

"I just thought you were a bit touchy feely, and well it was nice getting hugged. Looking back on it I really should have picked up on the clues."

We walked in silence for a while

"So where do we go from here?"

"I want to keep being your friend if you'll have me. I enjoy spending time with you and want to help you."

"Oh."

There was that kicked puppy tone again. A sigh left my lips. I'd been contemplating the idea since last night and it was time to bite the bullet.
"As for more, I guess I'm willing to try. I can't guarantee it'll work out given my bundle of issues. But the touching wasn't unpleasant or anything and as I think I've mentioned, the hugs were nice. It's just a lot to think about in less than a day."

We didn't speak for a bit as she mulled over what I had said. I wished it didn't have to happen like this. But it happened and I had to deal with that.

"So take it slow then?"

I nodded.

"Can I hug you?"

She wasn't doing the puppy dog eyes, but it still felt like it.

"I could probably do with one right about now."

She hooked her arm under mine, giving me a one armed hug as we walked. My arm wrapped around her shoulder and squeezed a little. I had kind of expected it to be awkward, but it still felt nice. Comforting even, especially with her warmth counteracting the chill of the sea breeze. We walked like that for a while down the beach.

"So, how did you get a whopping injury like that?"

Her tone made her concern obvious. I had hoped she would forget that.

"I slipped over while I was running through a park, landed on a stone when I fell."

She was silent for a moment

"Taylor, I've seen a lot of injuries over the years and that one was a doozy. I know we've had a bit of misunderstanding over the whole affection thing, but I'd like to think you'd trust me enough to tell me the truth. Are you being abused?"

The concept threw me.

"What, no! Why would you think that?"

She sighed and squeezed me tight.

"I didn't say anything earlier, because I thought I might have been mistaken, but I'm pretty sure you didn't get hit by a car. The injuries didn't really make sense. The bruising wasn't localised and the fragments didn't fit the wounds. This time you had some severe trauma but the bruising was spread out weirdly. If the bullying is still going on or if your Dad's abusing you or whatever is going on, I can help. Just talk to me, please. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Damn it. She was being all caring and reasonable at me. How the hell was I supposed to get out of this without ruining the already fragile friendship. I slipped out of her grasp and sat down on a nearby bench, hunched up with my elbows resting on my knees, my face in my hands. She sat next to me but gave me a little space.
"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm scared of what you'll think of me.

My voice barely came out above a whisper. Why did life have to suddenly turn so complicated.

"Even with how awkward everything is, I don't want to lose you as a friend. I'm afraid you might hate me if you knew."

She didn't say anything for a while. Eventually she wrapped an arm around me an whispered in my ear.

"Unless you're some kind of mass murdering psycho, I still think I out rank you as a horrible person."

"What, no you're a fucking saint. You've almost burnt yourself out trying to heal everyone, how the hell are you horrible?"

"Gallant."

One name was all it took to remind me of her crisis. The incident that started this whole friendship thing. She had trusted me with her darkest moment, well aware that it could ruin her life if it got out, that it could have made me hate her. I really didn't know how to handle this whole trust thing.

The Undersiders and I had trust, but it had started off with the stabilising element of mutually assured destruction. If they betrayed my trust, they would suffer and vice versa. Sure it had moved past that into trusting them with my life, but it had a foundation to build off.

This, this was a completely different thing. Someone reaching out for help with nothing but hope that it wouldn't blow up in their face. The last person I had done that with was Emma and look where that ended up. Now I was basically in the position Emma was in before the bullying began, holding all the cards while Amy's hope and secrets dangled there.

As much as I was afraid, I couldn't be like Emma. I wouldn't be like her and Amy deserved something better than that. And so I cast out my hope and secrets to balance out Amy's trust in me.

"I'm a cape."
Interlude

Amy

What?

That wasn't what she was expecting. To be fair, Amy wasn't sure what she was expecting. The entire afternoon had been one set of revelations after another and she was having trouble keeping up with them. Especially with her mix of disappointment and hopeful optimism.

She was still reeling from Taylor's sexuality confusion. She had been so sure Taylor was interested in girls. After all, all the evidence had fit. *Of course it couldn't go smooth, but at least she's willing to try.*

If she was a cape, who could she possibly be? Why would Taylor fear her hating her? She wasn't Asian and well Bakuda was in prison, so that eliminated the ABB. The Merchants were in prison so not one of them. Was she part of the E88? The only female cape of around the right age was Rune, but that seemed unlikely. If she was willing to at least try a relationship, that would clash with their Neo-Nazi ideals.

She had a sinking feeling as she realised where Taylor probably got her powers. *Poor Taylor.* That meant she was a fairly new cape and that cut down the options.

Faultline had a new member for her crew, *something to do with fire.* That was a possibility, but didn't do much to explain her fear. They hadn't really done anything of note lately.

She obviously wasn't a new Ward, or the Dean thing wouldn't have happened and she wouldn't have enjoyed their thrashing at the hands of the Undersiders...

Of course, it made so much sense. The way she spoke of the new vigilantes and her guilt over what happened at the bank. She wasn't Tattletale though, that girl was blonde and the voice was wrong. As well as her figure. She obviously wasn't Rachel Lindt. That would leave the rumours about Regent. The hair was kind of right, but she had heard him speak...

It suddenly dawned on her how much of an idiot she had been to go through every other cape she knew of when the answer had been staring her in the face since she met Taylor in the hospital. The vocal cords, the damage that was similar to what you'd expect of a bomb, her guilt and fear of being hated. The questions about Marceau. The concern at Victoria thinking there was flirting. *I'll have to ask about that.* The height and figure worked.

"Ah."

Now she just needed to decide what she felt about that.
Amy just sat there, not really moving for some time. Her arm was still wrapped around me and I could hear her slow breathing, feel her chest expand and contract against my arm. There was a slight hitch in her breathing before it returned to its former rhythm. Eventually she spoke.

"Ah."

So much information seemed to be conveyed in that single syllable. Understanding. Realisation. I hoped it might also mean acceptance.

"Yeah."

"So. I'm a little confused. Why were you hitting on my sister if you thought you were straight?"

It was immediately clear that she had guessed right, and of course that was the first thing she asked. Apparently awkwardness was my arch nemesis or something.

"That. Well, that was supposed to be an apology for the bank thing. I really didn't mean to hurt her but I was, well scared out of my mind. I thought I'd just knock her back a bit, I mean Glory Girl is supposed to be invincible and then that happened. And then, just like everything else it was misunderstood. I swear, it's like I have a master power to make things complicated and confusing."

I let out a sigh.

"Sorry for taking you hostage by the way."

She chuckled a little at that, surprising me somewhat. She seemed to be taking this in stride pretty well.

"Well at least it explains why you're always so quiet. I'm not sure why I didn't notice it before. But I guess the cross dressing threw me off a bit. Really quite a clever idea."

I nodded. Lisa's ideas weren't always bad.

"Before my voice got fixed, we decided it would probably help to distance my cape ID a bit further from the mute girl that I was."

She nodded and was silent for a little longer.

"So what was with the fake car accident?"

I sighed. It was something I had hoped to avoid explaining.

"Well after Bakuda almost exploded me, I was pretty beat up and then I get a call from Dad saying you were going to fix up my larynx and I kinda panicked. I was feeling guilty over the bank thing and scared that my secret identity would be revealed a few days into my career. Then some bright spark suggested making it look like I got hit by a car to explain the damage and I was too dosed up on painkillers to effectively argue how bad an idea it was."
I took a deep breath before continuing my story.

"Then I'm lying there noticing you look all exhausted. Of course then I felt doubly guilty about you having to heal me while being angry at the PRT for being sneaky bastards about fixing their fuck up. Then I go and spill my sob story on you and well you know the rest."

While I probably needed to breathe more, it was kind of a relief to get some of this off my chest.

"So I guess what I told you was the reason you asked Miss Milita for that autograph?"

"Partially that, partially to stop Armsmaster being a jerk and trying to arrest us."

I heard Amy snort at that comment. There was probably a story behind that.

"He's never really come across as friendly."

I nodded, that made a certain amount of sense.

"Huh, almost forgot to ask about your back."

"Ah, yeah. I got tagged by Rune last night when we hit an Empire storehouse. Turns out it was a trap."

"Damn it Taylor, you need to be more careful."

"Yep, I got too confident and was made to regret it. I fully intend to be a lot more cautious."

"Good. So no more being reckless and no more hitting on my sister."

I groaned at being reminded of that, but she had a point. I never should have made the puppy joke.

"Of course if the PHO is anything to go by, I'm not sure it will matter what I do."

"Good point. I'm assuming then that they aren't your harem."

I turned to look at her face, a huge grin spread across it. My mouth opened and closed a few times.

"I take it back, my power is to make everyone tease me over my imaginary love life."

"So, are any of the other Undersider's cross dressing?"

I chuckled a little and smiled.

"Ah, but that would be telling."

She made a joking tone of disappointment.

"But seriously Amy, I can't betray their trust by telling you anything about my team mates. As it is, I'm going to have to tell them you know my identity."

A second later the implications hit me like a sledgehammer. My face returned to my hands.
"Oh damn. I'm never going to hear the end of this."

"Huh?"

"They've been teasing me about stuff like this for a while, and now they'll have proof. Oh god they've probably made bets on it."

At that point, she started laughing. I felt a little hurt by that until I realised just how absurd it all must be from an outsider. Then I started laughing too. We sat there for who knows how long, laughing on that bench by the beach with our arms around each other.

Eventually the laughter died down and I had to ask the question.

"So, you don't hate me?"

"No. As long as you don't go beating up my sister any more or holding me hostage... well maybe that last one's fine."

She flashed me a shy grin and I couldn't help but giggle.

"I think if I did that, I'd have trouble avoiding the other. Though at least that's one way to get you to relax."

I had an absurd idea.

"Imagine the headlines. Undersiders kidnap Panacea. Treat her to a spa and massage."

And so the giggling continued.

"We'll catch up again soon?"

"I don't currently have any daring escapades planned, so that should be doable."

"I'll give you a call then."

I waved her goodbye as I headed off back to the lair. I figured I'd have to drop by and let the team know and suffer through the resulting jokes. Still, all told that had gone fairly well, if not quite as planned. I still wasn't sure what was going to happen between Amy and I, but it was in the open now and we could see where things went.
Our eyes met across the room. So much was said without a word as we gazed into each other's souls. All questions asked and answered in an instant.

"So it went well then."

Lisa had a way of being smug that bordered on the limits of possibility. Her grin spread wide across her face as she made the statement.

"Pretty well all considered. Oh, and it was entirely your fault. That one joke spawned everything."

"You're welcome."

My eyes narrowed at her continued amusement at the complications she created.

"What's all this about?"

It was then that I noticed Alec was lounging on the couch, previously out of sight. I had kind of hoped to avoid this part as long as possible. Turned out I didn't get the chance.

"Oh Taylor here is dating Panacea now."

"I thought that was already established."

My gaze drifted to Alec. He had his own cheeky smirk aimed at me.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up. Just a heads up, she knows I'm Marceau."

Instead of shock, all this provoked was laughter.

"Just as long as you don't reveal our identities or start using the Lair as a love nest. I'd rather not have the couch smelling of New Wave."

A gentle invisible slap was delivered, which only served to get him laughing harder.

"So what, no bets this time?"

"Nah I've given up on betting against Lisa on the obvious."

"Well thanks."

The sarcasm dripping off that statement could have filled a bucket.

"Mads owes her fifty though. She thought you'd keep your identity secret for longer."

I turned to face Lisa.

"Ah yes, taking advantage of someone's naivety. How like her."
She just grinned at me.

"Now Taylor, come and tell me everything. Its much more fun that way."

"Huh, would have expected her to kiss you. Though I guess you didn't get the heels. You should totally get the heels."

I sighed. Lisa was trying to be 'helpful' again.

"Enough relationship advice already. I think I've already had more than I can handle."

"Awww, spoilsport."

I paused for a moment.

"Why are you so invested in this anyway?"

"You obviously need someone and so did Amy, so I figured why not try to make both of you happy. Much better for my peace of mind if the Magical Mime and Ms Biokinetic don't get all mopey."

An eyebrow raised at that.

"What, don't look at me like that. You're basically my closest friend, so you being happy is important, even if I need to force you to be happy."

My stare rested on her for a while, but she seemed just immune to mind immolation as Alec.

"Well thanks for that. Would have liked some choice in the matter though."

"Oh you had a choice, I just provided the opportunity."

"I dread to think what would happen if you tried to take over the world."

She laughed at that.

"Nonsense, I would be a completely fair Tyrant. All would be happy in my domain."

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder, the other gesturing off into the distance.

"Imagine it. Tattletopia. Where happiness is mandatory."

I let that sink in for a moment.

"Still having feelings of dread."

Her cheerful laughter continued.

An hour or so later I was back home. The other Undersider's hadn't returned before I left, so I was unfortunately relying on Lisa to give them a run down if I didn't see them before she did.
I came in through the kitchen door, the sounds of sizzling and the smell of onions filled the air.

"Hi Dad."

He stood there in front of the stove, spatula in hand and stirring a pan.

"Hey Kiddo. How was your day?"

That was a very good question. While I could probably just not tell him anything, I figured it would probably get around quicker than I wanted so I decided to get a head start.

"Umm, weird."

He turned towards me, a curious expression on his face.

"Weird how?"

There was a short stretch of silence as I thought how best to word this.

"You know how you asked me if I was going out on a date?"

An eyebrow raised and his tone shifted to something slightly hesitant.

"Yeah?"

"Well, turns out it kinda was."

He didn't speak for a bit, instead tending to whatever he was cooking for dinner.

"With Amy?"

"Yeah. Not sure how that happened, but I'm. Well I'm kind of seeing how it goes. Given your earlier supportive comments I figure you aren't that bothered either way, but I'm still unsure if I am or not."

My shoulders hunched up in a shrug.

"Hmm. Well you should invite her over for dinner some time. I'd like to meet her." He chuckled a little. "Even if you aren't sure if she's your girlfriend or not, you seem a lot happier these days."

I walked up to him and gave him a hug. While it was still kind of weird between us, he did tend to be supportive even if he was perhaps out of his depth.

"Thanks for understanding. Though I have no idea how I missed all the signs."

He coughed lightly and looked just a little sheepish.

"You may get that from me. Your mother basically had to hit me with a clue bat before I realised she was interested."

I blinked at him a few times. That made so much sense. I loved my Dad, but he was a bit clueless about things. Apparently I had inherited more than just his build.
Still, that was one less secret between us. Now I just needed to work out how to tell him that my part time job was as a hero for hire. You know what, maybe later.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards. You are currently logged in, Marceau (Verified Cape) You are viewing:

• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Fifteen posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

Topic: The Empire throw lousy parties.
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America

Tattletale’s_Throw_Away
(Original Poster) (UnverifiedCape)
Posted on May 6th, 2011:
The E88 invited us to a party. It was so boring Marceau fell asleep, so we left early. The party favors were nice though. We thought we'd provide a handy guide.

How not to throw a party.

Love,
The Undersiders

(Showing page 14 of 14)

Beauty_Five
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@Nalta
Yep. I have to agree that the Empire lost a lot of face from this. Failing to set off a trap and losing that much cash and weapons. There's bound to be a response.

Red_Panda
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@Beauty_Five:
But how is the Empire supposed to retaliate. The Undersiders don't seem to hold any territory and they'll probably be more careful about traps in the future.

Stalking_Tanuki
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
It’s a Trap!

Marceau (Verified Cape)
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
*Honk*
*Revs invisible swiss army chainsaw*
Ignore this. This is just to fuck with the posters on Space Battles once again.

► Liehoarder
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
@Stalking_Tanuki:
Damn those Earth Aleph memes.

► Shelf_of_Cats
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
@Marceau:
Yeah Marceau, gotta agree with Regent, that is some A grade bullshit right there.
Did you get hurt there? Or was it really that dull for the Super Mime?

► SlowDresden
Replied on May 6th, 2011 ::
@Red_Panda
Yeah that would be a problem for them. Which is fine by me, those racist fucks can die in a fire. Undersiders Rule!

► CatgirlNurse
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
@Kraken:
Have we worked out who they were talking to yet?

► Marceau ( Verified Cape )
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
@Shelf_of_Cats
*Honk*
*Yawns*

► PsychoPoet
Replied on May 6th, 2011 :
@CatgirlNurse:
I thought they were just discussing the research they did before hand. They were talking about intelligence or something.

► Schadenfreude
Replied on May 7th, 2011 :
@PsychoPoet
I'm more worried about that walking censor mosaic. Obviously they have a new team member, but why would they be going through so much effort to disguise them. Oh, maybe they have video jamming stranger powers. How random would that be?

► Volan
Replied on May 7th, 2011 :
@Schadenfreude
Obviously Glory Girl has joined them due to her love for Marceau. Thus they have to blot out the video evidence. New Wave wouldn't like that.
Robot_Possum
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ Volan:
Speculation to the Undersiders thread. But I doubt it anyway. The person seems to have used a taser.

PsychoPoet
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ Schadenfreude:
Oh, that's probably who they were talking to. Silly me.

Cute_Frog
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ DeliberateTitle
I wonder if he actually even needed to fold that thing out? That just seems like pointless showboating. But I agree his powers are bullshit.

End of Page. 1 --> 12, 13, 14

Topic: Ultimate Showdown Thread X
In: Boards ▶ Discussion ▶ Cape Fights

Blasé
(Original Poster)
Posted on April 1st, 2011:
You know the drill. Keep all your power wank theories to this thread to keep the rest of the board clean.

(Showing page 414 of 414)

Goodgoo
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@ Day_Hunter
Alexandria would just walk over Glory Girl. You saw what happened at the bank vs Marceau.

Seagatherer
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ Goodgoo:
Speaking of Marceau. Do you think he could take the Simurgh. He has pretty over powered Telekinesis and he doesn't talk. You could have a mind powered mime off.
Ignore this. This is just a Simurgh plot to distract Space Battles once again.

Winged_One
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ Seagather:
I have no idea why they would want to fight. Marceau is too much of a gentleman. He's more likely to melt her ivory heart.
Ignore this. That is what she wants you to do Space Battles.

Heckyes
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@ Winged_One
Well that's a new record in Crack Ship territory. *Shudders*

- **Blasé**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @Seagatherer:
  Well I do have the calculations for his recorded peak force load calculated based on video evidence. He should be able to throw her around. PM me for details.

- **Swissrod**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @ Blasé:
  Really? You calculated it off video evidence of invisible things? This is why we can't have a sensible discussion dude.

- **Celebratory_Cheer**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @ Swissrod:
  I think you mean "Why we can't have nice things."

- **Covert Nonchalance**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @Winged one:
  I for one have little trouble imagining this...
  I wonder if the other Endbringers might also be female...

- **MoreNumbers**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @Winged one:
  That name...
  Oh god she's watching us.

- **NostalgicFailure**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @MoreNumbers:
  I'm less worried by that and more that she wants Marceau.
  Can one of the ladies in the thread explain how a mime is in any way hot?

- **JuicyBugs**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @NostalgicFailure:
  Oh. Oh!
  Marceau is a projection of Ziz!
  It explains everything. The not talking, the uncanny valley attraction, the telekinesis.
  [Screams Internally]

- **TinyMonster**
  Replied on May 7th, 2011:
  @JuicyBugs:
  Dude, take some pills.
  Ziz wouldn't go do hero stuff.
  Also, that's pretty damn offensive to Marceau to suggest he's an Endbringer puppet.
Or that he's girl? I think your crazy is confusing me.

► NotEnoughArms
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
Seriously. Everyone is way off topic.
Besides. The Simurgh can't use the internet, she doesn't have a computer.

► JuicyBugs
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@NotEnoughArms:
@TinyMonster:
That's what She wants you to think.

End of Page. 1 --> 412, 413, 414

► Topic: Undersiders In: Boards ► Places ► America ► BrocktonBay ► Teams ► Villains

BFG1104
(Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on March 29th, 2011:
The Undersiders are a new villain Hero? gang in the city consisting of:

**Grue**
-Motorcycle suit and skull faced helmet.
-Darkness powers.
-Dampens sound - confirmed by Wards.

**Tattletale**
-Domino mask, dark tight bodysuit, blond.
-Powers unknown, possibly thinker.

**Regent**
-Renaissance Fair Puffy shirt, tight pants, theatre mask and crown.
-Some kind of body control. *new info* Carries taser in sceptre.

**Hellhound**
-Cheap Dog mask, fur collar jacket.
-Big monster dog mutants.
-AKA Rachel Lindt, Bitch

*EDIT* - New Member as of April 14th*

Marceau
-He's a fucking stereotype Mime.
-Crazy telekinesis or reality warping. Extent unknown.
-Doesn't talk, just honks his horn.
-CAN MIME GUNS! *Added 27th April- see link.
-CAN MIME A CHAINSAW! Also possibly grenades. *Added 6th May- see link.
*EDIT - New Member as of May 6th*

Unknown (suggested name Mosaic).
-Costume unknown - image censored with mosaic in debut video.
-Powers unknown, possibly Tinker or video jamming Stranger.
-Seems to use a taser.

*EDIT - Possible status change as of April 24th*

Recent news reports suggest that this group may be performing vigilante acts against corrupt organisations. Evidence suggest all of their targets have been linked with criminal activities.

*EDIT - Undersiders and Protectorate team up vs Merchants April 27th*

Recent Undersider video shows them teaming up to capture all three of the Merchant's cape leaders. This lends further credence to their Hero status. Marceau appears to ask Miss Militia for an autograph. *Edit* 'confirmed' by Marceau.

*EDIT - Undersiders recognised as Vigilantes May 1st*

Sources inside the PRT say they are treating them as Vigilates until they prove otherwise. Still apparently wanted for questioning over the bank job.

(Showing page 112 of 112)

► Llama_Claus
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
So do we know if the grenade thing actually worked?

► Dramean
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@Llama_Claus
No idea. But I don't see why not given how crazy Marceau's powers are.

► Prequal
Replied on May 6th, 2011:
@Dollar Knight
No, that's just wrong. Obviously he should be with Parian. They both wear masks and have some kind of TK. They'd make a cute couple.
Ignore this. This is just to fake the shipping that won't happen on Ship Battles.

► Kingless
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@Cute_Frog
So any more news on that Mosaic cape?

► Volan
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
Reposting from latest video thread. I reckon the new cape is Glory Girl tagging along with her Mime lover. They have to censor her so New Wave don't get angry.
SpecificProtagonist
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
I doubt they have a Tinker. They obviously just hired some camera drones from Uber and Leet. They were just that impressed with Marceau. I mean who wouldn't be?

Nalta
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@SpecificProtagonist
Haven't seen you in the thread lately. Everything all right?

@Kingless
Oh, my money is on them messing with the footage just to troll us. You've seen Marceau's literal Trollface right?

King_Pleasant_IX
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@Nalta
Given all the other things they've done, I wouldn't put it past them.

@Prequel
Well from what I saw of her at a fashion show, she seems nice enough.

CavalryLord2
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
So, Rune seemed really interested in our favorite Mime. Can our French Resistance fighter win the heart of that Nazi girl?

@Volan
Nah, not enough property damage to be Glory Girl.

SpecificProtagonist
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@Nalta
Yeah Just been a bit busy.

@CavalryLord2
Nope, Marceau likes non evil girls obviously. So she can't have him.

Marceau (Verified Cape)
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
*Honk*
*Confused by people naming Imp wrong*

*Honk*
*Comforts sad Imp*

King_Pleasant_IX
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@Marceau
Holy shit, Word of Mime.
I guess. Sort of.

BFG1104, you need to update the info post!

End of Page. 1, --&gt; 110, 111, 112

I looked up at the girl watching over my shoulder like an angry hawk.

"There, are you happy now Aisha?"

"Yeah. Don't want them screwing with my name. Fuck that noise."

She stomped off in a huff. I couldn't really blame her for not wanting her name messed up. I'd read some horror stories about the names some people got lumped with. Like Flower Power or Chubster. At least I hoped Chubster wasn't a chosen name. Still, it would have been handy to keep her more mysterious a bit longer.

I was glad at least Madison was fine with concealing her presence on the team a bit longer. I just wished the disturbing posts by "SpecificProtagonist" would stop. Alas she couldn't change behaviour and tip someone off, especially if she was trying to spread a little bit of misinformation.

I looked back at the screen as it dinged, letting me know there was a new post.

► Wrath
Replied on May 7th, 2011:
@Marceau

Comforting hey? *Wink*

Looks like someone's expanded their Harem.

I sighed. Even with things getting cleared up with Amy, there was still enough misunderstanding left to go around. After double checking the forums and getting my terms right, I decided it had to be a Stranger power. Nothing else would explain it.
I stared at the implements of torture before me. Whoever invented them must have been a fiend, bargaining their soul to bring them into existence and profit from their unholy creation. Frankly if it weren't for the fact that Ziz was only a bit over nine years old, I would have blamed her for such a scheme.

All told, the high heels weren't particularly pricey and they were pretty in the same way a tiger or a weapon could be beautiful despite being incredibly dangerous to one's health. Come to think of it, the four inches of stiletto heel could surely be deadly if one ever got desperate enough. I guessed they were much like their namesake in that regard.

Lisa had practically nagged me non stop until I bought them Saturday morning. I had argued that I had enough trouble with a two inch heel. She claimed that my powers could stabilise me. I was somewhat dubious of course, but much to my chagrin she was in fact correct. She had an annoying habit of being right when I didn't want her to. Of course, using my powers to effectively give myself a full width area of contact could be considered cheating.

Still, after some practice I felt pretty comfortable walking in them. Being taller that Brian was kind of neat too. I also had the feeling that when Amy saw them, she would turn so red she could be mistaken for a tomato. This amused me far more that it should.

I considered putting them on, but eventually decided on some simple but elegant flats. I really didn't want to draw that kind of attention at school. *Or did I?* I checked my class schedule. No gym class today.

I was starting to regret my choice as I walked through the gates to Winslow.

Firstly, sitting turned out to be a slightly complicated undertaking compared to what I was used too. I was practically forced to sit demurely during the bus ride and that was a very strange feeling indeed. The extra height required the classic 'knees together with ankles crossed' pose to maintain any semblance of modesty. It made me glad I'd chosen a longer dress.

Secondly, my gait was reduced considerably. If I needed to get somewhere in a hurry, I'd probably be better off removing the shoes, or switching them with the flats in my bag.

The third and final reason was that I really wasn't used to people staring with quite that intensity. *You've faced down super heroes and villains alike, a little staring is nothing.* Telling myself that helped, but not as much I would have liked.

"Woah there Amazon, what have you done with Taylor?"

I turned and smirked at Aisha. Such a comment really wasn't a surprise from her and it was quite likely that I was the tallest person in the school at the moment, barring one or two basketball players. Well, two could play at that game.

"Is that you Aisha? I can't quite tell from up here."

A cheerful peal of laughter bounced across the entryway, drawing more attention. I was at this point
fairly sure everyone was staring at me. Trying my best to ignore them I walked into the hallway, plastering over my face with a placid expression. A dark thought crossed my mind. **Would they have paid more attention to the bullying if I was in heels?** I shook away the thought as Aisha asked me something.

"So, you gave in to Lisa's nagging?"

"Even only knowing her like a week, do you think she would give up?"

She was silent in contemplation for a moment and I just nodded, secure in my grasp of the situation. As silly as it would be from an outside point of view.

"Point. Anyway, catch you at lunch."

And with that parting comment, she ducked into her homeroom, leaving me alone to deal with the staring students in the hallway. I noticed there were also whispers along with the stares. Just a few months back I probably would have curled in on myself, but not anymore. I was a bad ass super hero, kind of, and I was better than that. My power lending me stability and a little confidence, I held my head high as I made my way to Mrs Knott's classroom.

I quickly determined that is was even harder to sit at a classroom desk than it was to sit on a bus seat. Given the relative heights of the desk and my knees, my options were being uncomfortable yet demure to the left or right. A third option would have my legs straight out balancing precariously on the heels and I didn't think I could maintain concentration on my powers while trying to pay attention to class. I spent homeroom orientated rightwards but was going with left for Mr Gladly's class.

It was harder to pay attention to class that I had thought as I was constantly aware of the glances in my direction. The ones I could see anyway. These stares of course included Madison, who had a knowing smirk and Emma, who's expression was strangely unfamiliar. I'm not sure I'd seen such a look on her face before now. **Maybe indigestion?** I smiled a little at her possible discomfort. It was possible that I was being a little petty.

My knees were a little stiff by lunch time and I made a note to perhaps not wear heels this high to school if I wanted to be comfortable during class. I had taken a seat on a table out in the yard as it allowed me to stretch my legs a bit while remaining somewhat decent. Madison and Aisha had taken seats on the accompanying benches.

"So, did you notice the way Emma was looking at you?"

My legs stopped swinging as I turned to look at Madison.

"She did look a little... queasy perhaps?"

Madison chuckled, shaking her head.

"That would be one was of looking at it. Though I'd peg her as being somewhere between envious and stressed."

I snorted somewhat at that concept. Emma being jealous of me? She had curves in all the right places compared to my stick figure.
"Why would she be envious of me?"

"You do realise you have been strutting all day right? With no clumsy clunking? And that you effectively have the figure of a catwalk model?"

I blinked several times as a few thoughts come to mind. Most importantly that my sound dampening power was being less than subtle. I may have panicked a little at that, but luckily the other points distracted me.

"Wait what? Strutting? Model?"

Madison just patted me on the shoulder condescendingly, which was an awkward gesture when she had to reach up quite high to do so.

"Taylor, you've been strutting. The way you've been walking in those heels is unnaturally good. You haven't so much as lost balance once that I've seen."

My voice came out as a low mumble.

"My powers."

"Ah, that makes sense. Kind of. No actually, you know what? Alec was right, they are bullshit."

She glared at me for a moment while Aisha chuckled. Her smile returned.

"Anyway, Emma is pretty, curvy and fairly busty for her age. She has and will get a lot of attention from the boys. But that same figure means she's limited to small jobs if she wants to go with a modelling career."

I looked at her, waiting for her to get to a point.

"You however basically just walked in to school today like you owned the concept of heels, while being tall and thin in a way she'll never be. The kind of figure you see on super models."

It sounded like she was trying to flatter me, but it still kind of felt insulting to be compared to anorexic fashion models. Only one response came to mind.

"Huh."

"That and she's gotta be jealous of you getting all that attention."

My gaze switched to Aisha, who was wearing a smile of great amusement. I blinked a few times before I realised I was being oblivious again and the stares had in fact contained some ogling. A blush came to my face.

"When did my life become so surreal? Not that I'm complaining mind you, it's a vast improvement over what it was a couple months back."

I pondered for a moment while they just smirked.

"I blame Lisa."
They nodded sagely, as if that was some universal truth. It did seem to be getting that way.

Both of them suddenly turned to look at something behind me.

"What **were** you thinking Taylor?"

I turned towards a familiar voice with a certain sense of déjà vu.
"That your appearance has ruined an otherwise good day. What do you want?"

There was no warmth in my voice as I addressed my former best friend’s question. Her annoyed expression gave me a small bit of satisfaction before she recovered her composure. I had to admit though that I was curious as to what made her think I’d want to talk to her. She was flanked by some of the other 'popular' girls, who had similar self important and disinterested expressions.

"So? How did you do it?"

My eyebrow raised at the apparent non sequitur. The tone in her voice sounding almost scornful. Not that that was much different from normal.

"Feel free to start making sense."

"How did you go from mopey loser to... This?" She waved her hands at me in an all encompassing gesture. "You couldn't have come up with this on your own."

I stared at her for a moment, a misleadingly placid expression on my face.

"Strange how one can grow when you aren't getting ground into the dirt. When you have friends you can trust."

She reacted almost as if I had slapped her. Something that I was sorely tempted to do. Where did she get off questioning my new found happiness after all she had done to me?

"What you mean these other outcasts?"

I stared at the girl to Emma's left. Mandy? Brandy? Sandy? It didn't matter, she was interchangeable with any other hanger on as far as I was concerned.

"Must be pretty desperate for friends to accept Madison."

The girl on the right this time. It appeared Emma had trained her new clique well. I decided to ignore them. They were inconsequential. I think I saw Madison cringe a little out of the corner of my eye.

"Oh, the girl who got your psycho lover kicked out of school?"

It was a pretty weak jab, but Emma seemed more concerned with student opinions than I and the hypocrisy didn't bother me. Unfortunately she was barely fazed.

"Still going on about that? Just because you have yourself some dumpy girlfriend doesn't mean everyone else is a dyke."

I blinked for a few moments before I remembered something.

"Ah, so you were that red blur spying on us at the theatre. What? Can't get enough of me at school, so you have to stalk me? Or are you Jealous?"
She seemed a little thrown by my flippant acknowledgement. While I wasn't sure about our relationship status, she didn't need to know that.

"Why would I be jealous of her, she's just as tragic as you and obviously has bad taste if she's with a loser like you."

"Oh my god, she's wearing those to show off to her girlfriend. Like, how tragic."

I maintained my focus on Emma. The minions were effectively her mouth pieces at this point, so I treated them as such. I switched to a different approach. Popularity was the most important thing to these bitches.

"I must admit Amy does like me in heels. Since it's so easy to walk in them, I thought I'd treat her after that double date with Glory Girl and her boy toy."

She and her hangers on looked a little shocked at the name drop. While I felt a little guilty for it, I couldn't argue with its effectiveness.

"No way."

"What? I thought you knew? I did tell you she fixed up my voice. Don't tell me you didn't recognise her. I thought you knew like all the important people?"

I wasn't proud of how easily I slipped into a valley girl impression for emphasis. Something popped to the forefront of my mind. It was cruel, but I didn't particularly care at that point.

"Doesn't your Dad work at the same firm as Amy's Mom?"

It was amazing how some questions could sound like a threat. Sure it was a completely empty one that I had no intention on pursuing, especially as I hadn't even met Mrs Dallon. But Emma was probably enough of a bitch to think I'd sink to that level.

"So you think you're top shit just because a cape took pity on you?"

Snorting at her sheer gall, I locked eyes with her.

"I wouldn't be the first."

She stopped talking for just a fraction too long. As dim as her hangers on seemed, I wouldn't be surprised if they picked up on Emma's discomfort.

"What the hell are you talking about Hebert?"

Ignoring her, I turned to my friend. Madison looked a little sheepish.

"So I was thinking we could find somewhere else to be. Her obsession with me is getting pathetic."

Madison looked like she was about to say something before she closed her mouth and nodded.

I got to my feet and started to walk away. I stumbled a little as my foot caught on something and heard a crash from behind me. It didn't take that long to get myself stable with my power extended soles and the table to act as a hand hold. I glanced back to see Emma on the ground face down and
groaning slightly. I guessed she catastrophically failed to trip me or something.

"Wow Emma, you really should be more careful."

I probably felt a bit too much glee by echoing one of her earlier jibes from when I was pushed down some stairs. One of the minions was trying to help her up, while the other seemed surprised I had managed to avoid falling over. I must admit I was a little surprised myself.

Madison and I walked off, leaving the tragic trio behind.

"Hah, you should have seen her face. Well, before it met the ground."

I startled slightly at the sudden appearance of Aisha as she started cackling. Something dawned on me.

"Shit, you tripped her?"

"Nah, just stopped her tripping you. Not my fault the bitch over extended. Much."

She continued laughing and after a while Madison and I joined in. I guessed I could forgive her this one prank.
As I caught a bus back home after school, my good mood from earlier was replaced with dread. The realization that I may have inadvertently outed Amy as a lesbian soured the joy at having somewhat embarrassed Emma. While I was pretty sure Victoria at least knew at this point given the whole double date thing, I didn't know who else was in the know.

As I got off the bus, I pulled my civvie phone from my bag and dialed one of the few numbers in it. I impatiently waited for her to pick up.

"Hi Amy. You have a minute to talk?"

"Hi Taylor, sure I have a few moments."

She sounded fairly cheerful, but there was some odd background noise.

"Emma, you know, one of the bullies I told you about? She saw us at the theatre and guessed we were a couple. I, well I didn't do anything to deny that."

"Hmm, made a decision have we?"

She sounded a bit hesitant, but there seemed to be a bit of amusement to her voice. I guessed it did sound funny considering what I had told her the other day. I sighed, but it needed to be said.

"It kind of happened a bit fast and I lost my temper and rubbed it in her face that I was dating you. Like an idiot, it only just occurred to me that this might be a problem for you. I don't know if you've told your parents or if you were trying to keep it quiet. I'm sorry, I just got so angry when she started insulting us."

There was mostly silence on the other end, with a faint sound of fingers tapping on something.

"I... haven't quite got around to telling them yet. Oh crap. I'm going to have to introduce you to my parents, aren't I?"

She didn't sound particularly thrilled with the idea. In fact it sounded a little insulting. But given the hints about her sister being her only real support, I couldn't really blame her if she was hesitant about her parent's reaction.

"Only if you want to. Speaking of which, my Dad wants you to come around for dinner some time. If you like. He's aware of our... relationship."

Real smooth Taylor. I was not good at this whole couple thing, if that's even what we had.

"That sounds a lot less stressful frankly. Umm, when would be good?"

That was a good question. I couldn't really surprise Dad with this tonight.

"Would tomorrow night work?"

I heard a bit of chatter in the background and guessed she was talking to some hospital staff. It was
hardly after school hours and it sounded like she was already hard at work.

"Umm, would eight be too late?"

"Should be fine. I can check with Dad and send you a message later to confirm."

"Okay. I'll wait to hear from you then."

She sounded a bit more hopeful as she ended the call. I realized I had forgotten to tell her about the heels, but I figured they could be a surprise for tomorrow. I found myself wondering how she'd react.

Sitting on the couch in the lounge room in ambush, I called out to my father as he came through the door.

"Hey Dad."

He nodded at me as he walked to the kitchen.

"Hi kiddo, how was your day?"

"Not too bad. Would having Amy over for dinner at eight tomorrow be fine?"

He paused mid step as his mind caught up to my hurried question. He turned to look at me with an air of amusement.

"Sure. Any preferences?"

"Well... I was thinking I might make lasagna."

He nodded as a grin spread across his face.

"Good choice. Bound to impress her."

There may have been slight blushing at his implications. I put aside those thought for the moment.

"Thanks Dad, I'll let her know."

I headed up the stairs to my room, closing the door behind me as I grabbed my phone off the bedside table. Dad still wasn't quite happy seeing them around. It wasn't too inconvenient and it made him a little happier, so I tried to keep it out of sight when possible. I sent through a quick message to Amy.

-8pm Tuesday is fine.-  
-Hope you like lasagna.-

Another day of school passed by quickly. Emma seemed to have decided it wasn't worth trying to torment me and I really hoped that it would stay that way. The bitch had the minor super power of being able to push a lot of my buttons. That just made it worse, she was so damn insignificant compared to the other problems I had faced.
On the way home, I dropped by the local supermarket to grab all the supplies I would need for tonight's dinner. While a lot of recipes I had seen were pretty basic, Mom's included layers of spinach and ricotta as well as the standard Bolognese style layers. A topping of mozzarella and parmesan added that little extra dab of flavour over the cheddar that some strange people used. It was the little things that made the difference.

I blushed a little as I realised how much effort I was putting into this dinner. While I had been mostly telling myself it was to make up for my indiscretion yesterday, I found myself getting excited wondering what she'd think of it. Oh and of course over thinking things. What if she doesn't like spinach, or is lactose intolerant? Surely she would have told me, right?

Ingredients paid for, I began the not too long walk back home. It wasn't quite far enough to bother with the bus and the bags were fairly light, so I thought I'd get a little more fresh air and sun.

As I walked I suddenly realised that there was a lot of things I didn't know about Amy. What were her favourite things? What were her dislikes? What kind of music did she listen to? All the conversations we'd had primarily consisted of our major issues and cape life. Surely we had done something backwards there.

Lost in thought, I took a short cut down an alley without paying much attention. I'd used it on several of my runs when I didn't feel like looping around a couple blocks. This time there was someone else there.

"Gimme your purse, bitch."

I stopped and looked at the guy in front of me. He looked a little crazed. I hadn't thought we had much of a drug problem in our area. But with the Merchants taken down, perhaps former customers had spread out. At least I assumed he was a druggie. He appeared to be mugging me while unarmed. I sighed internally at what was basically a minor threat. Why today of all days? I couldn't really use my powers in public without a mask, so I switched the grocery bag in my right hand over to my left.

"Oh ok. Let me just get it for you."

I tried my best to sound frightened as my right hand dug into my shoulder bag and grabbed hold of something to give him.

"Here."

A face full of pepper spray was not in fact anything like a purse. It was about as far from a purse as possible while still being something kept in a bag. The mugger was unsurprisingly surprised by this substitution, as was evident by his screams.

"Ahhhh, my eyes! Arrghhh."

I continued on as he clutched at his stinging eyes. For a moment I considered calling the cops, but I didn't have anything to restrain him with. Besides, I didn't have time to wait around. After all, I had a dinner to make. Hmm, maybe I should add a little bit of pepper for some extra bite. I looked down at the can still clutched in my hand for a moment before chuckling. Probably a little too much bite.
A knock on the door echoed through the house, telling me that I had run out of time.

"Dad, can you get the door?"

The sounds from downstairs indicated he was doing just that as I slipped on the heels I wore yesterday. Focusing a bit of power towards stability, I made my way downstairs to find Amy... and Victoria. Dad seemed to be chatting away with Amy and her sister. They had yet to notice me. While trying to keep my face neutral, I sighed silently. *Is this going to be a regular occurrence?* I put on my best smile and greeted them.

"Ah hello. How are we?"

That caught their attention and they all looked up my way. Dad had a mild look of surprise. I hadn't told him I 'knew' how to wear heels, but he had known I was dressing up a little. Amy stared at me, mouth slightly ajar. Then she realised what she was doing and seemed to be trying her best to achieve that tomato shade of red I had expected. Victoria's head switched between Amy and I, a smirk forming on her face. She was the first to answer.

"Hello Taylor, nice to see you again." She turned back to Amy. "I'll leave you to it shall I?"

Her voice conveyed just how amused she was at her sister's reaction.

"There's plenty of food if you'd like to stay for dinner."

Dad was trying to be helpful, to my hopefully concealed disapproval. While I didn't exactly have anything against Vicky as such, I didn't really want another awkward dinner. Though I supposed that I really should get used to her if I was going to be with Amy.

"Thanks for the offer Mr Hebert, but I already have dinner plans." She turned to grin at her sister. "Besides. We wouldn't want to crowd the love birds now, would we?"

This of course made Amy blush a little harder. *Is it getting warmer in here?* Dad just chuckled. Victoria stepped back out of the door and waved good bye.

"Give me a call if you need a pick up Ames."

"Bye Vicky."

"Nice to meet you."

"See you later."

With that, she took off as Amy waved. I was thankful that it was already fairly dark, otherwise she would have drawn a lot of attention with a stunt like that. *Dating a member of New Wave would do that though.* I paused in my thoughts for a moment and a small smirk played across my lips. *Ok, there may have been some denial on my part.*

I walked up to give the still somewhat stunned Amy a hug, which necessitated some leaning over to
get the right height. She squeaked a little in surprise as my arms wrapped around her from behind, my sound dampening making me accidentally sneaky. An amused smile shaped my lips at the sound. *Heh, I guess she is kinda cute.* Dad discreetly made his way to the kitchen with an amused look. I could have sworn he winked at me.

"I'm glad you could make it Amy. Dinner should be just about done."

I felt her relax as soon as she heard my voice. Her head turned a little to address me, bringing her cheek a little closer to mine. Warmth radiated from her blushing face.

"So, heels?"

I nodded lightly, careful to avoid knocking heads.

"Heels."

I released my hold and stepped back to lead her to the dinner table, Amy trailing behind. Gesturing to the table I grabbed some oven mitts to check on the tray in the oven. The top layer of cheese was golden and a quick poke with a knife told me it was heated all the way through.

"Perfect timing."

I braced myself and hauled the large tray of lasagne out of the oven and placed it on the cooling rack already sitting on the table. Dad meanwhile retrieved a Greek salad from the fridge that he had put together earlier. I motioned him to sit down while I served up portions of the steaming pasta dish.

"I hope you like it. It's kind of a family recipe that I've tweaked a bit. So, it's a little different."

My voice came out a little more nervous than I would have liked, but I wanted her to like it. It would be kind of depressing if she only ate it out of politeness.

"I'm sure it's fine." She leaned in and took a whiff of the square I had placed on her plate. "Smells delicious."

I smiled as I placed another portion on my Dad's plate and then another on my own. Picking up the bowl of greens punctuated by feta, tomato and olives, I presented it to Amy first.

"Would you like some salad?"

She nodded, her eyes widening in delight.

"Yes please."

Dinner served, I took my own seat. Dad looked our way.

"No need to stand on ceremony. Dig in, I know *I'm* hungry."

I noticed he was a lot more cheerful today. Was it just the fact that I hadn't made lasagne for a while, or was he that happy that I had found a... girlfriend? Yes, Amy was pretty much my girlfriend. I still thought it to be an odd idea, but I found it made me smile none the less. Slicing up a small square, I placed in my mouth and felt the pasta practically melt in my mouth before I started chewing. *Perfect.*
I glanced over at Amy and noticed her eyes were half closed as she savoured a mouthful. *Excellent.* A sense of satisfaction filled me as I watched her enjoying the meal. Then she caught me looking her way, before blushing and looking down at the meal before her.

"Mmm, tastes as good as it smells."

Basking in the indirect compliment, I flashed her a smile.

"Thank you."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a cooking tinker."

I panicked a little as I realised I hadn't told her that I hadn't told him. *Oh god, need to play it off as a joke.*

"Yeah if I had super powers, that would be hilarious. I could open a rogue restaurant."

My tone probably wasn't convincing.

"If? What... Oh."

Amy buried her face in her hands as she just realised what she had done. Dad was looking at me funny. I started to open my mouth to say something, anything to throw him off the trail, but Dad just sighed.

"I don't know why teenagers think parents don't know anything. I've known for a while now. You are my daughter after all, and all the clues were there for me."

A perfect response came to my mind.

"Buh wah?"

He just chuckled, shaking his head slightly.

"Your part time job run by a blonde girl. The necklace. The way you were always over at your friend's place and stayed the night when Marceau was gallivanting around. The silence. Oh and the whole mime theme. Did you really expect me to not clue in after using your Mother's favourite performer as an alter ego? I may be pretty oblivious, but I'm not stupid."

My mind was racing as my delusions of a secret identity crashed around me. Was it just that Dad knew me too well, or would it be this easy for others to guess.

"But you never said anything."

He sighed before continuing.

"I was going to, when I first figured it out. But by then you'd been labelled as independent heroes and well, you were happy for the first time in years. I didn't want you out there risking your life, but I couldn't take that away from you. While I would have preferred you to join the Wards, you have a team backing you up and I assume there are reasons why you joined them instead."

I sat there slack jawed for a while as everything I had feared about telling Dad fell apart in the face of
his surprisingly supportive understanding. I was starting to feel like an utter fool.

"With Amy here looking after you, I must say I feel a lot better about the whole thing. How long have you known anyway?"

Amy dragged her face out of her hands.

"Um, since Friday."

He turned back to me.

"I'm a little hurt that I seem to be the last to be told." He paused for a moment. "But I've been thinking on it. My temper does tend to run away on me and given my earlier thoughts, I can understand you wanting to avoid having me stop you. But please trust me a little more Taylor."

Guilt washed over me as he spoke. The pleading tone of his voice made me feel like I'd drowned a kitten.

"I'm sorry Dad. I was just afraid of what you'd think."

He just nodded. A stern look on his face.

"Fair enough. For one thing, no more robbing banks." His face shifted to a happier expression. "Other than that, I'm proud of you kiddo. You've made a difference. I know several dockworkers whose kids are safer without the Merchants around. Anyway, let's continue eating. It would be a shame for this to go cold after all the effort you put into it."

And so we ate in awkward silence as I pondered when my life had started working out while Amy seemed to draw into her self in sheer embarrassment. Dad just munched away with an amused smirk on his face.

Having finished eating, Dad did the dishes while I dragged Amy up to my room to have a chat. I closed the door behind us and turned to face Amy who looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you'd told him. I mean I'm so used to everyone knowing I'm a cape and it never occurred to me that you'd keep it secret from him and oh god I've made of mess of things."

Despite my annoyance at her loose lips, I was partially to blame for not having told her that I was keeping it a secret. My mood was probably better than it would have been, given how well it had all turned out. I stepped up and embraced her, my chin resting on the top of the head buried in my shoulder.

"It's okay Amy. I should have told you and well, I'd be a hypocrite if I tore into you after my indiscretion yesterday. Just please be more careful in the future. It probably won't work out quite as well as that did."

Her reply was somewhat muffled.

"I haven't told anyone else and won't, not even Vicky. Not unless you want."

A small giggle escaped my lips as the thought of Victoria's reaction bounced through my head. Yeah,
"As hilarious as the look on her face would be, I don't think we should tell her any time soon. I'm not sure how the rest of your family would react either. Don't think it would do wonders for my life expectancy though."

She tilted her head up to look at me, a confused look on her face. Then she started giggling. It was definitely an improvement over her earlier distraught expression. *Yep, cute.*

"Oh god, now I've got a mental image of Flashbang threatening to blow you up if you try to woo both of his daughters."

I blinked and then started laughing. Both at the absurd mental image and to disguise the fear that it could well happen if things went wrong. *Really need to avoid that.* Enjoying the warmth radiating from the girl in my arms, a thought came to my head. I returned my gaze to meet hers.

"Don't worry, totally not interested in her."

That really got her attention and her eyes widened a fraction. It looked like she was about to say something, but I interrupted.

"Just going to try something, okay?"

