Wake

by notes

Summary

It is a bad day when you have more than one potentially world-ending threat at the bottom of your to-do list.

Taylor Hebert is having a very bad day.
The city looked bare to him now.

Dead.

It wasn't the fact that it was dark, though it was very dark indeed: an overcast night made darker by the scant few lights marking high priority locations with generators. It wasn't the lack of traffic — well, not directly.

It was the sheer lack of people.

Ever since that day, two and a half years back, he'd been aware of the people around him. And, for all the times he'd tried to describe it, it wasn't easy. It wasn't sight, though it had elements of color; it wasn't hearing, though it had elements of rhythm and melody both; it wasn't really any of the senses he'd known before though it had elements of all of them.

The psychologists initially called it synaesthesia, which was a fancy way of saying that he perceived these new sensations through a rearrangement of existing sense-impressions.

He disagreed.

He described this sense with words used for the standard senses, but it was clearly its own thing, distinct. He'd never had any issues confusing the colors-that-weren't-colors that he didn't ‘see’ with the color of the clothing that someone was wearing, never been confused about whether that jittery melody that started up was anxiety or someone's new ringtone.

The fact that he didn’t ‘see’ not-colors in 360° had always seemed the clinching argument that his eyes weren’t really involved at all, even associatively. He’d raised it, and then been told that what he was experiencing must be ideasthesia, that what was triggering the not-colors wasn’t perceiving emotion but conceiving of emotion.

He was pretty sure that was wrong too — no such not-music when truly alone, even when thinking about emotions — but that had just led the psychologists to explain that it was ideasthesia triggered not by emotions as such, but by how he conceptualized what he did perceive of emotions. How, exactly, this could be distinguished experimentally from his own explanation — that it was like
using metaphor to explain color to the blind — was unclear.

It had been a relief to opt out of the study, and focus on productive activities like patrolling.

The useful range wasn't much: shouting distance and line of sight for any kind of detailed understanding of what someone was feeling. Even then, being able to see all the layered nuances of what someone felt wasn't much help without knowing why they felt it.

Outside that range, there were...clouds. Impressions. Where groups assembled, swirls of collective emotion rose up: unfocused, immense, and usually indecipherable. Oh, it was easy enough to tell, say, when the Patriots scored without checking the radio or tv by the way the city as a whole changed flavor for a moment, but that was about it.

Twice, when he happened to be looking in the right direction at the right time on a patrol, he’d ‘seen’ a spike of intense emotion flicker through the formless billowing of human activity in the distance — like lightning flashing within a storm — and been in time to intervene. Attempted rape and (briefly) successful robbery, respectively.

Twice, in almost two years of patrols.

He still wondered about the other seven ‘flashes’ that he’d seen on patrols, what moment of terror must have inspired them, and what he could have done to be there in time to help.

In theory, there were lots of innocent causes for momentary utter terror: everything from energetic five year-olds to almost slipping into traffic to realizing you’d drunk-dialed the wrong person. He’d even ‘seen’ one like that in person: a classmate who forgot that the calculus midterm had been moved up to Thursday. It helped him sleep better, knowing that false alarms really did happen, that maybe he hadn’t failed whoever had felt those terrors.

In some ways, the blurring of his sense with distance was a blessing. With the right vantage, he could ‘see’ the whole city. What would it be like to be able to clearly sense the emotions of an entire city? Merely being able to sense them clearly nearby had been devastating.

Neither his friends nor his family had been the people he thought they were.

He loved them: it was only natural that they got the benefit of the doubt. Being able to directly
perceive their emotions removed a lot of doubts. Combine the growing awareness that his loved ones were often petty and spiteful with the discovery of all the ways in which he had casually, unthinkingly, made lives worse in turn, from the small (clicking his teeth when he thought really did annoy his best friend) to the large (his grandmother had always been able to tell that he was lying to leave early) — with the realization that he wasn’t as good as he’d thought he was either… it had made for a really bad couple of months.

He’d contemplated suicide then, more than once.

And, in a very real way, the old Dean Stansfield had died on one of those late and lonely nights.

Everyone liked the new version better.

That wasn’t the point.

That wasn’t even what he was trying to accomplish. Getting people to like you, when you can directly perceive what they like, is trivial.

Being liked was never the point.

Being able to face himself as reflected in the lives around him… would always be.

Even when it meant doing some of the hardest things he’d ever done.

He took one more long look out the window at the darkened city below, and then turned around.

“We’ve had a routine patrol tonight so far. Start with a standard show-the-flag stop at a camp, then walk the streets. They’re mostly empty, these days — you’d like it. Especially at night.”

He paused, listening to the periodic beeps, eyes roaming over the softly glowing displays.

“Easier for you that way. Not much of a strain, either way: things are… quiet. At least, quiet compared to last month. Lung’s laying low, no one else even could pick a fight with E88, and they
want their areas to be peaceful right now. There’s some looting, and the camps are a pressure-cooker… but we’ve kept the lid on so far. It’s amazing how much people quiet down at night without artificial light.”

No change in her breathing.

“Even so, we’re being given light duties. None of the supply convoy escorts; none of the ready response slots. It makes sense: there’s only two of us active. Barely enough to patrol the safest routes at the safest times. A couple of the rogues have been walking with us, which is nice, and New Wave is basically acting as our entire ready reserve right now with their flyers, but we’re overstretched. The Protectorate is down to four, with Assault and Battery both out…”

A change, subtle but there, in her emotional state.

Could she hear, or was she dreaming?

No way to know.

“I don’t know if you remember my last visit, but it turns out waking up Assault when he’s concussed is a bad idea. He knocked out three nurses and went through the wall, Kool-Aid Man style, looking for Battery, to see if she was all right. If Leviathan had gotten her. She got him to calm down, told him it was a hospital, not a prison, and put him back to bed. Three hours later, he woke up again and got halfway through the same routine before she could catch up to him. So Director Piggot transferred them both out to a hospital in Boston, with orders to not be more than ten feet apart until he gets his head on straight again.”

He cracked the seals, and took his helmet off, settling the familiar weight against his hip.

“It’s kind of sweet, really. A second honeymoon. You can’t say he didn’t earn it the hard way: Leviathan was coming down on his team, and he bought them an exit. Bravest damn thing I’d ever seen, for about half an hour.”

He sighed, and rubbed his forehead.

“Probably what gave Carlos the idea. I miss him, and Dennis. Especially Dennis. We could all use some laughter right now, and I never saw him at a loss for a joke. Remember, on that roof, just
before it all went to hell, when the rain started and he…”

Dean jerked his head, and wiped his eyes.

“They’re the only reason either of us lived long enough for Armsmaster to get us out. Chris never even made it into the fight, so it’s just the two of us and John right now. And you’re not pulling a full schedule, exactly. I know she was a pain to work with, but even having Sophia transfer back would be welcome. At least we’re getting reinforcements tomorrow… or maybe it’s today now. Either way, we’re picking up Insight and Skotos in the afternoon for their debut on the right side of the law. And Weld.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I hadn’t even gotten used to command yet. Not that I envy Weld taking it. He’s senior, and he’s done good work up in Boston. Besides, we’ve both seen that the price of command can be… high.”

He lowered his eyes for the first time, to look at the still form of Missy Biron. Small as she was for her thirteen years, she looked smaller still now: lying in a hospital bed sized for an adult, overshadowed by the IV drip and all the machinery monitoring her coma.

“It’d be nice if you could make it back soon. I miss you.”

With that, he reached out and squeezed her right hand.

No response.

He sighed again, settling his helmet back on his head, and waited through the hiss-click as it reconnected to his powersuit.

The HUD took a few seconds to initialize, and then faded to a minimalist overlay.

Seventeen past midnight, and the third leg of the patrol still to go.
This was a half hour that he really hadn’t had to spare… but she was one of his teammates. Injured under his command. A friend, that crush of hers aside.

One of the better people he knew.

She didn’t deserve to be in this coma, and she definitely didn’t deserve to be left alone through it. Her family wouldn’t visit, and of her closest friends… who else was left alive?

He waved to her, and then turned and left the room.

A nod to the guard at her door, and he strode down the hallway toward the stairs. Very few people rated their own hospital room under the circumstances, but Vista — cute, young, heroically wounded in that desperate stand against Leviathan… if Triumph was Brockton Bay’s martyred son, Vista was everyone’s favorite little girl.

His lips quirked up.

She’d hate that.

She hated being treated as a little girl, instead of a veteran cape with more time in-service than he had. Someday, she’d figure out that she could be both. Probably after she lost that particular option to aging, actually.

If she woke up. She was getting the best care available in the world: checkups, twice a day, from Panacea. It was why she’d been moved out here from the PRT building, and while Panacea couldn’t fix brains, having literally everything else about her body set in perfect order had to help… hopefully.

He shook his head and pushed on, speeding his pace.

The stairs made a welcome change from hallways lined with gurneys, most of them occupied — there just weren’t enough beds. Not quite a thousand, in normal operations. Five times as many crowded in, and still more on waiting lists out in the camps. Even with Panacea living on site (the only other person he knew who got her own room), there were too many injured or ill to keep pace.
The gathering of so many, in such straits, was… uncomfortable. Hospitals were rarely easy in the best of times, and these days Saint Jude's was filled with a choking mixture of hope, despair, pain, and sheer weariness.

It would be good to get outside again.

He blinked three times, opening a channel and simultaneously muting his external speakers.

“Browbeat.”

A pause.

“Gallant?”

“Ready to head out?”

“I’ll meet you out the back.”

There was distant chatter coming through on Browbeat’s end: high pitched shrieking noises.

He stepped out of the fire exit on the ground floor and walked to one of the railings, leaning on it and looking out. It really was a magnificent view of the city from here: the hospital had been built on a hilltop, back when people feared the swampy air of low lying wetlands. The same precaution that had served against mosquitoes two centuries ago had let it survive Leviathan’s tidal waves almost intact.

He knew what his city looked like when it was healthy, the way the movements of the people and their feelings blended together to create a pulsing, organic whole with a toe-tapping rhythm all its own... and this looked nothing like that. The refugee camps were overloaded pressure cookers, and only getting worse now that people were beginning to come out of shock: they shone like green tumors to the west, grinding dissonance up to the clouded sky.

He’d spent a lot of time looking at Brockton Bay, looking at the clouds of human emotion, and trying to pick out the thunderheads forming. At this distance, he couldn’t pick out anything or
anyone specific. Even so, it had its uses as a barometer, a way to see where crowds were on the edge of boiling over. That was the more practical use of his senses on patrol, in identifying trouble spots and adjusting the route to cover them.

Tonight? Nothing.

Nothing beyond knowing that a lot of the people in the camps were crowded, uncertain, and unhappy, and it didn’t take a parahuman to tell you that.

Silhouetted against the bonfire of the hospital, a dense shadow approached from behind. He stood and turned, blinking the sequence that dialed up his lowlight amplification.

A lean girl, almost as tall as he was himself, wearing dark grey spidersilk with integrated armor panels and a disquietingly insectoid mask, complete with mandibles.

“Tailor.”

She nodded and drifted over to the railing to join him.

He turned back to the view, his attention on the rogue beside him.

“Browbeat’s late.”

“He was playing a game with some of the kids in the Pediatrics ward: one handed pushups with them piling on his back. It’s taking him a bit to get them settled down.”

Gallant grunted. “He’s a natural on the PR side of things.”

“Not in the field?” Her voice was calm, almost disinterested.

“He’s new. A few months as an independent, not even a month with the Wards. Just hasn’t had any real fight experience yet.”
She nodded.

Tailor had even less time as a cape than Browbeat, and she’d gone directly for non-combat work after that fiasco of a trial run with the Wards orphaned her… but after you’d fought an Endbringer beside someone, the rest of their combat resume was basically irrelevant.

Not that he blamed Browbeat for staying back on radio duty — what could he have done, punch Leviathan in the leg? The kid was three hundred-odd pounds of muscle and bone, and could hit even harder than physics could explain. Still not even close to enough to break an Endbringer’s skin.

Browbeat, though, Browbeat did blame himself. He felt guilty about missing the fight that had killed so many, and ineffectual. Gallant thought that he might have even been thinking about quitting the Wards, after Leviathan. For now, at least, it looked like he’d managed to head that off.

Not by using his power: the emotion-altering blasts he could emit weren’t anywhere near delicate enough to induce a mood deniably: the concussive shock involved tended to clue people in. Then again, you didn't need delicate if you were trying to rattle someone, and a dozen sharp mood-shifts in as many seconds usually left targets in no shape to fight. No, persuading Browbeat had been done the old-fashioned way: time, conversation, and care. One reason why Gallant had arranged so many patrols with him. No one was supposed to work solo, but technically Tailor, Parian, or someone from New Wave could be the second… at least under the current emergency circumstances.

“Any news on the Empire?”

He shook his head. “They’re still keeping things quiet, with the exception of testing us on supply runs. They’re not getting anywhere with those raids, but the Protectorate can field a max of three units right now: Armsmaster, Miss Militia, and then Dauntless plus Velocity. Even that arrangement has two soloes built in.”

“Think they’re planning something?”

He held his hand out, tilted it back and forth. “Maybe. Perhaps they just want to make sure we can’t assemble a strike force large enough to go toe-to-toe with them. The only time they’ve picked a major fight was that supply convoy raid two days back, as a cover for that attempt to break Alabaster out.”
“What about New Wave? That’s another six combat capes: as many as the Protectorate and Wards have put together, right now.”

“And the Empire has maybe ten. If we dropped everything else — keeping order in the camps, ensuring supplies make it in, S&R, even the little things like Browbeat visiting the children’s ward here — we still couldn’t match their numbers. Throw in New Wave — ALL of New Wave, and maybe a couple of the rogues like you? And for all of that, we’d get an even fight, or maybe two to one? With us fighting to capture, and them fighting for survival?”

He shook his head.