She looked at me with hopeful anticipation as I leaned in closer. Our lips met clumsily, the height difference making things a little awkward and I may have slightly bumped our foreheads together. The warmth was kinda nice, but the breath from her nose tickled a bit so it was an odd sensation. She started to melt in my arms as I broke contact. It seemed she liked it. She looked up at me, a smile on her face.

"That was... nice."

I nodded as I felt a smile form. It didn't seem like what all the books and movies made it out to be. But yeah, it was nice.
I waved goodbye to Amy as her sister carried her off home. A smile was still spread across my face as I thought about how much Amy blushed as I gave her a quick farewell kiss. Victoria had appeared quite amused by it all, and I had a feeling she'd be teasing her sister all the way home. Closing the door, I turned to see Dad standing there with a determined look on his face.

"So seeing as it's in the open now, we should probably discuss a few things."

My smile faded. *Oh, time for the Talk.*

"I should have talked to you about this before, but are you using protection?"

My eyes went wide and my jaw dropped. *Wait what? I've only kissed her.* Dad's head tilted in confusion at my reaction.

"Well I figured given the extra bulk, you were wearing a vest."

I blinked as my brain caught up with the fact that it was a *Talk* about being a *Cape.*

"Oh, um yeah first thing I bought. While my walls are crazy tough, I thought better safe than shot."

He smiled, apparently pleased with the answer.

"That's my girl. Anything else?"

"Well I have taser gloves, but haven't needed them yet. That pepper spray you bought me came in handy. Oh and I'm thinking I'll be forking out for an armoured body glove to go under everything. Apparently there are some amazing tinker tech options out there."

"Good to hear." He nodded and stroked his chin for a bit. "As far as spending goes, you are saving some right? I've been putting some money aside for college. But with things the way they are, I'm not sure it'll be enough."

I sighed. I wasn't sure whether I really had any interest in college, but he had a point.

"Yes Dad. I've got most of the money I've made put aside. Partially to save, but also because spending loads of money suddenly would draw too much attention. I've thought out these things. Though my team mates have helped with that."

"Ah yes, your team mates." He sounded a little concerned as he mentioned them. "Do I get to meet them? I figure Lisa is Tattletale and she seemed nice enough, but I'm a little worried about Hellhound."

I cringed a little at that. I'm not sure how Lisa react to him knowing her identity, but given the fact that she'd come to see Dad, I figured she probably wouldn't be that surprised. Rachel on the other hand.

"She prefers Bitch, but Rachel... She got a raw deal when she triggered. You've seen the news article on it right?" He nodded. I was thankful I wouldn't need to explain that. "She's a little tactless, has
trouble with social interaction. But she's reliable. As long as you don't hurt dogs or her 'pack', she isn't a danger. As for meeting, I'd have to check with them. Secret identities are kind of a big deal after all, so I won't press the issue."

He stared at me for a moment before nodding.

"I guess that's understandable." He sighed a slight frown creasing his brow. "Speaking of which, I'm a little hurt you told Amy before me."

I curled in on myself a little as the guilt returned.

"I wasn't going to, but well she kind of figured something was wrong and well I couldn't not tell her at that point and I was going to tell you soon. I just didn't know how to. I've fought off some of the toughest villains in the city and frankly your disapproval was scarier."

He stepped up and pulled me into a hug.

"It's okay. Just be careful alright? Finding out you'd beat up Lung freaked me out a bit and well, I don't want to lose you kiddo."

I just nodded, realising I was a little taller than Dad with the heels on. We stood like that for quite some time.

Another school day passed in a haze and I found myself sitting on a couch in the Lair, laughing along with everyone else. Well, everyone but Brian.

"Wow, and I thought my love life was weird. How the hell did that happen?" I couldn't help myself, the sheer absurdity of Brian with a racist milf broke all my self restraint.

"Yes, because being compared to the cross dressing lesbian mime Casanova is totally fair." He groaned, talking while his face was buried in both hands.

"I'm glad you agree." My face positively radiated smugness, something I had apparently picked up from too much time near Lisa. This just prompted another groan from Brian.

"You couldn't just keep your mouth shut Alec?"

"Hell no. This is way too funny to keep secret." Alec chuckled at Brian's obvious discomfort. It was strangely satisfying being on the opposite side of the relationship teasing.

"Any way, we're just friends. We helped each other out with some custody issues. It's not like we're dating or anything." There was something about the way he said that. Like he wasn't telling us everything.

"Yet." Brian turned his head to take in Lisa's grin.

His glare did nothing to diminish her amusement. Quite the opposite, she started laughing. As if Lisa was saying that it was basically a sure thing. At least it would divert some of the teasing from me for a while. With a sigh, Brian continued.

"Anyway. Since Taylor's gotten a bit of healing hand treatment from her girlfriend, we should plan
Out another job."

"True." Lisa nodded, still smiling. "Though I'd suggest we switch targets for this one. We've already pissed off the E88, so it'd be better to let them cool off a bit."

"Who we going to hit then?" Alec cut in. "Even with Wonder Mime, I'd still rather avoid Lung. Our options are pretty limited."

"Why don't we hit a couple of the smaller criminals." Madison spoke up as she came up from her downstairs work area. "Surely they aren't all part of the Empire or the Bad Boys?"

I noticed she was wearing a odd headset, with a visor over one eye. A quick look around and I noticed a little crawler drone clinging to the top of the kitchen cupboards. *Huh, guess it's a drone camera feed or something.* I looked over at Lisa, waiting for her to chip in.

"I'd love to, but there was basically an ultimatum from the PRT that we can't hit anything that looks civilian. Which limits us to obvious super villains and their gangs. I reckon they want us to get ourselves into too much trouble to deal with and come begging for help."

"I wouldn't put it past them." I nodded. It sounded like the kinda shit they'd pull. While Miss Milita had seemed pretty reasonable, I figured she'd have to take orders just like anyone else.

"Who else can we beat up then?"

Every one but Madison jumped as Aisha spoke. I realised she must have been sitting there the entire time. I glanced over at Madison. *Ah, the visor.*

"Christ Aisha." Brian cried out in surprise. "Don't give me a heart attack."

"Relax Bro." Aisha laughed at him, "I'll leave that to your kay kay cougar."

Shaking my head as Brian started slamming his head against the coffee table, I turned to our tinker.

"Madison, any chance of getting one of those visor thingies?"

She looked up at me.

"I could probably make them for you, but I'm not sure it'll help you. You didn't notice her last time you saw her on camera."

"Huh." I hadn't even realised that I had done that.

"Thinker power master race." Lisa put her hand up to Madison in classic high five pose.

My eyes narrowed as they high-fived. *Fucking Thinkers.* Madison turned back to me.

"Still might be worth making them for everyone to allow better data sharing. I can integrate them into masks and helmets. Oh speaking of which, I was working on something for you Taylor. One sec."

She raced back downstairs, leaving the rest of us confused. Rachel took this moment to give her own opinion.
"Eh, we can take the ABB. We've beat them before and they don't have Tinker bombs anymore."

Alec shook his head.

"We were lucky against Lung. Or rather Taylor was lucky against Lung, and we were lucky that she got lucky."

"Fair point." I would have protested, but then I remembered I had thought exactly that not too long ago.

The noise of things falling off benches echoed up from below and Madison called out.

"I'm fine."

Shaking my head I continued on.

"But if we plan well, we can hit somewhere he isn't. With only him and Oni Lee, they can't cover much of their territory. I'm more scared of Oni Lee frankly. I'm not sure how we're supposed to deal with him. Especially if he starts suicide bombing with his clones."

We were silent for a while before Madison came back up holding a familiar looking mask. She presented it to me.

"Sort of an apology and thank you gift. I modded this up similar to your current mask, but with haptic feeds to read your expressions and display a caricatured version on the outer e-ink display surface. It's also got a manual mode that acts like your existing one. Try it on."

My eyes went wide as I realised just how cool that could be. I slipped on the mask and Lisa handed me a compact mirror. I ran through a range of expressions, happy, sad, neutral, angry and confused.

"How do I use troll face? It does have troll face right?"

She nodded, clearly proud of her work.

"Twitch the left side of your mouth out like this."

She made a rather odd looking expression and I mimicked it. In the mirror the iconic internet meme stared back at me, or at least off to the side. I was frankly overjoyed at this gift. I wouldn't need to have my hands free to change expression.

"This is possibly the coolest thing ever. Thank you Madison. Where the hell did you get the time to work on this?"

"Oh I've got plenty of time these days. I've been noticing I don't really need to sleep anymore."

"Wait what?" I blinked a few times in surprise.

"Have to agree there," Brian nodded. "That's pretty damn handy."

Madison shrugged.

"Mostly it's been boring, as I can't always tinker away depending where I am. If I'm at home for
example, I tend to spend all night with my lap top under the covers so I don't tip off the folks."

I noticed Aisha nudge Madison and wink at her, but was distracted by a thought. I slapped my forehead.

"Speaking of which, Dad worked out I'm Marceau."

There were several hums and whistles before Brian spoke.

"Shit. I'm guessing since you're here and cheerful it didn't go too bad?"

"Yeah," I nodded, "He was remarkably understanding about the whole thing. Though it's made me kind of paranoid that others will work it out as easy as he did."

Lisa looked at me thoughtfully.

"Nah, must be a fluke along with him being you know, your Dad. Though he's of course worked out who I am."

Once again I nodded in confirmation.

"Yeah. He'd like to meet the rest of the team, but I told him it's unlikely given the secret identity thing."

The rest nodded and didn't speak for a while before Brian picked up our earlier topic.

"So, what are we going to do for the next job?"
Danny

He watched over his Daughter as she dozed, veins full of antibiotics and painkillers. His face was a twisted amalgam of fury and distress as he gently cradled her limp hand. Someone had hurt his daughter, almost taken her away from him.

*I can't lose her too. Someone will pay for this.*

"What do you mean there's no evidence? How the hell does my daughter get shoved in that, that filth with no one noticing? This is a fucking school, where were the students, where were the teachers?"

Danny was incandescent with rage as he tore into Principal Blackwell. They hadn't done a thing to find out who did this to Taylor.

"I understand your distress Mr Hebert. It was an unfortunate incident-"

"Unfortunate? She almost died. She's still in the damn hospital!"

Ms Blackwell sighed at the interruption.

"And of course the hospital bills will be covered. But without witnesses we can't find a culprit. We will of course make sure nothing like this happens again."

"Small comfort given my daughter has been permanently scarred because of your incompetence."

Before she could say anything else, Danny turned and stormed out of the office before he could lose control and choke her. *Useless bitch. I should have one of the boys break her legs.* He shook off the thought. It wasn't productive, no matter how satisfying. It would also obviously link to him and he didn't need that kind of heat when Taylor needed him.

*Fucking hell. I have resources, people I know. How can I be so helpless?*

Taylor was so withdrawn whenever he saw her. There was this gap between them and he didn't know if it was because of her voice or if she felt that he had failed her. *I have failed her. I couldn't do anything to make things better.*

He just didn't know what he could do to help her. And so, he threw himself into his work. If he could get more money coming in, he could get her transferred elsewhere. A better school, without the memories and the corruption. He chuckled darkly. *Like I'm one to talk.* Running a Union was never clean business. The things he'd seen. The things he'd had to do to ensure there were any jobs at all. He didn't like it, but that's the way things were in Brockton Bay.

"Ya hear about them Undersiders?"

Danny tilted his head as he picked up some of his boys having a chat in the lunch room. He listened in while making a coffee to help him through the day.
"Oh yeah, took down Lung. Never thought I'd see the day."

"Yeah, they hit the Central Bank yesterday. Got some super powered mime with them now. Doesn't talk or nothin'."

That got him to pause, as a chilly feeling of dread settled in his gut.

"Ah, thought I heard something about a 'Marceau' when I heard about Lung."

*No, it can't be. I would have noticed right?* He turned and walked over to the dockworkers. *Of course, Kenny and George. Such gossips that they'd put their wives to shame.*

"What was that about a mime?" He asked. They looked up as their boss took a seat with them.

"Yeah, it's all over the news. He basically took out several of the Wards himself. Heard the Undersiders got away with a bunch of money."

He nodded, suppressing the sigh of relief that wanted to escape. This 'Marceau' was a guy, so it couldn't be his poor sweet Taylor.

Danny was sorting out some laundry, but didn't quite have a full load. As Taylor was out with her new friends, he went up to her room to see if she had any dirty clothes.

He wasn't sure he liked the way she had sprung the fact that she had friends on him in quite the manner she had, but at least she seemed a lot happier these days. Though he wasn't sure if that was just because she could talk again. *Lisa seems nice at least, if a little strange.*

As he gathered up some track pants and sweatshirts from the basket, he noticed light glinting off something on her dresser. A few steps closer brought him into clear view of an enamelled silver pendant. *Theatre masks.*

He thought back to an earlier idea, that same feeling of dread returning. It seemed so unlikely, but he had to be sure. After he got the laundry started, he looked back through a stack of newspapers that had yet to be thrown out.

The first night she stayed out with her new friends was the night after Lung was defeated by a new cape and the Undersiders. The day of the bank job, Taylor was with her friends. The night Bakuda was captured, Taylor was out with her friends.

*Surely this has to be a coincidence. Taylor can't be Marceau. She's been helping out Panacea with something. Wait, is she feeling guilty over the bank. No this is silly, my daughter can't be a villain.*

He sat down on the couch, turning on the television to distract himself.

"-oid paying taxes on numerous local and international properties for years, if not decades."

He blinked at the strange fragment he heard from the news anchor, before the other took over.

“And you might be surprised who we have to thank for discovering this corruption,”
A series of images of teenage villains flashed across the screen. The Undersiders. *That blonde looks a little familiar*, he thought as it settled on Tattletale. His eyes widened as another piece of the puzzle snapped into place. *Oh Taylor.* He didn't know what to think, but the news kept coming.

Mark and Diane were saying something about them doing heroic deeds or some such. Rescuing puppies from a dog fighting ring was mentioned. He checked a more recent newspaper and noted that yes, Taylor was off with her friends that day.

*She's out with them now. What new thing could she be up to? Is she fighting someone right now. Is my girl getting shot at? Wait she fought Lung?*

He sighed and continued watching. If his daughter was a vigilante, he needed to find out what he could. Still, that she had taken a name that meant so much to Annette brought a tear to his eye. He shook his head a little and laughed nervously. *Perhaps she's picked up her Mother's sense of social justice too.*

He had spent quite some time thinking on it. To say he was unhappy would be underestimating to a hilarious degree. And yet, what would he do about it. *If I talk to her about it, will she just deny it? Will she run away? She's so happy lately. Can I take that away from her, just so I can feel that she's safe? I failed to help her once. Would I be failing her if I stopped her now? When she's dealing with the corruption of the city. Maybe making things better?*

He resolved to keep quiet for the moment. Hopefully she would come to him when she was ready. Besides, other than his absolute certainty that she was Marceau, he didn't have evidence beyond the circumstantial. He'd need to gather a bit more.

Pride infused his very being as he read the headline.

*-Merchants: Out of business*

His daughter and her friends cleared out one of the major gangs in the city. They had done more for the city in the last month or so than he had in several years of trying to improve things. He smiled. *I'll just need to do better then.*

He stretched as he finished filling out contracts for another twenty people. His new found determination to make things better for the Dockworker's Union had driven him to work harder, and finally it had paid off.

Already he had managed to get a few more jobs for some of his boys. The Ship Graveyard was frankly a mess, but there was a lot of useful scrap metal there to salvage. With the Merchants gone, his boys were free to start dismantling things and trading in the scrap for more money. Sure it wasn't great pay and the work was hard, but jobs were jobs.

Danny found himself being cautiously optimistic about actually having a clear bay again. Then he could see about getting that ferry running and get more jobs coming in. He looked over the personnel records. *Hmm, we could use a little more security in case the Empire or ABB start moving in.*

As he head to bed, he smiled as he thought about the new couple. Amy seemed nice, and Taylor certainly liked her if the kiss and the constant blushing were anything to go by. He felt reassured that
his daughter was in good hands. With her team mates to back her up and a girlfriend who could patch her up, she was as safe as she could be while still pursing her ideals. The secret no longer keeping a wall between them made him feel more relaxed than he had since Annette passed away. So it was that he fell asleep, dreaming of a better future.
We were prepared.

Or rather we were prepared for something entirely different.

When the Endbringer alarms started blaring out across the city, our plans to hit the ABB warehouse were suddenly forgotten. Grue's response as he slammed his helmeted head into the van's steering wheel mirrored my displeasure with the situation.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"The truce is in effect as of now. So we'll need to do this later. If there is a later." Tattletale shook her head in exasperation and turned to the newer members, myself included. "We never got around to discussing this since the three of you joined, but we had already agreed that if an Endbringer hit nearby, we'd go. Are you up for tagging along?"

I had been avoiding thinking about the possibility of an Endbringer, given how terrifying they were. But as much as the prospect scared me, I couldn't well leave them to go alone. Otherwise I'd be waiting in a shelter, unable to do anything and dreading what would happen to them. This way I could try to keep them safe. Maybe my bullshit powers could come in handy and even save a few lives. I nodded to Tattletale and she smiled a sad smile.

Imp fidgeted in her seat, before shrugging.

"Don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do to an Endbringer, but maybe I'll help with the rescue stuff."

"Can't imagine I'll do much either." Alec's laughter burst from the passenger seat. "Don't think my sort of powers even work on them. So we can be useless together."

"You don't have to come along." Grue said as he turned to his sister. Something of his nervousness was noticeable even through his costume.

"Ah, shut up Bro. Can't have you bein' all heroic and shit with out me." Grue looked like he'd argue the point but just sighed instead, the sounds echoing strangely through his power. With that sorted, it just left Intel.

"I. I'm terrified, but I guess I can help coordinate or something."

And so we did the only thing we could. Or rather, I did as I pulled out a burn phone and typed in a number I had memorised.

"Oh, hi. Kinda busy at the moment."

"Sorry Amy, but we need to know. Where do we meet up for the fight?"

There was a moment of silence on the other end. Then she sighed.
"We're meeting at PRT headquarters. Look, I gotta go."

_I really should have expected that_, I thought as she hung up. _Of course she'd be busy._ I turned to Tattletale who just nodded and spoke to Grue through the cargo cage.

"To the PRT building."

_Now I just need to let Dad know._ I pulled out my phone once more and entered the home number. I sat there waiting as the phone rang out. _Damn, he's already left._ I sighed as I realised I would need to buy him a phone and make him use it. Tattletale reached over and patted me on the shoulder.

"Don't worry. He'll have headed to the shelters like everyone else."

I nodded and hoped she was right.

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We pulled up to a congregation of capes in front of the HQ. It didn't look nearly enough to fight off an Endbringer. The Empire were out in full force, and I swear Rune was trying to bore holes through me with her mind. None of the others looked pleased at our arrival, though Purity was floating a strangely large distance away from them.

Thinking it odd but not particularly important, my gaze drifted over to Lung and Oni Lee. It was strangely reassuring to see the 'Rage Dragon' himself, given his previous exploits versus Leviathan. His glance my way indicated a completely different opinion towards me.

The Protectorate and Wards of Brocton Bay were also arrayed in front of us. New Wave were mingling with them and I could see Gallant and Glory Girl already standing a bit closer than was safe for his identity. A few wary glances from the Wards, as well as Glory Girl, swept across us and I certainly didn't miss the attention towards our two newest members. Miss Militia sent a nod my way, which I returned. Panacea however seemed to be trying hard not to make any eye contact. While it was a little painful, it was certainly a sensible idea. Couldn't very well be seen _together_ in costume.

Neither Coil nor Faultline's crew were around, not that I even knew what they looked like beyond blurry photos. Still, I would have expected them to at least make an appearance. I did notice a woman in an old fashioned dress and a doll mask off to the side. It would have been hard not to, as she was riding a stallion made of paisley cloth. I'd seen Parian on a few news articles, some kind of rogue who went into advertising and fashion design or some such.

As we approached, Tattletale twitched her head a few times as she looked around at the gathered capes.

"So, where are we going?"

Everyone turned towards our team as soon as she spoke. Armsmaster in particular glared at her before answering.

"We're waiting for transport to Boston." His voice seemed to carry a mix of approval and annoyance that we had come.

My head tilted a little in confusion. Sure we weren't that far away, but if Boston was getting hit, why were alarms going off here? Tattletale of course picked up on my confusion.
"Ah, yes. Leviathan right?" There was a nod from Armsmaster and Tattletale turned back to us. "Tidal waves are likely to hit here as well."

I felt a renewed sense of dread. It had always been known that they could do massive damage, but there was a certain emotional distance when I had thought of Newfoundland or Kyushu. That they were landmasses much larger than the distance between the two cities suddenly became clear in my head.

A few looks of surprise came my way. I was confused for a moment before realising my fallen face would have translated to the outside of my new mask. Regaining control, I set my face to placidly calm. Or at least I hoped so. Either way, my mask should have changed back to its default neutral expression.

Feeling a little awkward amongst all these people as I couldn't really mingle with the Heroes much and I wouldn't even consider it with the Villains, I approached Parian. I typed out a message as I walked. She seemed to eye me off warily as I approached, so I held up my phone and stepped up slowly.

-Your horse is amazing.-

I thought I saw her blink through the eye holes of her mask. She started at me for a moment, making me feel slightly uncomfortable. Did I do something wrong?

"Um, thanks I guess. But..." She paused for a moment. "As much as our costumes might match, I'm... not interested. Sorry."

An eyebrow must have raised on my mask to match the one on my face as I stared at her, confused. Then it hit me, I clutched at an imaginary arrow through my heart, staggering around for a moment before shaking my head and waving her off. She had looked rather confused at that and so I typed up another message.

-Why does everyone think I'm hitting on them?-

I shook my head again.

-Was complimenting your craftsmanship-

Parian paused for a moment and managed to look embarrassed through the layers of clothing, mask and what I assumed was a wig.

"Oh, oh. Sorry. Thank you."

I just nodded and walked back to the Undersiders. So much for something less awkward. Then I noticed most of the Wards, Protectorate and New Wave were staring at me. There was a mixture of disapproval, amusement and confusion amongst the capes. I just threw my hands up as if to say What?

Before anyone could explain to my what the problem was, a loud thunder crack filled the air as a cape suddenly appeared.

"Gather around kiddies and prepare to take the Strider Express."
There were some grumbles from several capes at the newcomer's behaviour, but everyone moved in close, so I followed their lead. He seemed to be a teleporter and the name sounded familiar, so I guessed he was the transport Armsmaster had mentioned. We were squeezed up uncomfortably close to try and fit in some arbitrary area. Though the way Strider was grinning below his half mask made me think we didn't actually need to be this close.

Another thunderous noise and it felt like someone had punched me in the gut as all the air was sucked out of my lungs. A flash and I was staring out over a different skyline, gasping for breath as rain fall started to soak me. *I guess this is Boston then.*

I glanced about to find a lot more capes standing around, a few in particular that I recognised. It was rather humbling standing only a few yards away from the Triumvirate. I had wanted to be like Alexandria when I was younger, and here she was, looking regal before us. It was kind of surreal. Legend turned towards our group.

"Ah excellent, the Brockton Bay contingent." Legend brought his voice to a higher volume and addressed the massed capes. "Now that we're all here, it's time to talk strategy. We have Armsmaster and Dragon to thank for their work on the early warning system, because of them we still have about ten minutes till Leviathan is due to arrive."

Armsmaster seemed to radiate smugness. But I guess an achievement like that did warrant some pride. Legend continued after gesturing to him.

"Even with our head start, don't. I repeat don't, underestimate him. I've seen too many heroes and villains die because they let their guard down. He's faster and more cunning than he looks. Behave like he's as strong as Behemoth and as tricky as Simurgh or you'll get surprised when he pulls something you wouldn't expect."

This speech wasn't exactly helping with my blooming terror, despite how majestic and confident Legend seemed.

"Boston is a soft target. Much of the coastal areas sit on an aquifer and the rivers through the city are going to make it easy for him to do massive damage. We need to end this quickly, so we'll hit him hard."

He gestured over at Miss Militia.

"The Brockton Bay Protectorate have a supply of powerful Tinker bombs that we'll be using to bombard him before he enters the city proper while our blasters will hit him as hard as possible. They'll be with me. Anyone with shielding powers or that can help against the waves will be with Narwhal to help reduce damage to the city. Anyone who can go toe to toe and fly will group up with Alexandria while other melee will be with Chevalier and Armsmaster. Everyone else help with search and rescue or healing and planning as appropriate."

A few capes were moving through the group, handing out armbands. While Legend explained their purpose, one salient point came up. How the hell was I supposed to use them without blowing my identity? Attaching it around my wrist, I stared at this device that was making my life difficult with two simple words on the display screen.

-**State Name**-

I turned as Tattletale leaned around me and pressed a button.
"Marceau."

I looked up at her and she grinned, but I could tell her heart wasn't fully in it. I nodded to her and hoped I wouldn't have to use the thing. My tilted head over at Narwhal, and she understood which team I was going to go with. We shared a quick hug as we parted and I hoped it wouldn't be our last.
Another flash and I was once more gasping for air with several other capes. Another thunder crack and Strider was off teleporting one of the other groups. Looking around, I recognized Shielder from New Wave, Bastion from San Jose and Narwhal of course. The rest of the team were a mystery to me, having never seen them before.

Following Narwhal's lead, we moved up along what must have been the mouth of Boston's inner harbour. With the wide open spaces of an airport behind us, I felt incredibly exposed. But I guessed this would result in less collateral damage or some other good reason. It looked like the plan was to try and divert or block as much of the waves as possible in an attempt to redirect it in a less damaging path. I was sceptical at best.

Catching a glimpse of movement, my eyes were drawn to the glowing form of Eidolon floating above the mouth of the harbour. I hope he has some tricks up his sleeves.

It was excruciating just waiting. The haze off in the distance was getting closer, but it felt like it was taking an eternity. A swarm of glowing lights and dark shapes flew by on my right. Blasters. Another thunder crack and the melee group were behind us.

Sparing a glance over my shoulder I notice Chevalier's cannon blade growing rapidly as he anchored it into the ground, facing towards Leviathan estimated arrival point. Armsmaster stood to the side, wielding a pair of halberds. Well that's new. Hookwolf, Fenja, Menja, Browbeat, Assault and Battery. Other familiar faces, well masks at any rate.

Lung had moved over to the side, already plated in steel scales. Mustn't get too close when he starts burning. There was a strange girl, like some cutesy midget version of Parian, chatting with Assault. Bambina? Battery didn't look particularly comfortable with the villainess' attentions on her partner. I saw Brandish and Manpower move up into my field of vision. I made a little mental note to keep track of them and do what I could to help them out if they needed it.

More fliers passed on my left. Even with the blur caused by the rain, I could still make out Alexandria. I thought I caught sight of Aegis as well, but I didn't recognise any of the others.

"Shields up!"

I was snapped out of my observations by Narwhal's sharp, accented command. My hands went up, forming one of the largest walls I had made. I knew I could make something bigger, felt like I could cover the entire group. But I knew it wouldn't be as strong. I couldn't risk having it fail against the brutal force of the tidal waves, and so I stuck with something about twenty feet high by fourty wide. It was angled to run off into the harbour as Narwhal had suggested. I hope this is strong enough.

The rain fall impacted with my wall, creating little rivulets of water running down nothing. The others took their cues from that and adjusted their shields to cover areas I hadn't, while Narwhal and Shielder did their best to overlap the ones already in place. Between us, we had a transparent barrier some fifty by a couple hundred feet. A patch work of glowing colours and distorted air. I hoped it would be enough.

Another agonising, terrifying moment passed as I waited for the growing wave to hit. I tried to drown out the noise and focus purely on making my wall as strong as it could be. If I fail, people will
die. I can't fail. I won't fail. I mustn't fail.

The wave hit.

A spike of agony lanced through my mind as my wall held against what felt like a mountain dropping on it. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I held my hands firm, leaning against my wall as the water diverted off to the side. I was saturated as jets of water sprayed out of the gaps between barriers. My arm band made faint noises, both mechanical and feminine, but I couldn't pay it any attention as I focused all my attention on maintaining the wall.

Another wave and another burst of pain from the feed back. I could feel my jaw muscles tensing as my teeth ground together. Thumping vibrations rocked my hands as the tonnes of water beat against the barrier. Another wave hit, but the pain was less, the stress reduced. I couldn't spare the thoughts as to why, but I was happy to take any break I could.

I saw another wave coming but it barely reached our barrier. As it fell, it revealed the tall, sinuous form of Leviathan as he burst from the ocean and landed on the coast before us. I barely got a look at the hunched creature, it's mismatched eyes seeming to dart to and fro, before it was enveloped in explosions. I almost jumped out of my skin when Chevalier's cannon went off behind me.

A veritable rain of lasers, energy blasts, tinker beam weapons and hard munitions buried Leviathan in a haze of steam and lights. The great beast dived out of the sudden cloud and into a wall of flying bricks as Alexandria’s team intercepted him.

I could barely make out what was going on amidst the rain and bursts of colour and sound. With a feral yell, many of the close up fighters charged past, running through a gap created as Narhwal shifted some of her shields. Once again her voice cut through the noise.

"Eidolon's countering the waves. Re-establish shields to assist the melee."

With a sigh of relief, and a reduction in the throbbing in my skull, I dropped the wall and looked over at the fight. Not for the first time I cursed my inability to create the walls at range. There was no way I could get close to that thing without getting squished. I saw Lung, now at least ten feet tall rush in close, clawing at Leviathan's legs. Large wounds were torn in the Endbringer's flesh before Lung was backhanded away.

The armband squawked out something more, but I couldn't hear it over the sounds of battle. A distant part of my mind hoped my sound dampening wasn't depriving me of important information. I hesitated for a moment, at a loss as to what I could do when I saw Leviathan's tail lashing out at a group on the ground. I saw someone fall before I could do anything more than lift my arms. I reached out with each hand and pulled. Someone who looked like Manpower and another I didn't know lurched back several feet as the tail cut a gouge in the tarmac they were standing on a moment before. They stumbled a bit as I stopped pulling the invisible ropes, but at least they weren't cut in half. The one I thought was Manpower gave a quick salute before diving back into the fight.

More flashes of light from above pelted into Leviathan's face, throwing him off balance. He stumbled a few steps before stopping. Completely. I was confused for a moment before I remembered Clockblocker had been with us when we left Brockton Bay. I looked around to see his familiar white costume as he was carried through the air by Aegis.

Massive structures like hellish scaffolding grew up around the beast. Glancing over, I saw a shiny figure that must have been Kaiser standing on the back of a commandeered luggage cart. The image
was surreal, but couldn't spare it much more thought as I turned back to see the progress. Where there weren't massive blades of steel, there were huge vines like something from Sleeping Beauty. Where neither of them covered, there were bands of energy wrapped around the beast. Lung paced about, shrinking slightly from his over fifteen foot height. He did not seem pleased.

This apparent plan seemed like it was pretty damn important. So I glanced down at my quietly murmuring armband and briefly wondered if there was a volume control. My troubleshooting efforts were quickly forgotten as Leviathan unfroze.

He lashed out at his cage, tail swinging in a brutal arc and sending his afterimage through a group of capes. More soft whispers issued from the device on my arm. Shields were thrown up to cover people on the ground as the blasters renewed their barrage. Then things got weird.

Amidst the flashes of beams from Legend, Purity and many others I couldn't make out, a strange explosion bloomed. Or rather, didn't. I couldn't quite tell what had happened, but what appeared to be a fire ball centred around Leviathan's left claw had frozen in mid air.

With a hellish tearing noise that sent chills down my spine, the Endbringer pulled away from the frozen explosion and breaking his bonds almost trivially. I blinked a few times in utter surprise as I realised he had left most of his forearm behind. The great beast leaped over the wreckage of the cage around his legs, clear over my head and dove into the harbour. With a roar of rage, Lung dove in after him.

I heard the sound of water rushing towards me and I turned, raising my hands to make a wall.
Lung

Lung was not impressed by the little girl before him. Dressed like one of those gaijin kabuki, she hardly looked threatening. She just waved, smiled and turned to run away. *Bah, weakling girl.* He quickly re-evaluated his opinion as he was knocked off of his feet.

"What the fuck?" His voice had a tinny echo as it came out of his steel mask.

*If this little bitch is going to mess with me, she'll pay for it.* He felt his body begin to grow, a little faster than he thought was required for this opponent. She made strange gestures, much to his confusion.

Lung didn't get much more time to think on it as his head collided with brickwork.

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_This is humiliating._ Those were Kenta's thoughts as he woke in a PRT holding cell, buried in containment foam. Memories of the night before flashing through his mind. It defied logic that he, Lung, was defeated by such a waif. _How far have I fallen that I'm losing to little girls._ He reminisced of the fight with Leviathan. The last time he was truly challenged. He'd since sworn off fighting the Endbringers, thinking it not worth his time given his pyrrhic victory at Kyushu. _I have been slothful, and have become soft. I shouldn't have fallen for such a cheap trick._

He sighed. _Excuses._ Laying there and barely able to move, Kenta just had to wait for his minions to free him.

___

"She did WHAT?"

Lung’s roar filled the building, his gang cowering in fear. _Like they should._ Rage barely contained, he awaited his lieutenant's answer.

"Bakuda put bombs in our members and forcibly recruited their families by doing the same." Oni Lee repeated, before he added more. "She also planted bombs at several civilian buildings."

He shook his head. While there was some amount of respect for the level of fear that would generate, she shouldn't have done it to _his_ people. He didn't particularly care for their well being, but no one touched _his_ things without _his_ say so. The rest of her actions were just careless and stupid. There was very little point killing random civilians. All it did was bring more heroes to make a mess of his territory with no gain to show for it.

"We won't be retrieving her." He told his lieutenant. "Let the stupid bitch rot."

___

Kenta sat in his recliner, watching the television. He had been keeping a low profile after his break out. He wasn't afraid of the Protectorate, but he just didn't care enough to make much noise.

Flicking through the channels he caught a section of a news program that brought a surprised look to his face. _The Undersiders. Heroes? What nonsense is this? That mime is with them? Why are they calling her a man?_
He shook his head at the pure fabrication that televised news had become. *That mime, 'Marceau'. Everything is her fault. My reputation is in the gutter because of her.*

The Endbringer alarms went off, interrupting his soap opera. Kenta was not pleased. He considered for a short moment that it would be better to just lay back and relax. Fighting an Endbringer was pointless after all.

*No. I've been lazy for too long and I won't lose what I have here.* He got up as Oni Lee came through the door.

"Lee, we shall fight."

"Who?"

A simple question, asked bluntly. Lung was not one for civility with heroes. So it was appropriate that Armsmaster was the one to answer.

"Leviathan. Boston."

Lung frowned. *Boston, why would I want to fight for Boston?* He was about to turn and leave when the Undersiders arrived. He glared at Marceau. He could see how people could mistake her for a boy. She had no figure and was well disguised, but he had seen her without most of that and knew a girl when he saw one.

*It matters not what she pretends. She humiliated me. If she is going to fight Leviathan I cannot lose face any further.* He chuckled quietly and rather darkly. A sound only picked up by Oni Lee. *At least I shall not have to worry about destroying my territory.*

Eagerly awaiting the arrival of the great beast, he watched as Marceau stood firm against the waves. He could feel himself getting stronger as Leviathan got closer, growing scales and gaining mass. It was faster than the last time. His powers knew the threat he faced. Soon he would be engulfed in flames, hot enough to vaporize the waters.

He had to admit the little girl was brave, standing there, so close to the massed shields. *Perhaps it isn't so humiliating to lose to her.* He shook his head a little. *Still, I shall once more test myself against Him, and restore my reputation as the strongest here.*

As soon as the waves died down, he charged. His strength propelling him in bounding leaps towards the beast. His claws gouged out great rents in Leviathan's flesh before one of the massive claws knocked him flying.

He felt several ribs break and his scales crack, but they were already repairing themselves as he grew bigger, stronger, tougher. Lung charged back into the fray.

*It felt like an age, waiting for Leviathan to unfreeze. He could feel himself getting a little weaker as his most powerful opponent was incapable of fighting. He paced about, impatient for the fighting to continue.*
Eventually, he was rewarded for his impatience with a tail to the chest. He flew back a few yards before his flames returned stronger, his wounds rapidly healing and once again he was growing.

Then the great beast pulled away, missing part of an arm and turned to flee. Lung roared in rage that Leviathan would deny him a decent fight after all the effort he'd gone through to get here. So he did what came naturally and chased the Endbringer deeper into the city's harbour. *He will not get away from me that easily.*

Lung started to rethink his plan as Leviathan outpaced him, moving further into the harbour. *Slow down and fight me, kaiju.* He raged as he practically tried to jam his thoughts into the beast's head. Luckily something else saved him the trouble.

Further ahead the harbour flash froze, filling the space between the two halves of the city and stopping Leviathan just long enough for the now twenty foot tall and winged Lung to catch up. Despite being mostly underwater, he was still surrounded by flames and water all around him was flash boiling. A talon dug into Leviathan's back before he could move away and Lung took the opportunity to tear into him more.

Partially submerged and gripping close, Lung avoided the swipes from the remaining claw as his own started blackening the flesh he held. Soon, his fire was hot enough to break down the water. The now hydrogen fuelled fires began to take on a purplish tinge as he tore and burnt Leviathan with plasma wreathed talons.

Matching him in size, he started dragging the beast towards the shore to get better footing. As soon as they surfaced, the other side of the Endbringer was pelted with beams of light. Leviathan tried to struggle free, but missing a hand it was having difficulty. Afterimages of it's tail tore into the nearby buildings, shredding masonry and steel frames.

He was distracted as a golden glow filled the sky and Leviathan capitalised on the opening, cracking several ribs with an elbow and diving out of Lung's loosened grip.

Spears of bright golden light lanced into the beast, driving it away and back towards the ocean. Countless beams of different colours joined Scion's attacks as Leviathan fled, picking up unmatchable speed.

Lung snorted as once more the cowardly beast fled, just when he was getting an upper hand. Letting out a great roar and a suitably draconic gout of flame, he surveyed the city. The streets were flooded, and several buildings were practically demolished. The airport was a lost cause, but the city was surprisingly intact.

He felt a strange sense of satisfaction. This wasn't like Kyushu, where victory was ultimately pointless. Here, he had made the difference. *Here, I have turned the tide.* He snorted at his own pun.

As the rain died down with the sea monster's departure, he could hear the cheering of the other capes. With his feelings of triumph reinforced, Lung smiled a very toothy smile.
Interlude

Tattletale

Tattletale took in her surroundings as she stepped into the impromptu command centre. The room was filled with faces she recognised from her research of the east coast cape scene. Accord, a Boston local, stood over a map of his city. He was planning out a strategy with Kaiser, Clockblocker and Blasto. *Timestop, metal growth and plant bio-tinkering? Ah, a trap. This should be interesting.* She thought she might have seen someone near Kaiser glaring at her, but dismissed it as unimportant.

She looked over to her side, where Intel unfolded her laptop on a nearby table before attaching a strangely bulky wireless modem. *Didn't see her working on that. Networking for drones? No. No drones brought along and rain too heavy. Access to something. Wireless traffic and security cameras.* She smiled, shaking her head in amused exasperation as her team mate began to set up city wide surveillance. *This is so going to ruin all of our mystique.*

Looking over Intel's shoulder, she saw a massive array of video stream windows, most of them not yet active. Her eyes were drawn to the windows linked to the Undersiders. Marceau's showed the wide open space of the Airport mustering point as 'he' looked around at the nearby capes. Grue's showed a view from the top floor of the Terminal, where he waited with several other Shakers and non flying Blasters.

Regent, Bitch and Imp were all transmitting a similar picture, just from different angles. They were waiting with a group of Movers who had been assigned to search and rescue operations. While Bitch's dogs might well have been able to fight the Endbringer, they probably wouldn't achieve much and Bitch was too worried about them dying to let them anywhere near Leviathan. Instead they became car sized canine ambulances, an Undersider on each.

*Tidal wave incoming*

The armband she wore snatched her attention away from the screen for a moment before she looked back at Marceau's feed. Already the barrier of force fields was being erected to stop the assembled capes from being washed away, though the view was somewhat limited to the blurry area in front of her team mate. Another window showed the view from a commandeered airport security camera, a cluster of heroes and villains behind a giant mostly glowing patchwork wall.


*Waller down, CD-8. Deflecto down, CD-8*

She looked at the view of the barrier and noticed the end sections had been chipped away. *Two barrier capes. Stone walls and force fields.*

*Waller recovered.*

Another wave hit the barrier and she winced as Marceau seemed once more in agony. *Damn it, I can notice it but can't do anything about it.*

ED-8.*

The barrier had shrunk along the northern edge. Tattletale's face dropped into a frown. *Two capes dead and he hasn't even surfaced.* She noticed that the next wave wasn't quite as large. Glancing about the video feeds she caught a glimpse of Eidolon hovering above the harbour making pushing gestures and Myrrdin pointing with his staff. *Wave's decreasing. Energy drain? Hydrokinesis? Yes. Countering Leviathan. Myrrdin diverting water. Teleporting? Ah, Pocket dimension.* She sighed with a little relief as Marceau seemed to catch a break.

*Bunker recovered.*

Another weak wave barely splashed against the barrier before Leviathan burst out of the ocean and leapt onto the airport field. A breath caught in her throat as she saw the size difference between the Endbringer and the assembled capes. She had of course heard the stories, but seeing it was a different matter. *I'm not even near him and I'm freaking out.*

She watched as the Blaster contingent unleashed their powers or weapons into the beast's face. Shallow wounds started appearing in his flesh as powerful beams lanced into him. Alexandria's group came in to flank him as he attempted to avoid the blasts.


The wide view camera showed Lung, Chevalier and a bunch of other land bound heavy hitters charging in. A gigantic blade hacked into Leviathan and gouges were torn into legs and torso as the melee fighters did their thing. A sweep of an arm and Lung went flying. Another took someone else while his tail bisected another.

*Oaf, deceased, CD-7. Brigandine deceased, CD-7*

More wounds piled up as the blasters pelted from above while others battered from below. *Odd. Amount of power to depth of damage inconsistent.* A swarm of missiles from Dragon's suit covered the beast in pock marks.

A sweep of his arm and his afterimage took out several fliers.


A deafeningly loud crack of thunder filled the room. Strider appeared for an instant before he disappeared, taking Kaiser, Blasto, Clockblocker and several others with him. *I hope whatever Accord planned works.*

Leviathan continued his rampage. A slash of a tail swept towards three capes, killing one before the other two dodged out of camera view. *Not dodged, pulled. Marceau? Yes.*

*Escutcheon deceased, CD-7*


*Enacting cage plan. Watch your fire.*
And then everything stopped. The Endbringer paused mid lurch. Tattletale smiled. *Nice work.* Kaiser started to build a steel cage around him while huge thorny vines grew and entangled like killer kudzu. *Blasto.* She saw a cloud of darkness build around Leviathan's head. *Ah Grue.* Finally glowing bands of energy encircled the Endbringer. She didn't recognise that power.

It was a moment of eerie quiet as an uncertain clock ticked down. Rescue teams moved in to recover who they could. The feeds from her team mates bounced around as they picked up a few extra passengers, but there weren't many injured that hadn't already been accounted for.

*Lady Photon recovered. Laserdream recovered.*

She smiled a bit at that. *Looks like New Wave owes us a few.*

Then all hell broke loose. Leviathan's tail lashed out, sending a wall of water slicing through a cluster of capes.


"Shit, he doesn't need his eyes to see." Everyone in the room looked at her. "His hydrokinesis must let him sense water in people. He targeted those capes despite Grue's darkness."


Another flick of his tail and another wave of water went flying at the terminal.


Her head snapped down to her armband. *What the fuck? Oh no!* She looked back at one of the camera feeds. The one that she had been looking at was replaced with static, but another showed a view of the Shaker/Blaster team. The balcony like structure was smashed up, glass everywhere and a couple of benches torn out of the floor.

Grue was on his back, but she could see he was breathing. *Injured, non critical.* She sighed in relief before she caught a glimpse of someone she hadn't thought she'd see again. *Shadow Stalker. She's out of prison? On Probation? Leniency in exchange for Endbringer attendance?*

She only belatedly realised the bands of energy had dissipated from around Leviathan. A glance back at the balcony showed the very still form of someone in a lot of leather. *Ah, Bondage.* In a flash, Strider appeared in the room and disappeared with the capes shortly after.

*Grue, Sundancer, Rune, Shadow Stalker, recovered.*

*Deploying special munitions. Stay clear.*
On the monitor she looked on in shock as Leviathan broke an arm free of its cage, bringing it up to block something. First an explosion was set off, then that explosion stopped as something else hit the outstretched claw. *Explosion stopped? Time stasis. Tinker device. Bakuda.*

Her shock turned to horror as Leviathan broke free of the cage. He almost casually tore his arm free from the effect, a slowly oozing concave wound where his forearm should have been. The Endbringer quickly leaped out of what was left of the vines and steel blades, taking several light wounds on the way. *Broke free easily. Was toying with us? Blocked the tinker bomb away from his body. Knew it was a threat.*

Leviathan leaped over several capes in a stunning display of agility, diving into the harbour. She watched as he was followed by Lung and his afterimage.


Her eyes darted across the monitor, but she couldn't see her in any of Intel's camera feeds. All the blood fled from Tattletale's face. *No, no, no.* Panicking, she almost yelled as she spoke through her com-bead.

"Guys, you need to find Marceau. Near the harbour."

"Ok." Imp answered. "Arm band thingies are pointing the way."

She just hoped they could get to her before she drowned under all the water being thrown around.

"Does anyone have a read on where Leviathan is going?" Accord's calm voice brought her out of her panic. *I can't do anything more for Taylor at the moment. Need to focus on the bigger picture.* Before she could do much, Intel spoke up.

"I'm tracking him going north west, deeper in to the city's harbour. Lung is following. Entering zone CE-5 now."

The Bostonian crime lord nodded curtly to Intel before relaying the information to the two flying teams. Tattletale watched the monitor as various cameras tracked the bow wave of Leviathan's movement. The streets either side of the harbour were flooded with water as the Endbringer sent smaller yet still powerful waves against both halves of the city.

Her eyes were constantly drawn to the feeds from her team mates. All they showed were static for Grue and Marceau and bouncing views of the runways from the other three.

"He's approaching the Sumner Tunnel. Deploy the ice."

She glanced up to see Accord looking over Intel's shoulder, watching a video feed from a nearby wharf.

*KKeep clear of CA-4. Tinker bomb inbound.*

She watched a section of choppy water suddenly expand in jagged spikes as everything in view flash froze. *Bakuda, you psycho.* She shuddered a little at the thought of that going off in Brockton Bay. A wave flashed over the instant iceberg, followed soon after by a billowing cloud of steam. While she
had a very good idea of the cause, it didn't become visible until several minutes later when Lung dragged Leviathan into view of a traffic camera somewhere in East Boston.

The gang leader was at this point of comparable size to the Endbringer and they were tearing chunks of flesh from each other. Leviathan's claw and tail doing more but being matched by Lung's regeneration while damage from his claws were slowly adding up. *But only superficially. How can that not be hurting him. Or is he an it? Not human? No gender. Humanoid appearance but impossible physiology. Layers. Just what is it? Not human.* She felt the start of a headache as her powers started looping and so tried to block out some of the input.

While Lung grappled with the beast, an endless rain of energy beams and projectiles pelted into Leviathan. None of the other capes dared come any closer with Lung’s fiery aura. It seemed to go on for an age while the nearby buildings were crushed by afterimages and only avoided immolation because of the omnipresent water.

The apparent stalemate was broken as Leviathan found an opening and knocked Lung aside, right before the beast was skewered by several golden beams added to the already considerable barrage. *Scion.*

As the golden man began to drive off the Endbringer, it lashed out as an act of spite, levelling several more buildings with it's afterimage before diving back into the harbour, swimming faster than before. *Was it holding back before?*

She had been tuning out the armband, too focused on analysing the Endbringer. But something finally grabbed her full attention and erased the dread that had been building up.

*Marceau Recovered*
Sounds of movement intruded upon what once was nothingness. Groggily, my eyes pried themselves open. I immediately regretted it as I was greeted with the harsh glare of fluorescent lighting. Squinting, I shifted my gaze and found a blurry, unfamiliar ceiling. Where are my glasses?

I tried to move my arm to fumble around the side table, where I would usually keep them. Nothing happened. Rolling my head to the side, I realized two things. First, there was no side table. Second, the blurry thing that must have been my arm was attached to the bed frame by a shiny thing and I hadn't even noticed. Huh?

Still somewhat detached, I tried to wiggle my fingers as I looked at my hand. Once again nothing happened. It was at this point that I started to panic as I realized I was paralyzed. Where am I? Where are my glasses? What happened?

My mind screeched to a halt as that last thought came to mind. Leviathan. Memories flashed through my head. Water. The afterimage. My wall failed. Pain and then nothing.

Rather than relief that I was alive, the memories just brought more dread as I realised the reason I couldn't see. My mask must have broken or been lost, along with its prescription lens inserts. I could feel something on my face and could barely make out some kind of reddish fabric crossing over my nose. My mask is gone and has been replaced. Someone saw my face. Crap.

Taking stock of the situation, I focused on what I knew. I was cuffed to a bed in an unknown location, probably a hospital. I couldn't feel much in the way of pain other than a throbbing headache and some tenderness where the fabric met my face. I quickly blamed that on my apparent quadriplegia rather than being otherwise uninjured or drugged up. I had no idea how secure my secret identity was and I had no idea what had happened after I got hit by that wall of water. Oh, and I had this nebulous feeling of being cold. All in all, it was a rather shitty situation.

Lacking any other options, I resolved myself to wait patiently.