“No point. We’re picking up three more Wards tomorrow; Assault and Battery will be back in a week, if that. Our position will be stronger as time passes.”

She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t have to: he could hear impatience rising within her, a Shepard scale endlessly rising, never resolving.

“And their position won’t? They can’t recruit too?”

No point staying on this topic; he could tell she wouldn’t accept any answer but total victory. Sometimes, though, you just had to buy time… and that was a kind of victory, too.

He shifted his weight slightly, and spoke. “How’s Amy?”

“Sleeping. No amputation patients on the list today, so I didn’t wake her.”

He nodded. After the second time he'd come in, Panacea had asked him if he could not visit. He'd bit back a dozen retorts, from the angry to the well-intentioned, and said he'd leave her in peace, but if she ever wanted to talk…

The situation between her and Glory Girl was messy. Even for him, and he could see exactly how the sisters both felt about each other: love, trust, fear, anger... and guilt. So much guilt. Over how they felt about each other, over Carol's death getting them both clear of that strange case 53... over anything and everything.
At least Victoria had moved back in with her father. Not that having his highly attractive superheroine girlfriend move in with him was a problem, as such… but she was just running away from the wreck of her family. He was happy to have given her a place to rest up, but some things had to be faced. Getting Victoria and Mark back talking was the first step in getting Victoria, Mark, and Amy talking again.

Besides, watching his mother and his girlfriend have breakfast every morning was a problem.

He ‘heard’ Browbeat’s swirling mix of happiness, weariness, and guilt before he heard the footsteps.

“Sorry — took a bit to get them all settled down again.”

Gallant stood. “Don’t be. Those kids have little enough to laugh about, these days. Good work there.”

The thread of Browbeat’s happiness brightened.

“One last stroll before we sleep, then. Two blocks east, then south on Lord until we hit the city limits, and the BBPD checkpoint there. From there, we’ve actually got a van waiting tonight.”

A quiet patrol, so far. It wasn’t as if there’d be anyone out on the streets anyway: all the trouble was in the camps these days. But even boring patrols beat staying at home or in the PRT building, sitting around and thinking about the dead.

He set a very swift walking pace as they fell in behind him: almost six miles an hour. Faster than he usually used on patrol, but tonight — running late and with the streets both clear and quiet — he just wanted to run the route and get home sooner.

He had his powersuit, and Browbeat could probably sprint a marathon: they could double that pace, or more, and sustain it for hours. Tailor had a hiking backpack and no physical enhancements… he’d slow as she needed it.
Browbeat had taken her pack an hour in, but she’d kept pace the whole time. Jogging, much of it. Hadn’t displayed any irritation, either, just increasing weariness and the obdurate determination that seemed to be her default emotion.

The lights of the checkpoint glittered, nearer with each footfall.

Soon, they would be there. Just a set of cones and spike-strips blocking the road as it went by the park, with the duty police slightly up the hill in a picnic shelter. A hot drink, some conversation, and then a short ride to showers and sleep.

He slowed to a stop, and Tailor went down on her knees, breathing hard.

Browbeat had her up in an instant, supporting her in a walk, telling her to breathe deeply and evenly.

Gallant nodded — letting Browbeat be of use was better for his morale than any dozen lectures — and turned up the hill.

“Officers.”

One of them turned and raised a mug of coffee in salute. “Gallant! Stuck on the midnight shift with us again.”

“Dan! Anything interesting tonight?”

He laughed. “Safely dull. They dropped your van down in the park pull-off. Coffee?”

Gallant shook his head. “We’re going off-duty soon, and hoping for some sleep. Thanks, though.”
He turned to look at the plain white panel van, parked in the soft dirt by this side of the Robert Wilson Park, clear ruts behind it.

Clear ruts ahead of it, too. Different tracks.

Fresh.

He looked back at the officers in the shelter.

Four officers.

No car.

Bakuda had taken down the major freeway interchange, and Leviathan had wrecked most of the bridges in passing; roads had been cleared only as-necessary to bring in relief supplies and equipment, and there were still neighbourhoods you couldn’t drive into except behind a bulldozer. Combine that with the fact that they’d set up one-way checkpoints — anyone who wanted to leave the city could, right now, but no one would be getting in without permission, at least until the food, water, and shelter situation stabilized — and vehicles of any sort were relatively rare on Brockton Bay streets, aside from relief supplies, construction work, or… emergency services.

No car meant no mobility for the officers stationed here.

He wasn’t all that sleepy anymore.

“Hey, anything interesting happen tonight?”

“Dull as ever. Unless you count Frank learning not to draw to an inside straight.”

One of the three by the coffee machine shook a fist amiably, before turning back to his conversation.

A midnight checkpoint, nothing to do, fresh tracks not thirty feet from their little outpost… that
they hadn’t noticed? They weren’t radiating anything other than honest confusion… but it wasn’t believable.

A triple-blink.

“We may have a Master/Stranger situation here. Tell Tailor, get up here, and be ready.”

Confusion and concern from the Ward, and… no reaction from Tailor. Odd.

“Dan, never mind. I think I would like some coffee after all.”

“Oh, sure. Hang on, let me…”

Gallant didn’t wait. Armsmaster’s powersuit could probably let him look through every camera for three states around all at once; the bare-bones version he’d built for Gallant… couldn’t. Couldn’t run for him, couldn’t put itself on, and couldn’t read his mind through some fMRI eye-tracking wizardry. It could review PRT or BBPD footage in the field, though, and right now he was grateful that the roadblock rated even a single camera.

Black and white, three men clustered around the picnic table, casting long shadows toward the blockade visible in the distance.

They shift positions, jumping about. One frame per minute? Two frames per minute?

A heavy transport truck with men clinging to the sides stopped at the blockade, the logo of Henderson Heavy Construction visible.

One of the officers walking toward the blockade; then returning with the truck gone.

More coffee around the table.

A card game.
A sense of pressure from behind, and he turned. Browbeat and Tailor, and apparently she had reacted to the warning. The same determination as ever, but the intensity… it felt like his temples were being gripped, lightly, between pincers of unimaginable size. Apparently, the pressure he’d felt in the Leviathan fight hadn’t been entirely in his head after all.

Gallant rolled his neck.

Not a problem.

He’d worked with Armstmaster for years.

Back to the footage.

He increased the speed of the playback, images flickering past faster.


Wait.

Back up.

Slower.

One frame at a time.

One leaves. Someone else comes back — that’s not a police uniform, just dark clothing. Police uniforms don’t have hoods. Talks to both. Leaves. No good angle. Profile, turning away. Tattoos around mouth: lips blackened, alternating two-inch fangs. And… check the timestamp. Barely an hour ago.
He grinned behind his helmet. A minor victory tonight, then… a distinguishing characteristic like that would give them a name, and from there they could begin trying to track him down. Or her, possibly: the image wasn’t that clear.

Absentmindedly he took a cup of coffee from the cop. Not to drink — who knew what might be in it?

A triple-blink. “Confirmed Master/Stranger influence. We’ll have to incapacitate them — carefully. They might not be turned or booby-trapped, but we won’t know until they’ve been released from quarantine. Set up for an ambush.”

“Dan?”

Gallant was debating calling for a surrender: three capes versus four normals was a fairly one-sided fight, even without the element of surprise, but it wasn’t without risk. None of them were, strictly speaking, immune to gunfire, though it would take some bad luck for a handgun to seriously injure any of the three heroes here. Gallant had his powersuit; Browbeat had his enhanced musculature and bone structure; Tailor had her armored spider-silk costume (and, next month, she’d start delivering them en masse).

On the other hand, the unidentified Master/Stranger might have left contingencies behind… and being discovered was a common one. Even if they hadn’t been meddled with, they could be expected to defend themselves if assaulted. Which set of risks was better?

“Yes?” The officer turned back toward Gallant… and then the choice was taken out of his hands.

Browbeat slipped into position behind Dan with as much stealth as he could muster. In fairness, he could step with a soundless grace remarkable in a six and a half foot tall, 300+ pound slab of walking muscle. On the other hand, everyone was watching this performance… including Dan who was twisting around, mouth opening to ask a question.

At least that meant no one was paying attention to Tailor, who’d drifted over toward the coffee table. Too late for a more subtle approach, Gallant thought as he squared up on the cop refilling his mug.

Hmm. If Browbeat was drawing all that attention deliberately… either way, he’d cover it in the after-action analysis.
A muffled thump as Browbeat’s fist buried itself in Dan’s solar plexus, forestalling any questions.

Astonishment bloomed at the coffee table, followed by terror as a cloud of insects rose up, completely obscuring the table and two of the officers.

Tailor had left a clear line of sight to his chosen target.

Just luck, or had she known which he’d picked?

A crimson beam leapt from his upraised hand, striking that officer and knocking him back half a dozen feet. Three more blasts followed, blue-green-brown flashing in quick succession, leaving the man a crying, twitching wreck. Being whipsawed from rage to nostalgia to lust to depression in less than five seconds would do that to you.

He’d be out of the fight for half a minute, maybe more.

Long enough for this fight, and too many blasts in quick succession could leave a target shattered — emotionally — for weeks.

A sharp crackling sound, and the aura of one the officers caught up in the cloud of bugs dimmed into unconsciousness. No line of sight on the other one, yet. Gallant pivoted to check on Browbeat.

The heavily muscled Ward had his target suspended in the air, holding him by the neck with one enormous hand. A one-handed sleeper hold from the front? Looked like he had been thinking about the options his strength opened up.

Two gunshots, almost on top of each other, and Gallant’s head snapped around. The cloud of insects wavered, letting Gallant see the final policeman firing his pistol at a denser shape in the cloud that flinched and fell backward as another crack sounded out.

A golden beam of light lanced out, flipping the target over the half-wall of the picnic shelter. Gallant took two bounding steps to his right to clear his line of sight, and re-engaged, battering him into unconsciousness with a dozen more rapid blasts. He turned to check on Tailor… and the fallen figure melted away into a skittering swarm of insects, while Tailor stood up over Gallant’s first
target, having secured him with his own cuffs.

Her emotional penumbra blended in disturbingly well with her clouds of insects.

Browbeat laid his unconscious man gently down.

“Cuff everyone, and disarm them.”

A few busy moments later, they stood over four cuffed bodies. Three unconscious, one crying softly.

“An unidentified Master or Stranger waltzed through this roadblock just over an hour ago. He, or she, has significant tattoos on and around his lips, patterned like fangs.”

“Do we pursue?” Tailor sounded as matter of fact as ever.

He shook his head. “Just finding out enough to identify the villain is a victory here: we won’t get blindsided later. At the end of a long patrol, with no idea where to look, no idea if the villain is alone, no idea who the villain is or what powers might be in play… no. No, we don’t pursue. We report this, have a BBPD wagon pick them up for transport, and then head back to the PRT headquarters at maximum speed. Browbeat can give you a piggyback ride.”

The hero in question winked, and flexed a bicep roughly the size of Tailor’s torso.

She shook her head. “Another time. I’ve got a meeting out at the Boardwalk staging area in the morning: some consultants coming in to talk about the reconstruction. That’ll take me northeast to your northwest and, without a vehicle, I need to start walking now.”

Gallant frowned. His father had similar meetings scheduled. People were already jockeying for position on the reconstruction contracts and redevelopment possibilities. Still… that implied Tailor had significant resources.

Being the world’s sole supplier of spider silk might do that. Still, this was no time to be out alone. Armsmaster and Miss Militia were taking solo rotations, but that was a matter of necessity. With
back up on call. And besides: short of Lung, those two were each more dangerous than any three
villains in the city.

This was a bad idea.

A very bad idea, but since she wasn’t a Protectorate cape, just a volunteer, he couldn’t just tell her
not to go. The most he could do, over something like this — not criminal, not endangering others
— is refuse to accept her aid in the future… and right now, this city needed all the help it could
get.

Perhaps she’d listen to reason?

“I recommend you stay with us. We don’t know who this villain is or what they can do, and
surprise can be deadly. At the very least, be careful.”

“Yes, it can.” She nodded, slowly. “I will be.”

Was that… amusement, underneath the deadpan determination?

With that, she turned and strode away, all weariness apparently gone.

Gallant watched, lips pursed, for a long moment as she faded into the night.
One week since Leviathan came ashore.

One week since Leviathan was thrown back into the sea.

One week since most of Brockton Bay — the city — was destroyed. The loss of life had been light: fifty thousand and change, with just over twice that wounded. More would die over time, of wounds or illness. Already, it was almost third of those who’d lived within the city proper; a twentieth of the broader metro area.

Some victory.

One week of picking up the pieces, burying the dead, and looking to the future.

It would have been nice to have been able to spend one week working on the recovery efforts undistracted, but that would have been asking too much.

“...significant tattoos on and around his lips, patterned like fangs.”

Gallant might not recognize that description, but I did. Krieg had warned Hookwolf to expect the Teeth and the Fallen, specifically, to be trying to move in on Brockton Bay. And while I had no fondness for the man who’d almost led Empire Eighty-Eight to its dream of ruling my hometown, making it a shining Aryan city on a hill, I respected his strategic acumen greatly.

If I’d feared his skill and intelligence less, he might still live.

He thought it wise to prepare for both the Teeth and the Fallen, to keep those two gangs from getting a foothold in my city. And, though my reasons for objecting to their presence were very different, I agreed wholeheartedly with his conclusion.

I’d done my research.
I pulled out a cellphone, and hit speed dial one.

It rang through.

The fifth time, I got a very sleepy Lisa on the phone. “Taylor, do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Two twenty-six. About an hour ago Valefor walked through a roadblock on Lord Street, south by the park, and took a police cruiser as he went. Ideas on where he’d go to ground?”

“Ah… what?”

“Knowing stuff you shouldn’t is still your superpower, isn’t it? Where?”

“I don’t know if that’s enough information for… but… try Valley, or maybe over into the Johnson Hill area.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

I moved to hang up, but she spoke again.

“Taylor, you… you really need to slow down. Pace yourself. Waging this secret war on every villain in range will get you killed.”

My stride ate up the ground, lengthening as I turned toward my target.

“It got you out from under Coil’s thumb.”

“And don’t think we aren’t grateful. For helping set us up with the lawyer, too. The clean record, even with the required Ward service… it helps. But if you keep at this long enough, you’ll lose. And if you’re playing for keeps…”
“I’m careful.”

She groaned. “Look, I’m going back to sleep. I’ll see you at the ceremony tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

I hung up, stretching out my senses to every insect in a five block radius, plotting how to most efficiently sweep those neighbourhoods.

If he was there, I’d find him in the next few hours.

I looked out at the waterlogged and abandoned houses nestled on the slope below me, shrouded in almost complete darkness. This had been a nice place to live, once. It would be again, some day.

Some neighborhoods — suburbs, mostly — had passed through the storm all but unscathed.

Some had been all but obliterated: anything bordering the shore was only so much wreckage. This neighborhood wasn’t so badly off, but neither was it one of the fortunate few where people were simply staying indoors and eating down their larder. It was damaged enough that nearly all those who lived there had moved into one of the temporary camps, but not so damaged that there was no shelter available. There were whole areas of the city like this, temporarily abandoned to looters and the desperate.

Or to villains looking for a place to lay low, like my two targets below.

Ten till four in the morning, and one of them was still up and about. Inconsiderate of him.

I blew on my thermos cup, cooling my tea.
I could wait.

I shifted my back against the tree, looking out across the city toward the islands of light and human activity. Survivors had gathered into the less-damaged areas, forming impromptu camps where the ground rose enough to have diminished the impact of the waves. Food was making it in, and if water wasn’t back on everywhere yet, well… people were relearning how to carry water from where it was to where they were. There was hunger, but no real starvation; disease, but no epidemics. The E88 was unofficially running a chunk of the city, and the Protectorate was letting them, in favor of concentrating on relief work and keeping order.

Still, the Empire hadn’t successfully picked off a relief convoy since the Protectorate started sending one or two heroes as escorts each time. There’d been two battles in the last three days alone, with the outnumbered heroes holding their ground until the villains retreated ahead of reinforcements. Those victories in open conflict hadn’t stopped the Empire from taking indirect control of deliveries in their territory… but they weren’t hoarding them. On the contrary, they were rationing out the supplies reasonably. Generously, even… but then, they had gotten one convoy entirely to themselves, early on.

More, Othala had done a lot to reduce casualties in her area. I wasn’t sure what that would do for the Empire’s recruiting over time, but for the moment it was enough to take her off my list.

I’d thought about hunting the rest down, even so.

Putting a clean end to the era when gangs had ruled chunks of Brockton Bay.

Unfortunately, they were mixed in with the unpowered E88 members almost all the time, in addition to those civilians who’d gone to them for food and shelter and been Aryan enough to be accepted. They were using half-gutted big box stores as communal meadhalls, with everyone sleeping together, training together, and working together under pain of being ejected. Not a bad idea, given these circumstances: their refugee camps were in better shape than most, with cleared streets and patched roofs.

Then again, the other camps didn’t have the luxury of extra supplies, the ability to turn people away, a dedicated regenerator on site, and a half-dozen capes to do heavy lifting where necessary.

Either way, it meant that I couldn’t catch one of their capes alone and launch an ambush, and to pick off someone in a crowd tracelessly… I’d have to get subtler. And trickier.
That left reconstruction work.

I’d spent a day supplying insect biomass for Panacea, but the number of people who a) lost a limb in the attack and b) didn’t bleed out almost immediately was pretty small. I still checked in every time I was at the hospital, but usually just to make small talk lately. Two days doing search and rescue, mostly with Wards. Another day was spent dealing with the farm. The ridgeline location had ensured it survived the attack almost completely intact (my apartment in the city, on the other hand, had been obliterated before I ever got to see it), but my swarms required some tweaks to make sure the spider production went ahead unhindered. I’d taken the opportunity to up honey production, too: it might help stretch the calories coming in through the relief shipments.

After that, I focused on Fortress. It had taken relatively little pressure to get them to take Quinn’s call — his reputation was real, apparently — and Fortress had already been alive to the ways in which their donation to rebuilding Brockton Bay, announced before Leviathan struck, could be spun into additional profitable reconstruction contracts.

For the moment, I wasn’t worried about them backing out on their commitment. I was worried about waste and corruption: it was nice to know that we were looking at billions of dollars of reconstruction coming into the city — maybe as much as ten billion, once you added in existing state or federal relief funds. That was enough to do... well, a lot.

Then again, Boston had spent about twice that on the Big Dig and gotten three and half miles of tunnel that still leaked, a lot of lawsuits, and two decades of construction mess. The reconstruction of New York after Behemoth struck there had been closer to a trillion… but that kind of effort would never be made here.

Might never be made again, anywhere.

This was my best shot at rebuilding Brockton Bay: mobilizing that kind of money again wouldn’t be simple. It might not even be possible. If we weren’t going to just waste the money, we’d need a plan… and audits along the way.

I paused — Valefor had been in bed for a little over an hour, resting from the long drive that had brought them in this evening.

Not long now, then.
Valefor and Eligos were of the Fallen. A gang of villains who worshiped the Endbringers as heads of a pantheon in which they themselves were lesser... demons. Visiting Brockton Bay was, for them, a pilgrimage of sorts. A chance to pay their respects, and emulate their idols... generally by causing more death and chaos. It hadn’t taken a Thinker to know they’d have been planning a visit here, soon.

I reached out, concentrating swarms in Valefor’s bedroom — enough of the structure remained to keep rain out, mostly, but the wave damage made bringing insects in trivial. Insect nightvision wasn’t all that I could wish, but it was enough to watch for my opportunity. Of the two, he was the more dangerous.

Eligos could fling blades of cutting wind on a wide scale: quite capable of bringing down buildings, and personally lethal. He dressed to imitate Behemoth, all black horn and dark hide. A threat, yes, but a straightforward one. Valefor wore a feathered corset and his mask was a woman’s face, in honor of the Simurgh. Those he looked in the eye froze, became suggestible. He could instruct them to kill, to lie, to forget or remember as he found convenient.

It was a power with applications bounded only by his imagination.

It said a very great deal about how thoughtful he was not that his name, face, and power were all known, and he was on the run rather than living in quiet luxury somewhere. Even Heartbreaker had managed that much, and his ambitions didn’t really extend beyond the bedroom. Valefor employed his power mostly to create mayhem, brainwashing people for aid, to lay false trails, or to set time-bombs. Lacking the Simurgh’s intelligence, his time-bombs caused pain, but didn’t ripple onward until the world shook under the impact.

Then again, he’d been a near ghost in his first few crimes: arranging conflicting eyewitness reports, plausible alternative culprits... even directly puppeting those investigating him at least twice. At least, that was the retrospective guess at why the investigation had led to unusually brutal raids on a few of his rivals. Success had made him ambitious, and careless: he’d tried to conquer a small town by hypnotizing his way onto the evening news.

Turns out, ‘live’ news is actually tape-delayed news, and whatever effect his gaze had? Recordings didn’t have the same impact.

That had been the incident that made it clear he wasn’t — as he’d claimed to be — a telepath.
He’d still managed to vanish before Protectorate capes hit the television station, staying out of the public eye entirely for months… until the day he reappeared as one of the Fallen.

No, it wouldn’t do to underestimate him.

There.

Rapid eye movement.

He’d be almost impossible to wake for the next few minutes.

I poured another cup of tea, thinking, and pulled my blanket closer around me.

I could kill him.

I’d been working on subtler tricks lately. The carotid artery was usually about two to three centimeters beneath the skin, depending on weight mostly. Far too deep for most spider fangs.

The largest tarantula I’d been able to find wasn’t most spiders.

Finding the carotid took practice, but I’d spent some of the last few days practicing the trick on myself. Easy enough to lie back in various sleeping positions and give myself dry injections while I worked with my swarm. Like playing with a yoyo, or maybe one of those office toys with swinging metal balls. Unfortunately, it had also made it clear that this trick would really only work on thin people… at least until I found a bigger spider, or at least a longer-fanged one.

One more thing on the to-do list.

Valefor was skinny enough to wear women’s jeans: his arteries would be shallow enough.

Getting the spider to only extend one fang and find the carotid was easy, now. As long as the subject wasn’t, say, thrashing around and trying to dislodge the spider on his neck, which was the predictable response when a spider large enough to tickle both your earlobes at the same time
settled in where it could french-kiss you.

I’d waited for REM sleep for a reason. Might make his dreams a little more interesting, briefly.

Hadn’t tested that.

Once in the carotid, I could inject venom — almost a full milliliter — and while I still wasn’t sure what that would do, I was pretty sure it could be painful, possibly lethal (unsurprisingly, there really wasn’t any good research out there about injecting spider venom directly into peoples’ arteries; spiders didn’t do that instinctively, and researchers had Institutional Review Boards which frowned on asking questions like that).

More interestingly, if I had the spider empty its venom sacs ahead of time, I could cause it to inject that same volume of air. And from what my research told me, that should lead to an aneurysm and death, and one a lot harder to trace than spider venom would be. I’d practiced that too, though obviously not at the same time as I was practicing how to fang my own arteries.

It should work.

In theory.

Especially if repeated.

And if it didn’t, there was always plan A: inject venom. Or plan C, devouring swarm. Or plan D, call Lisa and ask her to have a ‘hunch’ for her new bosses. Or plan E, see how ‘Fenrir’ felt about Endbringer-worshippers coming to challenge him. Or… well, there were a lot of contingencies available.

So.

I could kill him.

Should I?
I could probably manage ‘natural causes’ for one of them. Both… would strain credulity. If I went for a more direct approach, I’d either leave a lot of evidence, or have to make them vanish tracelessly.

I still wasn’t sure about what I’d done with Krieg, but I was sure that I’d done it because I hadn’t seen any good alternative. A lot of that had been because I didn’t feel at all comfortable with heroes losing their lives to clean up my mess, the gang war I’d provoked and fed until only a fraction of the villains remained. It was easy to look at the worst case scenarios, all the things that I would do to cause death and destruction if I had their powers and wanted to do damage, to make allowances for the fact that they probably could do things I hadn’t even imagined yet, and count up all the hypothetical casualties.

It was disturbingly easy to wipe a city off the map… in theory. I was pretty sure it was harder in practice — removing the gangs from the city certainly had been so far — but I didn’t really want to test how that would go. One thing trying to remove the gangs had taught me: the enemy would try their own plans.

It had taken me longer to realize that the heroes would too, that any attempt to bring ruin on my city would have to deal with the Protectorate along the way, or founder on their opposition. I still had to weigh the risks they’d face in dealing with the villains, but I was no longer sure it was right to assume that they’d take casualties.

It was a lot easier to think about relying on Armsmaster and the Protectorate to handle some problems after seeing the man fight Leviathan one on one, and lead his team through almost unscatched. I hadn’t seen him save my life, but he’d done that too, getting us to high ground before that final wave. Blowtorched Clockblocker’s stumps, and called in medical support… in time for Vista, at least. How much of the Protectorate ineffectuality I’d seen had been Calvert at work, using their trust to betray?

Not that it was that simple. Even today, I wasn’t sure that letting Krieg live would have been better. He was smart, and persistent, and zealous. I was sure that the Empire would have been much more dangerous under him than under Hookwolf. Knowing that, what was the right choice? I didn’t have the legal right to hand down a sentence, but I had the power to execute one. And that meant I had the responsibility to use the power well.

It wasn’t justice that the Empire could spend decades digging themselves in. Was it justice for them to be hunted down in the night?

I wasn’t really sure what was right when law and justice diverged; I just couldn’t stand for the
gangs to win again.

What I was certain of was that I needed to be more prepared, to have more options.

To make better decisions.

What did I want to happen here?

I wanted them to not create havoc. To go away, and for other villains to stop coming.

One problem at a time.

How to work this one?

Brian would say something about rep. Lung would agree in principle, but talk of fear instead, of how to combine certainty and uncertainty to maximum effect. Quinn would say something about surprise, and leverage. Carol… would have said something about being prepared. Krieg would have said something about considering carefully what ‘victory’ really was.

Lisa had just given me yet another speech about the importance of not killing everyone anymore.

Not that I’d ever killed many, directly. And of those three, Bakuda and Oni Lee had been clear self-defense.

She was a little melodramatic, but she meant well. She’d been there for me at my lowest; she knew the worst I’d done.

Put all those lessons learned together and… nothing was coming to mind.

Lisa wasn’t wrong, though, even on purely pragmatic grounds: making incoming villains vanish tracelessly might get the message out eventually… but people could be remarkably slow to notice things, and my working to keep their disappearances secret really wouldn’t help that.
Conducting extremely public executions or gibbetings _also_ wouldn’t help. That is, it would help a great deal with spreading the word that prospective villain visitors should consider alternative lifestyles, but the complications…

I looked through my swarms at the sleeping Valefor again, costume discarded across the room, bag in the corner, rugged cell phone on the nightstand showing the time…

I pulled out one of my phones, checked it. Signal. Cell service wasn’t back up _everywhere_ yet, and landlines would take even longer to return to service, but right here, right now, I had three bars.

I felt through my pack, thinking of ways to flesh this ploy out, even as my attention focused on Valefor’s phone.

Electronic displays of pretty much any kind were impossible for me to read through my swarms — all I saw was flickering noise. Whoever tuned displays to avoid flicker effects hadn’t been paying any attention to insect visual needs. Hard to blame them, really: insects weren’t a major market segment. But Valefor’s phone, I could see.

I recognized the model. A little old, it was rugged, almost as cheap as a flip-phone, and supposedly very battery efficient. I’d seen it in stores when I was getting my disposable phones; I might look into it again now that I realized I could see its display through my swarms. Different display technology?