After what felt like an eternity later, I was as far from patient as possible while still being a patient. I briefly considered calling out, but disregarded that as a bad idea. If my identity wasn't compromised, I wasn't about to screw it up myself. Though depending how bad it was, I might not have the choice. Why hasn't anyone come? Where are they? Are they... As I started to imagine the worst, tears began to fill my eyes. Please be alright.

Just as I started sob in silence, I heard a rustle of movement from outside the room I was in. I caught a fragment of hushed conversation.

"I'll pass it along."

A moment later, a blurry but familiar shape entered the room. Cream and brown, all wrapped up in white. Amy. I had a sudden sense of deja vu. Pretty lady in white. I choked back a delirious laugh as I remembered what I'd 'said' under the effects of opiates back when we'd first met.

I couldn't make out the details, but she seemed to be looking at a brownish rectangle. A clipboard? She stepped up closer and leaned down next to me, grasping my free hand.
"Oh, Taylor." She whispered into my ear, her words laced with sadness. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here sooner. You were listed down as stable, and there were so many..."

She cut off the explanation with a sniffle. She squeezed my hand a little and I began to feel a tingly warmth spread through my body. It started in my face and then work its way down in a wave of restored sensation. This brought a sense of elation at being able to feel my body and discomfort as I felt all the cold, wet clothes clinging to my skin. *Well that explains the cold.*

As control was returned to my limbs, my first act was to squeeze Amy's hand back and smile at her. Then I realised it probably wasn't visible under what I assume was as cloth mask on my face. I took a quick glance around the room before moving my face to her ear and kept my voice low.

"Thank you. I don't suppose you know what happened to my mask?"

"Umm, no. For a moment I thought I had walked in on the wrong room when I saw the red cloth wrapped around your face."

"Damn." I sighed. I was hoping she might have had a little more information. "I was only given it a few days ago and I have no idea who gave me this replacement."

She prodded me in the shoulder with her free hand.

"The mask is the least of your worries. I just had to heal up your spine and several bones. Stop. Being. So. Reckless." She punctuated each word with a gentle poke. I giggled a little as she set off a bit of ticklishness.

"Stop, I surrender." She stopped prodding me and I regained my breath. "I just couldn't stand aside and do nothing."

"I know." She sighed and bumped my forehead with hers gently. "Apparently my uncle owes you his life. He wanted to thank you in person, but I figured you wouldn't want him here while I healed you."

I nodded, glad that she had chosen the more discreet option.

"I am going to have some trouble till I can get home though. I can barely see a thing without glasses, or the lenses in my mask."

Amy was silent for a moment, a serious look on her face as if debating something. Eventually she spoke, her voice laced with hesitance.

"I could... fix them for you."

My eyes went wide with surprise. I had just assumed she just reset a body to how it should be or something like that. But really, why should I be so surprised? The tears returned as a mix of emotions swelled up inside. She sounded reluctant to do it, but was still offering to do it for me.

"You, you'd do that for me?"

She nodded, a sad smile on her face.
"Yes, if you want me to."

"Please." I nodded, touched at the gesture. She barely moved, already having a hold of my hand.

"This might feel a little odd as I correct the cornea and lens."

My vision swirled a little, the view distorting in strange ways as things slipped in and out of focus like some strange funhouse. Eventually the world came into sharp focus.


I moved to give her a hug, but only succeeded in yanking my wrist painfully against the handcuff. 

"Oh, that's right. I forgot about that."

"Huh. What's the deal with the cuff anyway?"

She looked up as if she hadn't noticed it.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't even think about that. Standard infirmary practice during the Endbringer truce. Prevents capes from wandering around and possibly taking advantage of incapacitated rivals. Umm, I don't have a key."

As I took in what she had just said, I glanced over at the cuff. I wonder if they do the same to 'heroes'. An idea popped into my head.

"That shouldn't be a problem."

I gave her hand another squeeze before slipping it free and wiggling my fingers around the key hole before I began twisting my wrist a little. Eventually I felt something silently give way and the cuff slid open. Amy flashed me an amused smile as I got up off the bed.

"Nifty. Seeing as you're all patched up, I can escort you out of here so you can meet up with your team mates."

My mind halted for a moment. I had gone from self pity to relief in the space of a few minutes and it had distracted me from my earlier thoughts.

"Did, did any of them..." I couldn't finish my question.

"No." She shook her head. "They're fine, though I had to fix up Grue a bit. He had a few broken ribs and dislocated shoulder."

I let out a long sigh of relief as the weight of uncertainty lifted from my shoulders, then dragged her into a hug.

"Thank you."

"Urg, wet!"

I released her from my embrace. *Oh yeah, I'm soaked.* My head tilted down sheepishly.

"Sorry."
She just smiled, shaking her head.

"I guess I can forgive you this time. Let's get you out of here shall we?"

My head bobbed in agreement as I checked my pockets. Pepper Spray, gone. Zip cuffs, gone. Phone, check. With some relief, I pulled the phone out of my pocket. The relief died a quick death as I realised it had shorted out. Of course it's not waterproof. That would be too easy.

"Damn." I couldn't type to communicate.

Amy stared a the phone in my hand for a moment before things clicked.

"Ah. We can grab you a note pad from the nurse station on the way out."

After a short walk through white corridors, I was equipped with a notepad and pen. We had a brief and surreptitious farewell in the lobby, as there were too many people around. With an overly elaborate bow, I silently bid her farewell as she went back to healing up the few remaining injured. I walked out the front door to find a surprisingly intact section of city. Sure the streets were under a couple inches of water that had yet to drain away, but the buildings seemed remarkably undamaged. I was ever so thankful that the rain had stopped.

"Marceau!"

My eyes darted around to find where the shout had come from, eventually settling on Tattletale waving at me from a large group of capes. My team mates were there of course. They seemed to be talking with the other three New Wave kids, Parian, some of the Wards and a few capes I didn't recognise.

Scanning the group, only Tattletale and Intel weren't completely soaked. As I got closer, my newly tweaked eyesight noticed that Grue's helmet had a cracked visor. Gallant had bits of seaweed stuck between armour plates, Clockblocker and Vista looked fairly untouched other than a soaking. I really need to do something nice for Amy. Everything's so clear.

Parian seemed to be struggling under all the extra weight of her water logged layers. She was standing next to one of the unknown capes, a girl dressed in dark purple with a large crossbow slung over her back. The rest looked like they'd gone through a washing machine with some rocks, costumes torn and somewhat filthy. My observations were interrupted when a blond girl in white and red glomped me.

"Thank you thank you thank you."

My mind froze for a moment as I tried to process the sudden turn of events. Who? What? Oh, Laserdream.

"Ok, that's enough." I glanced over at the young man in white, with blue hair. Ah yes, Shielder. He extended his hand once his sister released me and we shook. "Dad told us you saved him. You did some pretty good work with the barrier too."

I nodded to him, scrawled a response on the pad and held it out to him.
"You did rather well too-
-Did I miss much?"

He chuckled.

"Oh, only one of the shorter Endbringer fights on record."

Startled, I looked around again at the city.

-That would explain things-

"I think little boy blue here is understating things just a little."

I twisted to look at Clockblocker. At least I think it was him that spoke, it was hard to tell with the full face mask. I scribbled down something.

-That was freaking awesome how you froze Levi-

He looked at the note, then back up to me. Or at least his head moved in that sort of way. The way his head tilted after that, I would have guessed his mouth was flapping for a bit.

"Great, I have a mime fanboy." Sounding amused, he turned back to Gallant and Vista. "Hey guys, I told you I had fans."

As the other two Wards approached, I flipped a page and scrawled another message. I turned it towards Vista.

-Sorry for the manhandling at the Bank-
-Didn't hurt you did I?- 
-I tried to be as gentle as I could-

Vista stared at it blankly for a moment, while Gallant spoke up.

"Yes, Glory Girl said you'd asked her to give us your apologies." He seemed to be straining to be civil. I could hardly blame him. Even if I did think he was a bit of a tool.

-Doing my best to make up for our little misunderstanding-

"Misunderstanding? You robbed a bank."

I shrugged and wrote some more.

-We all make mistakes-
-I had hoped our other deeds might have outweighed that- 
-Haven't you ever made a mistake you regret?- 

He looked like he was going to say something, but instead turned and walked off. Vista glanced between Gallant and myself a few times before speaking.

"No, you didn't hurt me. But forgive me if I remain suspicious."

I nodded. It really wasn't surprising that she would be a bit angry at me, but I felt that I had to
apologise. It may have been that my mood had improved after Amy's little gift and surviving Leviathan, but I was feeling a little less spiteful towards the Wards. Sure Gallant still annoyed me on some level, but they had stood up to fight against an Endbringer just like I had. I had to respect that.

That dealt with, I sauntered over to my team mates.

"Hey slow poke, what took you so long?" Imp asked cheerfully as I got up closer.

My answer didn't take too long to write.

-Quadriplegia-

They replied with stunned silence.
My team mates blinked a few times, or at least those whose eyes I could see. Maybe my answer was a little off color, but I was too happy to care.

"Whoa quadriplegia? No shit? That's fucking hardcore." Apparently Imp was the least fazed by my glibness. I wasn't sure how being paralyzed made me 'hardcore', but what ever.

"Panacea patch you up then?" I nodded to Grue, though his question and Imp's outburst had grabbed Glory Girl's attention.

"You should be glad she patched you up, after what you pulled at the bank."

Despite her words, she didn't sound overly aggressive. Overall, it was quite the change from the last time we met while in costume. I nodded enthusiastically at her as I wrote some more.

-She is a wonderful person-
-I'm fortunate she found it in her heart to forgive me-

She read my note then stared at me for a while. I had probably gone a little overboard in my gushing over Amy, given I was in Marceau mode. But I meant every word. Eventually she gave me a short nod.

"Well thanks for saving my Uncle. Maybe you aren't so bad." She had an odd look on her face, one I couldn't quite interpret. Possibly a bit of surprise? Begrudged respect? Either way, her expression shifted to something more serious. "But no hitting on my sister. She's already in a relationship."

I blinked a few times, uncertain just how to word my response. Why did just about everyone think I was some kind of Casanova? Although in this particular case it was eerily correct. After a moment I figured out a suitably vague reply, not a lie as such.

-Worry not-
-I wouldn't interfere with a couple-

"Good." Seemingly satisfied, she flew off in the direction Gallant had gone. Watching her go, I couldn't help but assume there was another fight brewing between them. I sighed in silence. Great, I think I've caused another argument.

"So, what's with the red hood mask thingy?"

Brought out of my ponderings by Imp's query, I realised that things might get as complicated as I had feared and scribbled down a reply.

-Shit-
-I was hoping it was one of you guys-

Most of them shrugged. Tattletale however stared at me for a moment, then glanced about before cracking up laughing. An eyebrow raised under my mask as I wondered what set her off this time. I had to poke her to get her to actually read the note I wrote.
She eventually reined in her chuckles as we got some strange looks from the other nearby capes. Stepping up close, she whispered to me.

"Who has a penchant for fabric?" Her eyes drifted over my shoulder. "And was on search and rescue duty?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I caught sight of Parian talking to the cape in the purple and silver. When I looked back at Tattletale she just nodded, seeming much too amused by someone seeing my face. Really Lisa? This isn't funny. My body language seemed to convey my thoughts as she spoke once more.

"We can have a chat with her when we get back home. She doesn't seem the type to do anything malicious with it."

My head tilted to the side as I continued to stare at her. I then wrote a very pertinent question.

-How can you be so calm about this?-

She just flashed her usual grin at me.

"Well it's done and we'll have to deal with it. But at least she's a rogue and not one of the heroes or villains we've pissed off. Besides, one does not break the Endbringer truce lightly."

I took a few deep breaths to calm down. She had a point, but that didn't mean I had to like it. The rogue clothier was frankly an unknown variable. I couldn't really guess how she'd behave. Given that she lived in my home town, it could get really awkward if she saw me on a date with Amy or something. On the other hand, it's not like Parian had to make me a mask. She had basically ensured no one else had got a look at my face, or at least I hoped so. Don't know whether to be terrified or thankful. I wrote another note.

-Ok-
-Deal with it later-
-Now how do we get home?- 

"Ah, about that." She started after reading. "Apparently Strider decided he'd had enough of teleporting for the day, so it looks like we have to wait for a ride. The good news is the PRT has flipped the bill for a couple cargo helicopters to transport everyone back home. The bad news is we have to share."

I looked around at the large group of young capes with a growing sense of unease. The fact that there were only what I assumed were heroes and rogues did little to improve matters.

-We're going on a flight with everyone here?- 

I sighed when she simply nodded, an amused grin on her face. This is going to be... interesting. At least it doesn't look like we'll have to share one with Lung or the Empire.

Since we had some time to kill, I sauntered over to Grue. Getting a closer look at his costume revealed a few more cuts and tears I hadn't noticed earlier. Being told he got injured and seeing the
evidence up close were two very different things.

-You ok?-  
-Hear you needed healing-

"Ah yeah. So glad I don't have to deal with stabbing pains just to breathe." He sounded relieved, even through the power induced echo. He leaned in a little closer and whispered. "Forget about any trouble I gave you over your choice of girlfriend."

Lacking any other appropriate response, I gave him a friendly whack to the side of his helmet. He let out a low chuckle.

"Ok, I deserved that. But seriously, are you fine? When I heard you got hit, I was fearing the worst."

His concern was touching if a little late, given the healing. But I couldn't really blame him for not being able to drop by with the restrictions put in place. I wrote a quick reply.

-Better than ever-

"Hmm." He stared at the note for a second before laughing again. "Reminds me of a Marvin Gaye song."

I tilted my head to the side for a moment before the reference clicked into place. I put a hand against my face and slowly shook my head.

"What's going on?"

Grue started laughing for some reason or other, while I turned to find Intel had finished chatting with Regent and walked up to us. Looking at my Tinker team mate, something from earlier popped back into my head. Quickly scribbling on my note pad, I showed it to her.

-Sorry for losing the mask-

"It's okay." She sighed. "Taking a face full of afterimage will do that."

I blinked, confused for a moment before I asked.

-How did you know?-

She chuckled a little at my confusion. Pulling out her phone, she pressed the screen a few times before turning it my way.

"Mask camera footage." She said as a video played.

It showed my view of Leviathan, from a bit after that weird bomb went off. The image panned around as the Endbringer leapt over the assembled capes before panning back to fill the screen with bluish green. The footage stopped shortly after. I just stood there a few moments, stunned that I had managed to survive that. It had happened so quick at the time that it had barely registered. Seeing it again was sobering.

"Oh shit. I shouldn't have shown you that. Fuck I'm insensitive."
I must have stood there longer than I realised given the concern in her voice. I waved it off. It's not like I would have thought I'd react like this if our positioned were reversed. My pen scratched over a new page of the notebook.

-It's fine-
-Just a little weird seeing that again-

I paused for a moment before adding another line.

-Have you shown the others?- 

"No." She shook her head. "Only just isolated the footage a little while ago."

On the one hand, we had video footage of me being a recklessly brave hero. On the other, I didn't want that footage anywhere near Dad. He would be beside himself if he saw that.

-You can show people-
-But hold off on putting that online-
-Dad...-

She nodded as she work out what I was worried about. Another thought popped into my head.

-Can you waterproof my next phone?- 

After staring at my note for a moment, she broke into giggles. Giggles then turned into outright laughter, drawing the attention of several others. I didn't think it was that funny. But given the all that had happened, I couldn't begrudge her a chuckle at something inane.

It was about then that the helicopter arrived, landing in the large empty car park out front of the hospital. It was a fairly weird looking thing. Two rotors, one at each end of a long chubby body. As the back cargo ramp descended, Miss Militia stepped out and waved the group in.

"All aboard to Brockton Bay."

Several of the people who were mingling with the group said their goodbyes as the majority moved towards the aircraft. Looking at the ones staying behind, I guessed they might have been local Wards or something. A muscly young man made of what appeared to be dark grey metal and the girl Parian was talking to were among them. I vaguely remembered seeing the metal man hacking at Leviathan's ankles, so I made a mental note to look them up when I got back to the lair.

As we trudged up the ramp and took our seats, one though was at the forefront of my mind. Express flight to Awkwardville. When Panacea joined us shortly before we took off, I was both relieved and frustrated. It looked like she had finished healing up everyone she could, so now she could relax. However, she was right there and I couldn't even talk to my girlfriend or anything. Ah, the joys of a secret identity. I prepared myself for what was promising to be a very long flight.
The back ramp of the long twin rotor craft closed with a dull thump. For a moment, we were left with what little moonlight filtered through the windows to illuminate the cabin. Then the recessed lighting slowly brought the cabin up to a tolerable level. Not too dim, but not exactly well lit. There were faint sounds of discussion from the cockpit where the pilots seemed to be going through a series of checks. Pre-flight seemed the wrong term given they had just landed not that long ago and hadn't turned off the engines. Pre-re-flight perhaps? Miss Militia stepped out of the cockpit and took a seat nearby.

We all took our seats in silence, arranging ourselves on the long benches running the length of the large helicopter. Almost unconsciously, teams remained mostly seated together. Bitch opted to stay near the ramp with her dogs, while Shielder and Laserdream sat between her and the rest of us. Across from them were the other New Wavers, Gallant sitting next to his not so secret girlfriend and most of the other wards to his left. Kid Win and Parian sat opposite Bitch. While it wasn't particularly cramped on the seats, there was only about a foot between the feet of people on opposite sides. Stretching out would be tantamount to playing footsies. In my case, with Clockblocker. My absurd thoughts were broken by someone speaking.

"Hellhound?" Miss Militia sounded odd as she addressed my team mate, the padded inner surfaces of the aircraft doing weird things to her voice. Despite this, I could still hear her clearly over the sound of the rotors. Sound proofing?

"Bitch"

"What?" She seemed somewhat startled by the girl's reply. The other passengers had turned to stare at Rachel.

"The name's Bitch. Not Hellhound."

"Okay then..." While I couldn't see most of her face under the scarf, I could imagine she had a bemused smirk. She gestured at the three normal sized canines. "Will we need to strap in your dogs? The flight is unlikely to be rough, but there may be some turbulence."

Bitch stared at the Protectorate cape for a while before answering.

"No one else is strapped in."

Miss Militia just nodded, seeming to defer to Bitch's bluntly worded judgement on the matter. Now that it was pointed out by Bitch, I noticed no one else had moved to buckle up for the flight. Having not been on a helicopter before, I guessed they'd probably tell us if we needed to. After a second thought, I took a quick look around. There seemed to be some webbing on the walls, but not anything that I recognised a seat belt. I quickly scribbled a question on my notepad for the older hero.

-Speaking of straps-
-What do we do if it gets rough?-

Aegis, who had sat next to her, spoke up before she could answer.

"A little nervous are we?" His voice had some traces of amusement. I wasn't entirely sure he was
trying to make fun of me, but it seemed that way. I wrote another reply, dearly missing my phone. Pausing on the first sentence, I had a thought and added another line. Sure I had no idea if it would work, but given how bullshit my powers tended to be...

-Not all of us can fly-
-At least until I mime a plane-

Aegis made a small choking noise, drawing Clockblocker's attention away from Brow Beat. I obliged him by tilting the pad slightly and earned a burst of laughter from the Ward.

"Oh, don't tell me you can actually pull that off. You can't. You can? Tell meeeeee." His mock pleading brought a smile to my face. Once again I regretted the loss of my mask. Instead, I mimed laughing for a few seconds before writing another note.

"Tell you what?" Vista interjected before I finished.

-My lips are sealed-

"Oh har har." Sarcastically laughing, he turned to Vista on the other side of Brow Beat. "Whether his bullshit mime powers can make a plane."

"Wait what, really?" She asked.

I just sat there enigmatically smiling, which lacked some impact when they couldn't see my face.

"I'll believe it when I see it." Glory Girl snorted.

"Oh really?" Tattletale asked with a grin. "I thought you would have been eager to ride Marceau... Airlines."

Gallant did his best impression of a choking person while Glory Girl blushed a little. I turned to my right to face my team mate. In the corner of my eye, Amy seemed to be doing likewise. Not helping, I thought at her. She just flashed me a teasing grin, while Imp and Intel giggled like maniacs.

"So, how high does this helicopter go anyway?" Clockblocker asked, his head tilted to face the camo clad cape. Miss Militia turned to face him, silent for a moment.

"No. Just no."

A slapping noise followed shortly after, Clockblocker's head bouncing forward a little. I thought I saw some movement from Vista, but she seemed too far away to hit him. Oh wait, powers. It was definitely... interesting seeing the Wards in a more relaxed situation. There was still an overall tense feeling, but they seemed to be falling back into habits that must have built up from what I assumed was a lot of time together. A crackling voice came through speakers mounted in the ceiling.

"Prepare for take off."

Shortly after, the sound of the rotors kicked up in pitch to a dull whine. With a gentle lurch, the helicopter lifted off the ground. Once the initial jostling was over, Miss Militia turned our way.

"So, I can't help but notice you've gained two members since we last met."
I just nodded.

"What can I say, we're popular." Tattletale shrugged, completely unconvincingly before gesturing at the two girls to my left. "Intel and Imp."

"Ah!" A sound of understanding came from the Ward Tinker near the ramp. "I thought it sounded a bit odd the way you were referring to intelligence all the time. Cute."

"Thank you." From the shy tone of her voice, it seemed Intel may have misinterpreted the statement. Although given how oblivious I was to these things, he might well have been clumsily hitting on a fellow Tinker.

"So what's your specialty?"

"Surveillance."

Well, I thought. The cat's well and truly out of the bag now.

"Something that broad, Seriously?" Intel just nodded at Kid Win's incredulous query. "Can I pick your brains on a design?"

Intel looked my way and I shrugged. I didn't see how it could hurt given she'd already given away that much. Plus it would probably help to get a little goodwill with the Wards. Tattletale just smiled and nodded, probably thinking the same thing.

"Parian? Can we switch places?" She asked the independent cape. Parian looked a little startled at being addressed, but nodded and got up. A quick shuffle and the Tinkers were seated next to each other, staring at Intel's laptop and quietly discussing something or other. Parian took the empty space between Imp and I, her billowy skirts overflowing onto my leg. How the hell can she move in that thing? Oh right, weird cloth powers.

I was a little nervous having her next to me, not knowing what she was thinking. Hope she doesn't let anything slip.

"So, how's the harem going?" My gaze snapped back to Clockblocker, who surely had a shit eating grin under his mask as he seemed to glance between Parian and I. "I mean if PHO is to be believed, Grue and Regent are girls too."

Parian snorted quietly while Imp and Regent cracked up laughing. Tattletale just had a knowing grin. Damn those rumours, but I guess that confirms Parian knowing. The other Wards seemed to be trying to not look interested in the conversation, while the New Wave kids had various expressions of curiosity.

"No, definitely a man." Grue proclaimed in an echoed growl.

"Besides, who says a harem has to be all girls?" Regent voice carried a tone of delighted amusement. "I mean we're open minded in the Undersiders. If you... ever wanted to join us."

Clockblocker was silent and I took the opportunity to telekinetically slap my team mate for making things more complicated. Amy was giving me a look that said 'you will explain later'.

"Ah, I see you too have mastered the power assisted idiot slap." Vista sounded like a kung fu master.
appreciating another's technique. Given the mouth on Clockblocker, I guessed she had a lot of practice slapping him for stupid stuff. I mimed a cheesy martial artist bow to her, prompting an amused giggle.

"Christ!" Everyone turned to face Gallant at that outburst. "They beat the hell out of us and now you're all buddy buddy."

"Gallant." Miss Militia warned.

"No, this isn't right. Why can no one see how messed up this is?"

"Pray tell how is this messed up?" Tattletale's grin had gone full vulpine. I considered trying to get her to shut up, but it would be difficult stopping her when she got like this. It did of course reinforce my idea that Gallant was a tool, so I wasn't feeling too merciful on his behalf.

"You are obviously villains pretending to be heroes. No one robs places to do good."

"Cough Robin Hood cough." Clockblocker not so subtly interjected.

"Not the same thing." Gallant ploughed on. "They aren't giving the money to charity. Once a crook, always a crook."

"Oh really?" I hadn't thought Tattletale's grin could get that wide. "Let us say for the sake of argument that we're former villains as you seem to think. Does the name Mad Cap ring a bell?"

Miss Militia's gaze shifted from the Ward over to my team mate, eyes narrowed. "That's enough."

"What? It's not like it's a well kept secret or anything. Battery and Legend capture a kinetic manipulator and shortly after, Assault joins the Protectorate. Shock horror, redemption is apparently a thing."

Miss Militia groaned as the rest of the passenger's made various noises of surprise.

"Hell, Shadow Stalker was a violent vigilante before she joined up with the Wards." Tattletale added, apparently unsatisfied with one reveal. Great, she just had to mention her. Hope this doesn't bite me in the ass. The Wards were much more quiet in response to that titbit though.

"Yeah, not a great example Tats." Grue growled. "It didn't stop her from shooting me with a hunting bolt."

Several more gasps from the others accompanied that revelation.

"I swear she was obsessed with you Grue." Regent chuckled, then paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Still pissed off about you bleeding all over my new couch."

"Well serves you right for choosing white."

Gallant just looked at my bickering team mates, unmoving. I reached for my horn to interrupt, and found nothing. Damn it. Luckily, Intel came to the rescue.

"Besides, the Vigilante act of 1997 states that cash funds retrieved from criminals can be legally claimed by the apprehending vigilantes."
"That and we've already agreed to stop targeting white collar criminals after we captured the Merchants." Tattletale turned to face the older cape. "Isn't that right Miss Militia?"

"I can see where you get your name." She sighed. "But yes, that's what I said last time we met."

"So really Gallant, you are seeing things as black and wh-" I interrupted Tattletale by covering her mouth with a gloved hand. She mumbled something through my hand, probably complaining about how it was still slightly damp. With my other hand I held up the notepad where I'd written a single word just a moment before.

-Enough-

She stared at me for a moment before nodding her head. I released my grip around her mouth and like some kind of miracle, she kept quiet. Silently sighing in relief, I held up a finger for people to wait a moment as I briefly wrote down what I was trying to say. This would be so much easier if I could just say it. Stupid mime theme.

-Things happened-
-They're in the past-
-We just survived an Endbringer fight-
-We should just move on-
-Relax and recover-

Realising most of the people were too far away to read it, Imp took the pad out of my hands and read it out.

"Shit's in the past. We kicked Levi's ass. Chill the fuck out."

I stared at her, and was joined by the rest of the passengers. She looked back at me then around the cabin.

"Ok, so I might have paraphrased a bit." She chuckled "Sue me."

I shook my head in exasperation. At least she seemed to have lightened the mood somewhat.
Clockblocker eventually broke the somewhat amiable silence.

"So, we have the in flight entertainment sorted. Now where's that stewardess with my refreshments?"

An absurd mental image popped into my head of Miss Militía pushing a cart down the aisle. Shaking my head, I banished the thought as Imp continued the joke.

"Oh yeah, and those little bags of peanuts."

"I think we already have enough nuts on this flight." Aegis sighed, glaring at Clockblocker.

The Ward leader sounded weary, reminding me of Grue when he was dealing with our... more lively team mates. Clockblocker seemed scarily like some strange amalgam of Regent and Imp in character. I wasn't sure if this was his usual sort of behaviour. But judging by his name, that seemed likely.

"So Imp, what do you do?"

*Oh great,* I thought as he addressed my team mate. Conversation between Clockblocker and Imp surely couldn't end well.

"What don't I do?" She already sounded like she was going to milk this for all the fun she could. I hoped she wouldn't start another argument. His glossy helmet tilted to the side at her reply.

"Do you do clear answers?"

"Where's the fun in that?" She laughed.

It seemed all I had to worry about was an endless spate of questions. I tuned out a little as they continued their banter. It was at that point that my worry got the better of me. Taking advantage of their distracting discourse, I wrote a little note and nudged Parian.

"Can you actually answer without using a question?"

*Do I have you to thank for my current mask?*

"Can you give me a reason to?"

Glancing down at the pad, she turned her doll masked face back to me and gave me a tiny nod. Combined with her earlier amusement at the cross dressing jokes, that pretty much confirmed the worst. Scribbling over the previous question, I wrote another.

"What do you have to hide?"

*Should I be worried?*

"I don't ha- damn."

"Hah! I was wondering who would fumble fi- Huh, what was I saying?"
She shook her head slightly before holding out her hand for the note pad and pen. Figuring it would be a bit more subtle for her to write it than speak out loud, I handed them over. The pen scratched along a fresh page before she handed them back. Looking down, a short and slightly worrying message greeted me.

-Parian@PHO.net-
-#1-339-045-5860-

Before I could contemplate the implications of another girl giving me her number, my train of thought was interrupted by Clockblocker's startled yelp and Imp's gleeful giggling.

"Where did you come from?"

Glancing up from my notepad, I saw Imp now wedged between Aegis and Clockblocker's former position. The Ward had seemingly leaped up from his seat in surprise.. Oh great.

"You. You're a Stranger!" Clockblocker was pointing at Imp accusingly from where he stood. Aegis meanwhile had turned to realise that the girl was sitting there, glancing between the two troublemakers.

"Nah, we've been introduced. Remember?" Imp cheerfully mocked.

"Imp." Grue growled at his sister, clearly unimpressed. "Stop pranking the Wards."

She raised a finger as if to bring up a point before he cut her off.

"Or anyone else."

"No fun." She sulked, her shoulders slumping in dejection.

Aegis turned from the petulant Imp beside him, to face our leader with a sigh. With their respective masks covering faces, I could only guess. But it felt like some kind of sympathetic understanding passed between them. Looking around at the rest of the passengers, Amy seemed to be sparing the occasional darting glance my way while having a chat with her cousins. She seemed to have a concerned expression, but I couldn't really ask her what the problem was.

I also noticed Gallant's head twitching between several people. I assumed he was getting a little overloaded with all the emotions bouncing around or some such. Surely it would be as confusing as listen in on a bunch of conversations with so many people cramped together after an emotional high like a big fight. Or am I jumping to wrong conclusions? My thoughts were once again interrupted.

"OH! Marceau, can I borrow your notepad. Thanks."

Before I could respond, Tattletale had grabbed it out of my hand. She let out a short sharp laugh before flipping over to a new page. Damn it Lisa! She frantically filled a few pages with her small neat script before tearing them out and handing them to Miss Militia.

"I almost forgot about this. These are my observations from the fight. Not sure how much it'll help, but it felt... significant." Rather than her usual grin, she seemed rather more serious. "I was going to hand them off to Armstrong, but... Where is he anyway?"

Most of the Wards were rather quiet at that question, before once again Clockblocker broke the
silence.

"Oh he's just moping at having to be renamed Arm-master."

"Dude." Aegis' tone echoed with disbelief and displeasure. "Not funny."

Miss Militia practically glared holes through the Ward, and I caught Amy flinching a little. Could she not fix something? I had just assumed everyone I knew had gotten off lightly. It dawned on me that I didn't know just how bad the other capes from home were injured. That I hadn't seen any of the Protectorate from home other than our chaperone started to fill me with dread. I had no idea if anyone was dead. The sombre mood from several of the Wards suddenly made so much more sense. Who have they lost?

"Too soon?"

"Clockblocker." Miss Milita had a cold harshness that I hadn't heard in her voice before. "Your speaking privileges are revoked till we get back to base."

The time stopping cape seemed to realise that she would brook no further joking and just slumped back into his seat.

"I'm sure it's only a flesh wo-" Regent's joke was cut off when a small cloud of darkness manifested around his head.

"Sorry about that." Grue gestured at Regent, whose arms were crossed under the inky blackness obscuring his head.

The rest of the flight was uncomfortably quiet, the mood once again ruined.

Parting ways with the Wards after what was probably the most awkward flight in history, we returned to the Lair to debrief and unwind. The ride from the PRT headquarters was fairly short, but was still informative. Most of the way, we saw no change to the city. But as we headed North to the Lair, it was a different story. The waves that had been expected to hit did, but it was nowhere near the destruction of the buildings closest to the harbour in Boston. The streets had a few inches of water still running off into storm drains, and a few areas had power outages. We eventually had to drop the van off a few streets away and having de-costumed, walked the rest of the way.

The ground floor of the Lair was slightly flooded, a few inches of water that had yet to drain. Madison quickly checked on her work area, but it seemed it had been spared any significant damage due to the sensible use of work benches and ceiling mounted electrical outlets. A quick safety check and we determined we still had power. A small mercy.

Over the next hour or so, we took turns exhausting the copious supply of hot water and changed into clean and dry clothes. I apparently got 'first dibs' due to reasons of 'most bad ass injury', which lead to me having to ring Dad while the others got clean. Summoning up the bravery, I dialled the home number. It picked up on the first ring.

"Taylor?" He sounded justifiably stressed. Given how quickly he answered, he must have been waiting at the phone for me to call. I suddenly felt very guilty about the shower.

"Hi Dad."
"Are you okay Kiddo?" I had a feeling he wanted to say more. Surely he must have guessed I had fought. It would be the only sensible explanation for why I hadn't called or come home earlier.

"I'm fine. I'm with... the others." It was unlikely the call was being monitored, but better to be safe. I could hear his sigh of relief though. "I need to... deal with what happened, so I was going to stay the night. Are you alright? I saw some of the Docks and I couldn't get in touch when the alarms went off."

"Yeah, I'm good. I made it to one of the shelters, but it looks like I needn't have bothered. The Ship Graveyard took the brunt of the waves and was spread inland a bit. It's going to take a lot of work to clean it up."

A weight slipped off my shoulders at the news. If Dad had got hurt while I was out being recklessly heroic...

"I'll see you tomorrow then, okay?"

"Will do. Stay safe Taylor."

Once everyone was all freshened up, we squeezed into the couches. We'd probably need to get another one soon for more comfortable seating. We had heated up some cheap microwave dinners to fill our bellies after a long night.

"So." Lisa started after she finished a mouthful of rubbery looking macaroni. "Locally, the Protectorate lost Triumph and the Empire lost Stormtiger early on."

"Can't say I'm upset about that one." Despite his words, Brian's voice contained no glee. I was certainly finding it hard to be happy about the death of someone who fought an Endbringer, even if he was a horrible person that probably would have killed us. I wasn't sure if it was my morality being troublesome, or just that the aftermath of the fight was finally catching up with me.

Triumph dying would explain some of what I'd seen of the Wards' moods. What had seemed like fairly cheerful banter in hindsight felt forced. Given the Armsmaster was apparently injured enough for Amy to have trouble, I began wondering who else was injured enough to make my own pale in comparison. I shook my head to try and stop that train of thought before it left the station.

"Can we just watch something brainless and cheerful?" I asked. "I think I could really just use something to distract me from some of the things I saw."

"What do we have in the collection?" Alec clearly didn't intend to get up an check himself. I was about to move when Madison spoke up.

"Umm, I have like a couple of hours worth of cute and funny animal videos." We all turned to look at her, but didn't have to wait long for an explanation. "I may spend too much time on the internet."

And so it was that kittens, puppies and other animals distracted and amused us till we eventually dozed off, too exhausted to move to our beds.
The distinctive sound of an smart phone camera stirred me into consciousness. Bleary eyed, I glanced around to find myself once again draped over my blond team mate. Shaking the confusion out of my head as I tried to work out why I woke up, I realised most of the team were still dozing. Madison was curled up in the corner of the couch we shared. Alec stirred slightly, only to roll over on the recliner. It looked like Rachel must have taken her dogs for a walk and Brian was also nowhere to be seen.

After slowly extricating myself from the couch with a slightly embarrassing sense of déjà vu, I quietly scrambled around for my civilian phone. The little clock in the corner read 12:22. Thinking back to how late we'd returned to the lair and all the excitement of the day before, it wasn't too much of a sleep in. Though I really should have been off to see Dad by now.

Slowly, other details trickled into my sleep addled brain as I put the kettle on for some tea and went to get changed into some running clothes. I still had the strangeness with Parian to deal with and I really needed to speak with Amy, to see how she was coping.

When I left my room a short time later, Brian had returned bearing a box of doughnuts and a tray of hot drinks. Trying to avoid obviously salivating at the thought of a sugary brunch, I joined my now awake friends.

"Please tell me there are chocolate ones."

Brian chuckled at my plea, turning the opened box my way and revealing something that really should have given me diabetes just by looking at it. Snatching up the sprinkle and chocolate laden confectionery I immediately started munching on it, joining the rest of my snacking comrades. The only sounds that filled the room for a while were those of chewing and enjoyment.

"Delicious." My face bore a grin as I swallowed the last bite. I checked my phone and realised I'd let time slip away again. "Sorry to eat and run, but I still need to see Dad and call Amy."

"Give her my regards." Brian said with a cheerful grin.

He seemed to be rather jovial, all things considered. Perhaps he's got a date with his older lady friend? Shoving aside the slightly judgemental thought, I waved goodbye to my mostly sleepy companions and started jogging back home.

In the light of day, the flood damage was a little more obvious. Murky stains low on the walls showed the high water mark. The water had mostly drained off though, only leaving large puddles where there was insufficient drainage. I had to detour occasionally to avoid those stubborn bodies of water.

Eventually though, I hit the Boardwalk and was pleasantly surprised to find it practically untouched. There was some debris caught in a few of the storm drains, but it looked like the city council had got their work crews working on the tourist hot spot immediately. There were still a few council vehicles parked here and there, with labourers fiddling with one thing or another.

An unexpected shortness of breath told me I was still kind of exhausted from last night, so I slowed down to a walk and decided to see if Amy was free for a chat. The phone rang a few times before
she answered.

"Taylor!"

I was rather startled by the level of enthusiasm she put into her greeting. Amy was usually a bit more sedate. *At least as far as I've seen.* That thought did make me realise that I hadn't really spent all that much time with the one who was now my girlfriend. *I'll need to fix that.*

"Hi Amy, sorry I didn't call earlier. I slept in a bit." While it hadn't even been a day, it still felt like too long after that awkward helicopter ride. She made a sound of understanding before I continued. "How are you doing?"

"Good. Surprisingly good."

Her cheerful tone brought a smile to my face. She'd been rather down since I had first met her, so it was nice that her mood had improved.

"Oh? Do tell."

"Well, I've finished patching up the local injuries from the flooding and umm... apparently they've organised enough healing capes for Boston."

That... was unexpected. I would have thought even with the shortness of the fight, there would be massive casualties. Hell I was kind of surprised Amy hadn't stayed behind in Boston last night to help. Selfish thoughts of spending time with her aside, I was strangely glad she hadn't. Otherwise I was sure she'd be working herself to the bone, trying to heal an endless tide of injuries.

"Sounds like someone has finally realised that you're overworked." My surprise probably wasn't well concealed as I heard her snort in amusement.

"Could be." Her cheerfulness dropped a little as she spoke. "I feel like I should be guilty over this though, rather than relieved. I mean there's bound to be a lot more people who need healing."

There she was being all self sacrificing again. Though given my antics yesterday, I couldn't really talk. Still, I needed to derail her train of thought.

"If they needed you, I'm sure they'd ask. But I guess this means we're actually free to do something."

"Yeah that was the other thing. The parents want to meet you this week if possible. I think they were saying Wednesday would work best."

I thought I could detect a bit of derision in her voice, but it was probably nothing. Quickly going over my current lack of plans as I took a seat at the bus stop, I couldn't think of anything that would get in the way.

"That sounds fine. Let me know once a time's been worked out."

"Will do." There was a slight pause on her end, followed by the muffled noise of a closing door. "Now that I'm out of earshot, what's this I hear about a harem."

I choked and coughed a bit in surprise, that little incident having slipped my mind. I was probably a bit too used to the constant ribbing from my so called friends and so it had kind of blended in with all
the other times. Checking that no one was nearby to hear, I started to explain.

"Ah, yes that. What you have to realise is that my friends are all fans of incredibly bad humour, usually at my expense. Despite my protests, they've decided to run with the rumours on PHO and consequently expanded on the rumours in some kind of crazy vicious cycle." I sighed in exasperation. "I can't even make a fuss in costume, mostly because typing or writing is too slow to keep up with it and also in case I somehow expose myself."

"Mm hmm." She didn't sound entirely convinced by my excuses. She may have had a point. 

"Rest assured, I am in no way intimately involved with any of them." I carefully left out the fact that I had been interested in Brian and honestly, I still found him reasonably attractive. But with everything that had happened, it was a non issue and it really wouldn't help matters to bring it up right now. "Oh and I still need to smack my friend for that whole airline gag."

"Good. I was starting to think you had a thing for blondes or something." She chuckled slightly. 

"What about Parian? She seemed rather... intent on talking with you."

Shit. I sighed as I realised that she must have seen her writing on my notepad. Why was it that the universe seemed to conspire to give people the wrong impression. A few people were about to join me at the bus stop, so alas I had to be less than clear.

"She's the one who gave me that red scarf thing."

There was a moment of silence.

"So, she's into girls then?"

I was resentful towards the other people waiting at the bus stop as I couldn't well bang my forehead against the shelter without drawing undue attention. I had hoped that I was just being a bit paranoid about Parian giving me her number, but if Amy was thinking she was hitting on me too...

"I don't know, but I hope not. She gave me some contact details, so I want to make sure she isn't going to do anything silly."

Having to be vague due to eavesdroppers wasn't exactly a great help to the conversation.

"Taylor." The was an odd pause as she seemed to gather her thoughts. "I'm quite fond of you, but you are rather oblivious. Please make sure you don't lead her on by mistake."

She did have a fairly valid point given how we'd pretty much accidentally ended up together. A devious part of my mind pointed out her wording was rather exploitable, but I shook the Lisa-like thought from my head. I had no intention of doing so on purpose either, but I decided against bringing it to her attention. Instead, I answered simply.

"Of course." Another idea popped into my head. "I need to have a chat with Dad about... yesterday. But maybe later we could watch a movie or something?"

"Sounds good. Though maybe something a bit more light hearted." Her voice shifted a little more towards shy as she continued. "It's not like I exactly need an excuse to snuggle these days."

"Yeah." I chuckled softly. "I can live with that. I'll give you a call a bit later."
"Catch you later then."

Our goodbyes said, I pocketed my phone as I boarded the bus.

As I rode the bus back home, I pulled a different phone out of my other pocket and turned it on. It was a burn phone I had grabbed earlier for one simple reason. While I couldn't recall the number off the top of my head, Parian's PHO username was rather straightforward to remember. Logging in under my verified cape account, I figured I could at least send off a simple query to her PHO account. Much better than calling her anyway, this way I wouldn't needlessly expose the fact that I could talk.

It did take a good part of the trip to find wording that didn't sound too pleading or too antagonistic. I didn't want to come across as helpless but I also didn't want to threaten someone who had likely saved my life. Besides, it seemed reasonably unlikely she'd expose me after her efforts to help hide my identity. I just hoped Amy wasn't right because I really couldn't deal with that right now. Eventually I settled with something fairly neutral with a little appeal to compassion. As I pulled the battery from my phone, I hoped the message would suffice.

16th May 2011

**Marceau:**
I hope I can trust you to keep my secret safe.
While it would be... inconvenient if I was exposed, I'm more worried that the local villains would come after my friends and family. I frankly don't trust them to follow the unwritten rules after some of the horrible things I've seen them do.

When I finally got through the front door, I was immediately wrapped up in Dad's arms

"Please don't scare me like that again."

I couldn't promise that I'd never get involved in another Endbringer fight. But at least I might be able to give him a bit more warning in the future. For now, all I could do was hug him back and hope for the best. He broke the hug, holding me out and looking at my face with a confused expression on his face.

"Umm, Taylor. Where are your glasses?"

I blinked a few times, bringing my hand up to my face. With my new clear vision, I must have subconsciously assumed I already had them on or something.

"Yeah, about that..."
"So, let me get this straight." Dad had a strange expression on his face as he absorbed the information. "Amy fixed your eyes."

"Yeah, I lost my mask somewhere along the line and you know how blind I am without lenses." He nodded, though the concern on his face at the mention of the lost mask made me regret mentioning that. "So Amy offered to fix them while she was patching me up a little."

"A little?" Dad’s expression told me my description wasn't particularly convincing.

"Just a bit of bruising and broken bone or two." I refrained from mentioning they were vertebrae. I didn't really need to worry him any more than I already had. Besides, I'm all better now.

"You seem... awfully calm about all of this." Despite his incredulous tone, I could tell he was more worried than critical. I was perhaps a little flippant about it all, going a bit too far trying to convince him everything was just fine.

"I.. I probably haven't really come to terms with it yet. No one I really knew died, so I'm probably still just a little chipper about all my friends surviving." I shrugged. "I figure I can have a panic attack later."

"Please, just don't hold it all in. If you need to talk to me about it you can."

_Ah_. He was probably worried that I'd repeat what had happened with the bullying. To be honest, I was falling back into old habits. He deserved to know and yet I felt I couldn't tell him. I didn't want him to worry over things that were in the past. _Baby steps, at least I'm telling him some of it rather than none._

"Okay, I'll try." I sighed, before remembering something. "Oh, can I have Amy over to watch a movie or two?"

A grin formed on his face as I brought her up. He seemed way too cheerful about the whole thing, but I guessed he was just happy that I was happy. Finally.

"Sure kiddo."

As the movie ended I turned my head down to my lap, which Amy was using as a pillow. Sometime during the evening she had shifted there and had found it comfortable. At least I assumed so by the fact she hadn't shifted since, despite all the giggling over the rather silly Disney animation we'd decided on. Giving her shoulder a stroke to get her attention, I broached the topic that had been bugging me for a while.

"You know, we've kind of done this whole thing backwards."

"Huh?" Her head rolled so she was facing me, a few curls of my hair dangling a couple of inches away from her face.

"Well we've shared a lot of big stuff, but none of the small stuff."
She just gave me a confused look. I smirked a little at the rather adorable expression and tried to make myself clear.

"Like, I don't know... What's your favourite colour?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment before answering.

"Umm blue, maybe?"

"Maybe?" My right eyebrow rose a little at that. Who didn't know their favourite colour?

"Yeah, not sure I really like any in particular."

Apparently Amy didn't. The green shirt she was wearing didn't necessarily mean anything, so I briefly thought about colours I associated with her. She had been in a blue blouse shirt and black pants on our first date, so I guess there was some blue preference. The first time I had seen her she was in her white costume, but I hadn't seen her wear white clothes other than for her cape activities. A thought popped into my head as I recalled the shoe shop.

"Hmm, would have thought red given the heels you picked."

She winced a little, drawing another baffled look from me.

"Ah yeah... Red. I have a thing about red."

"A thing?" This is something I hadn't expected.

"Yeah. I can't really wear red. It reminds me too much of the hospitals and healing and stuff. The costume and the..."

My mind finished the sentence. Blood.

"Oh. I guess the same with white?" She nodded at my inference. Well, that was unexpected. I knew she found the healing stressful, but that sort of impact was more than I had thought. If she was separating her non-so-secret cape identity to that degree... I felt I needed to steer towards more happy topics, and an amusing idea popped into my head.

"So the heels were just a..." I paused and reconsidered my approach at cheering her up. "Nope can't finish that sentence."

"What?" She looked at me with the same sort of cute and confused look as earlier.

"The pun is too bad." I shook my head in reply.

Her bemusement eventually changed to an amused smirk and she gave a head shake of her own.

"Oh, har har." She sighed and pursed her lips a little. "No, that's the thing. I kind of like red on you. Don't know why. Might be because of that dress being linked to some nice memories. Or I could just have issues."

She sounded like she was trying for self deprecation, but I could hear the tinge of worry in her voice.
I considered trying to get her to open up a bit more, but felt like it might be too soon to push after all that had happened yesterday. Instead, I tried humour.

"Here's to our issues." I made a toast gesture with my right hand. "Clink."

She gave me another quick shake of her head as she chuckled softly.

"How about you?"

"Black." I hardly needed to think about it. Despite my recent foray into a more colourful wardrobe, it was a predominant colour in my life. After all, the Marceau costume was like sixty or seventy percent black. Oh and of course I had that little black dress from our trip to the Boardwalk. A happy little smirk twitched my lips.

"Black doesn't count." Amy wriggled around to fold her arms imperiously. "Everyone likes black."

Well so much for that. I was about to make an off-colour joke -hah- about the E88, but they wore a lot of black. Stupid Nazis, ruining my punch lines. Staring down at the girl, I proposed my next choice. Though it was another Marceau specific one, not having much in the way of civilian clothes because it clashed a little with my complexion.

"White is probably out for the same reason?"

"Not a proper colour." She nodded before a slight frown flashed across her face. "Also hospitals."

I smacked myself lightly on the side of the head. She had mentioned that just a moment before. What other colours do I like? While I did have some clothes in yellow and blue, I wasn't that fond of them. I didn't really like green and I didn't think I could pull off purple. I frowned as I realised what my only other choice was.

"Then by process of elimination I guess I'm left with.... red."

"As long as you don't expect me to wear any," She shrugged lightly before smirking. "I won't complain about your little red dress."

I looked at her with a smirk of my own before affecting a faux noble accent.

"How magnanimous of you."

"Indeed, my forgiveness is legendary." She nodded jokingly. "Though I think you still need to make up for some of your earlier dastardly deeds."

She didn't sound particularly upset about that, but I cringed a little at the memories of the bank. The guilt still hadn't gone away and I didn't think it would any time soon.

"How could I possibly make it up to you?" I still used the fake accent, but a bit of seriousness crept into my voice. She must have noticed it, her expression softening as she stared up at me.

"Well I can think of two things. First, you can put up with my family on Wednesday. I don't know how things will go. " Her expression turned dark. "Let's just say your Dad is a lot friendlier."