I could find out later; for now I’d use it.

It was the work of a moment to get insects onto it, and scarcely more to begin going through the contacts.

Into the text messages from “E”… and there he was. Eligos.

I took a moment to memorize their numbers, just in case, entered a message — “Mtg park 3 blks n. Truce rules. 10 min.” — pressed send, and had my swarms vanish into crevices and behind furniture. My own body was already moving at a steady jog toward the designated location, and other swarms were gathering there as I felt Eligos reach for the buzzing at his hip.
By the time Eligos had gotten the message, woken Valefor, gotten costumed up, and started walking toward the park… well, I’d already laid out my blanket in the middle of the park, broken a granola bar in half and set it on the blanket, scattered a few ticks, and moved two blocks further north into a well-covered hide with two good escape routes.

They paused on seeing the blanket, a darker square against the grass.

It really was remarkable how dark it was out. No streetlights, no moon or stars given the cloud cover, almost no light reflecting off the clouds. The kind of dark you saw out in the country, but never anywhere near a major city.

“Join me.” I spoke through the insects gathered throughout the park, weighting the buzzing speech so it came more from the blanket’s direction.

Eligos raised an hand, held it, while his head twisted back and forth. Valefor held a hand out in front of Eligos while he scanned the clearing calmly, like he could see clearly. Some kind of sensory enhancement, on top of his stranger power?

If they made for my body, it wouldn’t be to shake my hand. Plan C was still on the table.

“Impolite of a host not to show himself.” Valefor’s voice was high, but with no hint of falsetto. A countertenor?

“You have eyes yet. Do you not see?” This time, I sounded mostly behind them.

They jumped. Eligos twitched in midair, and medium-large tree fell, bisected, with a deep trench appearing in the dirt further on. The wind rustled new leaves throughout that corner of the park.

One hit with something like that would bisect me just as easily.

Actually, more easily, now that I thought about it.

That fragility was why I was two blocks away behind concrete. And hopefully a faster runner than they were. Leviathan had pretty much canceled my normal jogging routine, but doing patrols with
the Wards had proved an excellent alternative fitness program.

I gave a low buzzing laugh that rippled throughout the park, shifting which insects I ‘spoke’ through to give the impression of the sound rotating around them at a walking pace.

“Come now. Sit, and let us talk.”

They straightened, and walked toward the blanket. Valefor was doing better at keeping his composure: Eligos kept looking around every few steps.

With them at the blanket, I opted for equal volume from all sides. “Welcome to my city.”

Valefor bent over, took half a granola bar, and sniffed it.

Eligos kept turning around. “Your city?” He had bit of a southern drawl, and he took his time with the pronoun.

“Mine.”

Valefor took a bite, chewed slowly.

“Never heard of you.” Eligos managed to make it sound like yew.

“If you do not wish my hospitality, walk away. You won’t see me again.”

He turned and took a step before halting as Valefor's upraised arm barred his path.

“We didn’t see you the first time.”

“Just so.”
Finally.

Was it really that hard to understand that if I texted you from the phone of your sleeping friend, I could have killed him as tracelessly? And chose not to do so… for the moment?

Well, it was at least clear who the brains in this pair was.

“Your… welcome is entirely unexpected. Might I ask why you called this meeting?”

Eligos was gesticulating at Valefor; Valefor had a hand out toward him, palm out, awaiting my reply.

“I wished you to carry a message to the Fallen.”

“The content?”

“Do not trespass.”

Eligos erupted. “Or you’ll what? Big words from someone who won’t show his face!”

I let the silence linger a beat. And another. Then I tried for a sourceless whisper: “Leviathan trespassed, and pulled back stumps.”

“You threatening us?” It was hard to see transparent things in the darkness, but I rather thought Eligos had charged up a wind blade in each fist.

Valefor’s tenor was as calm as ever. “That was Eidolon and Hookwolf. Or Fenrir, as he styles himself now.”

“Indeed. Everyone saw what happened.”
Valefor’s teeth gleamed momentarily.

“You’ve given us food for thought, as well as food for our bodies. And for this hospitality we thank you.” He had a finger pressed to Eligos’ lips at this point; the other arm swung out as he dipped into a better curtsey than I could manage. “And now, with your leave, we’ll depart to consider your message.”

I chuckled again, buzzing about them. “Go in peace.”

He rose, taking Eligos by the elbow and moving away at a swift walk. I let them take a dozen steps toward the half-wrecked house they’d taken over before speaking one last time.

“Stay awake a little longer. The dawn in this place, the sun rising from the bay… it is a thing of beauty. You should both see it… once.”

Valefor’s stride hitched, and Eligos swung around as if he’d catch me hiding behind a tree, but they kept walking.

Carrying a few ticks each along for the ride.

Ticks were just about perfect for passive tracking: tell them not to feed, just to latch on, and they were all but unnoticeable… particularly if you took care about where to attach them. Removing them would take care, time, effort, and either a lot of mirrors or a helper. Sure, if they weren’t feeding they’d die eventually, but that would take days. They were a recent addition to the mix of bugs I carried around, just in case the local bugs I had available didn’t have the kinds of talents I might need, and this would be their first real field test: so far, things looked positive.

Given those persistent markers, I was confident I’d know them if they were in my range at any time.

I’d give them twenty-four hours, and if they had left town… well, perhaps the Fallen would scratch this city off their pilgrimage list. If I was very lucky, they might even discourage other villain groups from visiting.
If they didn’t leave town… well, I’d dust off one of the contingencies. Perhaps arrange a Protectorate bust, or… if all else failed, I was pretty sure that the discovery of their handless bodies would be a clear statement that any who came to Brockton Bay to imitate Leviathan would get the same treatment as the Endbringer itself.

It might be best to let ‘Fenrir’ do it: he’d see their arrival as a personal challenge, be delighted at the opportunity to boost his rep, and I wouldn’t have the same worries about heroic casualties. On the other hand, I didn’t want to boost Empire recruitment too much… and any deterrent effect from his reputation would be lost when he died or went to the Birdcage. Perhaps it would be best to do this in a way which left a more lasting impression.

Nothing so concrete that people would see me as a challenge, and come prepared; nothing so tenuous that they would come, dismissing the rumors.

A balance of certainty and uncertainty was critical to inspiring fear: Lung’s lesson. In this case, the certainty that coming to Brockton Bay as a villain would end badly; uncertainty as to everything else.

Tricky to strike that balance, in practice.

Still, an anonymous voice in the night was deniable, whatever happened next, and after the conversation we’d had… they’d do the work of giving me credit for anything and everything that happened. Eligos could walk into traffic today, and Valefor would never be sure that it was an accident.

I folded the blanket with a smile, pocketing the half granola bar that Eligos had left. Rude of him to not eat it, really, but I wouldn’t complain. It certainly beat the food coming in on the relief convoys.

I’d found the villains, (hopefully) discouraged them, and nobody had needed to die yet.

Progress?

I’d have to see if they were in fact discouraged, but I was optimistic. At the very least, it would leave me free to work on the the reconstruction side of things for a day.
It was nice to think that the job was getting easier.

Finally.

Not having killed anyone would also make dealing with the Wards tonight simpler, though I’d take care to catch Lisa alone beforehand anyway — she really needed to work on her habit of just blurt ing things out.

Besides, if Butcher really was leading the Teeth back to Brockton Bay, I needed to work on nonlethal contingencies… or risk becoming Butcher XV.

For the moment, though, what I needed was to start hiking. There were at least seven miles between me and sleep as the crow flew — more for me walking, given debris and detours — and less than twelve hours before I’d have to be up again.

I glanced off toward the bay: the clouds were already showing hints of orange, enough to wash out night vision and leave the ground seemingly darker than before. If I hurried, I might be able to be in my sleeping bag before the workday started.

Probably not.

At times like these, I really missed my Vespa, lost to a tidal wave. Then again, there just weren’t that many cars on the roads right now, and I hadn’t wanted to spook the Fallen on my approach. There were plenty of cars abandoned in place when the waves hit, most waterlogged and nonfunctional without repairs, and most of the rest were used to drive out of the city by those who had the choice.

I wouldn’t get any closer to sleep just standing here, thinking the thoughts of the sleep-deprived and procrastinating.

I sighed, shouldered my pack, and started walking uphill, keeping the faint glow to my right.
The buzzing of one of my phones woke me. I raised it and checked the time — 4:02 — while I felt out my surroundings through the swarm. Some activity about a half mile to the west, where a crew was working on restoring power, but otherwise very little sign of human activity.

The seaside neighborhood south of the Boardwalk had been hit pretty hard.

I crawled out of the sleeping bag and stood, stretching.

The afternoon sun could be felt, even through the clouds. I eyed their dark color, gauging the wind.

There would be rain again tonight.

Still, for now… I turned in a slow circle, surveying the city.

Construction crews active in over a dozen places that I could see, and probably more that I couldn’t. The Endbringers were a blight upon the world, but FEMA had never been so prepared, so practiced, or so well funded, and right now we were reaping the benefits.

I could see activity around the PRT building — another food convoy escort coming in, it looked like. Further inland, the one camp visible from this angle practically crawled with human activity.

Against the horizon, I could see the silhouette of more temporary housing going up. A rumble, and I glanced further left to see the skyline shift as a skyscraper sank straight down in a shower of dust: the last of the three implosions planned for today was going off, and only a few minutes late at that.

Toward the bay, flocks of birds swirled, marking out the shoreline with an elongated shifting cloud in the sky. Eventually, they’d run out of the fish washed ashore in the waves, or human food that had been waterlogged and abandoned, but for now… the gulls feasted.

A single distant shape, holding a steadier arc than the darting swoops of the gulls, stood out to my eye.
An albatross?

I didn’t think they were found in the north Atlantic.

I let the unflapping line of its flight carry my gaze around to my destination today: one of the forward depots set up for construction work. They’d cleared out what had been a couple of parking lots for retail, the asphalt already cracking under the constant abuse by heavy construction machinery. Right now, most of that machinery was out on various jobs, but the fuel supply was there, as were a half dozen trucks, a few Bobcats, and several office trailers.

I was due in one of those for a meeting in about an hour.

Hopefully, they’d have some place where I could wash up and change beforehand. If not, well… the consultants had to know they were coming to a city just deluged by Leviathan.

They could make allowances.

I rolled up the sleeping bag and stuffed it into its sack, before repacking my bag and shouldering it.

I set out at the same steady pace I’d used earlier this morning — only one and a half miles to go.

Just another beautiful day in post-apocalyptic Brockton Bay.

Quinn Calle met me at the trailer with a packet of sanitary wipes, a change of clothes for me, and the same even smile he always wore, one end hitched up by the vivid scar upon his face. His suit looked pressed, and I wondered if he’d brought in a steam iron on the cabin cruiser he’d piloted up from New York.
I decided not to ask the question, for fear he’d answer ‘Of course.’ The boat was a clever way of living well in a disaster zone, regardless.

“A formal change of clothes?”

“I remembered the meeting with the PRT, and thought the precaution might not go amiss.” His tenor was light and expressive, the instrument of a professional.

I shook my head, and took the wipes and clothes from him, stepping inside the trailer.

“Why did you need me at this meeting?” The trailer’s thin walls weren’t exactly soundproof.

Through the surrounding insects, I could see and feel him lean his back against the wall of the trailer, one leg straight. “The architect we’re looking at here is an eccentric. World-class, but there are going to be three people from WA Consulting here today. Two of them are just to manage the talent.”

I stripped down, using the wipes to take a makeshift bath.

“So why me?”

“The talent wants to see the ground himself, and doesn’t deal well with lawyers. He thinks we complicate deals, start fights, waste time. It was a concession for them to let me be present at all; he wants to talk to a principal.”

I smiled as I bound my hair back into a ponytail — the best I was going to manage without a proper shower.

“Is he wrong about lawyers?”

“Not… entirely.” He drew out the admission for effect.

I’d never yet gotten a handle on his sense of humor. Still, he was good at his job — by reputation,
the best — and had done well by me.

I pulled my armor back on — quite comfortable, really, even on the skin. It was, after all, basically multi-layer silk underwear. Spider silk, with some integral armor plates: insect chitin stiffening a layer of the weave.

“So if he needs a principal, why me? Why not some Fortress bigwig?”

The mask I held up for a moment, then set aside for now.

“Ah. My fault, really.”

I started putting on the pantsuit over the armor. It fit, and I wondered when — or if — I’d told Quinn Calle that I preferred to dress over armor.

Maybe he’d noticed at Triumph’s funeral. Or when we’d had lunch at that Italian place. Or… actually, almost every time he’d seen me, now that I thought about it.

“Your fault?”

“Mostly I do criminal work, but that’s not quite right. I work on parahuman cases. I don’t specialize in real estate, or construction law — rarely do contractual work at all. The firm has specialists whom I can consult, of course, and I am often consulted in return, but if I’m taking the lead on something… well, it’s a clear indication that both a parahuman and a lot of money are involved.”

I nodded, slipping my my feet into the flats Quinn had brought. Not as well armored as the shoes I usually used, and with none of the ankle support, but at least I’d have the silk backing them up.

“Part of why you hired me, of course. Fortress steps considerably more carefully around me than, say, Brian Tanaka.”

“Who?”
“The firm’s leading construction lawyer. He’s been involved behind the scenes — you’ll probably want to meet him before the reconstruction gets seriously underway: I am very good at what I do, but this isn’t what I do and a multibillion dollar contract is a bad time to learn through one’s mistakes.”

I nodded. What he was saying was true for me too… except there wasn’t any choice. I didn’t have the time to learn construction on some other project, and I wouldn’t get a second chance at rebuilding my city.

Well, it wouldn’t be the first time I’d had to learn on the job.

“People who aren’t capes — or who don’t work with capes often — tend to have an exaggerated opinion of your capacities. And the talent doesn’t deal with ‘underlings’.”

“So WA Consulting wanted to meet with the parahuman involved?”