I wondered what she could mean. Victoria seemed nice enough, if a little intense. So that left one or
both of her parents. Rude? Judgemental? I had trouble reconciling the image I had in my head of Brandish and Flashbang with people Amy would consider unfriendly. They always seemed so... personable. I guessed it could all be a front for PR.

"Umm, do they not approve?"

"Carol approves of little I do." Her whispered reply blew my mind. How could anyone disapprove of Amy's frankly selfless dedication. Well other than disapproving of just how far she pushes herself, of course. Though the way she was referred to as Carol rather than her mother... That spoke volumes.

"Did you want to talk about it?" I offered quietly, scooping up one of her hands in mine. "I'm here if you want to vent."

Amy closed her eyes with a sigh and was silent for quite some time. My left hand idly played with her curls and my right gently squeezed Amy's intertwined hand as the minutes crawled by. After a deep and emphatically expelled breath, she finally spoke.

"I'm not sure if you knew, but it's pretty obvious if you look at the rest of my family. I'm adopted."

I took a deep breath and let it out and I absorbed the information. I had thought it a little odd that she looked so different from her sister, but had basically written it off as one of those genetic quirks. Suddenly the situation made a bit more sense, if only a little. Why someone would even adopt a child without wanting to care for them seemed bizarre to me. My confusion must have been obvious as she continued.

"They took me in when I was two or so." Her voice had started to break, like she was about to start crying. I was still worried that it might have been too much too soon, but I had offered an ear. If she wanted to talk, it would be the least I could do listen. I continued to pet her, hoping to reassure her.

"After they put my father in the Birdcage."

My head tilted back a bit as my mind tried to catch up with that statement. Wait what? Amy's dad was a villain who was defeated by New Wave? This just baffled me for a little while, my brain trying to process the implications. Eventually I looked back down to find Amy's face etched with worry, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. Oh damn, I'm an idiot.

"Sorry Amy, was just a little surprised." I squeezed her hand reassuringly and stroked her hair. "Don't worry. It doesn't change anything for me."

I slid my free hand under her neck to lift her out of my lap and she begrudgingly complied. She was rewarded with a hug once she was upright, my arms wrapping tight around her. Amy's breath hitched a little, but she didn't start sobbing. I felt a little moisture on my cheek as tears must have run down her face, but they seemed to stop after not too long.

We sat there in silence for the longest time, words seemingly unnecessary. It could have been minutes or hours we spent entangled, one hand slowly stroking her back while she just held tight around my waist. Eventually I spoke, possibly tempting fate by bringing up an earlier point.

"What was the second thing?"

She loosened her grip and leaned out of the hug, staring at me intently for a moment. Eventually she
smiled, seemingly resolved on some decision. A hand slid up and wrapped around the back of my head.

"This."

My head was gently pulled down even as hers rose up. There was a faint thud as our foreheads gently bumped together. Our embarrassed giggles were soon cut short as our lips finally met. Not quite as graceful as the first time, but it was still nice.
I stood at the front door to the Dallon residence, clad in the little black dress with my hand hovering a few inches from the door. I had stood like that for at least a minute out of nervousness. My imagination had been over active in thinking up worst case scenarios after Monday's revelations. *Just how uncomfortable was this going to be?* Eventually I decided I was being silly, once again more afraid of social situations than actual physical danger. My hand finally curled into a fist and knocked.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a tall man with short sandy hair and blue eyes. His rather lean face was plastered with a smile, but I couldn't quite shake the feeling that it wasn't quite sincere. *Probably being paranoid.* I was a little surprised by the apron he wore over his dress shirt and slacks.

"Ah, you must be Taylor. Nice to meet you at last." He offered his hand to me.

"Likewise, Mr. Dallon." His grip was gentle but firm as we shook hands.

He chuckled a little as he gestured that I should come inside.

"Please, call me Mark."

He led the way through the entry hall and into a well furnished lounge room. It wasn't opulent by any stretch, but the combination of leather and hardwood was stylish and likely rather expensive. The lawyer job must have paid rather well, and I guessed the merchandising didn't hurt. I couldn't for the life of me remember what Mark did when he wasn't Flashbang. *Something admin related, or was he a full time hero?*

"Take a seat." He waved at the chocolate brown leather couch. "Carol is running a little late and the girls should be down in a moment. Would you like me to grab you a drink while I check on the roast?"

Well that explained the apron at least. It was kind of surreal having Flashbang offer me a drink, but I was a little parched from nervousness.

"Just some water if it isn't too much trouble."

"No problem, back in a moment."

With that, he zoomed off through another door and left me alone on a very comfortable couch in very uncomfortable solitude. I may have had a slight cape geek moment as it dawned on me that I was in New Wave's living room. Well, part of New Wave anyway. It passed mercifully quick, having been somewhat inured to celebrity by my own cape experiences. What left was a residual nervousness from being in the home of people who would likely be unimpressed by my cape identity and whose daughter I was dating. Just as I was starting to edge towards panic, Mark returned with my water.

"Here you go." He placed the glass down on the coffee table, a fancy looking coaster protecting the dark wood surface. He sat down in a matching recliner on the opposite side of the coffee table, a beer in hand. "So, you and Amy huh?"

The bluntness of the question caught me a little off guard. I was sure Amy had told her parents about
us, otherwise the dinner seemed out of place. He hadn't seemed surprised I was a girl earlier, so Amy must have come out to them. Was this what she had meant by 'putting up' with her parents?

"Yes." My eyes narrowed a little. "Is that a problem?"

He seemed a little surprised at my question. Perhaps my tone had came across as confrontational?

"No, no. Sorry, that probably came out a bit... I'm just a bit surprised is all." He took a swig from the bottle in his hand. "Still getting used to the idea that Amy likes girls. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It was just unexpected, even if it does explain a bit."

Ah, so they'd only found out recently then and were still adjusting. That put his question in a slightly better light. I was pretty lucky that Dad had gone with the flow so easily. Though I guess the earlier confusion regarding Aisha had got him used to the idea. Come to think of it, Dad kind of worked it out before I did. By accident of course. Mark raised an eyebrow and I realized I must have let my amusement show.

"Ah, was just remembering the conversation with my Dad."

He nodded but didn't ask me to elaborate, so I didn't volunteer the story. We sat there awkwardly for a little longer before the sound of footsteps drew my attention to one of the doorways. Amy and Victoria stood there, both dressed nicely. Amy in a different blue blouse and some loose dark pants, Victoria in a yellow knee length dress. At that moment I was glad that I had dressed up, otherwise I'd been the odd one out.

"Ah hello Taylor. Good to see you again." Victoria seemed much cheerier that the last time I'd seen her. But then the last time I'd seen her was in costume on the trip back from Boston, so that was hardly surprising. She moved over to one of the other recliners while Amy sat next to me on the couch and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. I entwined my hand with hers and gave her a peck in return before I turned to her sister.

"Likewise. It has been a little while." I didn't exactly lie, so much as exaggerate. "You seem well."

"Yeah." She let out a soft chuckle. "Can't really complain. My family is safe and things are generally going good."

I nodded along, understanding her point of view. After all, it was similar to mine. My friends had all survived and here I was next to Amy. Things were good.

"Besides, seeing Amy be all lovey-dovey is adorable."

I turned to look at Amy and as expected, she had developed a blush. Despite my own embarrassment, I had to agree with Victoria.

"That she is." I muttered absent-mindedly.

That just got her blushing harder while drawing chuckles from Mark and Victoria. I gave Amy's hand an affectionate squeeze, which she returned. Noises from the hallway signaled that Mrs. Dallon had arrived. She paused in the entry from the hallway, dressed in a business suit with her long blond hair wrapped up in a professional looking bun. Despite the immaculate exterior, I got the impression she was weary. *Long office hours will do that I guess.*
"Give me a few minutes to get freshened up and I'll be back down for dinner."

And with that she walked off, presumably upstairs. I blinked a few times, kind of surprised she hadn't gone about introducing herself. It seemed unlikely that she would have missed me sitting there on the couch. I hoped it was just a matter of being tired or something, otherwise that was a bad sign for the night. Amy leaned in closer to me. Glancing about, Mark didn't seem terribly concerned but Victoria had a slight frown. Perhaps she had noticed it too. Mark knocked back the last of his beer and stood.

"I better go finish up the gravy. I'll call out once everything is ready."

He disappeared through the other doorway, leaving me with the Dallon sisters and trying to resist the urge to make a fuss over the seemingly cold reception. In an attempt to distract myself and presumably Amy from that, I turned to Victoria.

"Were we expecting Dean this evening?"

She looked a little surprised at my question.

"Ah, no. He had some other things to do, plus I figured this was more of a family thing anyway."

I just nodded, relieved that I wouldn't have to be all paranoid about emotion detection again. It was exhausting trying to avoid feeling things, without any idea whether it worked or just made things worse. Victoria leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and gave me a studied look.

"So, what do you do for fun?" A mischievous grin formed on her lips. "You know, other than my sister."

"Vicky!" Amy sputtered while my brain froze. "It's not like that."

It seemed I couldn't get away from the teasing, no matter where I went.

"Relax Ames. It's a sister's prerogative to tease about romance. " Victoria reminded me a bit too much of Lisa at that moment. "Though Taylor, you seem less flustered."

"I'm kind of used to it." The words passed my lips before I thought about them. I noticed the intrigued look on her face and realised what I had said. "I have friends who have similar ideas on teasing obligations."

I hoped that the explanation wouldn't come back to bite me in the ass later, but there wasn't really any other way to cover my Freudian slip. She smirked a little but didn't seem to make any more of it.

"They sound amusing. You'll have to introduce us some time."

Or not. I tried to keep my face calm as warning sirens went of in my head. That was bound to end in an interesting manner. Amy nudged me a little from the side.

"I still need to meet them too."

I turned to look at her and a devious smile had curled up the corners of her mouth. I stared at her for a moment, eyebrow raised. Et tu Amy? I really needed to discuss this with her without others to overhear. She was pushing into dangerous territory. Still, after the debacle on the helicopter, I wasn't
surprised she'd want to meet them.

"I'll see what I can arrange, but they aren't the most social of people."

My excuse sounded hollow even to my own ears, but I was luckily saved by Amy's mother returning from wherever she'd gone. Mrs Dallon had changed into dress that was much less business-like, but still rather formal.

"So Amy, are you going to introduce us?"

Her manner still seemed a little off, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Amy twitched a little next to me and turned to her mother.

"Carol, this is Taylor. Taylor, Carol."

"Nice to meet you." I put on the best smile I could, figuring I should try to make a good impression. If only for Amy's sake.

"Indeed." Her tone was neutral. "Let's move to the dining room shall we."

Despite her words, it came across as more of a statement of fact than a question. Like she hadn't expected any other outcome, like she was used to getting things her way. Perhaps I was just looking at things in a skewed manner, biased because of Amy's discomfort. I gave Amy a reassuring smile and helped her up out of the soft, enveloping couch.

Following through to the dining room, I was once again struck by the choice in furniture. The large rectangular hardwood table with matching chairs dominated the room, stained in the same dark lacquer as the coffee table and covered with a dark brown table cloth. Plates, cutlery, glasses and a condensation beaded jug of water already in place. The walls were the same shade of off-white as the rest of the house, or at least what I had seen of it. The uniformity of the house was a far cry from the haphazardly assorted shades of my own home. I couldn't help but be impressed by the effect, even if it felt a little impersonal on some level.

Amy gestured towards a pair of seats, and I pulled one out for her before seating myself. Apparently my time as Marceau was leading to gentlemanly behaviour. Victoria took a seat opposite us, while Carol took one of the end seats. Mark entered a moment later, carrying a large oven tray laden with steaming roasted chicken and vegetables. Another trip to the kitchen brought a bowl of steamed greens and a large gravy boat. The aroma already had me salivating, but I patiently waited as Mark started carving and serving before he took his own seat at the other end of the table.

As the Dallon family quietly started eating, I joined them. The roast chicken was full of flavour, the pumpkin and potatoes perfectly done. Though roasts were pretty straight forward, apparently Amy's dad knew his way around a kitchen. Maybe he was a stay at home dad after all. I finished chewing and swallowed the tasty morsel.

"This is delicious Mark."

"Thank you." He gave me a small grin before taking a bite of some well caramelized carrot. "I do try."

There was an odd tone to his voice, but I couldn't work out what it was. He seemed mostly cheerful, so I wrote it off as maybe a bit of tiredness. Eventually Victoria caught my attention.
"You know, you never answered my earlier question about what you do for fun."

Damn, I was hoping she had forgotten about that. It was time to be vague, avoiding direct lies if I could help it. At least she had avoided repeating her earlier innuendo in front of her parents. That would have been mortifying.

"Well I run every day to keep healthy and I hang out with my friends a lot. Other than that, I probably spend too much time on PHO or watching movies."

"That would explain some things."

"Oh?" My eyebrow twitched up, curious about her meaning.

"Just that you don't seem very sporty." She shrugged a little. "But you do look fit."

"If by fit you mean twig like, then sure." While I was feeling a bit better about myself of late, that didn't mean I had delusions of a figure. I gave a weak smile, passing it off as self deprecation.

"Works for me." Amy whispered, blushing a little. Her face had gotten red so many times tonight, she was basically an embarrassment barometer.

"So, how did you two meet anyway?" Mark spoke up before things got too awkward. He washed down what must have been some aspirin with a glass of water. If he had a headache, that could have explained some of the earlier weirdness. I turned to Amy, figuring it better for her to take the lead here.

"Oh, we met at the hospital." That drew some interesting looks from her family. "What, it's not like I spend much time elsewhere."

"Oh." Mark sounded embarrassed by Amy's snark. "I thought it might be at school or some such."

"Unfortunately, I go to Winslow." My tone came out weary, but I hoped they'd assume I was more disappointed by not being near Amy.

"So Taylor." Carol's voice grabbed my attention. "I believe you go to school with a daughter of one of my colleagues then."

I felt an eye twitch as I realized who she was talking about. Victoria's face flitted between confused and worried, seemingly picking up on my discomfort. Shit, has Emma be talking to her dad? Is she trying to ruin things? Amy gave me a gentle nudge with her knee, which helped me focus.

"I." I took a short breath, trying to remain calm. "Think I know who you are talking about. Alan Barnes right?"

"Indeed." She nodded. "Such a small world."

"That it is."

With that bit of small talk done, we went back to eating in silence for a while longer. I kept dreading further questions about school or Emma, but Amy's leg kept me mostly distracted. Luckily it seemed they had picked up that I didn't really want to talk about it. On the other hand, I had probably made
everyone feel awkward as hell. Not exactly the best first impression.

"Well that wasn't awkward at all." I sighed as Amy and I walked out of the front door. There wasn't enough sarcasm in the world to fully convey my feelings. I'd politely taken my leave after dessert, conversation having stalled to be replaced by uncomfortable silence.

"Still better than I feared."

I turned to look at Amy, a wry smile on her face.

"Wow. What were you thinking?"

She leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

"Well I'm sure she would have had a seizure if she knew."

I let out a soft moan of distress.

"Yeah, that's a conversation I'm not looking forward to."

We walked a bit further along the garden path, delaying our separation for a little longer. She wrapped her hand around mine, dragging me into a quick hug before releasing me.

"You'll be fine to get home?"

"Yeah, the bus stop nearby is well lit." I flashed her a grin. "That and I can handle myself."

"How many times have I healed you now?" She shook her head "Just be careful, okay."

"Will do." I nodded, smiling. "See you soon."

I leaned in to give Amy a goodbye kiss, closing my eyes as I got closer. I heard a strange popping noise and my lips met cold steel. When I opened my eyes I found my girlfriend had been replaced with a mailbox.
“Only four of us need costumes,” Trickster said. “The other can make her own.”

“Only four costumes? When there are seven of you?” Accord’s tone made it all too clear that he knew he was admitting knowledge he shouldn’t have.

He knows about Noelle.

“When there are seven of us, yes,” Trickster said, feigning a lack of concern. The villain behind the desk stared at him for several seconds before nodding a fraction of an inch.

"Very well, I'll add on another ten thousand." Accord nodded, unperturbed by the team's arrangement. "I'll have the details forwarded to your accommodations within the next hour. If you take the offer, I expect the job to be done by the end of the week. Otherwise I expect the fifteen thousand in two days. You may go."

Krouse wasn't sure whether to be more worried by Accord knowing where they were staying, or by the tight deadline to attack Blasto's lab. It wasn't going quite as expected, but it was better than some of the alternatives when working with these deranged supervillains.

"I shall have an answer for you by the end of the day." Krouse bowed, taking the obvious dismissal for what it was and departing the office with deliberate care.

He nodded to the Secretary, who returned her own curt nod and met with Sundancer in the hall outside. They remained quiet till they had left the building all together, going through winding alley ways. Marissa checked if there was anyone nearby before speaking up, her voice tinged with nervousness.

"So we're good?"

Krouse sighed. She was always worrying about this sort of thing and he couldn't blame her. She didn't want to be involved in this, but they didn't have any real choice.

"We have a job offer that we'll need to discuss, but it'll wave off our entry fee and get us some shiny new costumes."

She looked down at her own makeshift costume and gave a sad chuckle.

"Just what I always wanted." The sarcasm was more depressing than biting.

Marissa's phone went off, seeming to snap her out of her moping. After she answered, he watched as her mouth turned from a neutral smile to a horrified gaping before she turned to him.

"It's Cody. He touched her." Krouse stared at her, a mixture of anger and confusion boiling up inside. "Four times."

"What the fuck?"
Krouse sat alone on a pier overlooking the Boston inner harbor, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. They'd been in Boston longer than originally planned, working off debts Accord insisted they owed for complicating 'his' city. Fucking Cody, ruining everything. Again. He took another drag of nicotine laced smoke before exhaling into the cool night air. Glad the fucker's gone. He deserved whatever Accord did to him. It wasn't all bad though, the work with Accord had been profitable and easily covered the growing food expenses.

He shuddered as he thought about the latest changes, the further growths. Noelle was still the girl he loved, but he was at a loss on what to do. They hadn't been able to find anything else about a way home, and the subtle enquiries he had made about broken powers hadn't borne fruit. He could tell the others were losing hope, just as he was. When the smoldering end of the cigarette reached the filter, he flicked it out over the water and dragged himself to his feet. He couldn't put off going back to their not-so-temporary base any longer.

So it was that he felt a strange sense of relief when the Endbringer alarms went off.

He cast his gaze through the assembled capes. Heroes, villains and the occasional rogue. All of them gathered together to defy the not-so-natural disaster that was an Endbringer. His eyes caught Sundancer, Ballistic and Genesis over in a corner, Jess had manifested as some strange aquatic beast, a cross between a shark and a seal. He noted they were standing deliberately distant to Accord and his Ambassadors. It wouldn't do to be associated with their current employer after all. He found himself migrating to the search and rescue teams. It wasn't like his powers would be any use against Leviathan. He soon lost track of his team mates, hoping it wasn't the last time he saw them.

He didn't understand, it should have been one of the safer areas. Looking around as he stumbled back to their house, the neighbourhood was flooded with some buildings damaged almost as bad as the areas near the harbour. Did the waves get channelled by the geography or something? As he got nearer, his worries grew. He hadn't heard anything from the others. Noelle couldn't go to the shelters of course, but Jess and Oliver could have. He'd heard the words 'Ballistic deceased', but they still hadn't fully sunk in. He'd heard the words 'Sundancer down' but nothing else had come of it.

His face fell as he saw that the house was half collapsed. Panicking, he started digging through the rubble. He picked up his pace as he heard the sobbing. Throwing aside bits of not-so-dry wall and pieces of the timber frame, he found the love of his life impaled by what looked like a piece of street sign. He reached out to check on her before restraining himself. No, that won't help anyone.

"Noelle, honey? How bad is it?"

"Why can't I just die?" She let out a delirious laugh. "I've got a piece of metal sticking through me and it hurts, but I'm still not dead. Why can't this just end?"

Krouse couldn't bring himself to answer that. Instead he took in the scene around him.

"Where are Jess and Oliver?"

"Don't know." She shook her head. "They didn't go to the shelters, the news report said we were supposed to be in a green zone. I haven't heard anything since the wave hit and I'm kind stuck here."

He looked down at her, sizing up the spear of metal pinning her to the wall. He wondered how the hell that happened and why she hadn't freed herself. She was crazy strong and this shouldn't have
been a problem. Has she given up?

"Here, let me help with that and we can find the others." If they survived.

He grabbed the pole, waiting for her to brace before he pulled. She let out a grunt of pain as the chuck of metal slid from the strange warped flesh below her waist. Noelle slowly pulled herself upright, or as close to that as her body and the ruined house allowed before curling herself up in the corner. Krouse moved over to the door to the room Jess had been using. Struggling to open it, he gave up and swapped it with some rubble to clear the way. His breath hitched as he surveyed the scene.

Two still forms lay in the room. One on the bed, debris covering her upper body. The other lying face down in the water that sloshed over the floor, a nasty mess of red matted hair on the back of his head. He stood there staring for a good couple of minutes before moving over to the bed. Oliver was a lost cause, but it was possible Jess could still be alive. Clearing the broken bits of ceiling off of her, he winced as he saw her face. Bloody and bruised, glasses shattered. He held his fingers to his neck for a moment before sighing in relief. Her pulse was strong, but she seemed completely out of it.

A crunching, scrabbling noise echoed through the rubble and dragged his attention to the doorway. Marissa stood there, clothing torn and a look of horror on her face.

"Jess is still alive. We need to get her help."

Her expression didn't change much as she glanced down at Oliver.

"Uh ok. Let's..." Her hand dragged down her face. "Deal with Olly and..."

Krouse grimaced as she started crying. He never was good at dealing with that sort of thing.

"When I told you about Panacea, I didn't think you were going to do something like this."

Krouse hadn't seen Marissa this angry in a long time. She was always so passive, avoiding confrontation. He didn't understand why she was being so picky now.

"I've looked into what she can do. She can heal up Jess, get her walking again. She can probably help Noelle." His hands waved around in frustration. "What is your problem?"

"Kidnapping her isn't going to make her willing to help. She's done a lot of charity healing, so we should just ask her."

Krouse shook his head. She was being hopelessly naive again.

"Mars, the truce is over. She's not going to help villains, no matter what our sob story."

"And what is going to happen when she needs to touch Noelle to fix her. Have you even thought that through?"

"She's a healer, and a teenage girl at that. A clone will be no problem. Don't you want to help them?"

"Of course." She gave a frustrated cry. "But this is going to backfire. Just like every other plan you've had. I want no part of this."
"We made a pact."

"Yeah? Tell that to Cody." She stormed out of the room, leaving him shaking his head.

He had been standing there on the roof of the small office building down the block from the Dallon residence most of the evening. He'd seen the thin brunette stand at the door for a few minutes before finally entering, but nothing else had happened since then. That was about two hours ago, but he figured another couple hours couldn't hurt. Rushing in to the house was pretty stupid, but if he could catch Panacea outside and alone... Well that was a different matter.

Genesis was crouched down behind the air-conditioning units, a strange winged beast with many arms ideal for grabbing hold of their target. Despite her latest injuries, she still had no problem creating her projections. It was even more of a necessity with how much more her real body's mobility was impaired.

Bored out of his mind, he lit another cigarette, careful to conceal the glow from the house. He was really wishing Jess had made a construct that could speak, so at least he wouldn't have to talk to himself to have a conversation. Another few minutes passed before he noticed the front door open. The brunette walked out of the door followed closely behind by the healer. He hesitated, figuring he should wait just a little longer to do it without a witness and give them more time. That changed when he saw them hugging intimately. Didn't know she swung that way. A devious idea popped into his mind right then and he turned to his team mate.

"If we grab both of them, we can use her girlfriend as leverage."

Genesis gave a strange blank stared before nodding it's stump of a head. Scanning the street below, he found the perfect objects. He seized the connection between the mailbox below and Panacea. The weights weren't quite matched, so it took a few seconds before they switched places with a pop. The difference between the Panacea and himself also required a few seconds, but the girl was too confused to work out what had happened before he was on the street and the healer squeaked as she was grabbed by the many armed beast.

He soaked a cloth with a bottle he pulled from his pocket, glancing over at the girlfriend who was starting to panic. He moved closer to a newspaper vending machine in time to catch her as he switched them, pressing the cloth over her face.
I looked at the mailbox I had just kissed, blinking in confusion.

"Amy?" I glanced around, not quite grasping what had happened. "Amy?"

Another popping noise, a sudden lurching feeling and everything was different. I was no longer standing on the garden path, instead on a quiet street between houses and shops. I had walked along this street to get to Amy's house. As I drew in a deep breath to scream out for Amy, I felt an arm wrap around me and something soft and smelling of pineapple was clamped over my face. Before everything went dark I heard words from an unfamiliar voice.

"Does this smell like chloroform to you?"

Noises intruded upon nothingness. Blurry sounds filled my ears as weird sensations cascaded over me. A strange fuzzy tingling and a glow from somewhere. Then temperature, the sensation of cold in one direction. Odours I couldn't identify assaulting me. I was confused, unaware of what was happening until my senses resolved into something familiar and my vision focused. The faint taste of pineapple was coating my tongue. I was lying on a floor, my hands restrained before me. Glancing down I saw the all too familiar shape of zip ties digging slightly into my wrists. It felt like the same had been done to my ankles.

"Well it looks like your sleeping princess has awoken. I told you the Pineapple Punch would wear off quickly."

That voice sounded familiar, and I could practically hear the trademark as he spoke. All I knew was that I was at someone's mercy and that I was not pleased. I turned my head to try and get a better idea of what was going on, but ended up having to roll over to see anything other than a plain painted wall bordering on tiled floors. Flopping over awkwardly, I was faced with a scene that filled me with dread.

Amy was sitting on a green couch, similarly restrained. A man in red and black stood off to the left with his back to me, a top hat perched on his head. He seemed familiar, but I wasn't sure where I would have seen him. He was obviously a villain though, given the whole kidnapping thing. Over to the right hunched a strange multi armed creature. Some kind of changer, or one of those monster capes? Amy gave me a worried glance.

"You okay?"

"Other than feeling like I had a late night out and the obvious kidnapping? Yeah. You?"

"Got manhandled by that one, but I'm unhurt." She turned back to Top Hat. "So what do you want? You've just broken the unwritten rules, so I guess it's important."

I glanced down at my bonds again. There was enough movement room for me to make something to cut them, but that weird monster thing had some of its many eyes on me. I had to bide my time.

"You're going to heal our team mates for us."
I saw her blink a few times, head tilted to the side.

"You realise you didn't exactly need to kidnap us for that, right?"

The monster tilted it's head, looking at Top Hat. It seemed to be implying something, but I wasn't sure what.

"Hah!" Top Hat clearly thought otherwise, waving off his monster friend. "Like you'll just heal villains. Besides, it's complicated."

It was bugging me that I couldn't recognise Top Hat. His accent was all wrong, so he wasn't a local, but I hadn't been out of the city except... Boston. I must have seen him at the gathering for the Endbringer. The truce only ended yesterday, so he must have been planning this since then.

"Okay, fine." Amy shook her head and sighed. "Let's just get this over with so we can go home."

"Good, good. Genesis, you first."

I glanced at the monster who had started lurching off to next room. I guessed that must be its name. It hadn't looked injured and seemed to be fetching someone else, so I was a little confused by Top Hat's words. The monster returned after a few moments with a fairly battered looking young woman. Nasty bruising covered her face and the visible skin of her arms and shoulders. It looked like whatever had happened to her had happened a few days ago. Except her legs, they were disproportionately thin compared to her fairly wiry arms. Like she was paraplegic or had polio or something. So maybe she had powers that let her get around that? Or was she just a normal human?

The monster lowered the woman down to where Amy was sitting as Top Hat turned my way. That was when I saw he had a pistol in his hand. I was developing a growing urge to educate him on the finer points of civility. It would take me a little while to get free and having someone with a gun nearby made that a fairly unsafe prospect, even if I could make barriers. Especially when I didn't know what powers he had, or what the monster could do. Still, I made an invisible blade just in case I needed to move fast. Amy reached out her hands.

"Contusions, cracked rib, paraplegia, broken nose and muscle atrophy. She's asleep not unconscious?" She had an odd look on her face. "I'm suppose to get consent."

The monster holding the girl nodded it's stumpy head. Amy looked up at the monster then back down at the girl.

"Ah, okay then." She glanced between Top Hat and I. "I can't really do much with the muscle atrophy. You'll have to build that back up the old fashioned way."

The monster just nodded again. I couldn't quite get a clear view, but I did see the bruises slowly vanish from the arm I could see.

"Okay, done."

The monster deposited the now healthier, but still sleeping woman in the room from earlier. I wondered whether it was some kind of minion or projection. I was guessing a projection based on the sleeping woman, but I didn't really have enough information to be sure. I made a mental note that she might be a weak point if things went sour. Amy looked back at Top Hat.
"You said team mates right?"

"Yes, I'll go get her." He walked off towards another door, pausing to looked back at us. "Don't panic when you see her."

My eyebrow raised at that. What could be wrong with 'her'? Maybe some kind of fear effect stranger power? My arm was getting a little cramped. So I took the opportunity to slowly bring myself up to a sitting position, releasing my construct so as not to accidentally stab myself. The monster, no Genesis, stared at me as I moved.

"What?" I glared at it, indignantly. "The floor is cold and hard."

I glanced over at the couch where Amy sat and sighed. Genesis stared at me for a little while before gesturing towards the couch. I guess the girl controlling it was grateful for Amy healing her, or maybe just had some common decency. Looking down at the bonds around my ankles I decided to just crawl over to the couch instead of trying to hop. Would it really have killed her to lend a hand? Genesis certainly had enough of them. Amy clumsily helped, pulling me up next to her. I leaned in, shoulders rubbing and silently cursing the bindings that prevented a hug.

"Awww, isn't that cute."

Amy and I turned to look at the doorway, where Top Hat's mocking tone had come from. I saw a worried looking woman, around the same age as genesis if I had to guess. Unkempt brown hair draped her frowning, tear stained face as she leaned in from the side. She must have been damn tall given that she seemed to be nearly horizontal to fit in the top corner.

"Fr- Trickster, said you might be able to help?"

The woman's tone was hopeful, but it was clear from her expression that she didn't think it likely. But given Amy's powers, I had trouble believing that would be the case. Well at least I had an actual name for Top Hat now.

"Well I won't know till I touch you."

The panic that suddenly flashed across the woman's face was surprising.

"What? But? Trickster what the hell were you thinking?"

"I'll be fine, she'll only need to touch you once. Trust me Love."

I could see the woman was going under an internal debate, clear by her shifting worried expression. What was the problem?

"Anything we should know about?" I asked, suspicious of their behaviour. There was something really strange about this situation. I reformed my invisible blade, just in case. The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Trickster interrupted.

"She's just shy." He stepped out of the wide doorway, gesturing into the room. "Now come along dear."

After a moment of hesitation she moved, flowing through the doorway and bringing herself fully into sight. I gasped as I took in the strange mass of twisted flesh that was her lower half. A mixture of
tones and features. What looked like a canine, bovine thing of angry red flesh made up a large chunk of it. Sprouting out the other side was a more draconic looking head, in smooth green-grey scales. Large legs in brown fur, with vicious looking clawed hooves and a mess of oily black tentacles seemed to support the large mass. The only think preventing me from panicking completely was the sad, ashamed look on the woman's face. She didn't seem hostile despite the deadly looking mutations.

"A case 53?"

I turned to Amy, slightly confused by her words. Was that the official term for monster capes? Not that I'd want to call the woman a monster to her face, despite how freaked out I was. She on the other hand looked more calm than I felt. Perhaps she'd seen worse in her career. Unsurprising if she had to heal a bunch of people from Endbringer fights. I wasn't exactly squeamish, but I hadn't really seen anything quite that horrifying.

"I don't know." She shrugged, which sent a disturbing quiver through the mass of flesh. "Just my powers, they've slowly been changing me since I got them. I think they're broken somehow."

Amy seemed to take that in as she scanned her eyes over the mess. She took in a breath and let out a long sigh.

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything. I've never seen anything like this, let alone tried to fix it." She pointed to the space in front of the couch. "Well come on, you'll have to come here because someone tied me up."

The woman looked back at Top Ha-, I mean Trickster. He gave her an encouraging nod and gestured forwards.

"It'll be fine." The woman undulated over to the space in front of us, which made me rather nervous as I waited for the inevitable complications. Trickster then pointed next to where the dog cow head thing was.

"Genesis, if you can stand over here."

I couldn't get a good read on the multi armed thing, but it seemed to hesitate for a moment before it moved over next to the flesh pile. Amy reached out her hands and the woman hesitantly moved to take them. The fear on the woman's face was way too much for just being shy. I opened my mouth to tell Amy to stop, but I was too late. As their hands met, Amy closed her eyes in a frown and a disgusting slurping noise filled the room a moment later. I looked over, seeing a puddle of goo spreading across the floor and a twisted, female form was grabbed by Genesis. A very apt question came to mind.

"What the fuck?"

As I watched, the twisted flesh of the girl smoothed out, malformed limbs straightening. Sections of skin discoloured and became loose on the body. It took a moment to realise it had shed it's skin to become some weird kind of clothing. It's warped face blended from an abstract painter's rendition, to a perfect mirror of my girlfriend. Still held by Genesis' six arms, what I guessed was a clone of Amy stared directly at me. I blushed as I realised that despite the coverage of the limbs and the organic clothes, I had seen more than I really should have of my girlfriend's body. A cruel grin spread across her lips.
"Hello Lover, do like what you've seen?"
I stared at Not-Amy, warning sirens screaming in my head at how wrong this was. Why the hell hadn't they told us this would happen? She just laughed as she saw my expression.

"You know she re-"

Her words were interrupted by an ear splitting bang, as her brains spattered across the nearby wall. Amy jumped in surprise next to me, but the woman didn't let go of her hands. As I saw a copy of my girlfriend's face go slack, I repeated my earlier question in a more panicked pitch.

"What the fuck?"

"Evil clone." Trickster waggled his gun a little at the body that Genesis had just let slump to the floor. "Problem solved. Now get the healing done and we can be on our way."

Amy, looking terrified and pale, just nodded and closed her eyes again. A frown of concentration creased her brow.

"Your body is..." She winced. "Fighting it."

I watched as the flesh was retracting and parts started sloughing off, before slowly being replaced with more. My mouth hung open at the disgusting sight. Then that same slurping noise and another twisted body slid to the floor. Genesis moved over to pin it in place.

"Shit." Trickster yelled before aiming his gun at the new clone. Another bullet put down the mewling wretch before it could move more than a few inches. "That wasn't supposed to happen. Might wanna hurry this up."

Amy still had her eyes closed and was sweating, seemingly trying to block out Trickster. My horror was slowly squashed by my growing anger. I turned away from where she was trying to fix the woman and stared at Trickster.

"You know, evil clones of Amy are really something you should have mentioned."

"Shut up, we've got it handled." Another clone popped out, flooding the floor with more goo. Another shot was fired. "Whatever you're doing, it's not -urk."

My eyes went wide as he coughed up some blood and slumped to the floor. Behind him stood the first clone, blood covering the side of her face and her skin clothes covered in goo. She was frowning, but otherwise looked as good as new. Then I noticed the blood covering long pointy fingers. What the hell? Was Amy's clone some kind of regenerating shape shifter?

"That wasn't very nurrrrr. " Her right eye twitched. "Apparently my brains are harder to figgle."

"Francis!" The slightly less monstrous woman cried out as she saw what had happened to Trickster. Apparently I now knew his real name too. "What did you do?"

"I only stabbed him a little, he'll be fine." Not-Amy waved off her concern with a blood covered claw as it slowly shifted back to a hand. "I mean little miss healer is right thurrrrrrr, and it's not like
shot him in the head. Do you know how much that hurts? Not to mention the aphasia. Huh, would have thought aphasia would have been llilll-. Damn it!"

Genesis, having dealt with another clone, grabbed Not-Amy again in an attempt to squeeze the life out of her. As I stealthily cut my bonds in case things got worse, Genesis was pierced by several long, thin spines before dissolving into a puff of purplish black smoke. The bony spikes retracted back into the clone's body as she shook her head in exasperation.

"I mean seriously, it's rude to interpret someone when they're spanking. That, that didn't come out right at all. Amy, hey me? Be a dear and fix my brain when you're done with hurrrrrr." She twitched again. "And don't go saying you can't, because I know you can and this is just getting soliloquy."

Not-Amy rolled her eyes again and sighed, prodding a moaning Trickster with her foot. I meanwhile was starting to wonder if I was actually still unconscious and dreaming. It was like a nightmare earlier and now everything had become way too surreal. Wait... What was that about brains?

"Just dissolve her Gemma or something." The clone added as she looked down at the rapidly decaying sloughed off flesh and the other, more reliably dead clones. "You alright Taylor? You look pale."

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it. Then opened it. Then closed it again before turning to my Amy. I just couldn't deal with everything at that moment.

"Amy dear?" She turned to me, looking strained as she continued to try to fix the woman. "Can you make the weirdness stop please?"

"But, I..." Amy seemed to be in pain, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

I wasn't sure why she was having so much trouble. Serious wounds were no problem. What was it that was so different about this woman? Other than the obviously hideous mass of flesh that was slowly repairing itself, of course. Amy seemed hesitant, of all things. Was it the thing about brains? Was she afraid of failing? I wrapped my now free arms around her, careful not to touch the woman and keeping a wary eye on the clone.

"I'm here for you."

I didn't know if the support would mean much, but I didn't know what else to do. Trickster was at least temporarily out of commission and Not-Amy at least seemed to not be hostile at the moment. She finally nodded and turned back to the woman.

"This might hurt."

True to those words, the woman screamed in pain. Pulling her hands free of Amy's grip, she began thrashing on the ground. The monstrous flesh falling off in lumps, dissolving into ooze. Amy slipped out of my hug and dropped down off the couch, reaching out again. When she grabbed the woman's arm, no clone emerged. Instead, the lower half's collapse slowed down a little. Amy seemed to be controlling the decay, making sure it didn't go too far. I just watched in horror, not knowing what to do. Trickster was lying on the floor, watching as his lover changed. The room was silent except the gentle whimpering from the woman and the pained moaning from Trickster. Not-Amy impatiently watched, looking rather bored as she swayed her head back and forth to some unheard rhythm.

After an interminable time, the woman's lower half had formed into a normal pair of legs. I had
looked away at that point while Not-Amy had fetched some sheets to cover her modesty. The woman's eyes eventually opened, looking around then down. She quickly sat up, feeling her legs through the sheets before lifting it up to get a better look. Before Amy could move, she was wrapped up in a hug.

"Thank you thank you thank you. You don't know how long we've had to deal with that."

While I still felt like clubbing Trickster with an invisible baseball bat, I couldn't help but smile at the woman's glee.

"You can let go now." Amy squeaked from within the embrace. The woman blushed and released her, looking sheepish. I moved down and hugged Amy in her place, the expression on her face said she needed it. While the woman was distracted I surreptitiously cut through Amy's bonds.

"Sorry." She said before wrapping the sheet around her and standing up with a wobble. She looked over at Trickster, then at Not-Amy before looking back at Amy and I. "He's fucking stupid and needs to apologise to you, but I do love him. Can you... Please make sure he doesn't die at least?"

"Hey! It's my turn thirst!" Not-Amy twitched again. "He's only paraphrased and she needs to figgle my brains."

Amy shivered in my arms as she looked up at her possibly evil twin.

"It feels wrong doing... I'm not even sure where to start."

"Relax me. I'll just copy yours a bit." Not-Amy flashed Amy a lopsided grin before holding out a hand in a fist. "Wonder Twin powers activate?"

Amy blinked a bit before looking at me. I shrugged, having no idea if this was a good idea or not. At the very least, I hoped it would make the clone less silly sounding. What the hell was she talking about with Wonder Twin powers anyway? Amy gave her clone an awkward smile.

"Form of... me?"

They touched knuckles in some kind of weird, rotated fist bump. Not-Amy winced a little before reopening her eyes with a smile.

"Great, I think that should do it. You can heal sorta-mom's douche bag boyfriend now if you want." She looked down at the villain, like she'd step in something unpleasant before looking back at us with a grin. "Though really, he should survive anyway. He only needs one lung right?"

I gave up trying to understand just what was going on around that point. It seemed Not-Amy wasn't maniacally evil, so much as lacking much in the way of empathy or tact. That her behaviour was reminiscent of Regent's was not lost on me. Amy meanwhile moved over to Trickster, leaned down and put a hand on the man's neck. A few seconds later she removed it before stepping back to me.

"We'll you'll be fine. You won't bleed to death, drown in blood or be paralysed. But it'll still be a few very painful weeks for you to recover fully. You frankly deserve to suffer more for what you did."

Amy turned to look at the woman. "The only reason I've even done this much is because of your reasons."

"Appreciate it." Coughed Trickster with a wince of pain as he slowly propped himself up. "There's a
duffle bag over there with your stuff. Ten thou that I was going to give you for emotional trauma and all that shit."

Not-Amy just shook her head a bit, while Amy and I stared at him. Eventually I just had to speak up.

"So instead of asking Amy to heal with an offer of cash, you kidnapped us and were going to give us cash afterwards anyway? You are a fucking idiot." I let my anger get the best of me and punched him in the face, the sound of a broken nose was strangely satisfying. "And that's for interrupting... our night."

He yelped in pain, but didn't do anything to retaliate, or dodge come to think of it. Nor did the new monster that I had only just noticed in the corner. I stared at the weird long and winged feline-horse thing, but it just stared back at me before nodding our way. Genesis apparently had a wide range of ability with projections.

Seeing as no fight was starting I pulled a slightly surprised Amy along, picking up the duffle bag on the way. Just because he was an idiot didn't mean the money wasn't somewhat appreciated and I'd be damned if I left the money with him. Not-Amy followed along, an amused grin on her face as we left the building and the villains behind.

"You know Taylor, you're pretty sexy when you're angry. I can see what I see in you." Not-Amy was making my brain hurt again. "Not as sexy as Vicky though. Speaking of which."

I didn't really have much time to process that statement because of the arrival of New Wave and the Undersiders... including Marceau. What the hell was going on? How had my team mates even known I was taken? As they got closer, I noticed the lack of Regent and I could see the massive grin on Tattletale's face. A horrifying conclusion settled in my mind and I began to wonder if Trickster's bad ideas were contagious.

"Don't mention the brain thing please." Amy whispered into my ear, shivering a little. "I really don't want to do that again."

I couldn't imagine just what it was like, having to do what Amy had just done. By her reaction, it mustn't have been pleasant.

"Your secrets are safe with me."

We weren't much further from the building when our would be rescuers met us.

"Are you alright Ames?" Glory Girl voice was heavy with concern as she looked at the Amy holding my hand before getting a good look at Not-Amy. "Wait, what?"

"Vicky!" Not-Amy immediately pounced, running forward to wrap her sister up in a hug. Before Amy could say anything, her sister realised something very important.

"Eeeww, what are you covered in?" She looked back our way, then back at the girl doing a great impression of a limpet before realising something more important. "Who are you, and why do you look like Amy?"

"Oh, I'm Amy's morally ambiguous twin." Not-Amy said cheerfully. "Call me Amelia."

Despite my gaze being focused on the debacle before me, I still noticed Brandish visibly twitch.
Victoria looked like I'm sure I had not that long ago, as Amelia continued being disarmingly weird. She was probably even more confused by the clone's bizarre behavior, having known her sister much longer than I had.

"Hands!" Glory Girl's startled squeak of a voice filled the street.

"Oh, sorry about that." Amelia sounded contrite, though I suspected she was anything but. "Still having some muscle spasms from getting shot in the head."

Amy was tensing up beside me, clearly uncomfortable with her clone's antics. I could see why having a clone of yourself hit on your sister would be awkward. I was really starting to dislike Amelia, if only for how she was making Amy feel. I opened my mouth to tell her to knock it off, but Glory Girl spoke before I could.

"What? Why? How?" All very good questions, asked as she removed herself from Amelia's embrace. I couldn't blame her for her discomfort.

"Shot in the head, splattered my brains everywhere before I mostly healed them up." I could see Victoria's face grow a little pale, but mostly just bemused. "Something stupid about evil clones. That's some serious discrimination right there."

She turned towards Brandish.

"I mean seriously... What kind of idiot thinks evil is genetic?"

The verbal jab at Amy's mom was not lost on me. The look on her face showed it had struck home too. I couldn't help but feel a little bit of satisfaction at that, despite the rather blatant delivery. Amy just groaned at the comment.

However, it was around that point that I realised just how much trouble having a loose-lipped, amoral clone with the memories of my girlfriend could be. On the one hand, she hadn't screamed out that I was Marceau. On the other hand, we'd only been outside for a few minutes. While it was likely that I'd eventually need to come out to Amy's family if we kept on dating, I'd much prefer to be in control of the situation. Especially the timing. So I decided to try a change of topic.

"Wow!" I yelled as loud as I could, which wasn't very. "I never expected both New Wave and the Undersiders to work together."

This of course distracted people some what from Amelia being... what I was starting think of as normal for her. The down side being I now had everyone's attention, a pouting clone and a smiling team mate in particular.

"You'll have to tell us how that happened." I tried to look eager instead of suspicious, but that just made Tattletale grin wider before she answered.

"Oh, we were just in the neighbourhood when we saw something suspicious and offered our assistance when we found out what happened."
In other words, they had been spying on us. Probably Aisha. There was no other reason for them to
be in the area, let alone having Alec play dress up. If it hadn't lead to a combined if some what
unnecessary rescue attempt, I'd be much more angry at them. With all the members of New Wave in
attendance, I'd have to be patient and wait to find out the full details.

"Though it looks like we needn't have bothered." She added as she looked at me, Amy and Amelia
in turn. "But still, it's not every day you see the plot of a soap opera play out."

Her emphasis did not amuse me. Even less so that I couldn't display my displeasure without it
looking odd. Instead I just smiled and nodded. 'Marceau' was practically lounging in a particularly
Alec manner on one of the dogs, Judas I think. If he wasn't even going to make the effort, why the
hell had he bothered to dress up as me?

Photon Mom... Lady Photon hovered over to us while it seemed Amelia, Glory Girl and Brandish
were having a presumably awkward chat.

"Are you two alright?" She asked, in a soft caring tone much divorced from the usual confident one
she used in the press releases. Amy and I both nodded, even if it weren't particularly true. She
already seemed much nicer than her sister. Looking over her shoulder at the clone of her niece before
turning back to us, she asked a very sensible question. One that probably would have been asked
earlier if not for said clone's disrupting presence.

"So, where are the kidnappers anyway?"

"They were in there when they let us go." I pointed back towards the house with a thumb over my
shoulder.

At my gesture, a few of Intel's drones buzzed over to the still open doorway. If they had any clue
what they were doing, they'd have mounted up on Genesis' presumably flight capable form and fled
as soon as we'd gone through the door. Though judging by what little I'd seen of their 'planning', I
was kind of doubtful. As the rest of the Undersiders waited on the recon drones, Laserdream flew a
quick circuit of the immediate area. Shielder, Flashbang and Manpower likewise moved to secure a
perimeter by the look of it.

"What happened?"

Lady Photon's question dragged me out of my musings and I realised she had taken an interest in the
goo splattered over Amy and I. More so Amy's pants, where she had knelt in it. Amy hesitated, so I
squeezed her hand and spoke for her.

"A desperate and stupid villain needed healing on his team mates. One of them made broken clones.
It was messy." Her eyebrow raised at that. I had probably understated things just a little.

"You seem to be coping pretty well... Taylor was it?"

"Yeah." I nodded, figuring Amy had mentioned me to her aunt. "It'll probably settle in later and then
I can have a little breakdown or something. For the moment I'm just happy Amy's safe."

She gave me another odd look before smiling. Intel meanwhile had turned pale, from what I could
see of her face underneath her large tinker goggles.

"Eeeeew. Someone's going to need to clean up in there." She shuddered. "But it looks like they've
Lady Photon nodded.

"We'll call it in for the PRT to deal with. In the mean time, let's get you two..." She looked back over her shoulder. "Three cleaned up and work out what to do. I don't suppose the villains said anything about a duration?"

My face fell at that. I looked over where Amelia was giggling in front of a concerned looking Brandish and Glory Girl. As much as she was creeping me out, it still did not sit well with me that someone who obviously had their own, if warped personality could just abruptly end.

"..." I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I closed my mouth and looked at Amy, who seemed likewise uncertain and gave a shrug to her aunt. My vision started to become blurry as I thought about possibly having to see someone with Amy's face die again. She looked up at me just as the first tears started to fall.

"Oh Taylor." She wrapped me up in a hug as the emotions I'd been holding back while everything was happening finally washed over me. Shock at seeing so much casual murder up close, anger at Trickster, relief at our safety and shame that I was making a scene in front of everyone.

"I guess that breakdown hit early" I sniffled a little before continuing. "Too much to deal with since..."

I managed to stop myself before I mentioned Boston, but it was a close thing. Apparently the stress was getting to me, almost letting things slip in front of a member of New Wave. Without the emotional distance I had to the Endbringer victims, death felt so much more real. Then that just opened the flood gates to what I had been carefully not thinking about since the weekend. As I sobbed into Amy's shoulder, I wondered where all my earlier control had gone and why it couldn't have waited another hour before slipping through my grasp so as to save me from the embarrassment. I let out a yelp as I felt another embrace me from behind.

"Aww poor Taylor." I tensed a little as I heard Amy's voice behind me. Amelia sounding just like her was a little creepy. "Are you upset over me? I didn't know you cared."

Shit, had she overheard our conversation? Did she also have some kind of enhanced hearing or something? Fucking shape shifters.

"Don't worry, I think I should be around for quite some time." That didn't exactly reassure me.

"Um, can you let go of my girlfriend?" Despite the hesitant sounding words, there was a certain steel to Amy's voice. Looking at her face, she looked rather annoyed at her clone.

"Ah, no need to be jealous Amy dear. I'm practically you after all." She chuckled as she let go, to my relief. While Alec was sure to make endless twin jokes later, I was rather uncomfortable in Amelia's presence. "Besides, I'd be more worried about the other Undersiders. I mean have you seen the way Tattletale was looking at you two?"

"Other Undersiders?" I froze as Lady Photon picked up that slip. Shit. Apparently I had tempted fate with my earlier thoughts.

"Oh yeah, we've always been jealous of Tattle..." As I looked at Amelia, I saw a sheepish grin shape
her features. "Umm, oops?"

Well that ruined any chance of passing it off as a misunderstanding. Lady Photon glanced between Amelia and me, still wrapped in Amy's arms. She then looked over at the Undersiders who were moving in, having picked up on Amelia's faux pas.

"Wait? You're Regent?"

I groaned while Amy broke into delirious giggles. Am I really so boyish? He's shorter than me damn it.

"I can definitely assure you Taylor is not Regent." Amy cackled as I glowered at her. I really didn't see the humour in the situation. Turning back I saw Lady Photon and the rest of New Wave looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. Or in Brandish's case, cold judgement.

"Well I guess the cat's out of the bag." I sighed. "I'd honk my horn, but I lost that in Boston."

"What?" Victoria yelled, apparently rather surprised by the revelation.

I think I heard Laserdream mutter something while Shielder laughed and nudged her.

"Marceau?" Asked Manpower, glancing between myself and Regent. Regent pointed at me before speaking up.

"I can see why you like cross dressing." He twirled about in a mockery of girlish self admiration. "This is fun."

I blinked in confusion. How was him wearing my costume cross dressing?

"What do you mean?" Asked Laserdream, voicing my own confusion on the matter. "You're dressed in men's clothes."

He let out a soft chuckle.

"Only on the outside."

My mouth hung open as more information than I ever needed soaked into my brain. Eventually I just decided on shaking my head. There wasn't any other sensible response.

"Well now that my secret identity has become a mockery thanks to Amelia," The clone flinched, at least having the decency to look embarrassed. "Can we go and get cleaned up? This goo is starting to reek."

Brandish stared at me for a bit. She opened her mouth the speak before closing it and stalking off without a word. Flashbang glanced between us and Brandish, coming to a decision.

"We'll talk about this later Amy." Flashbang said quickly before chasing after his wife. I looked at the departing capes, a mixture of anger and confusion overriding my embarrassment.

"Seriously? Your daughter was kidnapped and you don't even stick around to make sure she's fine?" My words were too quiet to reach the target of my ire, but they were not lost on the rest of New Wave. Amy just sighed in resignation, so I gave her another squeeze. "Sorry for making things
worse for you."

She just shook her head before returning the hug. Glory Girl looked like she too was going to chase after her mother for a moment before she turned back towards us. She stopped a few steps away, staring at me.

"So... explain."

"I'm sure that can wait till we get them cleaned up Victoria." Lady Photon chided her niece before turning back to us. "Let's get you back to our place so you can have a shower and a change of clothes. After that? Yes, some explanation might be in order."

"Taylor?" The echoes of Grue's voice didn't mask his concern as he glanced towards the remaining New Wavers.

"I'll be fine." I waved him off. "Plus I really want to get this stuff off of me."

He still looked unconvinced, but Tattletale just tapped him on the shoulder and nodded as he turned to look at her grinning face.

"Fine." He turned towards Lady Photon. "I trust that you'll follow the unwritten rules, despite your own views on identities."

"Relax Grue. My husband is still alive and my niece is happier than I've seen her in a while because of her. I have every reason to keep this a secret."

I nodded at Grue as he looked back at me. Eventually he shrugged and hopped back onto one of the dogs, the rest of my team having already mounting up.

"Catch you later." Tattletale called out, waving as they rode off. Thus I was left alone with my girlfriend, her clone and the other five eighths of New Wave.

"So, how do we get to your place?"

"Dibs on Vicky!" Amelia gleefully shouted, to Glory Girl's discomfort.

"I'll carry Amy then." Laserdream hovered over to us while Lady Photon reached out a hand to me with a smile.

"Guess I'm giving you a lift then."

The flight to the Pelham residence wasn't the most comfortable, the under the shoulder carry being a bit awkward but it sufficed. The silence also mean I had time to think on disturbing things. Like the fact that if Regent wasn't joking, he had to have gotten women's underwear from somewhere. I shuddered at the implications.

"Don't worry." Lady Photon said, slightly drowned out by the wind. "We'll get you warmed up soon."

I didn't bother correcting her.
As I was led through the Pelham residence, stretching out my stiff muscles from the flight in, I noticed a stark contrast in aesthetics in comparison to the Dallon home. Rather than an omnipresent theme, there was much more variety. Each room had its own thing going on. Whether it be a feature wall or a theme, each room felt kind of like it came from a different house. Like they were living in a furniture showroom. But despite this eclectic appearance, it still felt lived in. A few empty glasses on a table, or a bit of stray clothing taking away the slightly artificial sheen.

While the effect was impressive, I didn't think they had spent that much money on it as the Dallons had on their house. Things were nice, but they didn't have the same high end très chic feel of the furniture I'd seen earlier in the evening. If I had to guess, I would have pegged someone in the house having a passion for decoration. Spending long hours on sourcing the right accessories and painting to achieve it rather than just throwing money at it. I was pretty sure Mrs Pelham spent most of her time working on the New Wave PR and sponsorship things, so I guess that left Mr Pelham. What was his job again?

Lady Photon pointed me towards a charcoal tiled bathroom on the ground floor, while Laserdream and Glory Girl dragged Amy and Amelia up stairs. It didn't surprise me much that a reasonably well off family of four would have two bathrooms. I certainly wasn't complaining about not having to wait for a shower.

"I've got some of Crystal's spare clothes for you, so you have something to wear once you've cleaned up." She told me as she placed them on the counter. "Then we can see if we can salvage this dress."

"Thank you.. umm, Mrs Pelham?" She was still in costume, but we were in her home, so I was a little confused on naming protocol in this case. She smirked at my confusion as she grabbed some towels out of the nearby linen cabinet and hung them over a rack.

"You can call me Sarah. But I'll let you have your shower now."

And so I was left to my own devices in a strange bathroom. It took a little bit of fiddling with the taps to get the water temperature right, but when I did it was glorious. I had to use some of the shampoo as I realised there was some goo in my hair. Luckily it hadn't caused too much of a mess and dissolved easily, I'd hate to have had to cut it to remove a matted section. Eventually I tore myself away from the luxuriously hot water, figuring it impolite to use too much. Especially with Amy and Amelia also draining the tanks.

I slipped into the clothes, a slightly old pair of jeans that hung a little loose and a New Wave branded t-shirt that didn't quite cover my midriff. I hadn't realised just how much shorter Laserdream actually was. Unless that was the style of course. Taking one last look in the mirror and sighing, I stepped out into the hallway and walked back into the main living room. This happened to have a homely lodge theme, with wood panelling and matching pine furniture with navy blue upholstery. It even had a faux fire place to complete the feel.

Amy, Victoria, Crystal and... Eric I think it was, were seated on the two couches. Mr Pelham had taken one of the lounge chairs while Sarah and Amelia were presumably upstairs. Judging by the fit, Amy was wearing something of Sarah's. Otherwise the top probably would have a bit a bit too snug. Amy patted her hand on the space on her right, thankfully not making me sit between her and her sister. This would be awkward enough without that.
Looking around at the people in the room, there was a mix of moods evident on their faces. Eric seemed mostly amused, Crystal seemed to be a little distracted and Neil had a fairly jovial grin on his face. Victoria looked upset and I could guess why. Amy seemed a little withdrawn, but gave me a small smile as I took the offered seat. Victoria was the first to break the silence.

"So explain something to me. How many people are you with behind my sister's back?"

My mouth gaped open, words failing to come in response to that question. I thought she'd be angry at me for the bank, not for some imaginary philandering. *Wait, did she just call me a slut?*

"What? No. Just no. I wouldn't do that to Amy." My voice raised to, well 'normal' volume. "Where the hell did you get that idea?"

Sure I had my suspicions, but I was too angry to care about the obvious.

"Well you hitting on me, Miss Militia and Parian. Oh and your harem in the Undersiders."

Yep. It seemed I'd never escape those rumours.

"First no. I was trying to apologise for hurting you in the bank. Second, no. I was getting her autograph seeing as I'm a fan. Especially as she's the reason Amy and I met." That got a few confused looks. "Third, no. She rescued me and probably saw my face, so I need to sort out that mess. Finally, eeew. Seriously, no. Tattletale and Regent were just teasing me over my internet reputation. Or are you saying everything on PHO is true?"

She blanched a little at that, probably thinking of the rumours involving Marceau and Glory Girl. Serves her right.

"So why didn't you send flowers to the Wards?" That... was a fairly valid question.

"Well I barely did anything to them. Plus I was still kind of pissed off at them at the time, so I didn't feel as bad as I did for your injuries."

"So why were you pissed off at the Wards then?"

*Shit*, I walked into that question. I sighed as I realised that was something I'd probably have to broach tonight anyway. Amy already knew, and given that New Wave now knew too much already it probably wouldn't make things worse. A small optimistic part of my brain thought it might even help.

"Did you every wonder why your boyfriend was so uncomfortable when Winslow was brought up over dinner?"

"Yeah, that was kind of weird." Her eyebrow raised as she seemed to think back on the double date. "I thought he was just being... wait what? How did you?"

"How did I know you were dating Gallant? You weren't exactly subtle about things. I wasn't sure till I saw his reaction though." She waved at me to continue while the rest of the crowd were leaning in to hear better. "While I don't think they know I'm Marceau, they do know about what caused me to trigger and who was responsible."

There were a few small gasps. From what I'd heard and from my own experience, most triggers were pretty shitty so linking mine with the Wards was pretty damning. I was skirting the issue a little by
not mentioning Sophia, but Victoria wasn't as dumb as some might think. Comprehension dawned on her face as she made the connections.

"Oh."

"Yeah. I've mellowed a bit since then, since they seem mostly alright." I shrugged. "Still think Gallant's a bit of a judgemental douche though. No offence."

She looked like she was going to argue that point for a moment, but seemed to contemplate something instead. That's when Crystal spoke up.

"So why cross dress as a male mime?"

Everyone's attention was even more focused than before.

"I must admit I'm quite intrigued too."

I looked up to see Sarah with a smile upon her face, leading Amelia through the hall way door. Sarah in a sort of simple casual dress and Amelia in some over sized track pants and a hoodie. Eric's most likely.

"Ah yes, that." I sighed. "One of the things I kind of regret, despite the reasoning behind it."

"Oh?" Sarah smirked as she took a seat in Neil's lap, leaving the other chair for Amelia. Compared to Carol and Mark, they seemed much more affectionate with each other. Thankfully not too blatantly.

"Well the mime thing was because how my powers worked, and the fact that I was mute after my... trigger."

"Part of the reason we met." Amy interjected, snuggling up to me. "Miss Militia asked me to heal Taylor. Her larynx was completely wrecked."

I nodded before continuing.

"The cross dressing was Tattletale's idea. She pointed out that there were probably very few mute girls around my height, so my disguise had to be a little more thorough. It... " I cringed a bit. "Worked a little too well. I hadn't expected quite the effect it had, reputation wise."

Eric snorted a little at that. I guess it was kind of funny from an outside point of view. Crystal elbowed her brother, probably for being impolite or something.

"So it wasn't a car then." Victoria dragged the topic back a few steps.

"No." I shook my head a bit. "I got caught in a couple of Bakuda's bombs and the next day Amy here calls up my home to arrange an appointment."

Victoria nodded.

"Yeah, I saw that video. I'd figured it wasn't as bad as it looked given how you seemed fine on the next outing. I guess this explains it." She gave me a slightly angry look. "Takes a lot of gall to get healed by someone you took hostage the day before."
"Admittedly I was kind of concussed and loaded up on painkillers when I went through with that plan. But I'm still trying to make it up to Amy."

"Silly Taylor," Amy bopped me on the side of the head "You know I've forgiven you for that."

"I know." My frown shifted in to an uneasy smile. "But I still feel guilty about it."

"So how long have you known, Amy dear?" Neil asked still seemly amused by the proceedings, an arm wrapped around his wife's waist.

"Oh, it would have been, what a couple weeks ago?" She turned to me for confirmation.

"Would have been the 5th. Right after raid on the Empire storehouse."

"What a charming way to remember our anniversary, such as it is." A wry smile spread across her lips.

"Ah ha!" Victoria cried out, startling most of the room and drawing everyone's attention. "So that's how you walk in heels so well."

Amy giggled while the others were confused by the non sequitur. I figured I should let the other in on the conversation.

"Yeah, I imagine they're full platform boots. Much more stable that way. My quiet field also reduces the clomping sound."

"Quiet field?" Eric asked, apparently it wasn't a well known thing. At this point I might as well explain.

"Yeah it probably needs a better name, but everything I do makes something like a tenth of the noise it should." I sighed. "I'm basically shouting right now to have a normal talking volume. Can't turn the damn thing off."

"It's kind of creepy just how much your powers make you a mime."

I glanced over at Amelia, who had an amused smile on her face. I had been wondering when she'd start talking again.

"You're one to talk, little miss hedgehog." Flashes of her early spine producing exploits were still fresh in my mind.

"Aww, hear that Amy? She's giving me pet names."

My head tilted a little as my thoughts were derailed. That wasn't what I meant by that at all.

"Missing the point, Amelia." I sighed, but she just giggled in a disturbingly similar way to Amy. Not quite identical, yet not quite different enough. I started having uncharitable thoughts about cheap knock off brands. "Speaking of, I guess we need to deal with the other pressing issue."

It might have been a little selfish, but I was kind of tired of question time. Plus what to do with the clone was a fairly important issue. Given that the elder Dallons had run off, it seemed unlikely that she had a home there. Or was that all because of me? Shit, I hoped I hadn't made things too
troublesome for Amy at home.

"Ooh, let's." Amelia bounced cheerfully, apparently liking the attention. "Mom's being a bit of a bitch again and Vicky is being all stand offish."

Victoria glared at the clone of her sister, a very uncomfortable frown on her face.

"What? It's like people forget I was adopted after the Westermarck age. Anyway, I guess I'll need to crash elsewhere." In the silence left by her comments, she stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I know, I can stay with Undersi-"

"No." Amy practically yelled her objection. I wasn't entirely sure why she was so adamant, but I certainly didn't want to have to deal with Amelia at the lair.

"Aww, worried I'll steal Taylor away from you? We were so damn insecure weren't we?"

Well, I wasn't expecting that as a reason. But I guess it made a certain amount of sense given that Amy probably didn't realise just how uncomfortable I was around the clone. After all, she did look identical to my girlfriend. Other than that constant mischievous smirk of course. I really didn't need another person like that in my life, I already had enough of that provided by Lisa, Alec and Aisha. I really needed to remember to tell them off when I got back.

"There's no way you're seeing their secret lair before I do." Amy blurted out.

I wasn't sure if she was just trying to deflect Amelia's jab, or it was a serious issue for her. It made a certain amount of sense that she'd want to see the lair and properly meet the team. Especially given all the jokes and rumours. I squeezed with the arm wrapped around her.

"I'll see if they're willing to let you visit. While my identity has more holes than Swiss cheese thanks to Amelia." My pointed glare only got another sheepish grin from the girl. "They've still got theirs to protect."

"Anyway, back to me. Where am I supposed to stay? Or am I doomed to a life on the streets?"

I'd feel more pity for her if she wasn't smiling like she was.

"We have a spare room you can stay in until I have a chat with Carol." Sarah offered. "Though I expect you to behave yourself while you're in our home. Until we work out what we're going to do long term, having you wandering about would complicate things."

"So I'm a prisoner or something?" She frowned, actually looking kind of sad for the first time since she'd been spawned.

"Nothing like that." Neil shook his head. "Just we'll want to check with the whole legal issue of clones. Don't want you getting in trouble with the PRT just for existing."

Well that was something I'd never really put any thought into. With the amount of strange cape powers out there, clones probably would have been an issue before now. So it made sense that there would be some legislation regarding it. Here I was thinking only about my own and Amy's discomfort with Amelia around and hadn't even considered how much it could suck to be her. As a clone, did she even have legal rights? As uncomfortable as I was with her around, I don't think she deserved that. I glanced up at the clock on the wall and startled at the time, already past eleven.
With all the excitement of the evening I had forgotten it was a school night. Dad was being understanding with the whole vigilante thing, so I figured the least I could do was try to keep to sensible hours when I wasn’t doing cape stuff. The fact that I was kidnapped probably wasn’t the best excuse for keeping him calm though.

"Oh crap! Dad's going to be freaking out. I was supposed to be home an hour ago." I quickly stood and Amy came along for the ride. I turned to her as a thought came to mind. "Umm, how do I even get home from here? I kind of lost track on the way over."

"Well I can give you another lift." Sarah offered. "It'd be quicker than the car."
"And Vicky can give me a lift too." Amy added. I looked at her and she gave me a hopeful smile.
"That is, if you'll have me. I don't think I'm all that welcome at home at the moment."

Thinking back on how Amy's parents had parted company, yeah I could see that being an unpleasant option. Dad might object a little at the short notice, but I figured I could convince him. Even if I had to sort out the spare room.

"It's fine by me."

With that, we shuffled out the front door and we were once again carried off into the night. I had to give a fair amount of respect to Sarah. She didn't have enhanced strength or anything, but didn't complain about hauling me across the city for the second time in the night. She must work out. As we approached my home, she spoke again.

"Well it was nice to meet you Taylor. Once again, thanks for saving Neil and I'm glad to see you making Amy happy." It was rather nice being thanked by a hero. "But if you do anything to hurt her, I will be rather disappointed."

And with that I shivered a little. Totally from the cold. She placed me down on the footpath in front of my home.

"I have no intention of making that mistake ever again."

"Good." She nodded as Victoria landed with Amy a few seconds later.

The front door opened as we approached it, our chaperones and chauffeurs trailing behind. Dad looked... not frazzled as I had expected, but more slightly disappointed.

"Taylor, you're very late and..." Then he saw Sarah and his face twisted in confusion. "Didn't you say you were having dinner with the Dallons?" He must have done a little more research into Amy's family if he could recognise the members of New Wave out of costume.

"Yes I'll extend my apologies for that Mr Hebert. Due to events that happened, I insisted that Taylor swing by our place to discuss things." At my Dad's further bafflement, she continued. "Taylor, if you'd like to explain."

_Oh thanks, I thought. Put me on the spot._

"So you were kidnapped, let go, had your identity exposed to New Wave and there is a clone out there." He glanced over at Amy. "And Amy needs to sleep over due to family drama."
"Yep." I sighed. At least it had only taken one talk through of events for him to pick up everything. He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment.

"Okay then." He nodded, a smile spreading his lips. "Still not as bad as when I met your Mother's parents."
The small hours

Dim lights flickered above her, barely illuminating the room. With the sporadic bursts of light, she could make out the cold, dirty tiles lining the floor and the mildew stains marring the walls. Ahead of her, she could make out the silhouette of her love. She reached out to a shoulder strewn with dark curls, gently grasping the otherwise bare skin.

The girl turned to face her, but it was not the face she was expecting. The light flickered brighter, illuminating a familiar face framed in wavy blonde tresses. How had she mistaken the hair for dark curls of her love? Rather than Taylor's friendly, wide smile, she was faced with the disgusted scowl of her sister.

"Don't touch me you freak." Her sister recoiled from her, roughly knocking Amy's hand from her shoulder. "To think I trusted you all these years. Mom was right about you."

"No. It's not like that. I was confused. I thought you were Taylor." Despite her protests, she couldn't help but feel that her sister was right. She was moving on, but there were still traces of those feelings stubbornly holding on. Still making her feel wrong despite her feelings for Taylor.

"Oh yes, your little villain pal. You're just like your father aren't you." She turned to the new voice. Carol stepped out of the darkness, through a doorway she could have sworn wasn't there before. "I bet you used your powers to make her love you. That's the sort of thing you'd do."

"No. No I wouldn't do that to her." Amy backed away from the two blondes as the stalked towards her.

"But she liked boys before you." Victoria's voice dripped with scorn. "I bet you did it when you healed her after your first date."

"And you've proven you can't stop yourself from messing with brains." Carol moved around the edge of the room, putty Amy between herself and Victoria.

"No no no."

She started to panic as they closed in. She looked for an exit, some way to get out of this room. Just as they were about to get in reach, she saw another doorway and ran for it. Her family's taunts echoing from behind. She ran as fast as she could through the dark passage, heedless of the risk. All she knew is she needed to get away from them. Amy finally spotted the light ahead, spirits lifting as she approached the safety of daylight.

She ground to a halt as she passed through the doorway and found in a courtyard, facing Taylor and herself. No, Amelia. She felt the former optimism slip from her grasp as they turned towards her, disdain clear on their features.

"Why are you here Amy? I thought you wanted to be with Victoria."

"No Taylor, I want you. I was just confused." Amy pleaded, tears welling in her eyes. "Victoria was my only friend for so long. I didn't act on it. Please forgive me."
"She's lying Taylor." Amelia stepped up and hugged Taylor from behind. "Even now she's imagining you as a blonde. She can make you that way. Turn you into a cheap copy because she can't have the real thing."

She was horrified at her clone's lies. She didn't want that, did she? No.

"No!" She shouted. "I want Taylor as she is, damn it. Stop spouting bullshit."

"Oh but Amy dear, I'm you. Of course I know how you feel." With a malicious grin, she leaned in and kissed Taylor on the cheek. "Come now lover, you're safe with me. I can't make you into someone else."

"You're right Amelia. I'm much better off with you. Sorry Amy, but I just can't trust you anymore."

Her face fell as they turned away from her, sauntering off through an archway in the courtyard wall.

"Please Taylor. Don't leave me. Please, I need you. Plea-"

She jolted up, wrapped in warmth and still enveloped in the darkness. What little she could see was unfamiliar, walls the wrong shape and furniture in the wrong places. For a moment she thought she was lost somewhere in those near endless halls until she remembered where she was. The guest room at Taylor's place. As details slowly fell in to place, she realised the nightmare for what it was. Taylor hadn't left her, Amelia was elsewhere and Victoria didn't hate her. Carol... that might not have been far off. Still, she had to be sure. There would be no getting to sleep till she had.

Getting up and out from beneath the covers wasn't as torturous as she had expected. The night was fairly mild with summer near, even without any heating and her borrowed pyjamas blunted the sudden absence of warm bedding. Tip toeing towards the door, she was careful not to knock anything. She didn't want to wake anyone. Especially Taylor's Dad. After all, it would be poor manners after he'd let her stay the night. She slowly turned the handle and pulled to door open, cringing as it made a soft squeak before silently opening the rest of the way.

She softly padded along the carpeted hallway to Taylor's room, hand on the wall to guide her and keep herself balanced as she was still kind of dizzy from the exhaustion and broken sleep. After what felt like an eternity of pausing at every slight noise, she came to her girlfriend's door.

A gunshot rang out and once more I saw Amy die. I laid there, helpless and immobile. Nothing I could do to stop it, my powers didn't work and I couldn't move a muscle. All I could do was lay there and watch Amy's beautiful face go slack and the life fade from her eyes. Again. I had lost count after the first few dozen, tears streaming down my face as I tried to break free from the paralysis gripping me and put a stop to it.

A strange squeaking noise echoed through the room and hundreds of pairs of burning underwear fell to the floor. I couldn't move my head to see where they'd come from, and I had no idea why such a thing would happen. But at least it was a change from the endless looping death. Staring at the burning undergarments, I couldn't help but feel like this was a necessary thing. That they couldn't not be burnt to ashes. As I contemplated this further, Amy's corpse once again stood up. I tried not to pay it any attention. But rather than stand around, it hobbled over to me.
"Taylor?" It's voice came out soothing. So different from the anguished cries she'd let out during some of the deaths. "Taylor, it's me."

My eyes shifted to get a better look at the now talking Amy as she leaned in and shook my shoulder. I blinked and -

My eyes were met with darkness and a face silhouetted by what little light came through a window to my left.

"Taylor?" Once again Amy's soothing voice broke the silence of the room. "Are you alright."

"You're alive?" I mumbled as I realised her hand on my shoulder felt warm.

"You were having a nightmare."

My sleep addled brain started to accept reality, pointing out that what I had taken for fact only a moment ago was the pure delusion of dreaming.

"Did... I wake you?" My mouth slightly slurring the words as I spoke. "Did I scream or something?"

I saw the vague outline of her head shake, hair flopping about.

"No, I had... a bad dream too." Her voice hitched a little and even with how fuzzy brained I was, I could tell it had been bad.

"Come here."

I reached out to pull her into a hug and apparently pulled her off balance, as she fell on top of me. Luckily she didn't elbow me or anything, instead crawling under the covers to snuggle up next to me on the bed. Once she was wrapped up in my arms, I felt her breath on my neck for a few seconds before she whispered to me.

"Please don't leave me."

With the broken sleep muddling my mind, I didn't really understand why she'd think that would be a problem. Still an obvious, if muddled answer came to mind.

"Won't ever."

She curled up tighter against me and I gently stroked her shoulder as I drifted back to sleep.
The sound of my dad getting in the shower woke me a few minutes before six thirty as usual. What wasn't usual was the clinging warmth sharing my bed. As I realized I had slept with my girlfriend, completely non euphemistically of course, I may have panicked a little. Since Dad was in the shower and not telling us off right now, perhaps he hadn't noticed. We needed to move quickly if we were to pretend that we hadn't broken the implied ground rules of her staying the night. I poked Amy, which elicited a sleepy moan of displeasure. As I considered other options for rousing her, I was robbed of the opportunity by my alarm going off.

"MRrrrr." She grumbled, trying to bury her head under the pillow. "Turn it off."

Alas the alarm was on her side and her body was in the way, so she eventually reached out to silence the infernal device herself. As she was only precariously perched on my single bed, it was at this point that she let out a surprised yelp as she fell off and dragged the sheets with her. Divested of my bedcovers and my lovely but inconvenient impediment, I leapt up to check on her and thus bringing into view an adorable image. Tangled in the swirly cream and raspberry quilt, she looked up at me with a mixture of surprise and confusion. I couldn't help but giggle. She frowned at that, before turning a particularly cute shade of red as the full situation sunk in.

"Oh." She started scrambling to get up, which only entangled her further and got me laughing harder. Eventually I reigned myself in enough to give her a hand in disentangling her from the bedclothes.

"We should get you back to your room before Dad notices." I reached out a hand to help her get to her feet. Once she was standing, I pulled her into a quick hug. "But... that was nice."

I let her go and prodded her out the door before trying to find some running clothes. Staring at my wardrobe, I had second thoughts about following my routine that morning. I'd regret not keeping up with my running, but I was feeling like I really needed to spend a little more time with Amy before heading off to school. School. While it had improved since Emma had basically given up on targeting me, I wasn't sure I could really face it today. Concentrating on classes would be an effort given what had happened and I was still feeling less than brilliant from the broken sleep the night before. But at least the nightmares had been kept at bay after she came to me. A simple solution to one of my dilemmas occurred to me. Putting off my clothes change, I made my way to the spare room and knocked on the closed door.

"Amy? Did you want to come running with me?"

There was a moment of silence from the other side of the door.

"Umm okay? I'm probably going to slow you down though."

If Amy ran as much as I suspected she did, in other words not at all, she likely would. Still, I could restrain myself if it meant a little extra time together. I wasn't sure when I had become so clingy, but at that moment I didn't really care.

"That's not a problem. I'll get you some exercise clothes."

By the time I had changed into my track pants and sweatshirt and brought a spare set for Amy, Dad had finished with his shower. As he stepped out of the bathroom and met my eyes, a small
mischievous smile was on his face.

"So, did you two sleep well?"

I froze. His wording and expression told me all I needed to know.  *Busted.*

"Um, uh. Yes?"

He chuckled.

"I'd be angrier about it but you didn't do anything did you?"

I shook my head. All we had done was sleep, warding off each other's nightmares with our presence.

"Thought so. I figured you'd probably need a little comfort after last night too." When I nodded he looked at me appraisingly. "It was worse than you let on, wasn't it?"

I sighed. When had he become so damn observant? I guess my earlier actions had taught him to pay more attention. While it was sort of appreciated, it could certainly be inconvenient. Rather than answer with words, I just nodded again.

"If you want to talk about it, I am here for you kiddo." He sighed and shook his head a little. "And if not me, at least talk with Amy. Please don't let things bottle up again."

"Okay Dad." As the door opened and revealed an embarrassed Amy, I realised she must have heard us. "I was just going to drag Amy along for my morning run. We'll be back in about thirty odd."

He flashed a friendly smile at Amy before turning back to me.

"Okay, stay safe. I'll have some breakfast ready for the two of you when you get back."

"I stand correct." Amy panted, plodding along beside me as I slowly jogged at a walking pace for her to keep up. "You are the vilest of villains, torturing me like this."

I couldn't help by laugh at her melodramatic protestations against my exercise regime.

"Don't worry, I was just like you the first day out. We'll get you stretched out when we get back and once you've eaten some food you'll be fine." I jogged backwards in front of her, perhaps a little taunting. "A few more weeks and you'll be super fit."

"If I don't die of exhaustion first." She wheezed as she slowed down further. "I didn't think I was this unfit."

"No quitting just yet. We're only a block away. Then you can rest."

"Evil." She glared at me, in mocking judgment.

"Muah ha ha." I obliged her with some melodrama of my own. "It's all a part of my nefarious scheme to spend more time with you."

She glared at me a little longer before her frown twitched up into a grin.
"Oh no." She deadpanned. "What ever shall I do in the face of such devious plans."

I smiled and turned to face home.

"Come on, push yourself to jog the last little bit." She moaned at that. "If you do, you can have another kiss."

Somehow, she found the energy to keep pace for the last leg.

As we came round the last corner back to my home I noticed a white van parked out front. It seemed odd to have visitors this early and I didn't recognise it as belonging to any of Dad's workmates. Maybe Amy's parents came by to pick her up. I turned to face her and notice she had a confused look on her face.

"So not your family?"

She shook her head as we slowed down a few houses away.

"No, we have a sedan. That." She paused for a moment. "That looks like an unmarked PRT van. I've seen them a few times when I've visited the headquarters."

That sent chills of panic down my spine. What would the PRT be doing at my house this early? Had New Wave told them who I was? Surely they wouldn't break the unwritten rules so casually? If they were here because they knew I was Marceau, running now wouldn't do a lot of good and if they were here for another reason, running would look suspicious.

"Must be about last night."

I blinked as her words sunk in. Lady Photon had mentioned calling in the PRT last night hadn't she? That made a bit more sense, that they'd come to interview us about the out of town villains. Still odd that they'd drop by so early. She seemed unconcerned, but I couldn't help but be a little paranoid. I approached my house warily, keeping myself between the van and Amy. Nearing the van I noted the woman in PRT uniform sitting in the driver's seat and reading a newspaper. That implied they either weren't expecting trouble, or were horribly lax in discipline.

Coming in through the front door, I was greeted by a scene of my father having morning coffee with a familiar face. If you could even say that about someone wearing an American flag scarf over half of it. I paused in the doorway, rather thrown by the fact that Miss Milita was sitting on one of my lounge room couches. A small part of my mind threw up its metaphorical arms and declared that the world had become too surreal.

Several other seemingly important things were brought to my attention as I tried to reconcile what I was seeing with reality. Firstly, I thought it crass that dad hadn't made her a cup. Then I realised she wouldn't have been able to drink it without dropping the scarf. Then I felt Amy poke me because I was blocking the doorway.

"Oh you're back." Dad gestured for us to take a seat. "We were just waiting for you to return."

I sat down on the other couch, with Amy squeezing in beside me. In such close proximity, I could feel the heat radiating off her and smell the sweat she'd built up during our run. I probably wasn't any
less pungent. We both really needed a shower. And my mind seemed set on ignoring the current situation.

"It's nice to meet you Ms Hebert and you again Ms Dallon." I suppressed the comment of having met before. She didn't seem aware of my cape identity and I wasn't going to put even more holes in it if I could help it. Still, it didn't hurt to be civil.

"Nice to meet you Miss Militia." I probably came off as a bit unimpressed for someone who hadn't met her before, but it's hard to really recapture that feeling after having spent a couple hours in her company already. "Sorry about the wait, but we weren't expecting a visit so early."

She seemed to smile, or at least her eyes crinkled a little.

"Yes, I would have preferred to visit at a more civil time but alas the PRT thought this matter should be dealt with urgently."

I felt a small flash of irritation at that. The PRT did seem to do things at their own convenience quite frequently from my experience. Still, the idea of a cloning cape running amok would get their hackles up and Miss Militia seemed an alright person from my dealings with her. So I let my anger slide away and resolved to get this over with as quickly as possible. I really needed a shower. *Oh, I almost forgot.* I stood back up, dragging Amy with me.

"Don't mind us. We just need to stretch out before our legs cramp up." I explained as Dad and Miss Militia stared at us. "So, what do you need?"

As I started leading Amy through the appropriate leg stretches in the open area of the lounge, Miss Militia recovered from the conversational derail.

"I just need to get a statement in regards to the events of last night." She seemed to frown a little. "There was a bit of a mess after all. Now usually we'd do this at the PRT headquarters but given the unfortunate hour and everything, I'm willing to take it here. If now isn't convenient, we can arrange an appointment at the office later today."

I pondered this as I stretched out my hamstrings. On the one hand I was very tempted to procrastinate on the statement. I really wanted to get washed up and into clean clothes. But I wasn't sure I wanted to be inside the PRT building. A fairly large part of me screaming that it was a bad idea, that they'd have all sorts of tinker tech sensors that would pick me up immediately. While we had a sort of understanding with the local branch, I wasn't game to find out what would happen if they found out who I was while I was inside their facility. I realised Miss Militia had been staring at me. I must have paused a bit long or something.

"Well since you've come all this way, we might as well sort it out now." I turned to my girlfriend, adjusting her posture slightly to achieve the full effect. "If that's fine with you Amy."

"I suppose so." She shrugged as she came out of a calf stretch. "How much have New Wave mentioned already?"

"Only that the two of you were kidnapped in an attempt to extort healing and that we need to go through the clone citizenship approval process."

That surprised me. I had thought they were going to be quiet about Amelia till they had more time to check the appropriate laws. Had Carol pre-empted the Pelhams in reporting the incident? Or were the
legal issues much less complicated than I had thought? Amy seemed lost in similar thoughts, so I figured I should get the ball rolling.

"Well, it all started when I was saying goodnight..."

As I recounted the tale in greater detail than I had the night before with Amy filling in the gaps while I was unconscious, Dad paled at the moments I had glossed over. I would have liked to just brushed everything off as being simple, but I had to assume they had gone over the crime scene and so knew enough to make that a bad idea. Tears had gathered in my eyes and we had moved back to the couch by the time I got to the part where Amy had finished healing the woman. I remembered she didn't want me talking about that. So instead I waved on for her to continue, not really having to feign emotion distress.

"It felt... wrong when I touched her. Broken somehow." She mumbled, gazing at the ground. "I fixed her body, but I don't know if it will last. At least she seemed to get control over her powers at the end."

As she shivered, I dragged her into a hug. While I had guessed she'd either fixed or removed the woman's powers by doing something with her brain, I didn't know the full details. Letting that sort of ability become well known could be dangerous for Amy, with people being afraid of her or wanting to use her more than they already did. So I was more than happy to back up the evasion. Having regained my composure a little, I continued.

"Then they just let us go, just a moment before we would have gotten rescued. Seems they escaped while we made our way out of the building."

Miss Militia nodded, what I could see of her eyes showing concern.

"I'm sorry to have had to bring up painful memories." She seemed to mean it, for what small solace that gave me. "But thanks to your statements I'm able to confirm that it was the Travellers who did this. And given last night, it looks like they've been responsible for several unexplained clone related incidents over the last year or so."

"Why am I not surprised." I groaned, drawing a curious glance from Miss Militia. "Oh, it just seemed that common sense was not one of Trickster's powers."

"Alas, common sense seems to be a very rare super power these days." She snickered, shaking her head as she stood. "Well I've held you up far too long already."

A thought came to my head. It probably wasn't the wisest thing, but it still felt right somehow.

"I believe I have you to thank for introducing us?" I tilted my head towards Amy.

"I just did what little I could." Miss Militia sighed before once again her eyes crinkled up in what I had labelled as a smile. "Though I must admit I'm pleasantly surprised just how well it has turned out."

I chuckled a little at that. I doubt it was what she had in mind when she'd asked Amy to heal me. She seemed genuinely sad about what had happened though and it was firmly labelling Miss Militia as one of the 'good ones' in my head.

"Anyway, it was nice to meet you Mr Hebert. I'll be in touch in regards to your proposal." Wait,
what was that? "Always good to see you Amy, though I wish it were under better circumstances. Nice to meet you Taylor. I'm sure we'll see each other again. So stay safe."

She winked at me before heading out the door and hopping into the van. I was wondering what was up with that, but other things were clamouring for my attention.

"What was that about proposing?"

"Oh that." He smiled. "I was just inquiring about the legality of hiring some local capes to act as security while we clean up the ship graveyard."

I blinked at that. The ship graveyard. Cleaning. Those words didn't go together in any sensible sentence.

"Wait, what?"

"Well with several of the derelicts having beached due to the tidal waves, we have easier access for salvaging some of it. That'll give some work to a bunch of the Dockworkers Union. The only problem being it's in old Merchant territory, so I'd expect the other gangs to be moving in on it soon."

I could see where he was going with this. It would be a massive undertaking to clear up even a fraction of the shipwrecks. But if it got more jobs coming in, that would be a boost for the struggling dockworkers. The dots connected.

"Ah, and you'll be wanting to hire the Undersiders."

"Yep. I figured I could wrangle up some more legitimate and maybe safer work for you while helping to improve the city a bit." He smirked at me. "That and Faultline's crew would probably cost too much."

"Oh har har." I rolled my eyes, before another thought popped into my head. "There might be a few rogues around that might be able to help with the grunt work too."

"Yeah, I also hinted that it might be good PR for the local Protectorate and Wards to help out with..." He raise his hands to air quote, "Returning the city to its glory days."

I smiled at that. It was nice to see Dad enthused about prospects for work again. It had been some time since that had last happened. Thinking about rogues though reminded me of another problem I had to sort out.

"Damn. I still need to talk with Parian."

Dad gave me a confused look while Amy poked me.

"Yes, about that. Make sure she realises you are spoken for."

I looked down at my girlfriend, who was giving me a very stern look.

"Really now Amy. I doubt you have anything to worry about. She'd already said she wasn't interested when she thought I was hitting on her."

She just stubbornly stared at me for a moment.
"And what if that's because she likes girls and thought you were a guy."

"What are the odds of that happening?" I chuckled quietly, before reality dawned on me. "Ok, forget I said that. I'll make sure she realises I'm not available if it comes up."

"Did you want me to come with you?" She asked. I shook my head.

"I don't know how good a look at my face she got, so probably best not to give away too much just in case." I turned to face Dad. "Did you want me to inform her that you're looking for help with the graveyard?"

"Sure, if it isn't too much trouble."

I looked up at the clock and realised I was already late for school. Dad followed my gaze.

"Oh don't worry, I called in sick for you. Figured you wouldn't really be up for school anyway. Not sure about your folks Amy, so you might want to check with them. But given that they haven't dropped by to pick you up they're probably fine with that."

I refrained from making comments on Amy's parents, and she just hugged me instead of making her own. Still, we'd have to clear the air with Carol and Mark soon.

"Anyway, I'd better heat up that breakfast I was sorting out before we got sidetracked."

Breakfast sounded really good. Then Amy and I needed a shower. I blushed a little at that thought. Showers, rather.
Clean and fed, we found ourselves with the day free and nothing planned. Dad had left us alone by running off to work, apparently needing to arrange a bunch of stuff for the salvage operation. So after giving Amy her promised reward, I was racking my brain for things to do. Well things that were productive rather than just spending the rest of the day snuggling and watching movies. It was very hard not to listen to that part of my brain. Perhaps plan B, I thought to myself.

Though given the earlier reminder, I realised I should log into my PHO cape account to see if Parian had responded. I hadn't checked it for a few days with everything going on and I figured keeping Amy in the loop would help ease her mind on the whole worry that I'd be stolen away by some other woman. Booting up the computer and making sure the little wireless "stealth" modem I'd gotten from Madison was blinking like it should, I was soon signed in. Alerts for a personal message as well as several watched threads blinked at me. Ignoring what was probably more dubious inferences about my 'harem', I opened up the PM.

16th May 2011

Marceau:
I hope I can I trust you to keep my secret safe.
While it would be... inconvenient if I was exposed, I'm more worried that the local villains would come after my friends and family. I frankly don't trust them to follow the unwritten rules after some of the horrible things I've seen them do.

17th May 2011

Parian:
You need not worry, for I shall remain silent in that regard.
I can well understand your fears.

While I could have just told you that on the flight back, I was hoping to communicate further. Alas, I do not have any friends in the 'community' as it were. Being a rogue has led to me having little support, despite the PRT's claims of promoting rogues. Seeing as you and your team are independent and non villainous, I was hoping perhaps you might be someone I could "talk" to, regarding cape matters.

I can understand if you would prefer not, but I hope you will consider it.

"See!" Amy practically shouted over my shoulder. "She totally wants you."

Cringing a little from her overenthusiastic volume, I turned my head to look at her.

"It just sounds like she needs a cape friend. Remember how she was standing off by herself when we arrived?" She nodded. "I'm guessing she doesn't trust anyone in her civilian life to talk about this sort of stuff. I was like that not too long ago."

"Just wants to be friends huh?" She gave me a wry smile. "That sounds familiar."

I opened my mouth to refute that, but couldn't think of anything valid. As I closed my mouth, she just nodded smugly.
"So you're suggesting I refuse?" That idea really didn't sit too well with me. It wasn't that long ago that I was without a friend in the world, so Parian was kind of pushing several sympathy buttons.

"No. I'm just saying you should make it clear you're taken, just in case she is actually wanting more." She smiled, shaking her head in amusement. "Don't want to get the poor girl's hopes up now do we?"

I rolled my eyes, wondering how I'd even broach said topic without it sounding weird.

"Dear Parian." My hands mimed typing on the keyboard. "Sure we can be friends, but my girlfriend says no touchy. Sorry to disappoint."

That just earned a soft smack on the back of my head and a giggle from Amy.

"While accurate, I'm sure you can be more subtle than that."

I sighed, staring at the screen for a moment more before typing a response.

19th May 2011
Marceau:
I'd be happy to lend an ear and I'm sure many of my team mates would extend the same offer.

P.S.
Just to be clear though, I wasn't actually hitting on you at the PRT building. I really have no idea how I ended up with that reputation.

"That good enough?" I looked to Amy, who ponder a moment before nodding in approval. "So now that that's sorted, I think it might be best if we had a little chat with my friends and find out just what the hell was up with last night."

Amy gave me a slightly confused look upon seeing my frown, before an expression of contemplation settled on her freckled face.

"I was a little surprised that they were there, but I'm missing something aren't I?"

I sighed, cradling my chin in my hands with my elbows rested on the desk. She definitely was missing something, having not really gotten to know my team mates as yet.

"As much as I'd like to believe they were just passing by, it's much more likely that they were being nosy and watching."

There was silence for a moment and I turned my head back to look at her.

"Wait, what?" She wore a startled frown upon her brow.

"My so called friends seem to find amusement in my..." Love life didn't sound quite right in my head. "Our relationship. The fact that one can get around unnoticed and another is a surveillance tinker doesn't help matters."

That those two were the only support I had in school did not help matters. Aisha I had no doubt
would tag along for her own amusement. Those powers on a girl like her were a combination for mischief. Madison had been trying to make things up to me and I had felt I was starting to develop some trust for my former tormentor. However, her previous transgressions did not incline me towards giving her the benefit of doubt. I couldn't just forget all the things that had happened.

"So they might be watching right now?" Amy's voice conveyed enough alarm even without seeing her jerking her gaze around the room.

"If they are and don't make themselves known now." I said as loudly and clearly as I could. "I will be very disappointed in them."

I looked around waiting for some sign, but nothing happened. Deciding whether that meant they weren't watching or were just too afraid of revealing themselves was an exercise in paranoia. On the one hand, I had friends. On the other hand, they were often very difficult people to like. Even if I could trust them with my life, if not my privacy. Once more I sighed.

"So, I'm going to give Tattletale a call and see about arranging a meet up."

"Um yeah." She gave the room another quick scan. "You do that."

Dragging the appropriate phone from one of my pockets, I found the number marked 'L' and dialled. She picked up near immediately as usual.

"Hey Taylor. I was hoping you'd call soon. How are you after last night?"

I sighed, refraining from mentioning her name given Amy's presence.

"Well, you guys certainly made my life complicated."

Lisa was silent for a moment.

"Ah, Amy's with you. I wasn't quite expecting that. Also to be fair, I couldn't have guessed a loose lipped clone of your girlfriend would be there to give away the game."

While she did have a point, they were at least partly to blame. If they hadn't come along, it seemed fairly likely the topic wouldn't have even come up.

"Still, given the obvious indiscretion of one or more people, I'd like Amy to meet people in a more casual situation." Before she could point out what that usually meant. "Now I'm not saying you need to unmask or anything. But we do need to at least have a chat somewhere private."

"Well..." She hesitated for a moment. "I reckon I could sell it to... the boys. Rachel would need some convincing, but the other two probably would be fine with it."

She was rather obviously avoiding any unknown names, she must have worked out Amy was rather close.

"At least one of them has no right complaining now, do they?"

"No." She chuckled. "She wouldn't. Not that that would stop her of course."

She hadn't named names, but her choice of words told me enough. Aisha, but not Madison. I felt a
certain amount of relief that what trust I had managed to put into Madison hadn't been abused. I'm not sure I could handle any back sliding from her. I had probably made myself clear on that point though. Taking my silence as a cue, she continued.

"I'll call back once I've worked out a good time and place. It'll have to be after school hours though as not everyone was lucky enough that spend the day in with their snuggle buddy."

She once again chuckled, probably having worked out that I had rolled my eyes. I'd much rather have had to deal with a school day rather than... last night. Even if it did result in more time in Amy's company.

"Yeah, yeah. I had figured as much. Catch you later."

"Do try to enjoy yourself though." Concern laced her voice. "Bye for now."

With the call ended, I stood up from the desk and dragged Amy off to the lounge room to enact Plan B while we waited.

So after leisurely watching several movies while curled up on the couch, we had taken a bus up to the Boardwalk. A simple message from Lisa had informed me of a time and location. That the lair was said location came as a surprise. I wasn't sure whether to be touched at the level of trust they were showing Amy, or horrified at their lack of caution. I put aside those thoughts and instead focused on leading us through the winding side streets that separated the Boardwalk from my home away from home. Eventually we arrived at the rusted looking door, checking to see if anyone was watching before opening it for a slightly dubious Amy.

"Welcome to our lair." My arm swept across the warehouse before pointing upstairs. The sounds of television floated down from the loft.

"Lair..." Amy looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "That doesn't sound villainous at all."

I faltered in my steps towards the stairs. She may have had a point there.

"Would you prefer *Fortress of Justice* perhaps?" I grinned at her exasperated sigh. "Or how about the *Mime Cave*.

"Okay, let's stick with lair." She rolled her eyes, but she still had her lips in a smirk.

As we continued on towards the stairs, a familiar individual emerged from behind the divider walls to our right. Intel waved at us, her face half concealed by her goggles, but otherwise dressed in casual clothes and a solder marked work apron.

"Hi there, was just finishing up some work." She removed the apron, draping it over a hook before walking up to join us. "Nice to see you again Panacea. Or would you prefer Amy?"

"I only really go by Panacea when in costume, otherwise it feels weird."

"Ah ok." Intel nodded. "Then nice to meet you properly, Amy."

She extended a hand, which Amy shook after a moment of surprise. Pleasantries out of the way, I lead Amy up the stairs with her hand in mine. As she got a look at the living area, she let out little
'hmm' of appreciation. After all, the lower level wasn't really impressive, basically being an empty warehouse and all. So the well furnished and equipped upper floor was quite a step up.

The TV was muted and Tattletale turned her head towards us, domino mask in place and a smile upon her face. Grue was also wearing his helmet with casual clothes, which just made the scene somehow even more bizarre. Rachel was lounging off with her dogs, who growled a little at Amy before she redirected their attention with scratches behind the ears. She had unsurprisingly not bothered with a mask. Regent was nowhere to be seen and Imp... was probably hanging around. Intel had moved past us and took a seat on the couch.

"Welcome to our humble abode." Tattletale had stood and gestured widely as if showing off the loft. "Regent should be out in a minute and Imp can kindly not prank our guest."

"Aww man." Imp moaned from behind us, startling Amy and drawing a sigh from me. "Spoil all my fun."

"We need to have words about last night Imp." I said without bothering to turn around. "There's this little thing called privacy."

"What do you mean?" She chuckled as she moved around and took an empty seat on the couch. "It's not like I followed you inside or anything."

"Totally missing the point." I sighed

"Well I was worried, okay?" She crossed her arms in a huff. "And I was right to. Remind me who got kidnapped last night?"

"Yes, because you totally didn't do it just to spy on us." I turned to Amy. "Amy, meet my dysfunctional team mates."

"Hey, I resent that." Brian complained, but his tone rang with good humour rather than offence.

"Hey I resemble that." I turned to see where Regent's voice had come from and found the door to his room open and him wearing a dress along with his usual mask. My brain may have derailed at that point. Imp made some wolf whistles, which manage to disturb me, Rachel and her dogs in one fell swoop.