“Something like that. Their architect is very good, but doesn’t play well with others. Pulled out of three projects over the last ten years; completed two, took four years off from a third with no notice.”

I buttoned the shirt up, making sure to close the collar high to hide the armor.

“So why are we meeting with him if he’s a flake?”

“Cyril Bernsheim: he’s good, and he’s fast. Remember the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art?”

“That guy?”

The reconstruction of New York, after Behemoth hit it in ‘94, had taken a decade before the scars faded from easy view. The Metropolitan Museum of Art spent seven of those years with a half-built site, while an endless series of lawsuits and recriminations drained the endowment. An anonymous donor swept in and assumed the construction obligations, firing the existing contractors and bringing in a team of unknowns.
Just one year to the day later, a completely redesigned Museum opened.

Ahead of time, under budget, and beautiful.

I’d been there once, on a field trip back in elementary school. It was advertised as a work of art housing other works of art, and they weren’t lying. It felt more like a garden of art than a building, filled with branching paths and hidden grottoes, seamlessly integrated with Central Park itself.

“How is he even available?”

“He turns down most jobs, and, well... as I said, he has his issues.”

I shrugged on the jacket, checking the coverage of the sleeves. Could I keep the armored gloves? They looked like fancy grey silk gloves... I thought I could get away with it.

“What should I say to him?”

Quinn shrugged — I wondered if he knew that I could see him, sense his movements, or if it was just habit. “Be polite, be attentive, and be patient. If he doesn’t blow up today, I can keep working with his handlers and maybe we can get some work out of him.”

I nodded, checking the time: 4:57. And, at the edges of my range, a car approaching. I stepped outside, putting the mask in my backpack.

No way to hide that under formal clothing. Maybe if I wore a hat and veil... and they could be armored too...

Another time.

“How do I look?”
Quinn’s easy grin had never left his face that I had seen — he said that a display of casual confidence was generally appropriate for dealing with either friends or foes — but here it shallowed as his eyes crinkled. He brushed a stray strand of hair back behind my ear.

“Ready to face the world.”

I turned toward where the car had parked. Three people were getting out. I studied them through the swarms while I waited for them to come into sight. Two men, one woman. A muscular man, the driver, very dark with close-cropped hair, wearing a perfectly tailored black suit with a black tie and black sunglasses, and carrying a steel briefcase. A woman, blonde and tall, made taller by her heels, wearing a warm golden brown scarf-drape dress, a small handbag clutched in her left hand. Between them, a man in sunglasses, tan, in another perfectly tailored suit — dove grey, with a vest and… was that an ascot? Scarlet, matched by the pocket handkerchief.

And a cane.

Well, the ‘talent’ was supposed to be eccentric.

I stepped forward to meet them, Quinn falling into a position two steps behind and to my right.

They came out from behind the corner of a trailer and paused.

I stopped, also.

A moment of silence.

Dealing with people was why I’d hired Quinn in the first place, but if the architect didn’t want to deal with underlings…

I probably should have thought this through earlier.

Was it wrong that a business meeting scared me so much more than singlehandedly fighting two villains? Not that much of a fight had been involved, but then… with proper planning, there generally wasn’t. Even with improper planning, possible results from a cape fight mostly fell into
a) victory (in which case, mostly no problem) or b) death (in which case, no *further* problem). A meeting like this could screw up the whole Brockton Bay reconstruction, if it went wrong, and that would be quite literally harder to face than death.

Weren’t most people more afraid of public speaking than death anyway? Not that this was all that public... but my mind was wandering. Trying to avoid the crisis before me.

I fell back on the earliest formal social training I could remember: my mother having me welcome guests to our home. I’d been four, and she was entertaining other members of the English Department, as well as that year’s entering grad students.

“I’d like to thank you for coming here as our guests today.”

There weren’t any refreshments. Skip that part.

Curtsey?

No, not in a pantsuit. ‘Only curtsey in a dress or skirt.’ I could still hear her voice, echoing in my memory.

I bowed instead, the bow she’d taught me for my first flute recital.

Age six. Greensleeves. She’d been so *proud*…

I held the bow a moment longer, until my eyes stopped stinging.

When I straightened, I could see them standing perfectly still, watching me.

“Guest?”

The one dressed for a funeral spoke, his enunciation crisp.
I froze. What? Was that wrong?

Quinn spoke up from behind me. “This is a preliminary meeting; my principal would not presume another relationship until one has been mutually agreed.”

The architect nodded, and then turned and strode toward the gate. The man in black shrugged at us, drew a small device from his pocket, and followed.

Was that it?

What had I said?

I looked after them for a moment, until the woman stepped forward.

“Jessica Beale.” She had a firm handshake.

“I’m sorry about Todd, but someone has to ride herd on Cyril or, well…” Her smile was warm and apologetic.

I nodded.

“This is a decent start, really!”

“What would a bad one look like?” I spoke without thinking, and then bit my lip.

I could feel Quinn’s glance burn between my shoulderblades.

Jessica chuckled, tossing her artfully curled hair back. “Oh, you’d be surprised. But we should get moving before they get too far: Cyril will want to see the ground first.”
I learned a very great deal over the next two hours.

It is possible to wear stiletto heels and walk briskly through miles of rubble — if you’re just that graceful.

Jessica was.

Personally, I missed the ankle-support of my usual armored shoes already.

A steel briefcase can contain over a dozen bottles of mineral water, among other things.

I asked Todd if that was due to concerns about the Brockton Bay water supply… but apparently it was just another of Cyril’s foibles.

A double crossover merging interchange is substantially more efficient than a standard interchange.

I’d have to look up what, exactly, that was, right after I looked up diverging diamond interchanges to find out why Cyril hated them in comparison, ‘for their craven unwillingness to take the obviously necessary next step’, but he spoke with sufficient conviction that I was prepared to take it as fact.

I hadn’t even realized there was more than one kind of interchange. Let alone more than seven kinds. Then again, I wasn’t an architect designing (among other things) transport infrastructure.

“… and the rail link is of critical importance. There is no use to dredging and clearing up the docks unless goods can be readily transshipped: a proper container terminal will afford both efficient cross-docking and temporary storage. The latter could be sited… there, and…”

The architect muttered like that all the time. Whoever was on ‘herding’ duty had a digital recorder
on him; the other would walk with Quinn and me, making small talk.

Abruptly, he turned to me, eyes locked on mine, leaning in a bit too close.

“The city is, presently, a mess. A disaster. What do you want out of reconstruction?”

Both of his minders froze, and Jessica closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly. Maybe Todd had too, actually — his sunglasses made it impossible to tell. Quinn waited behind me with the same unruffled manner as ever.

This was the point where he declined the job, wasn’t it?

Well, for lack of a better answer, I’d tell him the truth.

“I want Brockton Bay to be safe and prosperous. Not as it was once, and certainly not as it has been throughout my life, but better. A place where people can work, live, and thrive, safe from arbitrary violence. A place my parents would have been proud to see.”

He tilted his head. “Sentiment.”

It wasn’t a compliment.

My eyes narrowed. “If I respect someone, I consider their judgment. Hypothetically or directly. What do you do?”

He waited a long moment afterward, and then inhaled deeply, closing his eyes.

“How will you ensure that this is done properly, to the end?”

Speaking to someone face to face, with their eyes closed, is… disconcerting.
“Construction is not my skill…”

He twitched, a whole body shiver.

“Do not cavil. It is beneath us. Fortress is a company built on fear of the superhuman. You have leverage and fear: they will bend to your word, so long as they see a path to survival and profit beyond. How will you choose to direct that influence?”

I considered, and spoke carefully, pausing to pick each word.

“I will engage expertise. You, if you are willing, for the zoning, planning, and architecture. Another, for auditing. If I can know what should be done, and know what is being done, then applying influence is… straightforward.”

Relatively straightforward. But then, that’s why I had hired Quinn Calle: his expertise was exactly in how to apply influence.

He rolled his neck, inhaling short, quick, breaths.

“The auditor?”

“The Number Man.” He served as an underground bank, some kind of Thinker high-powered enough to have made himself an institution despite the enormous interest of almost everyone, on either side of the law, in getting at the finances of various rogues or villains. If Fortress had accountants who could beat the Number Man, they deserved whatever rakeoff they could manage.

His eyes snapped open, finding mine, and a long pause followed.

“Very well. The question remains, how much of my spare time is available…”

He spun on one heel and strode off to get a better view of the Docks.

Jessica kept pace with him, one step behind and to his right.
I looked at Quinn, then at Todd. “His spare time? What other projects is he working on?”

“You should see his model train collection.” Todd’s face was expressionless behind the sunglasses, and his tone was casual.

I shook my head as he turned away to join Jessica.

Quinn came up behind me.

“I think he’s on board, for the moment.”

I blinked. “For the moment?”

“The next trick is going to be getting him to prioritize. Focus on the roads, rails, docks, zoning… other people can build shopping arcades, or apartment buildings, or whatever. Not as well, not as elegantly… but they will do it. If there’s money in it.”

“If you build the infrastructure, there will be money in it?”

He shrugged, his smile practiced and open. “Something like that, not that it’ll be anywhere near that simple. Let me put it another way: he’s not wrong about Fortress being nervous about parahumans. Even so, there’s no way I can control the whole of the reconstruction project. Not even close.”

“But parts of it?”

He nodded. “For most decisions, I could perhaps sway them one way or the other. But even if I could control any outcome, I definitely can not control every outcome — we’ll have to pick and choose what matters.”

“Isn’t that why we’re trying to hire him? To tell us what matters?”
“And we need to get him to focus on that, instead of — say — beating a member of the Privy Council unconscious with his cane because someone used a different turfgrass seed mixture than specified.”

I blinked.

“That’s not a hypothetical, is it?”

“No, that is why he can never work in Brunei again. The gardens still came out beautifully, which is why he got to leave alive, and paid.”

I winced.

“Well, his handlers seem… competent enough. Maybe we won’t have any problems like that.”

It didn’t sound convincing when I said it, not even to me.

The ending of the walk landed us back in front of a stretch of what had been the Boardwalk, a couple of miles from where we’d started and about that much from ferry docks near where I could see Quinn’s cabin cruiser at anchor. The three from WA Consulting withdrew a moment to talk, and I took the time to look out at the ocean.

The view out to the sea was actually better than ever — nothing to obstruct it, not anymore — and although much of the beach was still covered in debris, the patch in front of us was relatively clear. A slightly steeper slope? Fewer rocks to catch debris being swept out to sea?

The nearly-set sun behind us cast long shadows out toward the bay. The moon, waxing nearly full, was almost directly above and the tide was coming in to follow it. Watching waves advance up the shoreline… felt odd, after Leviathan.
The rain beginning to prickle down didn't help either.

A reminder of the rush of waters inland: all the death and destruction that followed. The sheer helplessness of it all.

I deliberately forced a smile and inhaled the salt air, turning my memory to some of the earliest moments I could recall: walks on the beach, half-suspended by the hands held by my parents to either side, a floppy sun hat half-swallowing my head, the laughter as they swung me forward between them.

I would give them victory in nothing, not where I had power.

My parents could never walk with me again, but this beach would hold other happy families.

This city would.

I swore it.

Not fighting the dozens of villains, not facing an Endbringer itself, not even business meetings would prevent this.

I felt the consultants break up their huddle behind me, and turned to meet them as they came.

Cyril led them, and he inclined his head as he came to a stop before me.

“Miss Hebert.”

He inclined his head.

“Mr. Bernsheim.”
I matched the gesture.

“I find myself, for once, interested in a project.”

I kept my face calm, but inwardly… yes! I would need a miracle to revive this city, and if this man was eccentric, well… he’d worked miracles at least once before.

“Accordingly, I anticipate that our subordinates will be…”

A grunting cough from Todd interrupted him, and a flash of rage, astonishing in its intensity, flashed across Cyril’s face before vanishing as suddenly as it had come.

“Do you have a reason for this interruption?” He didn’t even turn, his eyes still focused on mine. His voice was eerily calm, and all the more chilling for the anger I’d seen moments ago.

I glanced over at Todd myself to hear his reply, curious myself and more than slightly worried that they might not take the job after all.

He shook his head and coughed again. Coughed hard.

A red line grew about his neck, and his head simply fell off.
The young woman turned her back for a moment on the blaze of neon behind her, and looked out over the skyline. The rain clouds obscured the stars and the waxing moon above — in the week since Leviathan had attacked the city, the weather had been unusually wet — and only a fraction of the buildings were lit, leaving most of the skyscrapers as black outlines against a darkening sky, as the last light from a sun already below the horizon died away.

A flash of intra-cloud lightning threw out silhouettes in stark relief: buildings, some of them tilting ever so slightly. The blackness returned, all the darker for the brief light.

Now only a handful of buildings could be seen by their own lighting: those few reached by repair teams, and those with their own generators. Saint Jude’s stood out like a beacon against the skyline, brighter than any other building left standing, the red cross glowing in the spotlights. It hadn’t been the largest hospital in Brockton Bay… before. Now, the hilltop location that had rendered expansion impractically expensive made it the biggest hospital remaining.

She turned her head to the left as the thunder rumbled by, looking toward the second-brightest building in the skyline. Low-slung and massive, the Brockton Bay PRT headquarters wasn’t directly visible through the intervening buildings… but the column of light rising from its position was unmistakable in the gloom. In the shadows between the two, scattered tower lights marked constructions crews at work on demolition and repair.

It would be months before all the wrecked buildings were demolished; years before the scars faded under new construction. Water, sewage, electricity… even the most basic things were unreliable, or simply unavailable in some neighborhoods.

There was a lot of work to be done before daily life could resume.

She turned around, one hand up to shade her eyes.

And yet, despite all the more urgent needs, people had found the time to get the Palanquin nightclub up and running. The sign above the door changed colors in shifting patterns that caught the eye: deep blue rising briefly toward cerulean, and then edging back toward violet before rippling back through red-rimmed black to blue in a sequence almost, but not exactly, the same as the first time through. The subdued colors were probably intended to be understated in comparison to their competition, but on an otherwise lightless street they blazed forth, reflecting off the puddles and the wet pavement, painting the whole block the colors of a bruise.
They were very clearly still open for business, disaster or no disaster. There was even a bouncer outside, keeping watch over a soggy velvet rope. In this small corner of Brockton Bay, it was as if Leviathan had never come. The block even lacked most evidence of flood debris: it had been far enough inland, and high enough, to be spared the worst.

The illusion wasn’t perfect: the dull roar of a generator could be heard beneath the thumping beat of the dance music, and she’d be surprised if water had been restored to this block already. Then again, she’d be surprised if anyone in there were drinking water.

She clutched her trenchcoat closer against the rain — not that it helped with the trickle running down the inside of upturned collar — and walked toward the door, detouring around puddles as she went.

The bouncer crossed immense arms as she approached. “The grand reopening is tomorrow. Tonight’s the pre-opening.”

She hunched slightly, eyes not rising above his bearded chin. “Sorry.”

“You with the relief efforts?” His voice was low and rumbling.

She shook her head, droplets scattering from her hair.

He smiled then, white teeth splitting the dark beard that spilled down his chest. “Just want to celebrate not being drowned?”

She looked up as she heard him open the door, the electronica inside abruptly booming out.

“Raise a glass to surviving for me, hey?”

The woman nodded once, quickly, and stepped inside.

She paused at the entry, hanging up her trenchcoat. In some ways, the nightclub was darker even
than the night outside. The steady sources of light were dim, and the irregularly pulsing colored flashes from the dance floor wiped out any hope of nightvision. Still, she could see that the room was perhaps half-full, a thick knot clustered around the bar and a looser one crowding the central dance floor. Over half the crowd wore heavy work clothes emblazoned with the logos of Fortress Construction, Henderson Heavy Construction, and a dozen smaller players. The rest looked local: dressed in uneven salvaged finery and dancing like they’d live forever.

It looked like the best sort of party — lively and welcoming.

She turned and made for one of the empty raised alcoves lining the side. Safely ensconced, she looked around again.

Alone in the crowd, again.

Story of her life, even before. Few friends then, and fewer now.

Still… this place was alive. Better than the endless sullen silence of… before. White coats and white walls, solitude and that endless silence — as different from quiet as blindness was from a starry sky.

Better, but no place for one who needed quiet, tender handling, and time to heal.

Lost in memories of times worse and a scant few times better, she gazed unseeing over the kaleidoscopic surge of the crowd, letting time pass. Her friend wasn’t here now — she’d known that much two days ago — but she’d wanted to at least see where she’d ended up. Make sure she’d landed on her feet.

That she was among good people.

She deserved that, after all they’d both been through.

A nightclub… it didn’t really fit with her memories. A quiet, gentle girl, so often lost in her own world. One of the very few who lived in that place of misery and still didn’t let it define her. Stronger than she herself had been, for all her youth.
This noise, this chaos… it didn’t suit the girl she’d known.

A pair of fists thumped down on her table, before they opened to reveal shot glasses. She followed tree-trunk arms up to a barrel chest, where an immense beard half-covered the dress shirt and tailored suit leaning over her table.

The bouncer.

“Got off shift and came in to enjoy the party, and damned if it didn’t look like you could use a drink and a friend.”

She looked at him blankly.

He coughed. “Or I could drink them both and go dancing alone.”

A friend?

It had been a long time since someone had offered that.

A long time since anyone had looked at her romantically. Even longer since anyone had treated her… kindly. Maybe this was a better place than it seemed.

Maybe it was even a good place for Elle.

He half-stood, and she reached out and pulled a glass to her, shifting over ever so slightly.

He smiled, then, and sat across from her.

He looked at her, then raised his glass. “Absent friends.”

She drank to that, sipping a quarter of the glass and then erupting into a coughing fit at the vodka’s
He slammed his own, and then set the glass down on the table, spinning it this way and that with his fingertips.

“Lots of absent friends all round.”

She nodded, sipping a little less this time.

“Still, we beat the odds. Survived. We’ll rebuild.” Quieter. “Lot of friends would’ve loved to see the docks live again.”

He looked at her a moment, and then away. “Not much for talking, are you?”

What could she even say to that? What could anyone?

He shook his head, and pulled a cigarette pack and lighter from an inside coat pocket. “Fair enough, then.”

He lit up, and looked out over the dance floor. She watched the tip of the cigarette flare bright red as he inhaled, the color then dimming through orange to an ember of itself.

He looked back, and she noticed she was leaning forward.

“Want one?” He gestured with his cigarette, leaving glowing trails in the air.

She thought about it, and realized she’d nodded as he produced a second and lit it off the first before passing it to her.

“Should have guessed. I get mean without my nicotine too.”
He paused, and winced. “Aw, hell… where’re my manners? Donny.”

She drew deep on the cigarette, eyes closing in satisfaction, and exhaled smoke through her smile.

“Miriam.”

He stood, extending a hand to her.

“Well, Miriam. Care to hit the dance floor with me?”

She inhaled again, the cigarette end flaring, and let his hand swallow hers.

“Let’s.”

It had been a very long time indeed since she’d gone dancing, but she took courage from the flame between her teeth and gave it a try.

It was… fun. No one seemed to be looking at her, staring, judging… just dancing and drinking themselves. It had been a very long time since she’d felt like a part of any large group, and it was comforting to be a part of this one. Not held at a distance.

The dance floor lighting flashed a red matching her dress, and she smiled. Donny smiled back — a nice smile. Would she be more disappointed if he had designs on the rest of the evening, or if he didn’t? An entirely separate question from whether she’d want to play along, but it could be nice to feel wanted. Or even wanton, in the right company, and as she took another deep drag on the cigarette, she realized she hadn’t felt this free and easy in company in a very long time.

At the corner of her eye, one of the bartenders stripped off his shirt and got up onto the bar with a lit wick on a chain. She bobbed up and down as its flame did, turning to watch as he bent over backward, passed the flame above himself, and then unleashed a stream of faint blue fire upward, curling and flowing in the darkness between the strobes.

She shivered and leaned back as the vodka dragon’s breath died out. Donny laughed and dipped her, and in that moment the world was perfect.
Behind her, the crowd cheered to see the bare-chested man lift another poi, light it from the first, and begin spinning them, weaving dazzling patterns of afterimages against the dark.

She spun in Donny’s arms as the flames spun behind her, his solid frame standing out against the faceless, pointless, mass of heaving flesh crowding her dance floor.

It was getting on toward that time of the evening, then.

He had been adequate; she was not yet without mercy.

“Donny, could you get me some cigarettes from my coat? At the coat check? I’ll freshen up and see you at our table.”

He smiled and turned away, his determined bulk cutting cleanly through the dance floor chaos.

She remained where she was, a still point in the surging dance floor. The fire dancer’s performance was mesmerizing, easily the highlight of the night.

Someone bumped her.

She caught about half the apology offered before setting the offender on fire with an absent wave of her hand.

A beat of silence while her hair and dress stirred in the wind — it took remarkably intense heat if you didn’t want to leave bones behind, and her personal immunity to fire and heat didn’t cover updrafts.

And then there was screaming. Worse, the fire dancer faltered in his routine.

She sighed.
It was just impossible to get decent entertainment anymore, unless you provided it yourself.

With that thought in mind, she rotated on her heel, setting each of the exits ablaze as she did so. The one visible on the balcony probably didn’t have independent outside access, and even if it had, there was no one up there, but… well.

Why not set it on fire too?

So she did.

A massive man wrapped several coats around his forearm and smashed the flaming main doors open with a shoulder charge, a handful of others following him clear before she brought the curtain of flame down again.

She brought a finger to her lips in thought. Something about him… did she know him? She certainly hadn’t come here to see him: the plan had been to say hi to Elle. Who wasn’t here. Rude of her… no, not Elle. Elle was never rude. She was the nicest person Miriam knew.

She smiled suddenly.

That’s why Elle wasn’t here: she’d forgotten to call ahead!

Silly.

Well, maybe she’d remember next time.

An absent wave of her hand cut off some of the tedious screaming coming from the bar… and alcohol always burned so prettily. A lovely little accent to the rest of the display. The hint of a smile formed as she watched the blue flames pool and drip. Very little in the world mattered, but fire… fire was fascinating.

What were you supposed do when you came to visit a friend, and found them out? She put a finger to her lips while she thought.
Leave a note?

She glanced around, looking for a pen and paper.

Another large man, this one in construction overalls, leapt at her in a tackle.

She took half a step back, into the flames of that one who’d bumped her earlier, and then through those flames and to those on the balcony above. The man who’d missed the tackle sprawled on the center of the dance floor where she’d been, now abandoned except for the fire and this would-be hero: a tightening of her brow and the flames there exploded, a swelling red orange bloom that left him motionless and on fire.

No, there was nothing like fire for beauty, or for fun.

She brought her arms up, and gestured as if conducting a symphony. And the flames answered, growing and spreading, roaring through the colors of the spectrum, dancing to the beat with better time than those sacks of meat had managed, and better grace too.

Now this was a party. She lost herself for a timeless moment in the beauty all around. If only her friend was here to share!

The music cut off, abruptly — the sound system had probably melted.

The screaming was mostly done, thankfully: that never stopped being annoying.

Ah, well. A gesture brought a ball of fire into being before her, and she launched it through the window to arc down onto the roof of the building next door, then stepped through the fire around her, remaking herself out of the fresh flame there.

It was still raining, which usually put her in a bad mood, but nothing could keep her down while she had such a large fire before her. Instead, she sat on the edge of the roof and kicked her heels in the air, letting her shoes dangle off her feet, the fire behind her wrapping her close and keeping the raindrops off.
So pretty.

The fire was the usual reds and yellow and blues, yes, but she never got tired of watching them
dance and shift. The neon signs went up, and she frowned momentarily: neon just wouldn’t burn.

Irritating.

Even steel burned, with effort and air, but not neon. A whump and fireball restored her smile as the
generator’s fuel stock went up.

She’d forgotten her raincoat! One shoe dropped down to the street beneath as she thought about
that, and then shrugged.

Another light on the horizon caught her interest. Not one of the boring spotlights: a building was
on fire. Several buildings were, if she was any judge. It was out of her range, so she couldn’t tell
simply by reaching out and feeling… but then she’d seen a lot of burning buildings over her career.

Not that they had ever bored her, from that first childhood discovery to this moment, the way the
flickering dance bloomed and spread… *beautiful*.

Perhaps she should go and have a look.

Then again, the rest of the group would be waiting for her.

Very little could disturb this moment of perfect joy: not the rain, not her absent friend, not even the
thought of upsetting such as them.

Still, that last prospect evoked a certain… unease.

Best not to keep them waiting long.
She kicked off the other shoe and rolled backward into the fire behind her, only to emerge walking through the inferno blocking the nightclub’s main door.

She gave the fire on the horizon one last longing look, and then turned and walked away from the blazing wreck of the Palanquin, her footprints hissing steam behind her.
I froze for a moment as Todd’s head rolled off, bouncing and shattering his sunglasses before coming to a stop face up, unseeing eyes open to the rain.

They looked... puzzled.

Maybe, that was me projecting: I was certainly surprised.

It had been a while since I had been truly surprised.

Even if my attention had been on the social niceties of the occasion, there was a part of me that reflexively tracked every insect, every spider, every worm and snail and crab in a five block radius around me. That didn't guarantee that I was aware of everyone in that radius, but people generally couldn't go more than half a block without interacting with an insect in some way. A mosquito looking for blood, a fly looking for a spill... something.

A cockroach being scared away or stepped on, even.

Even beyond that radius, anywhere there was a significant concentration of insects I had what amounted to an array telescope. Nothing much more than a good pair of binoculars, usually, but enough that if there was a clear line of sight between my swarms and something, I could see it if I chose to concentrate a moment.

I had gotten used to knowing what was going on around me, all the time.

There had been times when I’d been mistaken about what I perceived — that was how I’d missed Oni Lee, disguising himself as one more civilian fleeing an oncoming Lung — but I simply did not miss events within my radius.

And while I thought, uselessly, about how what had just occurred simply couldn't have, I focused on Todd's back and saw my foe. Behind him hung a strange collection of smooth white ovoids, arranged like a bizarre modern art sculpture, supported on a strange criss-crossing set of hair-thin wires sunk into the concrete below as if, untethered, they would float away. Another set of wire-thin protrusions anchored it to Todd's back, plunged deep in at his kidneys, his shoulderblades, his arms.
One stood out rigid and unsupported in the air, precisely placed to have been inserted where the base of Todd's skull had met his neck moments before. The other wires holding him upright retracted, without a whisper of a sound, and the body toppled.

My jaw dropped.

The sculpture rearranged itself with startling quickness, reforming into something suggestive of a human shape: the largest ovoid a torso, a smaller one the head, two each for the arms and legs, some smooth white shapes connected by tiny chains and others by nothing so visible. The fingers gave the illusion away: nothing human could bend like that, rotate like that, and the toes… it stood on almost invisibly thin wires which thrust out from its toes and dug into the concrete beneath in a seemingly random pattern.

The torso spun a full clockwise circle, shedding a spiral of rainwater as one arm whipped out and extended, a blade emerging from the hand to decapitate Jessica.

Whatever they’d seen in my face, or Quinn’s, the consultants' reactions were immediate. Not informed, but sometimes doing anything was better than waiting.

Jessica folded into a faint, dropping straight down like a puppet with its strings cut. Cyril twisted, bringing his cane up as if to strike Todd… but catching the outflung arm of the thing before us, and knocking it higher.

Right.

Civilians, here.

Solve the rest of it later.

“Get them clear!” I shouted to Quinn, and tackled the monster. Not my preferred kind of fight, but no time for anything else right now.