"You know what?" My hands raised in the air. "I don't want to know."

My growing general annoyance with my friends' behaviour was quickly curtailed when Amy started giggling. I turned to see the look of gleeful amusement plastered over her face as she sunk further into a fit of laughter. Taking a mental step back from things, this would be pretty funny for someone who didn't know them that well. If I had to be honest, the only reason I wasn't laughing was that I still had the horrible feeling that he had worn my underwear last night. It was a small mercy that he wasn't currently wearing one of my dresses.

With the ice thoroughly broken, we took our seat on one of the recliners. Amy perched on my lap due to the lack of couch space and totally not for any other reason.

"So..." I started, figuring we should probably debrief on last night. "New Wave know my identity, the PRT are aware that there is a clone of Amy and I really should have punched Trickster harder."
While I got everyone up to speed with the situation, there was a niggling distraction. Something that would not be ignored despite my best attempts and despite a much more pleasant distraction that should have taken precedence. Eventually I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Ok, I've changed my mind." I said, abruptly interrupting a discussion about clone rights. "Why are you wearing a dress?"

Regent just stared at me and I would have bet money that he had a shit eating grin beneath his mask.

"Because it makes me feel pretty." He chuckled. "That and I hadn't realised just how comfortable these things were. Seriously, why does the gender with dangly bits get lumped with wearing pants?"

And there was a mental image I could do with out. Amy winced, while Imp laughed along with Regent. Myself and the others just shook our heads in exasperation.

"Just never really pegged you for wearing women's clothing." I shrugged my shoulders. While he was always a bit foppish, this was a quite a step forward. Not that I really had much of a leg to stand on with the whole pot and kettle thing I had going on.

"Au contraire. I'm a man and I bought it, therefore it's a man's dress." Though the humour in his voice kind of ruined any seriousness of the claim, that was the sort of 'logic' that one really couldn't argue with.

"So this is going to be an ongoing thing?" I was curious. It really had come out of left field, so I wanted to know what was up with it.

"Only if it keeps getting this sort of reaction." I sighed and closed my eyes. I really hadn't thought he'd go through that much effort just to troll me. "Besides, I still want to see what sort of response PHO will have if I do our next gig in drag."

I let out a little whimper of dread as I contemplated the consequences of such a stunt. The crazies on the internet already thought he was a girl despite clear evidence to the contrary and this would only feed the damn harem rumours further.

"Please don't." I groaned. "The rumours are bad enough as is."

"Ah but where's the troll I knew?" He asked, mocking disappointment. "She would have laughed at all the confused idiots on the forums."

I blinked at that. I would have found that funny not too long ago. Why wasn't I... Amy's family. Of course.

"Oh damn, I've turned into one of those people who care about other's opinions haven't I?"

"Yep." Tattletale nodded, having apparently divined my problem. "Dating will do that."

"Wait, what?" Amy ask, turning in my lap to face me.
"Well, I have been a little concerned about what your family would think of me." I sighed. "I may well have eased off on my messing with people. Hell, we've hardly even taunted anyone lately."

"To be fair, there was the whole Boston thing not that long ago." Grue added, and really that should have really been more prominent in my mind given how little time had passed.

"Point." I pondered for a moment. "So after Boston, I want to mess with Lung even less. But my Dad had mentioned the Dockworker's Union needs some cape security to cover the salvage operations they're starting. You know, if you're interested."

"Well I guess it depends on how much they're paying." Tattletale cheerfully pointed out. "Though the good press could definitely help."

"Speaking of money... I have this big old bag of cash. Oh, I missed my cue."

"That would be good." Grue nodded. "If you want to negotiate, but I figure there would be some kind of friend rates or something. How high a risk do you think it would be?"

"Pretty low, it was the Ship Graveyard right?" She turned to me for confirmation and I nodded even though she probably had already figured it out. "Then there isn't much in the way of useful turf. The only reason the Empire or the ABB would interfere is for posturing. No real profit in them doing so if there are capes on the scene though."

"There may be Ward or Protectorate presence as well." I added, which caught their attention. Intel in particular seemed to perk up at that. "Dad was trying to sell the idea to Miss Militia as a PR stunt."

"Even more reason to tag along." Grue's nodding helmet made him look like a bobblehead. "The less friction between the PRT groups and us, the smoother things will be. How about New Wave?"

"Umm." Amy was a little startled by the sudden turn. "I haven't had a chance to bring it up yet. But I'll let them know when I can."

I figured the Pelhams at least would consider it. Amy's parents... might take a bit more convincing.

"Speaking of which. We really should have a chat with your folks."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Totally looking forward to that."

A slightly awkward silence filled the room for a moment before it was broken by Rachel.

"Can you heal dogs?" Rachel had a contemplative look, or the closest thing I've seen on her before. Amy, having been dragged out of her own depressing contemplations blinked a few times before answering.

"I've never really tried before, but I don't see why I couldn't." She looked at me and I gave a reassuring smile. She slid off my lap to move over towards the dogs, I stood and followed along.

"What was the problem?"

"Angelica has one eye." She said bluntly and I didn't exactly care for what her tone implied. But Bitch was Bitch.

"Oh, okay then." Amy mumbled as we moved closer. Brutus and Angelica growled at her as we
neared, causing her to freeze.

"Stick out your hand for them to smell." I whispered into her ear. My dog behaviour knowledge had made leaps and bounds in the last month or so, out of necessity. Amy complied and the dogs moved up to sniff the offered hand.

Brutus, Judas and the new dog Benny seemed content, while Angelica turned her head my way for a moment before sitting back down. Bitch made a nasal huffing noise I'd learned to associate with amusement. What was that all about?

"So I can touch her?" Amy asked, and Rachel nodded. She leaned in, touching the battered looking terrier. Angelica stirred a little, looking at her warily before realising nothing untoward was happening. "Oh, wow."

Rachel gave her an odd look while I turned to her.

"What is it?"

"A lot of scarring. I..." She paused a moment, seeming to take her time with her words. "Who... did you rescue her from?"

Rachel stared at Amy for an interminable length of time.

"A bastard." That seemed to be enough of an answer for her. "So you can heal her?"

"Ah yes, just give me a moment."

Angelica whined a little as before my eyes the torn off ear regrew and the scar tissue around her ruined socket dissolved into a functioning eye.

"She'll need extra food, as I had to use some fat reserves to rebuild the eye and some torn tendons."

Rachel nodded and after pausing for a moment more, said something I'm not sure I'd heard from her before.

"Thanks."

And with that little miracle out of the way, we moved back to our prior seating arrangements.

"So anyway, no one has a problem with the guard duty?" I asked, returning to our earlier discussion.

"As long as it pays, or we get to have fun." Regent called out from where he was lounging in a very unladylike manner.

"If you're going to wear a dress, at least keep your legs closed." Intel groaned, having gotten an inadvertent eyeful. "But yeah, as long as it's not during school hours I can monitor the Graveyard from here while I get some more tinkering done."

Rachel shrugged, seemingly indifferent to the job. Grue and Tattletale had already made their positions clear, so it seemed we had a rough consensus. Assuming the pay was halfway decent.

"As long as it isn't too boring." Imp said absentmindedly as she plaited Regents hair. He seemed
completely unconcerned by her impromptu hair styling. Either he was getting way too into this or he really didn't care. It was getting hard to tell. "Oh and by the way, your bag o’ cash is in your room."

I blinked as I remembered the payoff that Trickster had gave us. So that's where it had gone. It seemed to have slipped my mind... Imp, of course. I turned to Amy, as it was hers as far as I was concerned. She just shrugged and mouthed 'later'.

"Cool then." I dragged my mind back to the conversation "I think they might be hiring others too and damn I forgot to let Parian know about the offer."

Tattletale chuckled a little at that before speaking up.

"As long as we don't have to work with Faultline, it's all good."

As far as I could recall, this was the first I'd heard her voice an opinion on the Mercenary.

"Oh?"

She turned to look at me, a look of displeasure on her face.

"Yeah, I don't like her. She always thinks she so damn smart."

I just stared at her blankly, not really being able to muster an appropriate response to that little comment.

"Yeah, yeah. Pot calling the kettle black and all." She shrugged. "I just can't stand her and the feeling is mutual."

Having never really met the woman myself, I'd just have to take her word. Though I had a suspicion that she wasn't as bad I was being led to believe. I glanced over at the clock and took in the time. It was already getting late.

"Ah damn. We should probably head back and sort out the family drama stuff." I prodded Amy to get her to stand up rather than continue using me as a cushion. "I should have some more solid information in the next day or so."

"Nice to meet you again Amy, and really, you have no need to fear." Tattletale said with a grin before pointing a finger at Grue and panning around the room. "Taken, not interested, straight, crush on Kid Win, just no and asexual."

I blinked as I absorbed that quick and dirty 'reassurance'. Intel was still flustered and babbling and oh my, that was an interesting titbit. Amy likewise seemed taken aback by the bluntness.

"See Amy?" I turned toward her. "This is what I have to deal with every day."

Shaking her head, Amy followed behind as we left the lair just in time for an argument to start.

The bus ride back to my place was fairly quiet as Amy seemed to be absorbing just how weird my team mates were. But it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, as we sat huddled up next to each other to counteract the overzealous air conditioning on the bus. Eventually we got off at a stop a block away from my place and started walking, side by side.
"So that did just happen didn't it?" She asked, clearly still a little baffled.

"Yeah." I chuckled softly. "I ask myself that fairly often too."

"Your friends... are exactly like their cape personas. I did not expect that. I thought it was all just an act."

"Kinda sad when the mime is a voice of reason huh?"

She giggled at that and gave a one armed hug.
"You've been waiting for an opportunity for that pun haven't you?"

"Perhaps." I flashed her a grin.

We finally arrived and when we stepped through the front door of my place, we were brought to a sudden halt by the scene before us. Carol and Mark in civilian clothes sat on one couch with my dad on the other. I had thought we'd have enough time to be more proactive about contacting them first.

"Amy, we need to talk."
Interlude

Brandish

She stared at the girl, not quite knowing what to think. Her behaviour was all wrong compared to her adopted daughter, despite the identical faces. Of course the clothes and the comment of being a 'morally ambiguous clone' were also clear signs that things had become complicated. That she'd referred to herself as Amelia set Carol on edge. The name Marquis had called his daughter. The name that she'd slowly convinced the girl not to use in an attempt to forget that monster.

"You know mother dearest. You really need to work on the whole obvious loathing."

That comment snapped her out of her musings. What was this... clone talking about?

"What are you talking about?" Victoria asked before Carol could. She warmed a little at her daughter's voice, a trusted presence in this confusing mess.

"Really Vicky? You've never noticed how she treats me, her... us?" The clone rolled her eyes in exasperation. "It's clear that she only barely tolerates, tolerated, damn this clone thing sucks. Tolerated me because of obligation. Though you weren't there when she said she'd never be able to love me."

Carol sucked in a breath. A distant memory resurfaced, over a decade old. So she had overheard in the car after all. *So she had overheard in the car after all.* Though why she was bringing this all up now was beyond her. She had tried, done her best to make the girl feel welcome. Allowed her and her beloved Victoria to grow close. She hadn't fobbed her off onto some random family despite her desires. *Surely she should be grateful for having a roof above her head and all her needs provided for?*

"What?" The clone asked looking at her daughter's frown, before turning back to her. "You do realise you've basically made us think we were a monster with the way you looked at us Carol?"

She blinked and wondered how had she been looking at Amy that would have made her feel like... oh.

"Ah, you didn't? Hmmm." The clone frowned for a moment. "So it that we look like Marquis or is it something else?"

Victoria gasped and Carol froze. *How long has she known?*

"It's amazing what you recall when you aren't repressing stuff."

Carol realised her expressions must be like an open book with all the revelations going on. *Have I been treating her poorly? I know I have no real attachment to the girl, but I haven't been too cold have I?*

"Oh wow." The clone giggled. "Amy's going to have a fit when she realises you weren't doing it intentionally. That is hilarious."

As she and her daughter stared at the strangely cheerful facsimile of Amy. Having her issues just thrown in her face like that was distressing. She'd told Sarah that she wasn't a good choice. And
while she thought she was getting better, she had apparently made as much of a mess of it as she’d feared. She felt sorry for Amy, but wasn’t sure what she could really do to fix it. But looking over at her and her... girlfriend, she realised she had hardly even thought of her as her daughter. But looking at her now, comforting the crying girl after who know what sort of ordeal they'd gone through.

They'd been kidnapped, not for long, but it still must have been terrifying given the obvious distress. She shuddered slightly as she recalled a dark basement and a man.

"Wait? You're Regent?"

Her sister's voice pulled her back to reality and her eyes went wide as the words sunk in.

"I can definitely assure you Taylor is not Regent."

As she took in Amy's comment, she realised the girl seemed much too amused for such a serious accusation. She stared at the young woman she'd let into her house, that she'd felt sympathy for. Anger slowly bubbled up inside her.

"Well I guess the cat's out of the bag. I'd honk my horn, but I lost that in Boston."

She felt the anger crystallise into something approaching cold fury. The girl had invited Marceau into her house. Had knowingly dated the one that had injured Victoria and robbed a bank. Had betrayed her trust like she had always feared. The others were talking but she didn't absorb the meaning. All she could do was stare at the girls. Her so called daughter and the mime. When Marceau turned to her, she could only move her mouth, failing to articulate the feelings of betrayal and anger that were bubbling inside.

With a final surge of control, she stopped herself doing anything rash and instead just turned to leave. If she didn't leave, she felt she might just do something she'd regret. She barely noticed as her husband tagged along.

A fitful night of poor rest later, she dragged herself out of bed. Mark had tried to comfort her, but he was lost as far as how to go about it. She couldn't quite muster up the mental energy to explain why she had stormed off and he hadn't pushed. Walking downstairs, she found that the house was otherwise empty. The girl hadn't returned home last night and neither had Victoria. What ever had happened to the clone, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Checking the time and realising there was no way she was going to visit the office today, she quickly typed out a message to one of the senior partners. They were understanding of her scheduling issues. Mostly because of the extra prestige they got from being tied to New Wave by her presence. That and she wasn't exactly acting as a full time lawyer these days. It just wasn't practical with her other obligations. Instead, she called Sarah. She'd know where her daughter was and probably had some important news about last night. She'd get a lecture from her sister, but frankly this was at least partially her fault.

"Hi Carol." Her sister's voice surprisingly cheerful. She'd expected a little more snark.

"Hello Sarah." She replied and was about to ask if Victoria was around when she was interrupted.

"So, what was the deal with last night? I know it must have been a shock, but you did leave your recently kidnapped daughter and her girlfriend to fend for themselves. I would have expected a little
more sympathy given the circumstances."

*Oh she didn't.* That her sister had brought *that* up against her hurt. That her thoughts before the reveal were running that way just made things worse.

"She betrayed my trust Sarah." She sighed. "Just when I was realising I've probably been as bad a mother to her as I told you I would be I find out she'd invited that villain into my house. How long has she been knowingly consorting with..."

She couldn't finish as she started sobbing. Outside of the immediate feelings of anger, the memories of broken trust and helplessness washed over her. It was only her and her sister, so her resolve to bury it all dissolved. Too many emotions piled together, overwhelmed her usually stoic self control and brought tears to her eyes for the first time in years.

"Carol... I'll be right over."

They sat on the couch, Carol's head rested on her sister's shoulder. Something that they hadn't done in at least a decade but came strangely easy under the circumstances.

"So, did she develop feelings for her captor or something?* Like me?* was left unsaid.

Sarah sighed, rubbing Carol's shoulder.

"No, nothing so sinister. Taylor's not the villain you're making her out to be. Frankly she reminds me a bit of you."

She turned to look at her sister, confused at Sarah's words.

"What do you mean?"

"She was brutally betrayed by her best friend." Carol's eyes widened at that revelation. "Something to do with her trigger. I didn't get the full story, but Amelia filled me in a bit after they left."

*Ah yes, the clone.* That was another issue to be addressed. Later if she could help it. Then the last few words sunk in.

"Wait, you said left?"

"Crystal and I dropped them off at Taylor's place. I had a nice little chat with Mister Hebert. Nice man, if a little strange in the humour department. So I now know where she lives if she ever does anything to hurt Amy."

The smile was reassuring, but there was still a little steel to it. *She would have made a better mother.*

"You really should of adopted Amy." Carol mumbled. "Maybe this whole thing wouldn't have happened then."

"Do you really think you did that bad a job?"

"I told you I couldn't love her. You said I'd grow to do so, but I never did." She sighed. "Amy apparently picked up on it and thinks I hate her. Given how I've reacted I can't really blame her for
that. Hell, I'm still struggling with Mark."

Sarah was silent for the longest time. She started to grow nervous that her sister was judging her. "I'm sorry." Sarah muttered. "I... I didn't realise it was that bad. I thought having someone else to care for would help you heal. Damn it, why didn't you tell me?"

"I did!" Carol's reply was practically a scream compared to the previously muted conversation. "But you just told me I'd get over it, and I trusted you."

The look of hurt that crossed her face was mirrored by her sister. So much pain and misery caused because she couldn't move on. Couldn't get over the dark basement and the man. Everything came back to that man. She had trouble with Amy, because she was a reminder of Marquis. She despised Marquis because he reminded her of him. That one evil bastard who had broken her so long ago, left her permanently scarred.

"What the hell am I supposed to do? I've basically let my issues damage Amy, I've probably alienated Victoria. I don't even know how to deal with the cross dressing mime and the clone."

"Oh Amelia should be mostly fine. The PRT have started the appropriate paperwork and there will probably be mandatory physical and psychological testing. We'll need to sort out living arrangements..." Sarah looked down at her. "But I think I can cover that in the mean time. As for Taylor, give her a chance. She really does seem to care for Amy and has apologised profusely to Vicky."

Carol stared at her sister, as Sarah had a cheerful grin on her face. "Okay, so I might be a bit biased because she saved Neil. But she seems a nice kid, even if she keeps kind of dubious company."

She let that soak in for a while as they sat in silence. Eventually she came to a decision. "I guess I better talk to them."
"Amy, we need to talk." Carol's voice was calm, but she wore a frown upon her face.

Those were some of the most loaded words in the English language. Rarely, if ever, did they precede good news. I thought I saw Amy flinch in my peripheral vision, but I definitely felt her hand squeeze mine. A small knot of unease grew in my gut as I felt my anger build. Carol had left her daughter when she needed her the most. That she was going to give a lecture or worse was just plain unacceptable.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes were slightly downcast and my impending rant died a sudden death. "I behaved poorly last night."

That simple apology was so completely beyond what I had expected of the conversation. What had happened to make this cold, proud woman actually admit her mistakes? Not that I didn't think it was needed after than frankly appalling behaviour. As Amy and I were still too stunned to really respond, Carol continued on uninterrupted.

"I was rather shocked by the revelation and let my emotions get the better of me." She sighed before raising her eyes back to face me. "My sister has vouched for you Taylor, and Amy obviously cares for you. But even if Victoria and Amy have forgiven your actions at the bank, I find myself having difficulty trusting you."

With those words, any delusions of moral superiority evaporated in an instant. My face fell as I was once again confronted with that one poor decision. Dad gestured towards the couch and we moved to take a seat rather than cluttering up the entry area. I had to wonder what he was thinking about this whole thing. He seemed rather calm given everything, so I had to guess he had already had a chat with Carol and Mark about all of this. As we sat, I asked a fairly simply but important question.

"So where does that leave us?"

She noticeably glanced at our joined hands and sighed.

"Well I'm not going to forbid you to see each other." That was a relief, though I didn't think Amy or I were likely to obey such a command. "But I will be vigilant and will not tolerate any criminal activity or abuse of the trust my family is extending you."

I felt a flare of anger at the implication, but my past actions weren't exactly above reproach. So all I could do was just nod. This sort of thing was why I had hoped to build up my reputation with them a little more before any revealing of my identity.

"So I take it you've been discussing things while we were out?" I asked, gesturing between my dad and Amy's parents.

"Yes, we have." Dad said, a slight smirk on his face. "We've addressed a few concerns."

Well that was cryptic. But it seemed like he wasn't going to elaborate. The earlier conversation we'd had about the job offer flashed through my mind.

"Oh, trying to convince them of the PR boon of supporting the salvage operation?"
"I may have mentioned it." His smirk shifted to a grin, while Carol rolled her eyes and Mark chuckled. "But more on something else. Mostly, how are you two coping?"

I let out a long sigh. I'd been trying to not think about that but with this morning's debrief with Miss Militia followed by the one with the Undersiders, I hadn't had much time for repression.

"It's too early to tell really. I still want to beat the hell out of the idiot who kidnapped us, despite his reasons. I'm not sure if I'm more angry at Amelia for screwing up my reveal or more pitying her because she's been dealt a bad hand. I just hope the nightmares don't continue."

Amy gave me a reassuring squeeze and turned back to the folks.

"I'm... not really comfortable with the fact that there's a warped copy of me with poor self control out there. That, I think is worrying me the most. But yeah, I'm not going to sleep well for a while."

"Ah yes, the clone." Carol said, looking at us with some unease evident on her face. "She'd informed me of a few things last night Amy."

Amy tensed up next to me. When I looked at her, her face was strained by fear. What could she possibly be that afraid of? Carol saw the look on her face and flinched.

"No need to worry. She just brought to my attention that I haven't been the best mother to you. I'm disappointed that you didn't feel you could tell me, but I mustn't have made it easy. I am sorry if I've made you feel..." She glanced over at my dad. "Can we discuss this at home?"

Amy still looked a little stunned and just nodded. She had implied that Carol was disapproving and standoffish, so it must be a shock to have her apologising after who knows how many years of that. Though I had to wonder how the woman had missed what she'd been doing to Amy. There was a story there, but I wouldn't pry. Or at least much more than asking Amy later if she wanted to talk about it.

"Well seeing as it is getting late." Mark finally added something to the conversation. I was starting to wonder if he had a sore throat or something. "We'd better head back home. Come on Amy dear, there are some things we really should have talked about a while ago."

She turned to me, a worried look upon her face.

"Go sort things out with your folks." I gave her a smile and then a kiss. "I'll be right here if you need me."

She returned my smile and gave me a hug before standing to leave with her parents. As we saw them out, I really hoped they could sort out their issues like Dad and I had. It was becoming ever more clear that keeping everything bottled in didn't work, and it looked like there were a lot of things that they'd remained silent about. With a final wave, Amy ducked into the Dallons' SUV and they drove off home.

As much as I figured Amy and Carol needed to hash out their problems, I felt a pang of regret that I would be without the safety net of her presence. Hopefully it wouldn't be another restless night for me.
I shot up in bed, slightly sweaty with my loudly beating heart and a nagging feeling of loss being my only companions. As reality slowly sunk back in, I realised I wasn't in fact being chased through a hospital by Leviathan wearing a top hat. Staring at my alarm clock, I sighed in resignation. I'd only been asleep for a little over an hour. Rolling over with a groan, I tried to drop back to sleep and wondered if Amy was having more luck.

By the time I arrived at school, I had managed to progress from sleep deprived vegetable up to just feeling like death warmed over. My earlier hope of a nightmare free night had turned out to be laughably naive. Waking up several more times had prevented me from getting anything approaching rest. Even dragging myself off for a run only left me slightly more aware of just how mentally exhausted I was feeling.

I waved at Aisha and Madison as I found them in the hallways, hanging around before home room started.

"Um, are you okay Taylor?" Madison asked, a slight tilt of her head and the tone of her voice conveying concern that was still strange to see from her.

"Didn't sleep well." My mumbling was barely audible over the background noise, but my appearance and her improved hearing made that a non issue.

"Ah, yeah. So glad I don't..." She reigned in herself before she finished the sentence. I wasn't sure whether it was because she realised she was rubbing it in, or that she shouldn't talk about powers in public. Either way, the conversation died awkwardly and the bell for home room cut off any attempts to revive it.

Classes dragged by at a glacial pace and I was sure I'd nodded off at least once. Not that any of the teachers seemed to notice. Everything just felt like a miserable waste of time. When lunch finally came around, I was well beyond caring about any of the subjects being taught. Logically I knew some of it would be useful to know, but I couldn't muster up enough energy to care. Even without the poor sleep, I'd been wondering of late whether it was even worth coming to school anymore. Sure Aisha and Madison were making things tolerable, and oh how strange that sounded, but the lessons just seemed less and less applicable to my life.

Maybe it was just the teachers and my general disgust with how this school ran. Maybe I'd be less apathetic to it all over at Arcadia. The thought of being able to spend a little more time with Amy was definitely appealing, though the thought of abandoning Aisha and Madison loaded on the guilt. Was I turning into the sort of person that would dump all their friends for their partner? I didn't want to be like that. Sure I didn't hang out with them quite to the extent that I had before the whole dating thing started, but it wasn't like I was completely ignoring them. Was it? So with these thoughts still kicking around in my mind, I sat down next to my two school bound team mates.

"Have I been ignoring people lately?"

"Hell yeah you have." Aisha put on an offended expression, but it soon cracked under my eyebrow raised stare. "But I demand a lot of attention."

Her antics could grate at times. But with how I was feeling, it was a welcome change from my dour mood.

"Well the last week or so, we haven't seen you much." Madison shrugged before continuing. "But
then again, a lot has happened so it's understandable. I guess with the job coming up we'll have plenty of time to hang out anyway."

They didn't seem to mind, so I wrote it off as me just being overly paranoid. With everything getting complicated since the other night, I was just getting concerned that other things in my life might be falling apart. Damn, I really needed to get some solid sleep. Deprivation was making me melancholic.

"Okay, cool then." I sighed, rubbing at my eyes and stifling a yawn. "Nightmares suck."

"Yeah, I.." Madison paled a little. "I saw the mess left behind, ended up losing my dinner after we left."

Aisha patted her on the shoulder.

"Yeah, that was some pretty messed up shit. Like one of them Kroney Burg films."

"It's Cronenberg. Or I would have also accepted John Carpenter for messed up film comparisons." I sighed as yet another thing occurred to me. "Damn, I don't think I'll be able to look at *The Thing* quite the same way ever again. Fucking Trickster."

"Well damn, that sucks." Aisha sounded rather genuine in her empathy, which was quite the rare thing. "Tell you what. If I see him, I'll tase him a couple extra times for you."

I chuckled a little before realising how odd it was to find that endearing. I must have been hanging around Aisha and Alec too much. Even if I still felt like I could fall asleep on my feet, she'd managed to cheer me up. I'd been taking it for granted lately, but damn was it was good to have friends again.
I stared at the mirror, and a face I hadn’t seen in weeks stared at me blankly in return. A replacement face for the one lost at Boston, with all the same bells and whistles but without the need for prescription lenses. Madison had been busy, and once more I felt a rumble of guilt for judging her so harshly the other day. I was trying my best to move past our prior history and acknowledge her efforts in making up to me, but there was always that little twinge of suspicion of which I couldn’t quite rid myself. Not that I was ever likely to forgive her of her part in things, but I thought I could at least give her a second chance and move on. But I wasn't sure just how well I was doing that. I felt a brief flash of morbid humor as I realized perhaps I wasn’t so different from Carol or Dean. Maybe I could make it up a little by hanging out with her more, perhaps a movie night or something.

I continued to appraise my appearance, the reflection showing my thoroughly laundered costume. Some parts had needed replacement, like the ruined leather boots and the missing beret, while others had only needed minor mending and a good soak. It was amazing just how much silt and scent of the ocean had infused into the fabric. The face in the mirror shifted through caricatured expressions as it tried to match my own, settling on a smile as I once more was pleased by the return of such a simple yet magnificent feature. Finally satisfied that Marceau would appear as perfect as possible after the longest period of inactivity in my relatively short career, I sauntered out of my room to join the rest of my team.

"About time." Alec's voice echoed with mock frustration. Any actual impatience he may have been experiencing was clearly reduced by whatever racing game he and Brian were playing. I just rolled my eyes, which went unnoticed beneath my mask.

"Well sorry if I wanted to make sure I didn't have some seaweed still stuck to my costume."

"Heh." He snorted. "I'd be more worried about crabs."

I tapped him not too gently in the shoulder with an invisible pole and apparently caused him to crash his virtual car.

"Damn it, I was in the lead too." He huffed, gently tossing the controller onto the coffee table and letting out a long, melodramatic sigh before slowly dragging himself to his feet. "Oh well, need to go do this boring guard duty thing anyway."

"Yeah, yeah. I know it's not that glamorous or well paying." Brian was clearly over Alec's whining at that point. "But it's easy money and you need to get some fresh air."

"Fine." Alec's shoulders slumped in defeat, though it seemed more for show than his actual feelings. It was hard to tell just what he was feeling some days. "But I'm wearing the dress."

With that groan producing announcement, he skipped off into his room to presumably switch his puffy shirt for the blouse he had surprised us with the other day. One of my gloved hand was soon pressed up against my replacement mask, an expression mirrored by Brian and Madison. Lisa was too busy finishing her transformation into Tattletale while Rachel seemed completely unconcerned. This was going to make things even more awkward when next I met Amy's family, but a small part of me was starting to see the humour in it. The practicality of wearing a dress while doing security work was less than optimal, but the absurd mental image of a bunch of dock workers wolf whistling for Regent brought a somewhat ambivalent grin to my face.
"So anyone else deciding to gender bend for the afternoon?" I couldn't keep the amusement out of my voice.

"Well I'm sure I could find a fake moustache somewhere." Lisa turned to me with a smile as she finished setting the domino mask in place, her blond hair framing her disguised face once more. The mental image of Lisa with a 70's handlebar popped into existence and I was soon chuckling quietly.

"Or we could add some pink racing stripes to Grue's leathers." Madison suggested, prompting a huff from Brian and renewed laughter from myself and Lisa.

"You should totally do that Bro." I jumped as Aisha added from beside me. Damn that girl's powers could get annoying. Her voice suddenly turned serious "Or are you uncomfortable with your masculinity?"

Brian blinked a bit at his sister, before shaking his head and asking a question.

"Alec suggest that one?"

Aisha just laughed, confirming his suspicions. I had to admit, it hadn't sounded quite right coming from her mouth. While she could actually speak properly, she seemed to take delight in being as crass as possible and as such rarely did. Just another little quirk that I had gotten too used to over the last couple months. Though Alec's latest quirk was still taking a bit of adjusting. Speaking of which, Alec returned from his room. Running my eyes up and down in a quick scan, I realised he had put a lot of effort into this. So much so that I had to wonder why he never seemed to bother the rest of the time. In this case, it was that he must have shaved his legs. Either that or the lucky bastard was just naturally smooth, which I refused to believe. With a chunky pair of boots, a knee length black dress and some lipstick artfully applied to his mask, he looked surprisingly convincing. Or at least as feminine as me, which was a rather depressing observation.

"About time." I mimicked his earlier comment, my fists resting on my hips and shaking my head in mock exasperation. "I swear, these girls and their prep times."

"You're just jealous that I look this fabulous." He laughed, striking a few poses. I refrained from confirming that he was at least partially right.

A short dog ride later and we had arrived at the ship graveyard. As we rode around to scope out the work area, I could already see some impressive progress on the salvage operation. It reminded me of an old nature documentary I had seen, where ants cut up leaves for their nest. Each ant only claimed a little piece each, but the number of them cutting in an endless chain made the leaves practically disintegrate under their combined efforts. While not quite the same scale, the effect was similar as I saw cutting torches separate pieces of ship hull in chunks small enough to be carried away by a team of burly men.

We dropped off Tattletale and Intel at the portable site office that was being used to organise the workers, where they would act as mission control and coordinate with Dad and the other supervisors. That left Grue and Imp on Judas, Regent and I on Brutus, and Bitch on the good as new Angelica. We then split up, with one monster dog per patrol direction and a recon drone hovering along with each team.

We headed north along the bay shore, weaving through chunks of wrecked ship or leaping through
other jetsam and flotsam washed up by the outskirts of Leviathan's waves. Teams of workers were spread out amongst the wreckage, several working on just clearing out the useless junk scattered around but others like the team I had seen earlier with cutting gear tearing into the rusting hulks.

A pair of younger workers whistled Regent's way as we passed by, much to both my and his amusement. I couldn't help by grin at the idea of the look on their faces if they ever worked it out. Unless of course they were into that sort of thing... The smile slowly died on my face though as I realised that the PHO would of course take this as confirmation that Regent was one of my 'floozies'. *I just had to team up with Regent, didn't I?*

I dragged my mind back to the task at hand. While I wasn't expecting much in the way of excitement for the day of guard duty, it wouldn't do to be complacent. This operation meant a lot to Dad, finally getting some solid work for a lot of the dock workers and doing something to improve the city. So I'd do what I could to help him out with this and make sure he remained as cheerful as he had been this last week. Stopping myself from daydreaming to actually pay attention was the least I could do.

"Oh look," Regent broke the silence and pointed to our left. "It's your other girlfriend."

Giving him a taste of my elbow to his ribs, I turned to look where he was pointing and thus confirming my suspicions. Parian stood off to the side of a bunch of workers, dressed in a navy blue coveralls that had been exaggeratingly feminised and waving a gloved hand our way. A huge, vaguely humanoid construct of fluorescent orange and reflective silver fabric manhandled a particularly stubborn section of hull. Apparently she had taken up the offer I had forwarded her after all. I held up my phone as if typing, but whispered to Regent instead of typing. I was well confident that no-one was near enough to hear.

"Behave."

"I'm offended." He chuckled. "What do you take me for?"

I just glowered at him, hoping my mask translated my expression sufficiently to get my mood across. Steering Brutus towards the rogue cape via leverage on spines and the occasional command from Regent, we closed the gap and dismounted. Parian seemed to pause and take in Regent's appearance. I could hardly blame her, she hadn't had a chance to develop a resistance to Regentness. I quickly typed out a message on my replacement and most importantly water-proof smart phone.

- *I see you took the job.*-
- *How are things?*

She tore her eyes away from the travesty of a transvestite to my left and read my message.

"Oh yeah, apparently we're getting things done at a reasonable pace." She looked over at her hi-vis gorilla thing and a certain tone of amusement entered her voice. "Apparently I'm much more convenient than a crane for this sort of work."

"I love your blue collar chic darling." Regent commented in an obvious parody of a fashion director. "I simply must order some of your work."

Parian looked at him, then back at me. This repeated a few times while I typed up a new message.

- *It's best just to ignore him.*-
While she was distracted by reading, I quickly slapped the back of Regent's head. Alas this just prompted further misbehaviour, seemingly out of spite.

"But tell me Parian, do I look fat in this?"

For her part, she seemed to actually put some though into her answer. Cradling the chin of her porcelain masked face, she tilted her head in contemplation for a moment.

"Actually, that dress does fit your figure surprisingly well. While black looks decent on just about anyone, I'd personally suggest more of a pale blue given your skin tone and hair."

While I was still surprised by her taking it seriously, Regent turned to me.

"See? I told you I made this work."

I blinked a few times before shaking my head. I was fairly sure my mask showed a grin though, as I couldn't help but smile. Things had perhaps been a bit too serious of late. We were still young, so it made sense to try to get away with as much silliness as possible while we still could. I typed out another quick note.

-See what I have to put up with?-  

Parian giggled as I exaggeratedly slumped my shoulders in mock exasperation.

"Oh yes, it must be such a burden to deal with such characters." While it was in good humour, I still wasn't sure I fully appreciated the sarcasm. "However do you cope?"

"One day at a time." Regent said, his tone suddenly serious as he rested the lips of his mask on his fist. "It's not easy, but we manage."

The forehead of my mask was soon trying to dig its way further into my gloved hand. I wasn't sure what the hell I was thinking by trying to tell Regent to behave. That sort of thing only worked on reasonable people. It was probably best if we just moved on with our patrol. But there was one last thing that really should be asked.

-Anyway, anything suspicious happen?-  
-Like gang activity or other capes?-  

"No." Parian shook her head as she read my message. "I've only seen workers. Though I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them belonged to gangs."

I nodded, as it was practically a given in this city. While there wasn't a huge presence in the union, I had heard stories about a few more obvious members that Dad had to deal with from time to time. That and pressure from the gangs not to hire people associated with the others. But from what I could tell, the vast majority of those working on this project were the ones who had stayed out of the gangs, despite the desperation that the failing economy had caused. It felt good, right even, that they had gotten this chance.

-We should continue our patrol.-
"Okay," she nodded. "Good luck."

As I mounted up, I noticed Regent go and whisper something to Parian, before something exchanged hands. He then hopped on to the back of Brutus, not caring about how indecent it was to do it like that in a dress. I gave him a meaningful stare, to which he responded with two words in a way too cheerful tone.

"Business Cards."

That was when I knew I was doomed to dealing with this behaviour for the foreseeable future. I could only hope he bored of it quickly. Maybe I could convince Parian to jack up the prices to deter him a bit... No, that was a pretty crappy thing to do to a friend. Even one as dysfunctional as Alec. As personally inconvenient as it was, it seemed to be entertaining him and it would be cruel to ruin his fun. It was pretty harmless after all.

As a whooshing sound and a gust of wind passed by my head, I realised I had once again drifted off into my own thoughts rather than being vigilant. Quickly scanning around, I found a familiar figure standing on a nearby wreck, flanked by another couple of unfriendly masked faces. Having learned my lesson from last time, I erected a wall behind us with one hand while setting up another in front of us. I was rewarded for my quick thinking by the dull thud of Rune's projectile slamming into the rear wall. I had no idea why the Empire would want to mess with the salvage operation, but here they were. Rune, Alabaster and Krieg. A dark though entered my mind. They weren't here for the operation, they were here for us. We had embarrassed them rather thoroughly not too long ago, these three in particular. Now that we were out in the open instead of doing our usual hit and run, we made a very tempting target. I glanced around quickly to see if there were more, but couldn't see any others as yet.

"Help inbound." Intel's voice buzzed in my ear. "Hold out till then."

Nodding my head for the drone to pick up on, I leaped off the dog so I could move freely while Regent dove for some cover. As I faced off against the trio of racist capes, Regent called out something from behind the chunk of hull.

"Sorry Rune, the harem's all full!"

The snarl of anger from the teenage Neo-Nazi echoed through the wreckage and led me to think a simple thought. Regent really needed to stop helping.
My left hand defined a barrier as soon as Krieg's own hands moved, almost as if he was conducting a symphony. In an instant, a storm of debris raised from the ground and was sent my way. Countless pieces of scrap metal and masonry silently plinked away as they impacted at arms length. The strain on my wall felt like nothing compared to other things it had resisted, but I couldn't discount the danger posed by the SS wannabe. Even if they weren't individually being propelled as hard as Rune's earlier attack, my costume wouldn't help much against a bunch of sharp steel and chunks of brick.

Alabaster took the opportunity to try and flank us while Krieg continued to spray me with junk. I couldn't just stand there and let that happen, but I was kind of pinned down. Bringing my right hand up to my mouth, I hoped to get the mime across when I couldn't really bite down on an imaginary pin with my mask in the way. With a jerking motion, I pulled my gripping hand back before flinging it forward in an over arm throw to clear my wall. The hand then went to my brow as my head turned to look at the impact site at Krieg’s feet. Rune and Krieg dove in opposite directions to escape the blast that wouldn't come. It was a cheap trick, but it worked last time and Grue's darkness prevented them from realising the first time around.

I switched hands on my wall as I started moving towards Regent. His head popped over the cover and an arm swung out with the usual finger snapping motion. Half a second later, I witnessed the effect as Alabaster tripped while trying to leap over a rusty I-beam. He face planted into the rubble in a way that would have been comical if not for the awkward angle of his neck. I winced a little, even though logically I knew he would be fine momentarily.

Distracted by the painful looking fall, I didn't notice Rune's attack until a slab of concrete thumped against my wall, sending a tingle down my arm and blocking off my line of sight to the girl's location. I moved further towards Regent, but as I cleared the edge of the concrete, it shifted to deny a clear line towards Rune. I didn't know what she hoped to achieve by that, but I had to assume there was more to it than hiding. She didn't seem the type. I was answered a moment later when Regent leapt towards me as another chunk of building crashed into his abandoned cover and crushing the spot he'd been just a moment before. *Damn.* I couldn't do much to protect against things I didn't know were coming. Or could I?

Waving Regent towards me as I moved closer to him, I started establishing walls around me. When he got closer, I filled in the last wall of the archetypical mime box. It did limit my tactical movement, but it would at least keep us relatively safe till I could think of a better option or reinforcements arrived. A moment later, another downside made itself abundantly clear. Regent had to be way too deep into my personal space to be able to fit in the box with me... Perhaps this was not the best idea after all.

It was at this point that the slab shifted once more revealing Alabaster with his hand gun pointed directly at us, fully intent on testing the integrity of my box. One magazine of freshly flattened bullets later and I was treated to a tirade of profanity from the albino bigot as he ducked behind some more cover. He was certainly colourful in his choice of insults. I wasn't about to correct him on the inaccuracy of certain homophobic slurs, but the cross dressing boy pressed up against me may have had something to do with his confusion.

"Not gay if it's Marceau." Yelled Regent in response, once again missing the point and not at all helping with my reputation. "Oh and if I'd known you'd be this jealous Rune, I would have offered
"I do not want Marceau, damn it!" I cringed as the hooded girl screamed. What the hell was Regent thinking. Making her angrier was not the best choice right here and now. This was made evident by another large chunk of concrete slamming against the walls of my invisible box and sending another tingle up my arm and into my head, where a mild ache was already beginning. As the impromptu missile pulled back in preparation for another strike, I heard Regent snap his fingers again. Rune stumbled as her legs gave out and the concrete veered off and crashed to the ground. With that brief respite and with Krieg leaping over the cover he had used not a moment before, I dropped one of the walls of my box and hurled another grenade before reforming it.

Rune shifted the concrete to cover herself from the presumed landing site, but Krieg himself stood there smugly. He must have caught onto my trick of miming a mimed grenade.

"Not going to fall for that one agai-eeeeeeeee"

Unfortunately for him, this time I had actually mimed one. I allowed myself a quick snort of amusement at the absurdity of that distinction. While my experimentation had shown I couldn't actually create explosions as such, I could set it up to knock things around in a similar manner to the strong wind trick. The surprised yelp as he was, relatively gently, flung several yards away and to the ground was immensely satisfying. That it gave me an extended reprieve from being pelted with rubble was an added bonus. A few of the larger nearby bits of wreckage were also tossed aside or at least jostled, prompting another sound of surprise from Rune as her barrier almost toppled. The fact that most of the smaller bits hadn't so much as moved was filed away for later pondering as it wasn't the best time for contemplating the bizarre limits of my powers.

I was just beginning to think this was going way too easy when Murphy decided to punish me for my hubris. Whether they had figured out something from observing the videos or were desperately flinging things to find out what stuck, it didn't really matter if it worked. Alabaster had lobbed a grenade of his own from his hiding place and silly me assumed it was something explosive and decided to maintain my walls rather than punting it back. I shut my eyes just in case, but couldn't risk removing my hands from the walls to cover my ears. Beside me, Regent did just that. As such I was surprised when instead of a ear popping explosion, I heard a small tinkling noise as it bounced near our feet along with a vigorous hissing noise. That was when I may have made another mistake by opening my eyes.

My vision was soon filled with white smoke, my walls doing almost nothing to stop it. Almost immediately my eyes, nose and throat began to burn and in no time at all I started coughing. It was all I could do to try and maintain the walls I had put up when my entire world was the sensation of burning and the sounds of hissing gas and our wracking coughs.

"Fuc-kagh" Regent tried to speak, but his words were cut off by another bout of coughing before he tugged on my arm and nudged me back. I couldn't be sure, but I had to guess he was suggesting we move. Lacking any better options, especially when one of them was standing over the source of the smoke I blindly stumbled back while doing my best to keep up at least one wall between us and where I thought they might be. When I felt the familiar tingling of a swarm of small impacts, muted by the omnipresent sting of the tear gas, I knew I had at least aimed in the right direction. The big hit a moment later however was more than my distracted mind could handle and I felt a stab of pain as my wall dropped, followed by another as I felt something sharp slice across my arm.

I dragged Regent to the ground, rolling over to put both my hands in the air, trying to visualise a curved dome through my tear filled, stinging eyes. I didn't want to be stuck here, but I knew we'd be
easy targets trying to limp away and this was my best shot for keeping a strong barrier up. My breathing was laboured with the gas still triggering coughs and a weight on my chest that given the loud coughing in my ear, must have been Regent. As I started feeling renewed impacts on my dome, I started silently urging my team mates to hurry up and get here. It can't have been that long since the fight started, but they had the dogs. I just had to hope I could keep it up till they arrived.

As the blows continued to rain down, in bursts of tiny impacts followed by larger ones as Krieg filled in the gaps as Rune's larger missiles cycled through smashing against us. An inexorable rhythm of tingling, building up the pain in my head to the point where it was overwhelming the discomfort from the gas, wearing down my endurance. I began second guessing every move I had made since the fight started, even as I tried to focus on keeping the barrier up despite the stinging and coughing. If I'd just tried to fling them away immediately, or just shot them somewhere non vital with an invisible gun. If only I'd been more aggressive, we might not have been in this mess. I shook my head as another coughing fit started. It wasn't important, I had to focus.

Suddenly the constant rhythmic pressure of their assault receded and I heard a panicked cry in Rune's voice.

"Fuck! Where'd that come fro-aaaaaahhh."

I tried opening my eyes to find out what was going on, but all I got was glaring colours through liquid distortion. I couldn't help but cry, mostly from the tear gas but partly from returning to crappy eyesight, if only temporarily. Amy would probably scold me for not being more careful. Struggling to keep my eyes open despite the stinging, I caught a flash of orange as another cry went out. This one from Krieg, and more of pain than surprise.

I didn't know what the hell was happening, but it certainly sounded good for us. Had my team mates arrived? I couldn't really think what else it could be, but surely they would have said something? My eyes shut again as I couldn't fight against the burning sensation but the sounds of fighting soon disappeared, leaving me with my arms up and holding a barrier till I knew it was safe. I heard a soft crunching noise as someone walked towards us, barely audible between our continued coughing.

"Not to interrupt your alone time, but they're gone." A familiar voice broke the tension with nervous laughter. "Hope I don't need to make a habit of rescuing you."

As the details clicked into place and I realised just who had apparently driven off the Empire capes, three thoughts came to my slightly disoriented mind. One, I didn't realise Parian had it in her to get into a cape fight. Two, the PHO was probably going to blow this way out of proportion. Three, Amy would not be amused.
With a certain amount of relief I let my arms drop to my sides, releasing the barrier that had been the only thing stopping us from being paste. I couldn't be sure that they would have let up once we were disabled, or even if it was possible to only disable us with a big slab of concrete. The idea that the Empire were playing for keeps rather than following the unwritten rules was worryingly believable. A few more wracking coughs shook my body as Regent slowly dragged himself off of me.

"Not fucking fair." His complaints as he moved were broken up by sporadic coughing as I heard more than saw him get up onto his feet. My eyes were still a blurry stinging mess "Thanks. Fucking tear gas."

As I tried to get up, I felt a pair of hands gently grab onto my arm and help lift.

"Up we go." Parian's voice once again filled my ears, this time from much closer. She had a faint accent that I hadn't picked up during the trip from Boston, the sound of the rotors apparently enough to disguise it. With the current state of my eyes preventing reliable use of my phone and my stubbornness about revealing the fact I could talk, I instead drew out a question mark in the air with my finger.

"Well I heard the attack happen from back where we met." Her voice still had that nervousness from earlier. Not surprising if this was her first actual cape fight. "I was going to let you sort it out, but then I saw the smoke and got a little worried."

So she had come along to help when she thought we might be in trouble. While I would have loved it if she'd joined from the start, I had to admit that it took a fair amount of guts to attack the Empire. Especially when she was a rogue and had been keeping out of all the hero versus villain business. I nodded and twirled my hand around to get her to continue.

"When I got a bit closer, I saw that albino guy distracting the big dog thing while the other two were hurling stuff at you." I tilted my head at that.

Thinking back, I realised I hadn't seen Brutus do anything after we'd dismounted. We hadn't ordered him to attack, but I would have thought he'd pounce on a cape anyway. I guess Bitch had them well trained, if inconveniently so. I made a mental note to ask Regent if he actually knew any of the attack commands. Our assumptions that this would be a milk run of a job had really bitten us in the ass in the preparation department.

"So umm... I rushed them with my gorilla to try and scare them off. I don't know how it got so close before they noticed. It's bright orange!" Her voice became a little manic as she went on, but I had to grin at the idea of a hi-vis gorilla surprising them. "The girl, Rune was it? She ducked out the way and only got clipped. But the Nazi guy was limping and got knocked aside and stopped moving."

Well that explained the amusing sounds. Krieg must have landed wrong when I'd sent him flying. Just a shame his powers didn't seem to care about leg injuries. The cloth construct hadn't looked all that threatening. But if it was lifting large bits of ship with ease, it had to have some pretty impressive strength to it. I found myself even more amused that Krieg had apparently been defeated by a stuffed toy. That wouldn't be good for his reputation.

"Then Rune and the albino ran over to him and she slapped the ground with one hand while cradling
the other. Then they flew off on a chunk of road or something and oh god I fought the Empire Eighty Eight and they're going to retaliate and oh no what have I done this was a bad idea oh my."

As she started to ramble on, I reached out and settled my hand on what I figured was her shoulder from my blurry vision and gave it what I hoped was a reassuring squeeze to stop her from passing out by not breathing between words. The poor girl had helped us and quite likely earned the ire of at least those few capes. Once again I started regretting my choices from the fight. If I had ended it earlier, I could have prevented this. I just knew I could have done it, but no, I just had to think I was nigh invulnerable. Lacking any other way to communicate without spilling my secret, I mimed a stick and carefully wrote out on the silt and debris covered ground.