It collapsed before me, dropping into a pile of pieces as if jointless.
I rolled clear, cursing the fact that my equipment was all in that trailer. No taser, no baton, no pepper spray… just whatever insects I could call, and my body.

Not that the gear might have helped much. Would a taser even bother this… this… what was this? It didn't look alive, not that that was any guarantee with the stranger capes, and that meant… probably a tinker device.

Some sort of killer robot… which meant that there might be more.

Well, the trick to dealing with a tinker was just that: deal with the tinker. They tended to be just as frail as normal humans — just as frail as I was — once you got past their devices.

If you were lucky, you could even turn those against them. That's how Bakuda had died, losing a game of catch involving one of her own explosives.

Thoughts for another time. Win this fight, then find the tinker. And figure out why he was after me in the first place.

Around me I could feel swarms of insects boiling forth and converging. Quinn Calle had Jessica up, and led both her and Cyril out at a run, his long legs eating up ground. I vectored a cloud in on them, opening a path before them and closing it as they passed, shifting the insects behind them to obscure their path as best I could.

If the rain got too much harder, I wouldn't be able to keep my swarms in the air. That wouldn't exhaust my options but… better to finish this fast.

Another swarm reached me, and I stepped back into concealment as it shrouded me and then swept onward. A tide of black chitin swarmed over the pile of things before me, biting and stinging… not that I felt them making any headway against those smooth white surfaces. I couldn’t even find holes: the places where the chains or wires came forth were so perfectly machined as to leave no gap.

And then came a puff of pressure, and every bug within five feet of the pile of parts just… died.
I put a hand to my forehead. The last sensations from those bugs had been strange: an intense taste of purple, and numbers.

Pieces rose up from that mound of bug corpses in a seemingly random order, held above the layer of dead on its crazy array of stilts, and reassembled themselves again into that mockery of a man.

Its head rotated in a full circle, twice, and then oriented on me.

Not that I could be sure it was looking at *me* — it didn’t have eyes, or a mouth, or *anything* beyond a smooth white curve — but I rather thought that that meant it could tell where I was through the swarm surrounding me.

And it had come prepared with some kind of anti-insect gas or wave or something.

* Fucking tinkers. Everyone else got one trick, or maybe a handful: they got a seemingly endless bag of them, limited only by resources, time, and creativity. Well, he could see me through my insects?

Two could play at that game. I split off a fragment of attention, searching the surrounding area for someone with goggles, glasses, a remote control... something. No guarantee that the Tinker had to be *here*... but no harm in finding out.

Well, no harm to *me*.

While I searched for the puppeteer, the puppet's hand rose. Whisper-quiet, a blade speared out and retracted flicker-fast, almost swifter than I could see. I stumbled back, feeling it score my cheekbone and glance off, barely missing my right eye and leaving a deep cut behind on both cheekbone and brow. I closed the eye as blood welled up thick and fast — head wounds always bled so much.

My mask was also in my bag.

Well, if the talent could bring a *cane*, I could show up to a business meeting in a bug mask. And I *would*, next time. At least unless that hat and veil idea worked.
If I lived for a next time, of course.

I scrambled down the slope, forming human-like shapes in the swarm that fled in other directions as I sent in more insects.

He ignored them, moving deliberately after me and only pausing to clear his immediate vicinity with another puff of... something.

Well, that confirmed that he could locate me through a dense, shifting, buzzing swarm of insects.

Also, irritating.

I kept gathering more of them around me, blacking out a wide radius about me, on the theory that there was no point making it any easier for him.

My own search had been fruitless: no sign of anyone in my range cackling over a remote control or anything similar. Just a very few construction workers finishing up paperwork — most had knocked off about when the sun hit the horizon.

Still, things weren’t all bad. He wasn’t going after my architect any more.

Assuming my architect was still my architect after all this: it did seem like the kind of encounter which might lead people to rethink an association.

I frowned, and spoke through the swam enclosing them while I still had them in range. “Quinn — until I’m quite sure that this is settled, could you get them — and yourself — to Boston? Avoiding whomever might be trying this?”

He spoke between gulps of air. “My boat? Got it.”

The thing before me raised its arm again, but this time I was tracking it before it settled on target, and dodging before it extended the blade.
I caught Cyril muttering something about my hospitality and winced as I rolled to my feet again. Hopefully, that wasn’t him quitting right there.

What if Quinn quit over this? That would be… a real problem.

I had to admit this wasn’t really in the expected line of his duties, but still. Who would I find with half his competence?

Cyril’s assistant didn’t look like she’d be quitting. Actually, Jessica was keeping pace at a run in high heels, and making it look easy.

I was more than a little jealous.

I was also more than a little busy: the thing was now spinning its torso like a top, altering the plane of its rotation to bring those blades to bear on me like some kind of buzzsawing doll.

I dodged the first slashing approach, diving low into the sand of the beach.

It approached, resembling nothing so much as a modernist sculptor’s dynamic depiction of a championship figure skater, one leg up and arms tight in a spin.

At least that made the style of attack relatively predictable. Then again, I hadn't yet shown I could stop this: why should it bother changing tactics?

This time, when the blades scythed through the cloud of bugs above another frantic dive, they met silk drogue lines… and cut right through them.

*Sharp.*

My armor, tight-woven and reinforced as it was, might be able to block something like that more effectively… but that particular plan just went to the bottom of the list. Silk was hard to cut, and I'd been hoping to foul its blade with those lines.
Apparently, it had come prepared for my armor, my insects, my ways to hide... who had even *seen* me use all these? Or had the mystery Tinker just known how I’d use my power better than I had?

I *did not like* dealing with an ambush prepared for me. I spent a great deal of effort avoiding fair fights — because I might lose, and there was far too much at stake for that. This fight wasn’t even close to fair, and it had rigged everything the other way.

So far, nothing I was trying was even slowing it down.

The cut on my face didn't feel particularly deep, but it was producing a *lot* of blood. I closed my right eye to keep it clear.

Well, I didn’t have to win, but I wasn’t going to just give up.

I rolled to my feet again, stepping backward with the sureness of someone who could feel every piece of the terrain around her.

It approached… and paused, slowing its spin.

I waited for a long second, looking at it through the eyes of my swarm — maybe it could see me through all those insects, but I certainly couldn’t see it with my body’s one working eye.

It was at the edge of the concrete path along the beach. And those tiny extensible stilts, or whatever it was using, that sank into concrete so easily…

I looked at the sand around me, then back up at the thing.

Let’s see you spin without firm footing.

It let the stilts collapse, and stepped on to the sand, circling round me until we faced each other parallel to the rising tideline.

A part of me absently noted that sirens were sounding in the distance.
Good. Those wouldn’t be reinforcements for it.

The head rotated toward the city, and then back toward me.

I grinned.

It raised a hand and beckoned with a single finger.

I considered flipping it off… but resisted. Every second that it wasn’t trying to kill me, help was getting closer.

If it wanted to kill me, it would have to come forward and try it: closer to the ocean, and deeper in the sand.

There's an idea.

Not a decisive one — I still didn't have a good answer on how to take this tinker-toy apart, but I wasn't out of tricks just yet, so long as it kept following me... and besides: it wasn't the enemy.

It was the tool.

For right now, survival was victory enough: its master, whoever he might be, had come for me in ambush.

And failed.

He would never have so good a chance again: after this, I’d be watching for him.

More, I'd be hunting him next time.
I grinned, and replied with the classic 'come on, then' full-hand beckon that started a thousand kung fu fights.

It turned sideways — if that word even had meaning for something with the kind of symmetry it did — and edged toward me, feet pressing for footing in the sand.

I stepped back and to my left, ever closer to the waves, always waiting for the next thrust. It was too far to hit me with the range it had shown so far, but...

A lunge!

It sprang forward in a remarkable uncoiling leap that launched the assemblage forward like a torrent of soap bubbles, those white ovoids glowing pearlescent in the sea spray. I dove away into the water, felt the blade stab against my backplate at an angle, catch, and push... but not pierce.

Give me a place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I shall move the world. Tinkers had better tools than Archimedes these days, but they still needed a place to stand if they wanted to apply force to the rest of the world.

Still, those blades were sharp. I could feel the way it had cut through the silk, catching only on the layers of chitin.

I backed away, deeper into the water. Almost knee-high now, and it slowed my movements.

I waded deeper still while it reassembled itself. Almost waist-high, by now. I had to be careful with the swarm about me, raising them as waves came in and lowering them as they passed, keeping me covered without sacrificing too many to the water.

Already, I was losing some of them to the rain. And for this to work, I needed to keep him chasing me and my swarm.

Reassembled, it again oriented on me. Another headshake, and this time a finger wag as well.

I spread my arms wide in invitation. Those blades were fast, and they were sharp... but had they
been designed for underwater?

I was betting... not.

It waded closer, swaying unsteadily as the waves swept in, the whole crazy structure wobbling off-center, but somehow managing to keep the 'head' still. Calf-deep in the ocean already, and the tide was rising.

Of course, better to simply not need to put my theory to the test. The robot had been cooperative enough to chase to just about where I wanted him, and now...

Dozens of crabs gathered beneath the sand answered my will and grabbed hold, attempting to crush its legs.

That failed.

Whatever that white substance was, it was unbelievably tough.

I shifted them to trying to pull the pieces apart. That had better results: the pieces attached by chains, I could pull apart until the slack ran out; the ones attached by something else (magnets?) I could separate outright. Some of them anyway.

Bubbles rose to the surface: whatever gas it had used to defend against swarms of insects was lighter than water, and no use under the present circumstances.

About time something went my way.

I turned and waded toward the shore at an angle away from the beleaguered robot.

The legs continued to kick, extruding those spikes it had used to root itself into concrete. Water blunted their force, but at the right angle, they still cracked crab shells with ease, though the claws retained them in a deathgrip. Getting them separated, out of range of mutual support, and angling them correctly... it would take time, but I could see how to hold them safely. The hands were less lethal but harder to keep hold of: they tended to cut partway through the crab's shell, and then
shove themselves clear of the gripping claws.

Still, the underwater battle was devolving into a swarm of robot parts versus a swarm of crabs, and that was the kind of battle I liked. One where my own body was standing safely on the shore, I had ever more crabs crowding in, and my minions were steadily disassembling the robot and dragging it out to sea.

The song about how the toe bone connected to the foot bone ran through my mind, bringing with it a smile, as I carefully arranged the feet at opposite ends of the melee beneath the waves, mixing things up so that no piece was near any piece it could connect to.

I spared a moment to check myself over and winced, stripping off the remains of what had once been a perfectly decent pantsuit.

Diving into the ocean had been a counsel of desperation: salt water did horrible things to silk. Given time, it would quite literally dissolve my armor entirely. A corner of my mind turned to calling spiders toward me.

Well, I'd already been planning to do a new set of armor using the Darwin's Bark spiders. Once they got here, anyway: deliveries to Brockton Bay had been restricted to relief and reconstruction shipments since Leviathan hit, and it would probably take time to breed them in sufficient numbers for rapid production.

While I mused about repair, the robot hadn't been idle. Those scattered parts abruptly reconnected to each other without any regard for human form, producing something that looked more like a long piece of string than anything humanoid, let alone human.

Thus reattached, it thrashed the long 'tail' behind its torso, generating enormous propulsive thrust, and sped further out to sea.

I was uncomfortably reminded of a school sex ed video.

Some of my crabs remained attached, but I lost their feedback as it passed beyond my range in a handful of seconds.

I was hoping that meant the robot had been designed for underwater work: the alternative, that all
that had been improvised while dismembered... was considerably worse.

I turned inland, aiming for the construction staging area where the evening had started. I'd check on my employees in a moment, but for right now? I wanted my mask and tools back: someone who could build one robot could build two.

I really didn't want to fight two of those at once.

A thread of attention directed behind me caught a white arm and hand rising above the waves about a mile out, and I checked stride.

The index finger extended. After a pause, it wagged back and forth once, twice, and then sank beneath the waters once more.

I wouldn't even be able to see something that size at that distance with both eyes… but these days I was seeing most things through my swarms, either directly up close or using my insects as a sort of crude array telescope for distance.

Worse, immediately before my right foot, written in the sand, was a cryptic message: B4N.

Had it timed everything in advance? Arranged the fight so that I would be by this message at the end? Or was it just that skilled at improvisation?

While I stood there, lost in thought, spiders climbed up my legs and began the process of cleaning and reinforcing my armor. If I had been very lucky, my armor wouldn't be any weaker for the dunking. A handful diverted to my face, weaving bandages for my wound.

I wasn't feeling particularly lucky. The way the rising tide washed those letters away right after I read them didn't help in the least. The precise timing implied...

I shook my head, and set off at a run for my bag, footsteps splashing as the rain grew heavier.
After donning my mask, shoes, and backpack, I took the car the consultants had come in: the keys had been in Todd's pocket. Under the circumstances — the robot had escaped out to sea, might possibly have been targeting the consultants, and I'd sent them to a boat to escape — I rather thought no one would mind if I borrowed their car in order to bring it to them.

I'd never driven a luxury sedan before, but it was fast, quiet, and comfortable. The streets weren't exactly clear, but this monster was as comfortable taking sidewalks as it was on the road. It wasn't nice enough to make me rethink the replacement Vespa I'd ordered — too bulky, for one — but it did make me understand how some would want a car like this. Especially for driving in the rain: the Vespa mostly made the rain fall harder, and horizontally.

Those sirens hadn't been for me: there was a fire somewhere northwest of here, glimpsed at intersections and through gaps in the buildings. A big one, judging by the number of sirens converging on it.

Just as well I hadn't strung the fight out, hoping for reinforcements.

I brought the car to a screeching halt before one of the few jetties to survive Leviathan's onslaught: a metal frame and deep-sunk pilings had apparently preserved it in more or less workable shape. At its end, I saw Quinn and the two consultants jogging toward the zodiac that Quinn used as a bumboat for his cabin cruiser.