-Thank you & sorry-

I couldn't really trust myself to write out a longer message with the residual coughing and the tear filled eyes, but I hoped the meaning would get across. It was about then that I heard some louder crunching noises and familiar voices calling out.

"Shit are you guys okay?" Grue's echoing voice called out as I heard panting dogs skid to a halt nearby. "We came as fast as we could and... Parian?"

"Umm, hi?" She sounded thrown by the sudden appearance of my team mates, and Grue seemed equally surprised that she was here. Not that I could blame him, but I would have thought Intel would have updated him.

"Sorry, didn't expect you here. Intel's drone got knocked out of the sky, so we didn't know what was happening." Ah, well that wouldn't have helped. I could only hope that that meant there was no footage of my horrible defeat and the embarrassing position I had been in. I really didn't need anyone else seeing that and would have to put my foot down about posting it if any existed.

"Came in like a knight in cloth armour." Regent chuckled between coughs. "Rescued this damsel in distress and our mime again. Please tell me someone caught the plushie taking out the skin heads?"

Okay, so perhaps there was a downside to the drone not capturing the fight. That would be damn satisfying to watch after everything that had happened. Though if that made its way to the internet, there was no way that Parian wouldn't suffer for it.

"They seem to have been tear gassed." Parian explained to Grue as we both broke into another series of coughs. "Rescued this damsel in distress and our mime again. Please tell me someone caught the plushie taking out the skin heads?"

"Wow, that's gotta suck." Imp's voice came from near my left ear, prompting a small flinch. The surprised squeak from the rogue further to my left told me that yes, Imp had just disabled her power rather than me not hearing her approach.

"Imp." Grue growled. "Stop startling the friendlies."

"Awwww, but that's no fun." Her voice came from my right this time, somewhere near where I had last heard Regent. "Anyway, let's get you out of here and looked at. Oh, you've gotten your pretty little dress all dirty."

Yep, definitely near Regent. It was disorientating to have to rely purely on my hearing to work
anything out. I'd need to check with Intel whether she had any idea how to rig some kind of filter into my mask. Or, as my internal critic reminded me, I could just knock away grenades in the future. After all, I'd done it against Bakuda. I was pulled from my introspection by Grue speaking again.

"Do you want a lift back to the office? We kind of owe you for helping out."

"Umm." She hesitated before continuing. "I'll ride along on my gorilla. The dogs make me a bit nervous."

"Fine. Don't want you on my dogs anyway." Bitch grumbled, letting me know that she too had arrived. "Brutus, heel."

I soon felt strong arms help me up the rough and spiny hide of presumably Brutus and I did my best to stabilise myself, gripping bony protrusions as I felt the dog sway. Another, less muscly pair of arms wrapped around my waist.

"Don't mind me." Regent rasped from behind me. "Can't see shit."

And so it was that we started the short but confusing trip back to the office, leaving me feeling rather queasy as I lurched around without any sensible reference point to orient myself.

"Oh shit, why didn't I notice this before?" Tattletale first words upon my arrival were somewhat confusing. I tilted my head to indicate as such to her. "I thought your constructs didn't make any noise purely because of your sound dampening. I totally overlooked that sound would go through them because air did too."

I sighed as she pointed that out. I wanted to be angry at her for not realising this earlier, but I really hadn't put much effort into figuring it out myself so I could hardly complain. Once more I realised how little thought I had actually put into my powers. Sure I had come up with some inventive uses for them, several of which had earned me a reputation for 'bullshit hax' as some posters on PHO had called it. But I was mostly just coming up with stuff in the spur of the moment rather than thinking ahead.

Really, something like this should have been picked up in the first couple weeks when I was initially playing around with my powers. I must have been too enamoured with the power and possibilities to really consider the weaknesses. Hell, I had even taken out Lung on my first night in what was increasingly looking like a fluke. If he had gotten anywhere up to full strength, would the heat of his flames have gone right through any walls I made? Was this the sort of thing that got other capes killed? Misjudging their own limits and getting screwed over by a niggling little detail was a really shitty way to lose.

"Now don't get all mopey." Tattletale must have picked up on my mood. "It was pretty easy to miss, even for a genius like me."

It didn't exactly make me feel better, but it was something to work on. I'd need to carefully go over everything I thought I knew and see if I'd made any other disastrous assumptions. I tapped at the eyes of my mask.

"Ah yes, let's get you washed up." She grabbed my hand. "Imp if you'd... ah, I see you're already helping him."
Imp being proactively helpful was... strange. That was an uncharitable thought, but I hadn't really ever noticed her be obviously caring. She'd usually make a bit deal any time she needed to help. Before I could think on it more, I heard a door close behind us. We must have made it to the washroom. I felt her hands grasp the sides of my mask and slip it off, having to trust her that no one outside of the group was in here with us. I pulled my eyes open to find them filled with glare from the fluorescent lighting and a blurry cream and blonde shape before me. I saw movement to my side before the stinging convinced me to shut my eyes again.

"Don't worry, just Imp and Regent" she said calmly. "Now come over here and we'll wash out your eyes a bit."

Her hands guided me to a basin as the sound of running water filled the room. Pulling my gloves free, I quickly rinsed my hands before cupping the water up to my face. Forcing my eyes open to flush out the tear gas residue was a distinctly unpleasant experience. But the spluttering noises Regent made from my left along with Imp's chuckles helped distract me from it, at least a little.

Eventually I could manage to keep my eyes open, with my vision only slightly blurred by residual tears. I could deal with that, kind of like chopping up a bunch of onions. Giving my mask a quick rinse to remove all the mucus, I carefully dried it off with the hand drier before fitting it back in place. Staring at myself in the mirror for the second time today, my shoulders slumped as I took in the mess that had been made of my freshly laundered costume. It also brought to my attention something I had basically forgotten about, the cut in my upper arm where one of Krieg's swarm of projectiles had tagged me after my wall failed. Poking and prodding around the area showed it wasn't too deep, but it definitely needed cleaning. A quick splash of water and dabbing with some paper towel would have to do till I could get it properly seen to.

One last check of the mirror and I was as good as I was going to get without a full clean up. Glancing over, I caught Imp giving Regent a cheerful slap on the ass as she pushed him through the door. I blinked and turned to Tattletale, a grin already plastered on her face. Oh, so that's what was going on then. Things suddenly made a little more sense, while also giving me an unsettling feeling that things would get complicated. I had to wonder if Grue knew. Given that he hadn't pummelled Regent lately, probably not. I was not looking forward to that revelation, but hopefully his own romantic interests would calm him down a bit. After all, his own choice wasn't exactly flawless.

Following the quirky... couple through the doorway, we moved to the office lounge where Grue, Bitch, Intel and Parian were sitting around discussing something. Most likely what had happened.

"So, what'd we miss?" Imp asked as she hopped up to take a seat on one of the benches.

"We were just discussing how to proceed from here." Grue turned to face his sister. "If the Empire are going to be acting in this area, we're going to need to be a lot more cautious."

"I'm surprised they were here at all." Tattletale took a seat next to him, her head propped up in one hand. "If they were really interested in disrupting things, they would have interrupted some of the works, and with more capes. Frankly I think they just took the opportunity for a bit of revenge."

I tapped out a message on my phone as I took the seat on her other side before showing her.

-How reassuring-

She just chuckled and patted me on the shoulder.
"They might be satisfied with their symbolic victory against you for the moment." She turned to face Parian. "Though from what I've heard, you humiliated them. That might be a problem."

"That... is what I had feared." She sighed and curled up in on herself in a disturbingly familiar way. Much like I had habitually done just a few months back. "I don't exactly regret saving Marceau and Regent, but I... I don't know what to do. I think I may have lost what little security I had as a rogue by getting involved and I'm really not cut out for being a hero."

Her voice and posture told me just how frightened she was of what could come and I once more felt a pang of guilt for getting her into this. I started typing another message as Grue spoke.

"Well hero or not, you did a good job today. You have our thanks and we'll do what we can to keep you safe."

I held up my phone for her.

"-We do owe you one or two.-"

"How about we add another team mate?" Intel suggested.

I turned to her, blinking under my mask. I didn't think that was exactly a great idea if we wanted to avoid her getting into anymore trouble. The fact that it would worry the hell out of Amy was a completely different matter. On the other hand, she had already seen my face at least. So I had the least to lose by her joining.

"We already have too many people." Bitch grumbled. She had not been particularly happy with the recent increase in team mates decreasing her cut of the monthly retainer. Though maybe we could convince the boss to add a bit of extra like we had for Intel's tinkering budget. Why was I thinking of ways to get Parian in. That was a bad idea.

"Well you are pretty talented from what I've seen." Tattletale added, a devious smile already growing to replace her earlier thoughtful frown. "We could probably arrange something to have you as more of a support role like Intel here."

While Bitch continued to grumble, the others took a moment to think about it. Regent was the first to break the silence.

"Well I have no complaints having a staff seamstress." He chuckled before continuing. "Plus the whole saving my life thing leaves a good impression."

"Eh, could be fun." Imp added a moment later.

"Hmm." Grue tapped his fingers along the bottom of his helmet. "If you're willing to help out, it could work."

I just shrugged in an exaggerated manner. I could see both benefits and complications to the whole thing. She had been needing a bit of cape friendship, her powers could be useful and I probably owed her my life twice over now. On the other hand, she was hesitant to get into any fights and my own personal complications made this awkward. Though if she was going to join the team, it would at least let me get the message across clearly that I wasn't available. Not that I actually thought she was interested in me, but Amy's words had left me a little worried.
"Umm, wow. Can I have a little time to think about this?"

"No problem" Tattletale handed over a card she'd just written something on. "Call this number when you've decided. Don't worry, we won't be offended if you don't take us up on the offer."

"Thank you." She glanced over at the clock on the wall. "I guess I had better get back to work. But if you can keep an eye out for more danger, that would be great."

As she left the building and mounted up on her cloth construct, I had to wonder how I'd gone from having a social circle of zero to lots in such a short period of time. Who could have guessed that beating up villains, and formerly heroes, would be so good for meeting people?
Interlude

Rune

I couldn't see why we should have even bothered looking at this salvage operation. It wasn't one of our fronts and the boss had said not to interfere with it too much. So what was the point of dragging ourselves out here if we weren't going to bust some heads? Seemed a bit soft to me. I mean they were hiring all sorts of foreign scum when there were plenty more Americans that could fill those jobs. But I guess he figured they had at least hired a bunch of white dudes and were cleaning up the place.

Still it was looking like it would be a dull as shit day near the bay. I wanted to go and hang out with the girls, but no. Krieg was being curious, and I had to pay for my uncle's curiosity. Heh, maybe I'd get to take out my frustration on some niggers on the way back.

I was beginning to despair that nothing would happen when I saw that fucking mime ride by on one of that butch dyke's mutant dogs. Riding around like he owned the place, with some slut along for the... Shit, that was Regent. No matter what all the PHO geeks thought, I knew for a fact that he was a dude. Jesus... As well as a bastard mime he was a dirty fag too? Fuck it. I touched a piece of rusty scrap metal and pushed my power into it. Krieg looked my way.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Homo hunting." I replied with a grin.

"We're supposed to..." He didn't finish before I flung the metal at the queer and his tranny, but the distraction was just enough for me to miss. Damn, but I'd get him on the way back. Fuck me, the bastard blocked it? Here I was hoping he'd fall for the same trick as last time.

"Well yes, thanks Rune. I was hoping to avoid disobeying Kaiser today. But perhaps we can at least make up for the armoury debacle, yes?"

I grinned as I saw them hop off that ugly beast and take a stand. It looked like I'd get that fight I wanted after all and I wasn't about to let this butt pirate get the better of me again. I was better than that.

The door slammed behind me as I stomped into Kaiser's office. This day had gone from bad to worse. Seriously, what the hell? We'd been pummelling that fucking mime and his fuck buddy when that doll bitch ambushed us. So I had to answer to the boss. And those damn twins just looked at me like something the cat had dragged in. I had cleaned up and dressed up in civies before reporting in so I wasn't filthy. Sure I was still cradling my arm, but I was pretty sure it wasn't broken so I didn't think I looked that bad. They must have been informed of what had happened. Fuck, I didn't need to deal with those smug bitches right now.

As I got closer to his desk, he slowly spun around in his chair like a fucking bond villain. Sometimes I had to wonder how the hell anyone took him seriously. Sure he was ugly for an older dude and had money and was pretty bad ass. But couldn't anyone else tell that he had an ego the size of the moon? Maybe it was justified, but I couldn't help but be annoyed by it. Hell, I could see why Kayden left his smarmy ass to go do whatever she was doing these days. Still, he was the boss of the only game in
town. Unless of course you wanted to be a prissy door mat like the Wards.

"It is in our best interest if we're seen to be a positive influence on this city's growth. Sabotaging efforts to rebuild when the workforce was predominantly white erodes our support from hard working Americans." Max Anders leaned over his desk. One hand wrapped over another, his chin resting on top. "So why pray tell did you disobey my orders to not interfere with the salvage works?"

Fuck me, it was going to be a lecture.

"Marceau was fagging up the place so I took a shot. We were far enough away to not catch any workers in the cross fire."

"You still started a fight nearby, which you then lost."

I glared back at his judgemental scowl. He didn't need to tell me that. I was fucking well there. Stuck up bastard. We'd done a hell of a lot better than Cricket and Stormtiger. Not to think ill of the dead or anything. Shit, his death had to have hit Melody hard. She'd been pretty damn distant lately. Where was I again? Oh right, that fucking sneaky bitch.

"We were winning till that Parian slut ambushed us."

"Parian... The rogue that performs puppet shows?" Okay, so maybe mentioning her wasn't the smartest move. "You were run off by a fashion designer?"

"Well that fashion designer can make some killer threads. Fucking cloth gorilla came out of nowhere, cold clocked James and fucked up my arm. He was still unconscious when we left him with Othala."

I frowned as I thought back on leaving him with her and Victor. He'd probably be all patched up, good as new. But I still worried about the old guy, he wasn't quite as fit as he used to be and a broken leg and more must have been hard on him. "We should rough her up a bit for that shit. Probably some kind of fag hag anyway if she's rescuing Marceau."

He gave me another condescending glare.

"So I've noticed you're using some new epithets for the Undersider..."

"Yeah, Regent was wearing a dress and was all over him. Knew there was something fishy about all those rumours." My smile returned as I thought about the one good thing about the fight. "Still, they went down like prison bitches when Milky chucked a tear gas grenade at them. Fucking hilarious when his invisible box did shit all."

That at least got a smile out of him. Whether because we found out a weakness or just the usual glee at bashing the freaks, I couldn't tell.

"Well that is interesting, I'll have to commend him for revealing that little titbit. Tell me though, did they catch your humiliation on video like last time?"

He might as well have slapped me with a question like that. What did he think I was, retarded or something?

"Nah, took out their drone at the start of the fight. I learned my lesson last time."

"Good, having that disseminated would not do. I guess I can let this failure slip. You may go."
I'd dearly love to shove my fist through that smug grin, but just nod instead. Where the fuck does he get off? He hadn't had to fight the Undersiders. Didn't know how fucking tricky they are. Just once I'd like to see him get knocked around by some invisible bullshit or chewed on by a giant dog, see how he liked it. But no, he'd just sit all pretty up in his corporate throne and leave us to sort everything out unless shit got real deep.

As I walked out of the office, I ignored the twin playboy giants and thought about how best to get back at that doll bitch. At least we'd shown Marceau and Regent not to fuck with us. That pleasant image stayed with me as I got into my car and drove back to check on James.
Once again I stared out across the ship graveyard as people swarmed over the wreckage like ants, occasionally taking in more details with a gizmo covered pair of tinker binoculars. The progress was obvious from my perch at the top of the old office building, already one of the larger ships had been cut down and carted away to be recycled or otherwise repurposed. That still left at least another few months of salvage work followed by who knew how long to refurbish the dock area. There were already boats docked at some of the more accessible areas, container shipments diverted through Brockton Bay while Boston's harbour facilities were out of commission. It was a pleasantly alien sight, having actual shipping return to the bay rather than just small civilian craft and fishing trawlers. It would never return to its peak, like back before the Endbringers, but it was something. A small glint of hope for a city that had been slowly dying.

The E88 hadn't made another appearance since last Saturday, but to my surprise there had been a few stray remnants of the Merchants. Probably trying to sell their dwindling supplies to some of the workers. I had no idea what they were thinking or how they were even still around, but New Wave discouraged them during their patrol on Thursday. I was a little surprised they had gone along with the idea of helping guard the graveyard works, but it did look good for them to be seen helping out the city. I had to wonder what was the bigger contribution, public relations, keeping up with the PRT presence, or Amy prodding them on my behalf.

I let myself smile at the thought of Amy getting all indignant at them. While she was usually soft spoken, she could be a menace when provoked. A week later and I still hadn't heard the last of her nagging over getting tear gassed and the whole sorta recruiting Parian thing. I felt I already had enough self recrimination, but somehow her stern lecturing came across as adorable. Okay, maybe I was little biased. I'd managed to calm her down once I told her about a new filter system added to my mask and distracted her from the other point for at least a day with the tactical application of tickling. Other methods had been employed later. I smiled as I thought about that morning.

"Umm, what are you doing?"

I turned my head to look at a rather confused Amy stepping into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She looked adorable in her pyjamas, even if her bed hair was atrocious.

"I'm making us breakfast." I said as I turned fully, revealing the pancake batter swirling around in mid air. "That and getting some more practice in."

She stared blankly at my invisible mixing bowl and spoon. It was taking a reasonable amount of concentration to make sure I didn't spatter the kitchen with batter, but it definitely cut down on the dishes. One of the little tricks I had been playing around with to get a better grip on my powers. I'd found that while my constructs did bumpkins against gas and fine particles, anything a bit more cohesive was a simple matter to contain. I couldn't for the life of me work out why the hell that was the case, but after several failed experiments of trying to make something to block such things as finely powdered chalk dust but managing to paint an invisible wall with spray paint, I was left having to deal with the ideas that powers made little sense. Sure there was a bit of spray through from that experiment, but the warehouse section of our lair didn't really suffer from a few faint spots of paint.

"So in other words, you're showing off?" A small smile formed on her sleepy face.
"Hrmph." I pouted before turning to pour the batter onto the frying pan. "Sounds like someone doesn't want blueberry pancakes."

As the batter sizzled I stared at the pan, still disappointed that the invisible pan trick hadn't worked out. Apparently direct application of a gas stove wasn't really a good way to cook things. Unless you know, you liked things charred in a ring pattern. It also hadn't helped with the realization that Lung could have easily cooked me. Maybe a hotplate would work better? I felt arms circle around my waist and a head nuzzle into my back.

"Aww, don't be like that. I'm always happy to eat what you cook, and I do appreciate it." She gave me another tight squeeze before her tone darkened. "I'm still not sleeping well."

"Likewise." I sighed, flipping the pancake. It was slightly awkward to do so with Amy attached to me, but I had no complaints. "But last night wasn't as bad."

"No, last night wasn't as bad." An amused tone crept into her voice. "Though I almost fell out of bed. There just isn't enough room on a single."

"True. But I doubt Dad will let me put in a double. He's been politely ignoring that you've been sneaking into my room to cuddle up to me and that's probably only because he knows we aren't doing anything more. I don't think he could ignore a bigger bed."

"Guess we'll just have to make do then." I felt another nuzzle in my back.

"Yep." I flipped the pancake onto a plate with an invisible spatula. "Can you get the ice cream from the freezer, this one's done."

"Oh, in a good mood?" Imp asked, breaking me from my reverie. My grin must have transmitted to my mask. At my nod she chuckled. "Let me guess, Pan Pan?"

I checked around to make sure we weren't being overheard. Satisfied that no one was around other than her and Intel, I spoke.

"Yeah." Staring at her and having relationships on my mind, I decided to ask what I'd been wondering for a while. "So, you and Regent huh?"

At that, she cracked up laughing rather than shifting in embarrassment like I would have expected from most girls. Intel didn't appear all that surprised, but she did seem to hang around with Imp a lot more than I had lately.

"Shit, was I that obvious?"

I shrugged, having only really twigged because of what I saw a week ago.

"Just don't tell big bro. He'd totally spazz out." She glanced out over the graveyard. "Not that he has any high ground. Gotta wonder what's the deal with bringing along ze Über-Milf."

"Über... Milf?" I asked before shuddering. "That's just given me a horrible mental image."

"Oh...Yeah. Eeww. Totally didn't mean it like that." She shrugged. "So it's not my best material."
"Yeah... But I know what you mean. He's been tight lipped about the whole thing, despite Tattletale's cryptic cackling. But he did say something about her wanting to help."

As I closed my mouth, something drew my attention. What I had considered to be just another one of Intel's drones hovering above us, was upon more careful inspection quite different. Much sturdier looking than the usual RC helicopter chassis, it looked quite the engineering marvel with... was that a gun? Slightly nervous, I turned to my team mate.

"Umm Intel? Is that new?"

Glancing up from her laptop, I could have sworn I saw a bit of a blush on her face below her goggles.

"Oh yes. w-I just finished it the other day. It's uh... call it a covert heli-remote, mark fifteen."

"That... is descriptive but a bit of a mouthful." I stared as it came down to land next to her. "But it looks impressive."

She preened at the compliment. Something that tended to happen whenever I commented about her latest nifty gadget.

"Well it's listed in my docs as C.H.R fifteen."

"...Chris?" At that I swear she turned into a tomato. What was up with that? Was she that embarrassed about her naming conventions or something. If I were a tinker, I'd probably run out of good ideas for names too.

"Um... Yeah that'll work." She suddenly jerked her head back to her screen, the new drone quickly taking off as she did so. "Heads up, Grue inbound... With someone else."

Following her hand as she pointed towards the South East, I spotted a dark cloud approaching. Pulling up the binoculars, I took a closer look. There was Grue in costume, darkness billowing out from him and flowing behind as he approached on what appeared to be a dirt bike. What was really interesting was the person in white, arms wrapped tight around his waist and barely peering over his shoulder. I couldn't imagine the passenger, presumably this Kayden he'd talked about, could really see much as the wisps of black smoke drifted past their head. Frankly, I was still stuck on the fact that apparently Grue owned and knew how to ride a motorbike. I must have missed that with all the training I'd done over the last week. That and the quality time with Amy of course.

"Well, let's go down and meet your future sister in law."

Imp just punched me in the shoulder before we headed down. They took the stairs while I... also took stairs. Just invisible, external ones. As such I touched down on the dirty concrete of the footpath bordering the silty debris field well before the rest of my team mates made their way out of building. As my friends came through the door behind me, I lounged on nothing. Partially to make an impressive first impression and also to keep practicing with my powers. The more seemingly pointless uses I could think of for them, the more useful ones might pop into my mind. At least that was my theory and I was sticking to it till something better came along. While I reclined in the air, I reached into a pocket and pulled out something that had been missing from my life for too long. As the bike pulled up and Grue and his lady friend dismounted, I lazily waved with one hand in greeting.
I could immediately tell that Grue was exasperated by how his head dropped. I couldn't get a read on the woman though, other than perhaps some confusion. She had a full bike helmet on as well, disguised her face apart from the area around her eyes. Getting a closer look at her clothing, it was a white bodysuit. Something I'd more associate with a cape.

"So everyone." Grue spoke, his voice distorted by the darkness billowing from his body but still sounding hesitant. "I'd like you to meet Purity."

There was stunned silence as she began to glow and took off her helmet, revealing a face, but with its details obscured by the light. As I glanced over at Tattletale, her smile made me realise she'd known for a while. That explained the cackling at least. Wow, I had thought getting into a relationship with Panacea was a big deal. But this? Well, this took the cake. Several politically incorrect jokes ran through my head, but all I could do was bring my hands together to clap. Grue had managed to defy any expectations I could have had for today and I was speechless. Which was convenient given that I was going to stay in character till I worked out how much I could trust her. Apparently Purity and Grue did not take my impromptu applause well, quiet though it was.

"I've got to agree with the mime. You don't do things by half measures, oh glorious leader." Regent was probably the most amused I'd heard him since, well probably a few days ago. He was a bit like that.

"Says the lazy bastard. No dress today?" Grue asked.

"Do you know how long it took to get the dirt out of my petticoats? Nope, going to wear pants on patrol."

"Awww." Imp whined. "But seriously bro? You bagged a bigoted blaster babe?"

I face palmed, despite my appreciation for the alliteration. As surprising as it was, that wasn't the most tactful thing to say.

"Imp. Behave." He turned to the glowing woman. "Sorry about that. I may have exaggerated on how well behaved she is and they tend to get irreverent."

I started typing immediately as Imp cracked up laughing at the understatement of the century. I held up my phone for the diametric pair.

- Turn about is fair play -

They both stared at it for a moment, Purity seemingly confused. Grue just sighed.

"Okay, so maybe I deserve that after my teasing."

I nodded. While he wasn't as bad as the others, he had taken part in the playful but annoying teasing about Amy back before I had realised we were already dating. A little payback was certainly satisfying.

"So this is going to draw a bit of attention from the PRT isn't it?" Intel asked. "I mean, well no offence but as far as I was aware, you're a villain right?"
She had a point. We were only barely acknowledged as being not villains by the PRT. Associating
with a well known and identifiable E88 cape was going to cause a bit of trouble. Not that I had any
problem who Brian chose to spend his private time with, but damn if this wasn't going to impact on
us. Amy's parents were unlikely to be impressed. Damn it.

"Well I've been trying to distance myself from the Empire." Her glowing form slumped a bit as she
sighed. "I don't really agree with how they do things and want to try and help the city."

"Hmmm. This may take a bit of work. You haven't exactly had the cleanest record and I doubt the
PRT are going to just wave it off." Tattletale rubbed her chin as she thought. "You could probably
join the Protectorate and get rebranded, but you'll be under heavy restrictions and they'll relocate you
to make it less obvious."

"That is... unappealing." Her tone made the words an understatement.

"Or you could try rebranding yourself and hope everyone goes along with the obvious ploy."
Tattletale suggested, clearly amused by the idea. "Of course, actually fighting the Empire would help
sell it."

Purity was silent at that. Something about that pissed me off. I guess I could understand not wanting
to fight old friends, but if she was trying to be a good person, protecting them wasn't the best way to
go about it. I quickly typed into my phone.

"Well yeah, it's not like your old friends would want to shank your new boy toy and his pals or
anything." Imp snarked as I was halfway through typing something similar. Slightly dejected, I just
pointed at Imp. Purity sighed and nodded solemnly.

"If I do that. My daughter will be in danger. To them, it would be bad enough that I'm dating a
darkie." She flinched and squeaked as Grue prodded her in the ribs. "What, I thought that word was
okay?"

Grue sighed a sigh of exasperation, and I got the distinct impression that this was and would be an
ongoing problem.

"Just call me a black guy in public, please."

"Purity, listen." Regent moved up and wrapped an arm around Purity's shoulder before leaning in
conspiratorially. The effect was ruined by him not whispering. "We should totally make up some
words which he can't use in public. We can call each other those terms but they can't, because they'll be
our words."

"Why are you taking my side?" She asked, baffled by this sudden turn of events. I felt the first pangs
of sympathy for the woman, she'd never dealt with Regent before.

"Trust me, he's not." Imp chuckled from the sidelines, shaking her head.

"Imp's right though. This is purely for my own entertainment."

"Everything you do is for your own entertainment Regent." Tattletale commented, echoing my own
thoughts perfectly.

Purity just twitched as she looked at Tattletale before slipping out of Regent's arm.
"Anyway, they know who I am and they won't sit idly by if I betray them. Hell, my ex will probably try to get custody just for seeing me with you. This was a bad idea."

Damn, this just made everything complicated. At least my girlfriend was on roughly the same side of the law. I was having trouble being truly sympathetic with Purity. She'd made some really bad decisions and now I suppose they were coming back to bite her. But I could see she was trying to be a better person, or at least doing a good job of pretending to. I had trouble believing she'd be sleeping with Brian just to infiltrate us. Especially with the story of how they'd met.

Despite that, all I could think about was how the hell I was supposed to explain this to Amy's family? *Well she's a reforming Nazi. Sure the E88 killed one of your members, but she's banging a black dude so it's totally cool.* Hell, if I remembered correctly, Purity had directly fought New Wave on quite a few occasions. There was no way this was going to go smoothly. The only upside I could see is having a really powerful blaster on our side. If only tentatively. Though other than Lung and well, the Empire, there weren't really any likely threats that warranted that sort of fire power.

"
"- that right Marceau?"

*Oh damn.* I must have got lost in my thoughts again. It was happening way too often of late. I tilted my head towards Tattletale, who was already looking put out at me not paying attention to her.

"I said we should probably make our rounds."

I nodded, she was right. We'd already spent enough time slacking off. While it seemed unlikely that we'd have another event, especially with a glowing beacon of destruction tagging along, it'd be better if we made our presence known to ward off any potential trouble for the workers. As dubious as I was with the circumstances, what's done is done and it was already likely too late to pretend it hadn't happened. As Bitch's dogs finished growing, we mounted up to patrol the ship graveyard in force, Tattletale and Intel staying at the office to coordinate with the Union. Last Saturday's fiasco had driven home a message I should have listen to after so many horror movies. Don't split up. Hopefully our support team didn't count for that.

Frankly though, I was more concerned about running into a Protectorate patrol with a former Empire lieutenant in tow.
The longer our patrol went on, the more I thought about it and the more I felt this entire thing was a very bad idea. As much as I wanted to pretend this thing wasn't going to be a big deal, a heavy feeling of trepidation had settled on my shoulders. Without a better idea of how to deal with this without alienating Brian, I decided to at least give Amy a heads up rather than let her and her family find out second hand.

*Just found out something complicating-*
*Grue is dating Purity, who is trying to reform-*
*Invited her on patrol*
*wtf right?*

We had barely travelled a hundred yards before I received a reply.

*Serious? Isn't he black?*
*Damn, they won't like this.*
*Hell, I don't like this.*
*Can he at least not date the nazi in public?*

That would have been the best idea as far as I was concerned. I glanced over at Grue riding on Judas with Purity hovering a little too close for my liking. I couldn't have a discussion without her hearing. Damn it. Text messages were not the best way to hash out problems. Still...

*So*
*this is going to make things awkward with New Wave*
*already on shaky ground*
*thanks*

A moment later, he pulled a phone from his jacket and checked it. As he turned to stare at me, I realised that I might have been a bit passive aggressive. But seriously, did he think this through at all? My relationship put me at risk, and basically none for my team mates. His could ruin any progress I had made in earning the trust of Amy's family. Not to mention our general reputation. Why the hell did he spring this on us in public? He signalled for Purity to scout ahead and steered over to ride along beside me.

"So you're saying she doesn't deserve a second chance?"

I stared at him, wondering how he'd missed the point. I couldn't risk talking though, so just face palmed and typed up.

*Not the problem*
*Public reve*

I didn't get to finish typing the message when a burst of static filled my ear and dreadful words were spoken.

"Protectorate inbound." Intel's voice came through clear in my ear piece. "North West."

I silently cursed in frustration as I turned to face the incoming heroes and braced myself for the brewing shitstorm. Within a few moments Assault and Battery landed nearby, with Kid Win arriving
shortly after on his hover board.

"Well well well, what's this then?" Assault asked in an atrocious British accent as he strolled towards our group, glancing up at the glowing form of Purity. "Got reports of an Empire cape hanging around, but didn't expect this."

Battery stood a little off to the side. She barely moved as she took in the scene, her costume taking on a bright glow. Meanwhile the Ward circled the area before catching sight of the new spy drone. I could have sworn he waved at it, but it was hard to tell from my angle. Hmm, maybe Intel didn't have a one way crush then. I meanwhile gestured toward Grue before face palming once again. Assault gave me a curious glance before looking back at Grue as Purity dropped down, hovering level with him.

"Well you see..." Grue started before pausing, apparently not sure how to continue.

"Grue's helping me reform." Purity spoke, breaking up the silence. I mimed a wall and started bashing my head against it. I wasn't sure, but I didn't think it hurt as much as it should have. Still, it kept my mind off how much this was going to screw us over.

"Really?" Battery asked, her voice deadpan. When I stopped my elaborate display of aggravation, I could see a disbelieving twist of her lips underneath her visor.

"Well I'm helping her with her... issues." Grue answered, his echoing voice still hesitant. "She was hoping to help out, so I invited her along. Get her to contribute to the betterment of the city and all that."

"You realise of course that this isn't doing anything good for your reputation, right?" Battery sounded exasperated more than anything else. "Associating with villains is frowned upon."

"It wouldn't be the first time a hero's redeemed someone." Grue said before turning to the other cape before him. "Isn't that right Assault?"

Battery frowned, but he just chuckled. He didn't comment on the obvious barb and instead redirected.

"Surprised you'd get anywhere with how much you lot have been clashing with the Empire."

"Everyone knows that once you've gone black, you never go back." Yelled Regent from over Grue's shoulder, causing Grue, Purity and myself to flinch. I did my best to stop any mental image forming, but all I could do is think that he might be speaking from personal experience. I shuddered and shook my head, but still managed to stop my imagination from getting out of hand. Assault cracked up laughing and continued even after Battery stepped up and smacked the back of his head.

"You're joking right?" She asked as her partner continued his hearty chuckles. If he didn't have a mask, I would have bet I'd see tears running down his cheeks.

Grue turned to Purity and she just shrugged. I guess she figured the cat was well and truly out of the bag at this point. Grue slipped off one of his leather gloves and showed off the chocolate skin beneath with a little wave before putting it back on. Battery let out a surprised 'huh'.

"Geez." Assault wheezed and tried to rein in his mirth. "You guys never fail to make life interesting. Whatcha say Puppy?"

Battery punched him lightly in the side, before addressing our group.
"We're going to have to let the Director know about this." She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what her reaction's going to be, but I do know that Kaiser won't like this."

"Kaiser lost any right to complain about my decisions." Purity spoke with a surprising cold tone. But I suppose she had to be capable of that sort of fury, given what I'd heard of some of her exploits.

"We won't make a big deal of this for now, but don't think we'll just ignore everything you've done." Battery glared at the glowing blaster. "Make sure you behave yourself."

She turned to Assault and tilted her head back and to the side. Apparently they were pulling away for the moment. Assault nodded her way before stepping a little closer to Grue and holding out his arm, hand curled into a fist. He had to raise it high due to the dog induced height difference. Grue paused a moment before leaning down and bumping their fists together.

"Nice work." He said, which just prompted his partner to grab his collar and chuck him flying back towards the Protectorate base before zooming off after him. Even though I knew he could easily land from that, I was a little worried at the excessive show of disapproval. Purity likewise reached over and smacked the back of Grue's helmet, knocking him further off balance and ending up with him on the floor next to a surprised Judas.

"No bragging."

Kid Win seemed to take in the fact that he was left behind, and with an awkward salute to the drone, sped off in pursuit of the older capes. That had turned out better than I had expected from meeting up with the local heroes, but I could help but feel that there were going to be further complications from this meeting.

"What the hell Regent?" Grue shouted at our team mate as he stood up, dusting himself off. It was a pretty good question really.

"What?" He spread out his hands questioningly. "I diffused the situation, didn't I?"

"In the worst way possible, maybe." He growled.

"Hey!" Imp poked him from the side, startling him and surprising the rest of us as she appeared next to him. "It's not like he was thinking with his pecker and dragged along the Stepford supremacist in public. Are you really surprised this sorta shit happened?"

All I could think is why hadn't she said something earlier. Hell, why hadn't I? I should have put my foot down as soon as he'd introduced her. Basically this entire thing had ruined the good mood I had started the morning with.

"Well I'm fucking sorry I wanted to introduce you guys to her. It's like Marceau's the only one allowed to be in a relationship."

I just stared down at him, wondering how he could be so dense. Reopening the message from earlier I finished it off and sent it.

-Not the problem-
-Public reveal-
-E88 killed Amy's aunt-
-dumb ass-

I considered just turning Brutus around and heading back, but I was sure that would piss off Bitch.
Still, I couldn't stay here. I was way too pissed off at Grue, and I was sure my mask showed it. Instead I hopped off the dog and stepped a few yards away before leaning forward, pushing my arms out and grabbing hold of nothing. I lifted my leg up and swung it over nothing waist height and settled into a seat on what was forming in my minds eye as a motorbike, similar to the one Grue had driven in. With a quick hop up, I kick started the non existent engine and with a twist of my wrist I hurtled away from my team mates.

"Wait up." Grue called out behind me, but I ignored him. It wasn't the smartest idea, but I wasn't sure how much longer I could go without trying to yell at him. I sure as hell didn't want to do that in front of Purity.

"Look, do what you need to do." Tattletale sighed in my ear piece. "I'll try and explain why he's an idiot. But you will need to talk to him eventually."

I considered using the small microphone that Madison had mounted in my mask for emergencies, but I really didn't feel like answering. Lisa must have picked up on it though, as she didn't push for a reply. Instead, a simple but sure farewell.

"Catch you later."
As I rode through the streets and alleys of the docks, I received my fair share of odd glances. I guess it wasn't every day someone rode by on an invisible bike after all. It must have been quite the sight, but I wasn't in the right mood to enjoy the confusion I was causing. I was already thinking that I probably shouldn't have just run off like that, that it was an immature way to deal with the situation. But I just couldn't think of something better at the time and damn it, I was justifiably pissed off. I really didn't want to just head back either, sure that I would say or do things that I would regret if I didn't calm down first.

As tempting as it was to just spend most of the day riding around and causing a scene, I realised I really needed to vent. Otherwise I'd just be stewing in my own anger and more than likely making things worse. So I eventually turned down a few side alleys and, after making sure I wasn't spotted, entered the lair. I stomped up to my room before stripping off my costume, scattering the parts across my bed and floor. Any thoughts of tidiness were far from my focus as I changed into something nice.

Glancing over at the clock on my wall, I silently cursed as I realised Amy would be at the hospital by now. I sighed and pulled my civvie phone from the drawer and dialled. It rang five times before she picked up.

"Hi Taylor." The confusion in her voice was clear even over the background noise of the hospital ward. "I wasn't expecting a call so soon."

"Yeah, I kind of had a tantrum over that thing and was hoping to have a chat."

For a drawn out moment, all I could hear were the sounds of beeping equipment, squeaky wheeled stretchers and the muted mumbling of doctors and nurses. Finally with an audible exhalation, she spoke once more.

"I can be free for lunch. There are a few terminal patients that were flown in that I want to get sorted, but I can put off some of the less severe cases till later. The café around the corner at one?"

"Yeah, sounds good. Thanks Amy."

"Well, I had better get back to it."

Two and a half hours before Amy would be available for lunch. It would only take me about thirty minutes to get to the hospital by bus and hanging around the sick and injured did not exactly fill me with joy. Besides, Amy didn't like meeting me in the hospital if she could help it. I may have had some uncharitable thoughts about people taking up her time, when it would be better spent with me. I stared at my face in the mirror before giving myself a quick slap for being jealous of the terminally ill. Why did the day have to turn to shit so quickly? I just wanted to have a chat with my girlfriend and try to calm down a bit, but the world seemed set on making things difficult. I took a deep breath before releasing it. Relax Taylor, it's not really all that long. Despite my efforts to calm down, I still felt anxious and restless. I couldn't just hang around here. While it was unlikely that they'd be back before I left given the original patrol schedule, I really didn't want to see Brian until I had calmed down.

I quickly came to a decision. Though I wasn't the biggest proponent of retail therapy, I could at least keep my mind off darker thoughts by focusing on shiny pretty things. After all, I still needed to replace my little black dress. While clothes shopping had happened since it had been lost to clone goo, I hadn't stumbled across anything suitable. With a new objective in mind, I set out towards the Markets to kill some time.
As I stepped into the bus, I couldn't help but notice the suspicious people clustered in the back. The fact that they weren't wearing the ABB red and green despite several Asian members was weird enough in what was basically Lung's territory. What made it even more bizarre is I could have sworn they were Merchants. The gaudy mix of colours was about right, but they didn't look stoned enough. Last I had checked, the three rejects were still in prison after we'd taken them down. Had some unknown managed to take over the remnants? With that mystery to distract me, the ride to the markets was a little more stressful than I had hoped. I found myself trying not to stare at them during the trip until they stepped off halfway there, letting me finally relax. I made a mental note to mention it to the team... when I was in the mood to talk.

***

Fuck my life. It was turning out to be a very trying day, and those thoughts were quickly becoming a mantra as I couldn't ignore all the shitty little things that were piling up. Really, they were nothing compared to the legitimately bad things that I have gone through. But as I stumbled into Victoria and Dean in one of the market's various clothing outlets, I couldn't help but think it. Fuck my life.

"Wow, funny running in to you here." Victoria commented, a curious smile on her face and her arm entangled with his. Funny was not the word I would have used, but given that she was aware that I was supposed to be patrolling today, it was quite apt.

"Yeah, change of plans." I sighed. Dean being present made everything more complicated. "Needed to kill some time before catching lunch with Amy."

"Are you alright?" He asked, apparently trying to live up to his cape name. Damn empath, couldn't just leave well enough alone. Still, he was trying to be helpful so it would be better not to bite his head off. Especially as he was with Vicky.

"Just kind of pissed off at one of my friends and needed some space."

Victoria gave me an odd look while Dean just nodded, my anger and frustration must have been obvious. I couldn't help but wonder how she'd react once she found out about Purity. That would undoubtedly be a painful conversation, one that I certainly couldn't have while he was around.

"Oh well, we'll just have to help you find something then." The smile she gave me did not reassure me.

"I'm sure she'll be fine on her own." Dean said, picking up on my discomfort. "Nonsense, she can always do with a second opinion." As she continued to grin in my direction, I saw Dean mouth 'sorry' from over her shoulder. As much as I had thought him to be a bit of an annoying douche earlier, at least he seemed to realise I wanted to be alone. Looking back at Victoria, I knew I'd have trouble escaping her 'assistance'. So much for getting some space.

"Fine." I sighed, resigning myself to her company. "You can help me find another black dress."

"Another?" She asked, a confused look on her face before it changed to one of realisation. "Oh."

"Oh?" Dean asked, clearly missing the context.

"An idiot made a mess of it." I quickly interjected before she could say anything more.

Even though he must have known about the incident itself given Miss Militia's interview, I really didn't want to talk about it. While I really wouldn't be surprised if he knew that I knew, the longer I put off addressing that the better as far as I was concerned. At least I hoped Victoria hadn't directly
told him I knew, that would be awkward. Though as long as she hadn't let him in on another certain secret, it wasn't that big of a deal. Once more I was having to deal with the repercussions of Amelia's indiscretion.

"Well first off, this isn't the best store for a dress like that." Victoria seemed to have picked up on my evasion and decided to continue on regardless. "Follow me, I know just the place."

And with that she tugged on my arm, gently enough so as not to dislocate my shoulder, dragging me off to some boutique or other with a long suffering Dean following in our wake. It was a small mercy that I hadn't worn heels.

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Say what you will about overly enthusiastic sisters forcing you to shop, it definitely kept my mind off my issues with Brian. If only because I was too busy trying not to do anything that would give away my identity to Dean. Still, he hadn't looked at me with shock on his face or any other clear signs of recognition, so I could only assume I had been successful. At least Victoria had picked up that I wanted to have lunch with Amy, alone. That and she had found a suitable replacement for my little black dress, along with another seven dresses and a new pair of shoes. She was damn insistent on those seven inch pumps, having apparently decided to reinforce Amy's love of heels.

So it was that I found myself burdened with several bags and sitting in a booth at the café we'd frequent whenever she was volunteering at the hospital. It was a fairly standard sort of place, with five million varieties of coffee with pretentious names and an array of decadent pastries and cakes. What made it somewhere that we'd bother going was the small lunch menu. Well that and its proximity to the hospital. I ordered her favourite to be ready in time for our lunch, a quiche ludicrously packed with fillings like ham, mushroom and an assortment of vegetables. For myself, I decided my mood required sugar. So when Amy took her seat across from me, my lips were already powdered with sugar from the matchstick pastry. She smirked as I looked up at her guiltily before she sighed.

"It must be bad if you're resorting to that for lunch." She glanced around to make sure we weren't being overheard. "So... Purity."

I quickly wiped my mouth clean before talking.

"I was too mad at Grue to stick around. He couldn't even seem to work out why I was angry with him. This being after his lady friend brought the attention of the Protectorate on us."

She just stared at me, blinking a few times before commenting.

"Shit."

"Yeah, so the subtlety ship has sailed. I frankly couldn't care who he decides to be romantic with in his own time but damn, it's like he didn't even think it through before he ambushed us with it." I looked up at her. "I can't imagine it's easy for you either, given your family's history with the Empire."

She shrugged and leaned in closer, quiche seemingly forgotten.

"I really don't even know what to think about this. I wasn't as close to Fleur as Vicky, Crystal or Eric were, but it was still a bad time." She didn't speak for a while, and I was about to shift to give a hug when she continued. "Purity might not have been involved with that, hell I don't think she was even a member back then. But she has clashed with New Wave quite a few times, though not lately."
"Apparently she's trying to reform, be a better person for her daughter or something." I shrugged as Amy looked up at me. "I must admit, I probably didn't pay enough attention given how pissed off I was at the time."

She snorted and shook her head before taking a fork to the quiche. We sat there for a while, eating and enjoying each other's company. The silence was broken by Amy giggling. I tilted my head questioningly at her amusement.

"Sorry. Just the absurdity of them being together given her history."

I smiled. As inconvenient as it was, it was kind of funny. Waiting for her to finish her last bite so she wouldn't choke, I told her what Regent had said. We had to leave the café shortly after. It was the only way to avoid the stares that Amy's raucous laughter had brought.

As I walked her back towards the hospital, I realised I had put things off long enough.

"I guess I should go back and make up."

"As long as there's no kissing, yes." She teased, smiling at my unimpressed expression. "But if there's anything I've learned these last few months, leaving it to fester is a bad idea."

"Yeah, you're right. Just hope Ms Flashlight isn't there, or I'll have to put off the talk till later." I stopped walking and shuddered as a thought made it past any mental barriers I had. "Never before have I been so glad he has his own apartment."

Amy stared at me for a moment.

"You have a filthy mind Taylor."

"Hey, it's not my fault!" I almost shouted before lowering my voice. "Blame Regent for putting that thought into my head."

"I'll do so next time I see him then." She gave me a wry smile before something seemed to occur to her. "We were still up for dinner at mine right?"

With everything that had gone wrong today, I had almost forgotten. I let out a long sigh.

"Yeah. Probably for the best, so I can tell them face to face. Ran in to Vicky today and couldn't tell her because Dean was around."

"Oh that'll be an interesting dinner conversation. Guess we'll just have to deal with it. Catch you tonight. Maybe in something from those bags?"

"Indeed." I leaned in and gave her a kiss goodbye. "Take it easy, okay?"

"You too."

I gave her a final wave as she disappeared back into the hospital then started the journey back to the lair. I'd probably make it back to the ship graveyard in time for another couple hours of patrol before the workers finished for the day. As I travelled, I let my mind wander and couldn't help but wonder what the PRT would make of this latest thing in a long line of strange things we'd been involved in.
It was around two thirty by the time I pulled up on my invisible bike. I put a little extra effort into showmanship, making it kick up some rubble. As if I actually needed to skid to a halt. The feedback from the construct was... odd. I had never actually ridden on a motorbike, but at least compared to a bicycle it was uncannily smooth. I did however have to lean into turns or I'd likely fly off the thing. It looked like even my powers had to deal with at least some physics.

I went through the motions of dismounting, even it was quicker to just let got of my focus and let the bike dissolve. Partly it was out of a sense of style, but it was mostly just a delaying tactic. Still, I couldn't put it off forever and so started the short walk over to where my team mates, plus one, were waiting.

"You know, we'll have to dock your pay for that extended lunch break."

I just rolled my eyes with an accompanying exaggerated head roll at Regent's playful teasing. He didn't seem particularly bothered by my fit of pique. But then again, not much tended to bother him. As I got closer, the glowing form of Grue's lady hovered over to me. I watched her warily as she approached, still not really trusting her not to blast me. Grue meanwhile remained silent, watching from atop his canine mount.

"Tattletale made us aware that Grue and I may have complicated your private life." At that I glanced over at the blonde, wondering what the hell she'd told them. But she just waved me down, trying to calm me down. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. It hadn't occurred to me that my previous associations could cause quite this level of trouble."

I stared at her for a moment. I was honestly surprised that Purity, one of the scarier capes power wise, had just apologised for making my love life difficult. I wasn't sure what was weirder, that it had happened or that it wasn't the strangest thing that had happened to me. That Grue hadn't apologised irked me. I pulled my phone out and started typing.

-I appreciate it.-
-More annoyed at Grue for not thinking this through.-
-No offence if I'm a little slow to trust you.-

It was hard to really pick up on her mood, but something about her posture seemed resigned. Or I could have imagined it.

"I guess I can't really expect any more than that." She sighed, her glow dimming slightly. "I'll do what I can to earn it."

Nice sentiment and all, but I wasn't really holding my breath. Though something did occur to me and so I quickly tapped out a question.

-Know why Rune hates me so much?- 

I could have sworn she pursed her lips, but her features were too bright to be sure.

"I haven't talked with her since before you came on the scene so I can't be sure." She brought her hand up to her chin and tilted her head a little in though. "It might be due to the rumours on PHO though."

My shoulders fell and my hand went to my face. Of course it would be that. I shook my head in
exasperation.

"This is a recurring issue isn't it?" The amusement in her voice was the icing on the cake. It wasn't like I needed more people entertained by the weirdness of my life.

"Yes, very much so." Regent answered in my place, though I futilely wished that he'd stop 'helping'. I glared daggers at him, which only seemed to garner the usual amount of amusement. "Perhaps we could finally continue with the patrol? I've got more entertaining things to do."

I nodded at that idea, as I felt that it would be better to have this day behind me as soon as possible. Rather than get on one of the dogs though, I decided to stick with the mimed bike. It was a lot more comfortable than riding a mountain of bone and muscle while holding on for dear life. Not that I'd make a point of bringing it up around Bitch of course. So without any further discussion, we set off on another sweep of the work area.

Nothing really seemed out of place, the dockworkers were labouring away on the same tasks they had earlier and there hadn't been that much progress as far as I could see. But as we skirted the northern edge of the salvage zone, I couldn't help but feel like we were being watched. I wasn't sure if was just the workers warily keeping an eye on us since Purity was there, if someone was monitoring us or if I was just plain being paranoid. Either way, it was disconcerting. When we next stopped to check out an empty building, I sent Intel a message.

-Do you see anyone suspicious?-

"What, other than Purity?" She sounded amused, but I could still hear a bit of worry in her voice. I had noticed a certain waver when she was trying to be flippant about things. I could only assume she didn't broadcast that to Grue as well. "No, I haven't seen anyone else. You getting a hunch or something?"

I nodded, relying on the drones hovering nearby to convey my answer.

"Nothing's really popped up for me either." Tattletale added. That was generally a good sign. If she hadn't noticed anyone, even if she was relying on the drones, it seemed unlikely that there was anyone.

"Hmm. I'll try scanning over a larger area then. See if I can pick up anyone further out."

With that, I saw a couple of the cheaper drones buzz off over the nearby buildings while we took a look inside the one before us. It was fairly heavily water damaged, having been at the leading edge of the few waves that had hit the northern edge of the city. The ground floor reeked of rotting fish and was covered with a thick layer of caked mud. Apparently no one had gotten around to cleaning it out before the warmer summer days had dried it out. What little furniture present was starting to either rust or rot, but the structure itself still seemed sturdy. How long it remained that way was another matter, as it looked like mildew had already started to degrade the not-so-dry wall.

Another one of Intel's drones flew up the stairwell as I shoved open a moisture warped door into what looked to be an old office. The lack of computers or frankly anything beyond a desk and old gas lift chair told me it had been abandoned since before the flooding. Just another casualty of the economic downturn.

"You guys might want to check this out." Intel's voice cracked over my ear piece. "Looks like someone's been up here."

While Grue, Purity and Bitch kept watch outside, Regent and I checked upstairs. I could only
assume Imp was nearby. We came to a door at the end of a hallway where the new drone was hovering, gun pointing into the room. That alone raised my eyebrow. What I saw when I looked inside caused the other to join it. Rather than the empty void I would have expected, it was a well stocked room. A rather clean looking camp bed off in a corner with a cooler chest and portable stove near the centre of the room. What really made it interesting was the telescope near the window, facing out onto the expanse of the ship graveyard. The roll down blind gave just enough space for it to peek out with a good view of all the salvage operations.

"Looks like we've had someone watching us."

I turned to Regent, who was sauntering over to the telescope. He leaned in and took a peek.

"Yep, that's the office we've been using." He chuckled. "Definitely a voyeur."

Inwardly I cursed. I couldn't really think who would want to set up camp like this. The E88 wouldn't bother with something this permanent, or at least it didn't seem like their style. The ABB would probably just have Oni Lee teleporting around, watching as we patrolled. The Merchants? Nah, they would be too high to actually plan. But who else could it be?

"Can you three leave some bugs?" Intel's drone hovered over, depositing a few little devices on top of the cooler. Well that was confirmation that Imp was around. "We'd like to see if someone comes back."

Frankly, that sounded like a great idea. I didn't like the idea of an unknown spying on us. I leaned over and picked up on of the miniature web-cams and looked around for an appropriate place to put it. Eventually I decided on putting it in the hallway, while Regent and a suddenly there Imp hid them inside the room. Hopefully we'd get something useful before they noticed the little tinker bugs. We then carefully tried to leave the room as it was found, relying on recorded footage where it was needed.

"Okay, time for us to get out of here." Imp yawned, stretching out before leading the way back down. "I'm tired and bored and have plans."

The way she glanced over at Regent as she spoke suggested something of a date. I wasn't sure what she saw in him, but it was none of my business if they were together. At least they wouldn't bring down a bunch of issues on our heads, unlike her brother's choice. I sighed, really needing to talk it out with Grue. I'd need to make sure he'd swing by the lair before heading off with his... lady friend.

As we rode back to pick up the girls, I began to wonder if I was only angry about the lack of foresight. It really wasn't all that long ago that I had been interested in Brian. Even if I had Amy and was happy with her, could it have been that I was a little jealous? I mean he was pretty handsome and I'd seen him first, but I didn't think it was that. We didn't have that sort of... relationship. Was it just that I was worried about some old bitch coming along and taking away one of my friends? I had been without any for so long that I might have been a little protective of them. Was I just being possessive? Angry that I would have something else taken from me? Once again I was getting way too introspective and before I knew it, we were back at the office building.

"So I see you've calmed down a bit." Tattletale grinned at me as she stepped out of the front door, Intel in tow. "Well let's get back to the lair so you two can hash things out. I'm sure Grue can catch up with you later Purity."

The blaster just nodded, giving Grue a quick hug and farewell before rocketing off into the sky. It was kind of scary just how quick she could move. Intel hauled herself up behind Bitch on Angelica while Tattletale practically skipped over to me, a gleeful look on her face that gave me an uneasy
"Marceau, could you let me ride your marvellous mount?" She asked rather loudly.

My eyes narrowed, wondering what her game was. Glancing around I caught sight of a few workers with raised eyebrows. I would have to get her back for this. It was bad enough dealing with all the completely baseless rumours, I didn't need her intentionally creating more. A mischievous though in mind, I patted on the invisible seat behind me. She wanted a ride? Oh boy would she get a ride. Once she sat down and grabbed onto my waist, I leaned forward and took off. As I heard her screaming behind me and her arms pulled tight, an ever so satisfying question popped into mind. Who needs realistic acceleration?
"So, what the hell were you thinking?"

Brian dragged his fingers down his face while I stood there, waiting for an answer.

"I was thinking that maybe you'd be happy for me?" He sighed, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked up at me. "Maybe overjoyed that we've got the Empire's biggest hitter on our side now?"

My eyes rested on his face. He looked and sounded weary, but he had to have expected this. I let out a long breath through my as I shook my head.

"I'm happy that you're happy Brian. I'm the last person to criticise you over getting into an awkward relationship," As he gave me a disbelieving look, I held up a finger. "That you're with Purity isn't the issue. I don't really care who you're banging as long as it doesn't fuck over the rest of us."

Okay, so that might not have been entirely true if my earlier musings were anything to go by, but I was mostly happy that he'd found someone. The calm I'd achieved earlier slipped through my grasp and my tact had gone along with it. Was he being intentionally dense?

"The problem is that you decided to spring this on us, in public and in the most thoughtless way possible." I rubbed my temples, trying to get some control over my irritation. "You've set back our slowly improving reputation with the PRT and I'm going to have to spend tonight explaining all this rather than having a pleasant dinner. I was already on thin ice with Brandish before all this shit."

The room was silent for moment that seemed to stretch on. Alec, Aisha and Rachel had wandered off shortly after we had returned sans Purity. I couldn't blame them for not wanting part of this argument as I was pretty sure they'd already spoken their minds while I was away. Lisa was hiding in her room, having claimed to be managing things with the boss.

"Fine, I fucked up." He growled and shot to his feet before pacing around the room. "But she wasn't going to just sit on the sidelines forever and the PRT would have found out about it eventually."

"That may be the case, but a little warning would have been appreciated." I turned towards Lisa's room, where her door was a little ajar. "And don't think you're getting off lightly either. You knew and didn't do anything."

"I didn't think he'd be dumb enough to show her off in the open." Her voice called out past the door, but she didn't leave the relative safety of her room. Brian mumbled some curses under his breath in response. I shook my head. For such a smart girl, she could cause herself and the rest of us so much trouble.

"Anyway, I've had enough yelling." I started moving towards the stairs. "I'm going to go take some lozenges and get ready for the cluster fuck of a family dinner."

I still needed to let Dad know, so he didn't get blindsided by it. While he had met Sarah, Carol and Mark, it would be the first time he had to properly meet the Dallons and Pelhams as a whole. I had already been nervous enough about the dinner before this added complication. As I reached the bottom of the stairs from the loft, Madison stood waiting in her tinkering apron.

"You going to be okay Taylor?"

I stopped and took in a deep breath, letting it out in a long sigh before turning to her.
"I hope so. This just feels like a deal breaker for Carol and..."

Tears came to my eyes as I contemplated what that would mean; the emotions I had bottled up during the day finally overwhelming my self control. Before I knew it, I had arms wrapping around me.

"It'll be okay Taylor. She sounds like a bit of a bitch, but she has to see how happy you make Amy." I felt a hand patting my shoulder as I tried to avoid sobbing into her shirt. "Besides, she'll probably be too baffled by Purity liking them young and dark to blame you."

I couldn't help it. With a snort, my sobs turned to laughter as the tears continued. The hug was yet another way my life had turned out completely unexpected. It wasn't all that long ago I wouldn't have believed it if I told myself that Madison of all people would be comforting me when I was upset. It still felt surreal, but I was glad she was here. Somewhere along the line my unease had shifted to comfortable companionship and I couldn't work out when. Nor did I really care.

"Thanks Mads. Just give me a heads up if you get serious with Win though."

"Yeah, I'll do that." She blushed and nodded before a pleased smile formed on her lips. "He seems nice so far."

I blinked a few times as the implications sunk in. I slipped out of her hug, mouth gaping.

"Oh. Oh you devious little minx." I pointed a finger at her accusingly. "I thought something about that drone looked familiar. You've been tinkering together."

Her blush returned in full force.

"How the hell can you make that sound dirty? We've only had like one accidental meeting. Anyway, don't you have somewhere to be?"

It was an obvious ploy at getting out of a questioning session, but she was right.

"Damn. I'd better get a move on. But don't think I'll forget this." I declared with a certain amount of relish as I opened the door. "It's about time I got to dig into other people's love lives."

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Dad and I stood waiting on the Dallons' front step for only a moment before Victoria opened the door.

"Ah Taylor, Mr Hebert. Come in." She stepped aside to let us in. "It's been a while since I last saw you."

"Please call me Danny, no need to be so formal."

"Okay then, Danny." She smiled one of those smiles she was famous for and I had to remind myself not to stare. "If you two would like to wait in the lounge, Amy should be down shortly and the other half of the party should be here soon."

"Were we expecting Dean tonight?" I asked innocently. Having him around would make discussing certain issues troublesome. Victoria shook her head before glancing towards my dad.

"Nah, he had some... family thing to do."

Family thing? Given her slight hesitation in regards to Dad, it must have been Wards duty or some
"Ah okay then. That works out pretty well, I've got some cape stuff that needs to be addressed."

"Oh?" She gave me a curious look, with a side order of smug smirk. "Anything to do with why you weren't patrolling around lunch time?"

"Yeah, but I'll save the explanation till everyone's around."

"Awww." She pouted. "After all the help I gave you picking out that dress you're wearing."

I gave her a level, unimpressed glare.

"You aren't going to guilt me into telling you early."

"Oh fine, be that way then." She chuckled. "I should go help Mom with dinner anyway."

With that last comment she departed towards the kitchen, leaving me and Dad to be enveloped by the chocolate leather lounge. As much as I preferred the aesthetic of the Pelham residence, I couldn't fault the comfort of the furniture as I sank into the cushion. Dad shifted a few times to get comfortable before a contented smile spread across his face; his silence leaving me to ponder Victoria. In the grand scheme of things, it hadn't been all that long since she found out my alter ego. Yet she seemed as playful as she was before that particular revelation. I would have expected her to be a bit more cold still given our past; I knew I had trouble forgiving those who had wronged me.

Was Vicky's return to the strange friendship oddly quick, or were my trust issues just giving me a skewed perception? I had to wonder how that might change once I told everyone the news. Would she bounce back as quickly? My thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Could you get that Taylor?" Victoria called out from the kitchen, her hands presumably full.

"Okay!" I yelled as loud as I could while I extricated myself from the couch, hoping it was enough for her to hear me. I quickly made my way to the door and opened it to reveal the Pelhams... And a blond haired Amelia. That was unexpected, but I guess she was a changer.

"Hello Taylor." Sarah greeted me, her expression strangely neutral. "So, how's it been associating with villains?"

I blinked with my mouth slightly ajar as my plans to discuss it after dinner crumbled to dust.

"Ah, hello everyone." I stepped aside to let them in while my brain caught up. "I was kind of hoping to cover Grue's poor decision making after everyone had eaten."

"Relying on a full stomach to soften the blow?" Her eyebrow was raised as she stood to the side, arms crossed; the rest of the family walking between us into the lounge.

"That and I didn't want to ruin the dinner." I let out a long sigh as I closed the door. "I was already anxious enough having the big family gathering before this got lumped on me. How did you find out anyway?"

She stared at me a moment longer before nodding.

"I do keep on top of PR for New Wave, it's kind of my job after all." A small smirk formed on her lips. "So when I notice something startling on PHO regarding my niece's girlfriend, I investigate. I must admit to being curious why Purity of all people."
"Purity?" Victoria asked as she walked around the corner, clearly having excellent timing.

"Purity." Amy confirmed from the top of the stairs. I may have been a little distracted from my plight by the view. The pale green fabric of the dress she wore hugged her curves in a rather... flattering manner.

"What's this about Purity?" Carol asked, stepping into the doorway next to Vicky.

I flopped into the couch next to Dad with a sigh, only waiting for Amy to join me before elaborating.

"Long story short. Grue, my African American team mate, is reforming Ms Glowlight of Doom with the power of love." As their stunned silence continued even longer than expected, I elaborated further. "Apparently she's been trying to get away from the triple E for about a year, which is why she hasn't been seen with them lately. Doesn't want her daughter to end up like she did."

"Rewind a bit." Crystal said, bemused by my explanation. "You know, back to the part about a Nazi and a black dude together. I'm not sure I heard that right."

"Yeah, we all had a laugh when we found out he'd somehow gotten involved with an ex empire woman. Or kay kay cougar as Imp put it." The younger New Wavers all snickered, but the parents were fairly stone faced. Dad tried to disguise his laugh with a cough. "It stopped being funny when he introduced her today as Purity."

"Oh so that's why you were at the markets today." Victoria jumped to the fairly obvious conclusion.

"Yeah. I was not happy with him. Actually, I'm still pretty angry at him for ambushing us with that." I interlaced my fingers with Amy's. It helped calm me down a little, but the support was more important. "So I went off to let Amy know just in case things went even more downhill. Well that and I didn't want to be yelling at Grue while Purity was around to hear."

I was met with blank stares.

"What? I sure as hell don't trust her enough to reveal my identity. I've fought a few of her old friends after all."

"I don't know Taylor." Amy turned to me, a mischievous expression on her face. "You did humiliate her ex, that's got to count for something."

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me of another gang leader that has a grudge."

"You might want to slow down kiddo." Dad nudged me with an elbow. "You'll run out of villains at this rate."

Despite his humorous words and a few chuckles from the others, I could hear the worried strain in his voice. Before I could reassure him, Sarah spoke dragging the conversation back on topic.

"Anyway, this will affect things. My own opinion of Purity aside, New Wave can't publicly associate with someone who has such obvious ties to criminal activities."

We shared a moment of eye contact at that last comment, a smirk forming on her lips before she continued.

"As such I'm going to have to say no to any shared patrols with the Undersiders if she is present. Even if I wasn't incredibly suspicious of her motivations, I won't put our reputation on the line by having anything to do with her." She took in a deep breath, once again staring right at me. "The only
reason we could justify any cooperation with the Undersiders is your general good reputation along with the PR boost from helping with restoring the city."

I let out a sigh, that was more than reasonable. It was better than I was expecting and at least Sarah didn't seem to hate my guts. Carol had been strangely silent so far though. Somewhat worried, I turned to face the mother of my girlfriend. Her face was a mostly passive mask, but there was a little twitching to her eyes and lips that got my stomach unsettled. Eventually she spoke, switching her gaze between me and Amy.

"Amy, I don't want you being anywhere near her. Taylor, you'll not take her to your base of operations unless you can guarantee Purity will be nowhere nearby. While I'm trusting you to look out for Amy's safety, I don't want my daughter caught up in any Empire business and Purity will bring trouble whether she means to or not."

I nodded, thinking her requests quite sensible given that I had been thinking the same thing. After all, couldn't have Purity see Amy, nor me, in any way connected to Marceau. Not to mention the potential danger to the girl by my side. I would not allow that to happen.

"I'll be taking an invisible two by four to Grue if he invites her to the lair without permission anyway. As much as my team is like a dysfunctional family, he's lost a lot of goodwill today."

"So, seeing as that's sorted." Amelia's sudden outburst brought everyone's eyes to her. I had to wonder if the clone had some sort of compulsion towards attention seeking. "How about you reintroduce me to your Dad, Taylor."

My hand twitched slightly in Amy's grasp, my other pointing to Dad while my head turned to Amelia.

"Amelia, this is my father; Danny Hebert. As you well know." Switching the directions I was pointing and facing, I continued. "Dad, this is Amelia, Amy's...

While he knew she was a clone, it was a bit of a blunt way to describe her. As I searched for something a bit more polite, she finished my sentence for me.

"Clone slash sort of daughter." I coughed at that, reminded of her description of Noelle. "Which makes Taylor my step-mom I guess."

Dad was the one to choke in surprise, while I glared at her. I stared at that cheeky, smug grin; Amy blushed in my peripheral vision.

"Even if you're giving me a bit of a cold treatment, you're still better than Noelle. She just popped me out and left."

I wanted to argue the point, but I saw a little bit of hurt in her eyes no matter how big a grin she was wearing. Frankly I had been avoiding her like the plague. As unsettling as I found her and her sense of humour, it was pretty shitty of me. If she had all of Amy's memories... her girlfriend was treating her like a pariah because she wasn't the original. But she wasn't Amy. Even if she looked identical, I couldn't treat her the same. It wasn't because she was a clone, but her personality was all different; she just wasn't the girl I had fallen for. She didn't really deserve the silent treatment I'd given her, even if she did complicate everything. I let out a sigh.

"Sorry Amelia. I have been avoiding you and it's not your fault." Well not entirely at any rate. She looked a little surprised at my apology. "It's just that you remind me of something I still get nightmares about."
She nodded, not looking as surprised by that.

"Yeah, I've had a bit of a chat with Amy about... things." She gave my girlfriend a lascivious smirk. "She was against sharing, so I guess I just have to find something else to occupy my copious free time."

I blinked as Dadstrangled his laughter before it could get much further. I had not been prepared for that comment. Amy seemed less embarrassed and more annoyed. Probably by the spare time jab.

"That'll cut back once you start school." Crystal reminded her, receiving rolled eyes and a sigh in return. I looked over at the young flyer, my head tilted in confusion.

"Wait what?"

Neil was the first to respond to my baffled query.

"Amelia will be attending Arcadia at the start of the next term."

I definitely hadn't expected that. While I knew she had gone through some kind of process with the PRT, for citizenship or some such, it hadn't even occurred to me that she'd be attending school. But I guessed that she too would have to graduate and while she was technically only a couple weeks old, she'd probably count as Amy's age. I looked at Amy and she didn't look surprised so much as resigned. She would probably have to put up with her presence a lot more.

"I haven't seen any mention on PHO." I cast my gaze around the room. "What's being told to the public?"

I was understandably worried what the public would know of her origins and status, given my and Amy's involvement in them.

"Officially I've been adopted by the Pelhams." Amelia explained as her face shifted, matching something that would pass as related to that half of New Wave. When she continued, her voice was a little different too. "While the PRT have me listed as a clone, they've agreed that it'll be smoother if I claim to be a mild Case 53 changer."

A monster cape? Given her ability to shift, she could basically make up whatever original appearance she wanted. A flash of memory from that night gave me an adequately monstrous form. That seemed like the best idea for her to have some semblance of a civilian life.

"Huh. Guess that works." I pursed my lips as I thought of one snag. "You're alright with this?"

"Meh. Not much choice really." She shrugged, her new mouth quirking up at the side. Already she was less disturbing by the simple fact of not looking like Amy. "I was a bit annoyed at not being able to wear what I consider my own face, but I've been playing around with my powers a bit. It's amazing how much shape shifting messes with your self-image. Haven't decided if I'm taking up the family business though."

I nodded. Even with what I'd seen of her powers, being a hero was dangerous and frankly a lot of work. Not exactly everyone's cup of tea. As I was pondering this, a buzzing sound echoed out from the kitchen.

"Oh, that would be the casserole done." Carol announced turning back towards the kitchen. "Everyone to the table, we can continue this as we eat."

As everyone moved out of the room, Amy and I lagged back a little. I flashed her a relieved smile,
glad that things hadn't blown up as much as expected. I could tell there would be a strain on my future interactions with Carol, but I thought I could deal with that; I was sure we'd eventually move past it. As we stood up off the way-too-comfortable leather cushions, I gave her a peck on the cheek before she led me to the table. Already a delicious odour had filled the dining room as the food was laid out.

Perhaps it wasn't such a bad day after all.
Interlude

Assault

I sauntered into the meeting room a scant few seconds before seven o'clock. Piggot glared at me as I took my usual place next to my Puppy. A quick glance around the room let me do a head count. Clockblocker, Gallant, Vista, Browbeat and Kid Win followed by two empty seats. One where the little psycho would have been and another because Triumph, Rory, had been taken way too early. He'd barely got to know the newest Protectorate member before Leviathan left him broken and drowned. I let out a small sigh as I looked over at Miss Militia sat in her usual rigid posture on the opposite side of the table.

Dauntless was off on a patrol with Aegis but the Halbeard himself was sitting next to Director Piggot, shiny chrome instead of skin from his right shoulder down. I knew that the table must have covered even more replacement parts. It was a little surprising to see him, having expected him to still be getting poked and prodded by Dragon.

"Yo Colin? Feeling better?" I couldn't help myself. "Stronger? Faster?"

Puppy elbowed me in the ribs, Hannah and the kids looked a little confused. I guess it was a bit before their time. Piggy just sighed while Colin glared at me. Calling him Steve Austin for a while would be fun.

"I guess I asked for this, didn't I?"

"Yep." I nodded in agreement. I had no idea why he didn't beg Panacea to regrow his limbs. "So shall I start the debrief or does someone else have some juicy gossip?"

"Just get on with it." The Director practically growled. The lady really needed to get a sense of humour.

"So Battery, Kid Win and I were on patrol near the docks this morning when we got a report about Purity flying around the salvage works." Kid Win and Puppy nodded along while the others mostly looked concerned.

"Did the Empire attack the Undersiders again?" Vista asked the obvious question. After all, those kids were trouble magnets when it came the local skinheads. "I haven't heard anything about that."

"Nah, this is where things get interesting because..." I started an impromptu drum roll on the table, drawing a sigh from the missus and the usual mix of long suffering looks and smirks from the rest. "Purity's banging Grue."

I leaned back in my chair, watching the changing expressions on everyone's faces. From doubt about what they heard, to confusion, to denial and back to doubt. It was totally worth the shit I'd get from Piggy for not letting her know right away.

"Sorry, run that by me again chief?"

I looked at Clockblocker, a huge grin on my face.

"But wait young Padawan, there's more!" Kid Win sighed at my theatrics. "Turns out Grue is dark as chocolate, so Purity's got jungle fever."
The slap upside the head from Puppy was a small price to pay for the repeated cycle of confusion and doubt.

"So... wait, what?" Vista asked. "How did that happen?"

"No idea, but she claims to be reforming with his help." I waggled my eyebrows, getting a snort from Dennis. "It would explain why we haven't seen her with any of the other Empire capes in the last year or so and why she wasn't standing with them before the teleport to Boston."

"Still, this does sound highly suspect. A prominent member of a white supremacist group suddenly having relations outside their race." Piggy had a fist up to her lips for a moment, a frown creasing her brow. "Colin?"

"Yes Director?"

"The speculation we have on Regent's previous alias... Would he be capable of this?"

I raised an eyebrow. This was the first I'd heard of something like this.

"It is possible, but all the information on Hijack suggests he'd need a lot of time at close proximity to do it. We're also certain he hasn't been in the city more than five months."

"Hijack?" Dean asked, beating me to the punch. Colin looked over at Piggy. After a moment, she nodded.

"We have reason to believe that Regent of the Undersiders may in fact be Jean-Paul Vasil, also known as Hijack and one of Heartbreaker's children."

There were gasps from the group, but all I could do was let out an impressed whistle. Everything I knew of Heartbreaker said he didn't like his children roaming. That meant one of his little psycho rug rats had managed to slip his grasp and remain hidden for quite a long time. Given how well the Undersiders had performed to date, it wasn't that surprising that he'd be competent. It might also explain those pictures of him wearing a dress. From everything I'd heard of Casa de Mindrape, it wasn't a place for the normal.

"So what, we're thinking Purity has been mastered?" I asked, doubting that was the case, she'd seemed much too embarrassed by the reveal to be faking it. Or was he just that good. "Does he have a range limit? Witnesses saw her part ways with the Undersiders after their patrol."

"We aren't certain of his capabilities, but it does seem he's been down playing them if he is indeed Hijack. It's part of the reason why we hadn't brought it up before." Colin looked down at his tablet. "But our best guesses indicate he wouldn't be able to continue control while he's asleep. Which means either he's kept his abilities hidden from his team mates, or they know and don't care."

"Given Tattletale's presence, the former seems unlikely." Piggy's tone was worrying. She almost sounded happy about this news.

"Though she was going on about second chances on the flight back from Boston." Dennis looked my way as he said that. Oh, she must have told them. Sneaky girl.

"Umm... what if Purity was one of those forced recruits?" Vista brought us back to the original topic. "I mean not much could really threaten her, but maybe she was blackmailed into the Empire. It might explain things."

"Heh." Dennis snorted at her idea. "Or since we're throwing around master ratings, we could go with
the rumours of Marceau having harem building powers."

The room went quiet as they thought about it.

"I don't know." I scratched my chin, it didn't feel quite right. "He seemed rather put out that Purity was even there."

"Well the Undersiders did change behaviour right after he joined." Colin gruffly pointed out. "Doesn't seem likely that he'd have master powers on top of everything else, but it's possible."

"Actually, I caught sight of him driving off in a huff on his..." Kid Win twitched a little "Invisible motorbike. Just as we were leaving. Plus Intel was bitching about getting surprised by Grue's new... milf."

There were a few snorts of laughter, though Chris himself was blushing a little. I had thought that Grue must have been a bit younger than Purity.

"Hmm." I looked over at Dean and caught his eye. He looked like he had something he wanted to say, but shook his head.

"So while I'm doubtful that we have a master situation here, it'll be a good idea if we remain watchful and only approach the Undersiders in groups. Just in case." Hannah looked over at Piggy, waiting for a nod of agreement before continuing. "Any news on how the Empire has reacted to this?"

"Nothing yet. They've been pretty quiet of late and haven't made any aggressive moves against the ABB." Puppy sounded concerned; a lack of activity often meant planning after all. "We've seen Hookwolff make some rounds by himself on Thursday. Krieg, Rune and Alabaster were seen last Saturday. Kaiser, Fenja and Menja were seen Wednesday. We have confirmation that Stormtiger is dead, but we haven't seen hide nor hair of Cricket, Victor or Othala since Leviathan.

"Could we be looking at a schism?" Hannah didn't sound her usual certain self as she sounded out the idea. "I mean the Empire has taken some serious hits to their reputation in the last couple months. There might be some dissatisfaction in the ranks."

"It is possible, but we don't have much evidence for it." The Director glanced down at some paperwork before looking around the room. "We have been getting reports of renewed Merchant activity though. Does anyone have any information to add?"

"Well..." Kid Win suddenly had the undivided attentions of Ms Piggy, poor kid. "I may have already mentioned I was talking with Intel through one of her drones today."

"You were a little occupied." I smiled at the kid. "Sweet on the new tinker in the neighbourhood are we?"

The way he blushed confirmed it. How interesting. Chris mumbled for a moment before continuing.

"Well yeah. She's nice and she kind of helped me work out my specialisation." There were a few surprised gasps from the table. The kid had been struggling with that for a while now. Very interesting.

"We can discuss your collaboration later." Colin gave the Ward a thoughtful glance. "For now go on with the debrief."

"Sorry. Yeah Intel mentioned that New Wave drove some Mechant dealers away from the salvage works during the week. She also sent me a message warning me that they'd seen some more around
"If the Merchants are acting up again, it's with new leaders." Puppy leaned over the table, cupping her chin in her hand. "Their capes are still in prison last I checked. Frankly I had thought they would have dissolved."

"Hmm. I have heard reports of unidentified capes in the city." Colin fiddled with his tablet, a slight whirring noise coming from his arm. I really needed a way to make them sound like the ones from the show. "If they've taken over the Merchants, they're certainly being more subtle about it."

The Director frowned, clearly unhappy with the situation.

"Very well then. I expect you all the keep an eye out for these new capes and any link to the Merchants. I don't like having unknowns in my city." She glanced around the room once more. "Any other local issues I should be aware of?"

"Just that Lung and Oni Lee have been posturing around the borders between the Empire and Bad Boyz territory." Hannah fiddled with her knife as she spoke. "I wouldn't be surprised if he makes a move soon with how passive the Empire have been."

Piggot nodded before looking around the room. No one else brought up anything else.

"Very well then, on to other news. The Boston repair works are going slowly. The Teeth have been carving out some more territory. Mouse Protector and a couple of Wards have been shifted over as reinforcements, so they are making efforts to push them back. Accord has been oddly helpful in supplying funds towards rebuilding and information on the Teeth's movements. However, most concerning are the Siberian sightings."

I let out an nervous whistle; that could end poorly to say the least. The others in the room seemed equally worried.

"So the Slaughterhouse are practically next door?" Dennis asked, justifiably freaked out.

"None of the other members have been spotted as yet." Piggot had an oddly contemplative look on her face as she continued. "In fact, Management hasn't made an appearance this year. Though give how elusive the bastard has been, I can't say I'd surprised if he's laying low."

"It's been well over a decade but I've still got to give him credit." I chuckled, drawing a few odd looks. "Well it's hard to discuss him with out sounding mundane. I mean his original declaration of 'the Slaughterhouse Nine is under new Management' was bad enough. But now every time he's mentioned it sounds like we're complaining about our bosses. That had to be intentional."

Clockblocker gave me an appraising look before nodding.

"Yeah, I could totally see him picking it just to make debriefings absurd."

The rest of the room just gave me and Dennis blank looks.

"If you are quite done, I believe we are up to date on current affairs." The Director stood, moving towards the door. "You are dismissed. Colin, please update Dauntless and Aegis when they get in."

"Yes Ma'am."

Well, things were certainly more interesting these days; almost as fun as the old days. I looked over at my girl and slid an arm around her. On second thought, it was better than the old days.
With a strange sense of Déjà vu, I stared into the mirror. Instead of Marceau, Taylor stared back at me in clothing I'd never expected to wear and I wasn't fully convinced I should. The tailoring was impeccable and fit me perfectly, but I couldn't help being nervous. I hadn't done anything like this before and the night's proceedings were important. Mostly for Amy, but I wanted to enjoy it. The fact that I could have another go in two years didn't help calm my nerves. As I continued to fidget and examine myself, I thought back to how this had all started.

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"So umm." I stared down at Amy's flustered face, my arms wrapped around her while I waited for her to speak. "Willyougotothepromwithme?"

Did I hear that right? I blinked and quickly re-ran her words through my head a bit slower while she looked on hopefully.

"Did you say prom?"

"Yes." She nodded and took in a deep breath. "Will you go with me?"

With everything going on the last couple months, it hadn't even occurred to me that it would be happening. My general disregard for school social activities and non-senior status may have had something to do with that, though I could definitely make an exception for Amy. As images of her in pretty dresses began flitting through my mind, there was one little detail that seemed wrong.

"Of course." She let out an adorable squeak as I agreed. "But isn't it a bit late for that? I thought they would have done that last month."

"It was slated for the 20th of May. But with the Wards recovering from Boston and the general dark mood, Arcadia's prom got pushed back till the 11th of June." She flashed me an adorably devious smile as she hit me with her unnecessary trump card. "I thought I could make it a sort of early birthday present."

I hadn't even put any thought into my birthday and was kind of surprised that she'd worked it out. Thought given that fact that I could recall hers, we must have exchanged them a while back. It was kind of hard to keep track of all the conversations we'd had; the movies and hugging tended to blur together in a rather pleasant way.

"Well I appreciate the thought." I gave her a squeeze along with an exasperated sigh. "Though a little extra warning would have been nice. I'll need to pick up something to wear."

I somehow didn't think the little black dress would cut it. Sure I may have been a social reject for most of high school, but even I knew I'd need to find something more formal for a senior prom. Wait, it wasn't one of those themed things was it?

"Well it's not like you're lacking in free time right now."

She looked completely unrepentant about ambushing me with this. The fact that we were on summer holidays was completely irrelevant; a week's notice was not sufficient to adequately prepare for such a night. I had no idea how long it would take to get any adjustments done and where the hell was I supposed to get a prom dress anyway? A sudden, devious and perhaps slightly cruel thought popped into my mind.
"You're right. I guess I should give Parian a call and see what she can whip up for me in a rush."

She gave me an adorable, yet frightening glare. Maybe I had gone a little too far with my teasing. Parian hadn't made anything I would have called moves on me, but Amy seemed insistent that it was only a matter of time.

"If you insist on that, I will be accompanying you to make design choices." She left unsaid the implication of jealously guarding me from Parian herself. "I don't think it's a good idea anyway. I don't like the idea of her knowing your identity."

"Good point. If she'd committed to joining the Undersiders, it wouldn't be a problem."

I was still having mixed feelings about that. Admittedly the team was pretty huge already, but it was kind of nice having a larger circle of friends. Okay maybe dysfunctional family was more accurate, but friends none the less.

"On the other hand, she has saved my life twice now and I wouldn't be surprised if she's seen us around together."

She glared at me a little longer before sighing.

"Yeah, Brockton Bay is a small world... After all."

She flashed me a grin as I groaned over her blatant reference. We'd probably watched too many Disney films of late in an attempt to overwrite the nightmares with happy-snuggle-time. I hadn't been able to bring myself to watch any horror movies since that night, even the not-so-scary-cheese of the Nightmare on Elm Street series or some other laughably shlocy films. Not that we needed the excuse of scary things for Amy to latch on to me anymore.

"What are you grinning about?"

Amy's voice dragged me from my musings with a curious tilt of her head as she looked at me.

"Oh, just how clingy we've both become."

She snorted in an unladylike manner.

"Yes, quite the change from 'I'm totally straight' to 'mmm Amy, you're so warm'."

As she rolled her eyes, I gently prodded her ribs with my fingers and elicited quite the cute squeak from her. That earned a gentle slap on the shoulder and an annoyed pout from my girl. It was of course at that point that Victoria stuck her head around the corner, drawn by the noise. She gave us a quick look, noticing the blushes on our faces before grinning a disturbingly Lisa-like grin and slipping back out of the room. I made a note to never let the two blondes meet if I could help it.

"Don't worry Mom, they're just being saccharine again."

Her voice echoed down the hall, informing all the dinner guests what was going on. And to think that I had at one time wanted siblings. I shook my head at her antics, a slight grimace on my face before looking back at the girl in my arms.

"You know Amy, I think my place is a lot quieter."

She nodded, a smile on her face as the embarrassed blush faded away.

"True, but the couch here is a lot more comfy."
I had to concede that point to her and nodded accordingly. Realising that we'd veered off topic again, I asked a fairly important question.

"The Prom's formal wear, right?" At her nod, I continued. "Do you already have a dress? And how come I'm only hearing about this after the original date?"

"Ah, about that. I wasn't going to go originally and by the time I wanted to go with you, the ticket purchases were closed."

"So that's a no to the dress." I shook my head with a brief chuckle. "How do we have access then?"

"Well..." She looked to the side, clearly embarrassed. "I bought our tickets last week and with everything going on, I was worried about asking you."

I would have thought what we'd gone through together would have shown she had no reason to worry. But I guess I wasn't exactly a social butterfly.

"So you weren't certain I'd say yes, but bought the tickets anyway?" At her nod, I leaned in and bumped by forehead against hers. "Such a silly Amy. Though I guess if I weren't with you, I wouldn't be setting foot anywhere near a prom."

She looked at me strangely before comprehension dawned across her face. She was well acquainted with my opinions on the teenage drama. It was kind of funny how much drama I still got dragged into given how hard I was trying to avoid it, albeit less teen and more cape related.

"Well I'll just have to make sure you have fun."

Her cheerful smile was already making the idea much more palatable. Still, there were a few niggling details to sort out. Transportation, clothing and damn it... Did I need to get her a corsage? What the hell was the protocol when it came to lesbian couples and gender specific accessories?

"So how are we getting there, and how early are we starting the search for costumes?"

"Costumes?" She gave me a funny look and I closed my eyes and sighed as I realised what I'd said.

"Sorry, formal wear. I swear I've been thinking about cape stuff too much lately."

Her body started shaking as she laughed at me. I could only roll my eyes in response as she didn't stop.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up."

She took that as an invitation and laughed harder.

"Sorry, sorry." She tried, but failed to rein in the laughter. "I just imagined what would happen if it was a costume ball instead."

I stared at Amy as I let her go so she could breathe properly. Then my face fell as I realised what she must have been thinking. A swarm of Marceaus, if my online reputation was anything to go by. When Amy caught sight of my horrified expression, any semblance of calm completely broke down as she began rolling around on her bed. Vicky once more appeared in the doorway as my girl's mad cackling echoed through the house. Her gaze switched between the writhing Amy and my near catatonic form before asking a simple question.

"What?"
"Marceau." Amy cackled, took a deep breath and then lost it before she could get out the next word. Victoria, apparently having decided her sister was a lost cause, looked my way.

"Have..." I took a moment to compose myself and work out what to say. "Have you ever had people dress up as you for costume parties?"

She seemed to ponder that for a moment before her eye twitched and she too broke into laughter. It was rather depressing being the butt of a joke again, especially when it was disturbing more than amusing. I flopped down on the bed, a frown forming on my face as the sisters took joy in my suffering. Eventually Amy noticed and tackled me down onto the bed with her.

"Sorry Taylor, I just imagined you going as Marceau and everyone thinking you're too girly."

Okay, maybe that was a little funny. My lip twitched up a bit as I considered how I could basically reveal my identity and no one would believe me.

"That would so totally serve you right." Vicky choked out as she tried to stop her own chuckles. "I still need to get you back for that flower stunt."

A feeling of impending doom settled on my shoulders at her words. I was going to have to distract her before Halloween season came around, lest I be lost in a sea of fake mimes. Maybe I could fight back and get people to dress up as her instead.

"So how did that come up anyway?" She asked, having finally managed to control herself.

"I asked Taylor to the Prom, so we're going to need dresses."

Victoria's face lit up at that, most likely due to the requisite shopping trip.

"Oh, oh! I'm so going to help with that." She paused and looked my way with a evil smirk. "But won't you want a tux?"

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes, an expression I've had to resort to much too frequently for my liking.

"Probably for the best not to draw attention to my cape specific cross dressing."

"But you'd be so dashing in a suit." She said much too cheerfully. "You could totally pass it off as you being the pants wearer in the relationship."

I raised my hand up to my face, my fingers massaging my forehead while Amy was quiet next to me. If I believed in some higher power, I'd probably have invoked them to save me from this sort of situation.

"Well as long as you wear heels..."

I turned to my much too sly looking girlfriend and stared at her, my lips pursed in irritation. It was a bad idea, totally unwise in fact. I needed to keep my two identities as separate as possible and me wearing a suit to a public event would not help that. On the other hand, the look she was giving me was... compelling. We sat there staring at each other for what felt like several minutes; given that Vicky hadn't interrupted, it was probably much less. Eventually I let out another sigh. At least it would be more comfortable than some overly elaborate dress.

"We'll see."
Amy let out another adorable, if high pitched, sound of joy at my tacit approval; it was somewhat reminiscent of an over-excited guinea pig. Her sister too seemed overly enthusiastic about the whole thing.

"I know a couple good places to get you two some outfits. We're so going shopping tomorrow."

As the full horror of a Glory Girl run shopping trip sunk in, I felt my shoulders slump and I let out a piteous moan.

"Why did I say yes again?"

Amy just shook her head and wrapped an arm around me in a barely sympathetic hug and echoed my earlier comment.

"Such a silly Taylor."
"Nope. Just... no." I shook my head emphatically as I looked at the abomination before me. "I'm not wearing that."

Victoria frowned and let out a huff of disappointment at my declaration, but the dress she held up was atrocious. I had no idea how Amy's sister had gone from having a good eye for fashion to trying to turn me into a Barbie doll. First off, there was no way I was going to wear something that revealing in front of a whole bunch of strangers, and most likely several Wards. Second, I didn't want to wear blue.

"I have to agree with Taylor here, Vic." Crystal shook her head at her cousin's antics. "It would make her look way too cheap."

"Thanks?"

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or slightly offended at the comment. Actually, I really wasn't all that sure how Crystal had gotten involved in the shopping trip. I would have complained about Victoria inviting her along, but she had been a voice of reason and ally against Victoria's excesses. As she'd been to her own prom the previous year, she leant a helpful, experienced point of view of what to expect of the night. On the other hand, she was also leaning towards the 'get Taylor in a tuxedo' camp.

I had no idea why everyone seemed to think that was a good option. Sure I could probably get something made up that would be flattering, but I didn't want to go to the Prom in anything masculine. I was already having enough trouble dealing with the idea that no one doubted Marceau was male, to the point of having a following of fan-girls. That my actual male team mates had rumours about them being girls didn't help my self esteem. Well, the rumours about Grue at any rate. Regent was helping the gender confusion along with his antics.

"Try this one on."

I turned to find Amy holding up her own offering. It wasn't all that different from the abomination Victoria had shown me; a bit longer and with a neckline that dipped rather than plunged. It was still blue, but the hopeful look on Amy's face broke down my resolve to deny it. It had become a recurring pattern that Vicky would suggest something outrageous before Amy showed me something similar but more modest. It had to be some kind of strategy that the sisters had worked up in secret. Damn Amy's cute puppy eyes!

"Oh all right." I smiled at my girlfriend, eliciting a pleased grin from her. "But I'm on to your nefarious scheme."

Amy looked confused by my declaration, but the mischievous smirk on Victoria's face before she turned around confirmed that the blonde was planning things. I definitely shouldn't let her and Lisa meet socially, as it would doubtlessly complicate my life even further. I took the blue cocktail dress into the dressing room and quickly stripped down. It was a routine that had become like clockwork over the last several hours of shopping. I slipped into what must have been something like the thirtieth dress of the day, but it was the first that I'd had so much trouble with. All the others had either gone on easy or had been too large for my twiggy frame. After struggling with the zip in the back for several minutes, I finally relented and asked for help.

"Amy? Could you lend me a hand?"
There was a moment of silence, followed by some giggles and eventually a stuttering Amy.

"B-but. Dressing room!"

I blinked as I realised what she must have thought. Despite having shared a bed a few times, there had always been pyjamas involved. We hadn't even seen each other in underwear... Oh my. I could feel a little heat in my face that had nothing to do with the season.

"Relax Amy." It took a fair amount of effort to conceal my own embarrassment. "I just can't get this damn zipper up."

I turned away from the entry, as Amy finally slipped past the curtain to join me. I pointed over my shoulder with a thumb at the damn stubborn zip that was sitting in that awkward to reach part of my back. Though I was facing away from her, the mirror prevented either of us from hiding the blushes that had formed on our cheeks. It really shouldn't have been so embarrassing, as I was fully clothed apart from the still open back of the dress. It wasn't as if I hadn't been mostly naked around girls my age, the locker rooms had seen to that. But they weren't Amy, and the earlier thoughts wouldn't leave my mind. I hadn't exactly been lusting after Amy or anything. I was well and truly content with what we had, with our gentle snuggling and the comfort of her presence. The kisses were nice too. I hadn't really put much thought about what she might look like under her clothes and so it hadn't really clicked that she might want to see me until I heard the embarrassment in her voice. Stupid!

After that, I couldn't help but wonder just what she thought of my body. Sure she'd already expressed an appreciation for my legs, especially when high heels were involved, but this was different. Once more I cursed my high school experience for turning me into a socially inept fool. I should have thought of these things earlier with all the signs Amy had shown. My earlier doubts that she was just staring at my necklace back at the cinema came back to mind. While I had gotten used to the idea that Amy liked me a lot, it was still bizarre thinking that someone actually found me physically attractive. Well, the female me and not the imaginary buff and manly Marceau that had entranced so many in some cosmic joke at my expense. That didn't exactly help matters.

I felt her warm hand on my waist as the other gripped the zip firmly and pulled it the rest of the way up. I had to suck in my belly a little, the dress pulling in tight as she finished closing the back. The then free hand grabbed onto the other side of my waist as Amy's head popped over my shoulder to stare at me in the mirror. A small smile formed on her lips before she spoke.

"You look good."

It was a simple statement, one I could tell was honest and carried a lot more meaning beyond the suitability of the dress. I could see the redness spreading further from my cheeks but couldn't do anything about it. Instead, I just enjoyed the feel of Amy being there with her warm hands holding me as my eyes met hers in our reflections.

"Thanks." I mumbled. "But I still don't like the colour. Maybe if I can't find anything else."

"Aww."

She pouted adorably, but somehow, my weakened resolve managed to hold against the onslaught. It took much willpower to deny her such a simple thing, but I knew I could find something that fit better and came in a more appealing shade. Sure, blue would be yet another step divorced from my cape identity, but I really didn't think it suited me.

"So do we get to see what it looks like? Or are you two perhaps too busy?"
I cringed as I heard the undisguised innuendo in Victoria's voice and the blush that had started receding flared up once again. The mirror showed that Amy was in similarly dire straits before she turned, her hands leaving my waist only to shift to my hand and leading me out of the dressing room. Given Victoria's teasing I was more tempted to just say no and change back into my sundress, but Amy seemed intent on showing me off. I should have felt a bit miffed about that, but it was a relief to have her be assertive about things she wanted. I didn't want to mess that up over a little shyness. Well, that and I was still a little flustered and didn't react quickly enough. The appraising looks and mock wolf whistles the two girls gave me as I was paraded before them certainly didn't help that. I made my displeasure know by glaring at them fiercely.

"Okay, okay." Victoria gave in before cupping her chin in her hand and giving me another look over. "Accentuates the curves while still showing a bit of leg. But something seems off."

"It's the wrong shade." Crystal nodded sagely, as if it weren't obvious from my previous protests about blue dresses. "Looks okay with her skin, but doesn't do much for her eyes or hair."

"Something warmer?"

"Yeah."

And with that, the two blondes had finally come around to my way of thinking.

"Yellow!"

With great enthusiasm, Crystal pulled a canary yellow gown from behind her back and held it out to show off the cut. She must have found it while I was struggling in the dressing room. Perhaps I was a little hasty with my earlier observation, but at least it looked a little more comfortable. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to put up with something as tight as the dress I was wearing. With a sigh of resignation, I took the offered garment and returned to the dressing room. It only took a few more minutes to find that I was once more stuck with that damn zip.

"Umm, Amy?"

There were more snickers from those evil, evil cousins before she finally answered.

"The zip again?"

"Yeah." I let out a long, emphatic sigh. "I swear a villainous tinker designed it."

A soft chuckle accompanied the sound of the curtain shifting as she joined me again.

"Really Taylor?"

"Well either that or the dress was just poorly made." I whispered over my shoulder. "But I figured I shouldn't loudly insult the designers while I'm in their store."

I felt her warm fingers brushing against the skin of my back as she gripped the dress. I hoped she missed the flustered look on my face as she started tugging on the stubborn zipper. It was only a bit of innocent help, but my earlier thoughts just wouldn't go away. Damn it! Why did this sort of thing have to happen in public, rather than all those times snuggling on a couch or holding hands or...

Okay so maybe it was a little like that when we'd kissed. But even then, I hadn't felt so embarrassed. How the hell had one little comment had such an effect when all the teasing my friends had given me hadn't caused such a reaction? Was it just that I'd gotten used to it from them? Was it really so different having Amy acknowledge the innuendo? It was a relief in more than one way when Amy finally managed to move the zip and let go. Yet I couldn't help but feel a little regret at the contact
"Thanks." I said over my shoulder with a smile.

She returned my smile with a nervous one of her own. We stood there for a moment, looking into each other's eyes before she opened her mouth to speak. Before she could say anything though, she did a repeat performance of her tomato impression and closed her mouth. I raised an eyebrow, wondering what she'd been about to say. My own face heated up shortly after as a few ideas came to mind.

"Umm, never mind." She hurriedly blurted out. "I'll just let you change."

She quickly ducked out of the curtained booth, leaving me to slide out of the slinky blue number and hop into the excessively frilly yellow dress. Alone. I still didn't know quite how I felt about that. I wasn't sure I would have minded if she'd stayed to help. But as I pulled the yellow dress over my head, I realised I wouldn't have had legitimate need for assistance. It was odd how little that did to clarify things. Looking at myself in the mirror, I realised it didn't look too bad. The frills were a bit much, but I could work with that. I still wasn't completely sold on the colour, but it wasn't as bad as the blue. A quick twirl and a turn showed of the back and soon revealed a flaw in the design, as the front slid down with little provocation. The strapless design was turning out to be a recurring issue. With an aggravated snort, I slid the dress back up to cover myself before calling out to my less-than-helpful helpers.

"Could I have a dress that doesn't require D-cups?"

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