I left the engine running as I jumped out of the door and made for them. Quinn paused, and came back to meet me.

He wasn't smiling.

"Taylor, we need to leave. Now. You too."

I blinked, wincing as some blood from the forehead cut made it into my right eye.

"I beat the robot — it did escape out to sea, but it lost. And it won't get another shot at complete surprise."
"To sea?" He rubbed his hands a moment. "We'll have to risk it. I don't like having a fight with him on a small and sinkable boat, but staying here right now would be a very bad idea."

I tried for a smile.

"This can't be the worst you've seen on the job — nothing like that mess that gave you the scar, right?"

He passed a hand over his face.

"No, Taylor, I have not yet suffered injuries requiring complete facial reconstruction today. And yes, in my perhaps obsessive attempt to reach the absolute top of my profession, I have in fact seen some chancy circumstances involving parahumans — the one that cost me my face included. So please understand that I am saying something meaningful when I tell you that this, right here, right now, is the the worst situation I have ever been in."

I tried to speak, but he slashed a hand down and continued.

"That wasn't a robot, that was Mannequin."

I swallowed my attempt at reassurance.

Mannequin.

Sphere, once.

Alan Gramme, before it all went to hell: one of the greatest tinkers the world had ever seen. A man who had promised a future for humanity on other planets, deep in the atmosphere of Jupiter, or plying the routes between the stars in vast, self-sufficient ark-ships of his design. A man who had given the world hope, a man who had set all our sights on something beyond mere survival.

The Simurgh found him before those dreams were more than half-realized: killed his wife, killed
his daughter.

Killed his sanity.

His genius, regrettably, remained intact.

He cut himself apart, sealing himself piece by piece in impenetrable, self-sustaining modules of his own tinkertech design.

That hadn't been a robot I had just fought, that had been the tinker.

Who was unqualifiedly not just as fragile as I was, but instead encased piecemeal in modules probably designed to withstand the vacuum of space, the crushing pressure of a gas giant's core, and a close approach to the Sun to boot.

His most recent redesign apparently included a smooth white aesthetic, extremely sharp blades, and even some kind of insecticide-on-demand feature. If we ever fought again, he'd probably have an automated crabmeat extractor too.

_Fucking tinkers._

Ever since his self-dismemberment, he'd wandered the earth... killing. Mostly other tinkers, but not always.

Worse, he didn't travel alone: he was a long-time member of the Slaughterhouse Nine.

The group had a rotating cast — casualties were extremely heavy among new members — but just joining it brought an automatic kill order. A death sentence for crimes committed, pronounced in absentia, to be carried out by whomever was able, however they could. And a bounty to match: enough money to buy your own archipelago.

No one even bothered trying to collect the bounties on the veteran members anymore. There was greed, and there was fear, and then there was simple good sense. No one was eager to face the prospect of going after, say, Jack Slash: their leader insofar as the Nine had one, and someone who
had survived over *two decades* in the Nine, and hadn't yet fallen in combat or to fratricide.

No, the bounties of veterans went unclaimed for one good and simple reason:

The Nine killed.

They killed civilians, they killed cities, they killed heroes.

They killed Hero.

I'd seen Alexandria, Legend, and Eidolon in action against Leviathan. The Triumvirate were generally held to be, alongside Scion, the strongest heroes in the world: the first into every Endbringer fight, and usually the last out. Often decisive; always invaluable.

All three had played key roles in the fight against Leviathan, barely a week past.

There had been four such titans... once.

Two days after a disastrous fight with the Siberian, only three had been left to face Leviathan in Naples.

That hadn't gone well, either.

Those were things that everyone knew about the Nine, shared in whispers at night when talk turned to the monsters who were real and walked among us.

I knew more.

The former kingpin of a chunk of downtown, Coil, had been holding a young girl captive when Lung pointed me at him in order to remove a rival. The girl, Dinah Alcott, was a precog of extraordinary power, greater even than Coil's talents in that direction — not that I'd ever known for sure what his power was.
Whatever it had been, it had been strong enough that he could discern that someone was after him, on no evidence that I could ever see, strong enough that Tattletale, one of the stronger thinkers I'd ever known, served him out of fear... but not strong enough that he could tell that I was the one hunting him.

His methodical attempt at using Dinah's power to find me had led him to check against a list of powerful capes and organizations the world over, including ones which I had never even heard of before then.

The Slaughterhouse Nine was on that list, and although Dinah reported that she didn't see any of them killing Coil, she did note that, based on all the futures she saw, if Jack Slash lived... then everyone in the world would die in a handful of years. To give the devil his due, Coil had moved saving the world almost to the top of his list, leaving it just below figuring out who was after him personally.

He never did find me, and when New Wave had stormed his hidden fortress at my instigation he chose death over surrender.

It hadn't seemed like the sort of problem I'd need — or have the chance — to address personally.

But if Jack Slash were here, in my city, today... that meant that the stakes were still higher. This wasn't just the life of my city in the balance, but potentially the survival of the world as well.

I was wearing my mask, so I wasn't sure what Quinn had seen to let him follow my thoughts — a change in posture, perhaps — but he nodded decisively and spoke.

"Great. Let's go."

He turned on his heel, and both of us ducked as a large explosion sounded in the distance.

He spun around again; I could see through my swarms without turning. Another building, this one closer to downtown, was now completely on fire. The ones to the northwest were still going strong.

Fires, in the rain, in a city that still hadn't dried out since Leviathan? Multiple fires?
No, Mannequin hadn't come to Brockton Bay alone.

I opened my mouth...

… and, just then, Shatterbird sang.

Shatterbird wasn't the most senior member of the Nine (that would be Jack Slash), nor the most dangerous in a fight (the Siberian), nor the most frightening member they'd ever had (Grey Boy had that hands down), nor even the most inventive (Bonesaw).

She was, however, the one with the most casualties to her name, in a group for which the entrance requirement was inventive mass-murder.

She could manipulate glass, and silicon more generally, on a range that was *at least* city-wide, and the delicacy of her control was as extraordinary as her range. She could make literal castles in the air, or fly on stained-glass wings, or do anything else her imagination could conjure out of glass.

At the moment, only her range was in play: this particular trick was decidedly unsubtle. A well trained soprano could hold a note at the resonant frequency of a glass until it shattered; *Shatterbird* could pull that same trick with every piece of glass, with nearly every piece of electronics in the metro area. Only, with her power, things didn't shatter.

They *exploded*.

That was how Dubai ended, in her debut.

Oh, there was still a city with that name on the map, but it was a shadow of its former self, with skeletal skyscrapers mocking those who tried to scrape out a living in what was left of the city.

She sang, and a whisper of her power let the glass throughout the city carry that song forth as if each window were a loudspeaker.
The raindrops bounced off the windshield of the sedan like it was a trampoline.

She was singing opera, of some kind. Something in German, fast and light and almost bouncy, with no hint of the horror to come. I hadn't ever seen enough opera to tell if she was doing it justice or not, and my attention was on other things at the time, but it was incongruously beautiful all the same.

I tackled Quinn, taking him to the ground and trying to cover his body with my own: I had armor, and he didn't.

She reached the conclusion of some phrase, holding a high note... and my city shattered.

The sedan's windows blew out, showering my back with glass, and I heard the engine cough, sputter, and die as the microchip controlling it exploded. In the small of my back, I felt each of my phones twitch, as their silicon circuitry answered her power's call. None of the shrapnel made it through the backpack, but it still felt like I'd been kicked in the kidneys.

Out on the water, the cabin cruiser listed and a stain was beginning to spread on the water around it. How...

I stood, brushing off the shards, and offered a hand to help Quinn up.

He stood with a grimace, following my gaze out to where his boat had been.

"Fiberglass hull."

I winced. Just as well they hadn't made it out to the cruiser, then.

"You're going to need a new evacuation plan." Cyril spoke, seemingly as relaxed as if he'd been out for nothing more strenuous than a stroll on a pleasant summer's evening. Jessica's lips were tight with tension, but she had produced a collapsible umbrella from her handbag and was using it to shelter him from the rain, always remaining a dutiful step behind him.

I turned to him.
"I'll have one."

He tilted his head.

"No ships with significant range remain functional, almost no motorized road transport, and they'll be putting up blockades around the city soon. The prospects for travel by air are even worse."

"No ships within Shatterbird's range."

He nodded judiciously, acknowledging the point. Maybe his calm was infectious: Jessica and Quinn both looked like they were regaining their poise.

"And who would bring a ship to this city, now?"

I shook my head.

"Not here. Near here." I pointed at the zodiac tender boat, still tied up near the jetty. "The outboard motor might work. Might not. Either way, oars alone can get it over the horizon."

"And to a rendezvous. Signal flares, or some such." He stroked his chin with one hand, the other absently cradling the handle of his cane.

I nodded.

"And if I said we'd rather take our chances on our own?" His voice remained perfectly mild.

I swallowed. I couldn't *force* him to stay here, but going out on his own would be a very bad idea. I could try to reason him out of it, but the question assumed a situation where he'd already made that decision for reasons he thought good.

No, only one workable option here...
I squared up on him, standing straighter. "I'd thank you for coming out here, wish you well, and ask how I could help."

He removed a pocket watch from his vest, snapping it open and shaking out the glass before studying it carefully.

After a handful of seconds, he snapped it shut and returned his attention to me. "For the moment, then, we will wait, though I do not guarantee we will wait until your ship comes in. Regardless, your hospitality has been acceptable and your staff diligent, even under trying circumstances. Come, Jessica — that briefcase and its bottled water should be our priority just now."

With that he strolled away, cane clacking rhythmically against the concrete. Jessica followed a step behind, picking her way through the glass in high heels, carefully keeping the umbrella above him even as the runoff began to soak her instead.

I watched them go, Quinn stepping up beside me as he calmly walked back down the same path over which they had fled bare minutes ago.

"He seems much calmer in a crisis."

A shadow of Quinn's usual smile returned. "The old question: is he a sane man playing a madman, or a madman playing sane?"

I shrugged. "Madman playing madman?"

Quinn puffed out an exhausted laugh and turned to face me.

"You're not coming with us, are you? My advice to you as your lawyer is that you should." His smile flickered, but he couldn't hold it.

I paused, thinking about it.
"Remember that message I left with you once, in case I didn't survive picking a fight with Coil? About Jack Slash?"

He spread his hands wide, changed his footing slightly to place one foot further forward. I wondered if he even noticed what he was doing, or if a lifetime of advocacy left deeply engrained habits about how to argue.

"There are others who will take up that fight. Others who will be better able to fight on their level. At those stakes, who of the heavyweights wouldn't throw in? You know that Alexandria's wanted a rematch, and this might be enough reason for the PRT to let her risk it at last. Legend's just a couple of hundred miles away, and Eidolon..."

I nodded.

He wasn't wrong: if the PRT thought they could end this by killing Jack, if they threw their mightiest into the fray... I'd be insignificant beside all that. I'd seen Eidolon fight only twice: the first time, he — singlehandedly, and effortlessly — eliminated a force assaulting New Wave in retaliation for their strike on Coil.

The second time, with the battle against Leviathan all but lost, with all who remained on the field numbered, like me, among the dead or dying... he'd abandoned his struggle against the tidal waves called by the Endbringer, and instead faced the monster directly, in single combat.

I'd seen an Endbringer turn and run that day.

Sure, the beast been weakened by the battle beforehand. Wounded more deeply than he had ever yet been, by Armsmaster's extraordinary last stand and then Hookwolf's suicidal charge.

Even so.

If Eidolon was not thought to be the most powerful cape — ever — it was only because no one was sure what Scion's limits really were.

If he came back... if he fought to his limit, fought beside Legend and Alexandria, Myrddin, Exalt, Chevalier and our own Armsmaster, all those famous heroes united to save the world...
If that happened, what use would I be?

That was the wrong way to think about the decision.

I'd been thoroughly insignificant in the fight against Leviathan, too.

But I hadn't given up then either.

Granted, the worst Leviathan dealt was death.

The Nine — particularly Bonesaw — could do so very much worse.

*Would* do so very much worse... unless they were stopped.

Quinn dropped his hands to his sides, and leaned a little closer.

"As your *friend*, I am asking you: get out while you can."

A pause, while he studied me as if he could see through mask and bone alike, and read the thoughts within my head. He spoke again, slowly, letting just one word out at a time as if he did not have the strength to carry two such burdens at once.

"This does not have to be your fight."

I turned away and looked out at the city through the eye not covered in slow-clotting blood, assessing it in the light of the lessons taught by Leviathan's aftermath. Shatterbird had exploded glass and sundered microchips. What consequences followed?

Transportation, crippled.
Communication, crippled.

And with those gone, any hope of a coordinated response... crippled.

There would be thousands or tens of thousands of fresh injuries — what had to have happened in the hospital *alone* would be a horror. It might not be the worst possible case: having so much of the population crowded into tents, having so many of the windows broken already by Leviathan...

Whatever it was, it was bad enough.

Worse, it wouldn't be getting better with time: this had just put every reconstruction effort in Brockton Bay on hold. If we were all *very lucky*, they'd keep the food shipments coming until some villain or panicking civilian attacked them — and someone would, soon enough.

If we weren't lucky, they'd already canceled tomorrow's convoy. Food reserves... if we had more than two days per person of food left in the city, it could only be because so many had died already.

Cut those relief convoys off, with the city's water system still down in many neighborhoods... it wouldn't even take hunger or thirst starting to bite, not when dread would strike first. And once anyone started trying to seize supplies by force of mob... things would get ugly.

Fast.

Riots, and blood, and chaos: a city tearing itself apart in desperation and fear.

Which was, of course, exactly what the Nine were aiming to make here: a slaughterhouse.

None of that grim assessment even considered what fresh hell they might make, as and how they chose.

I looked into that possible future, and then at the man beside me who had changed my life.
When we'd met, I'd been an underaged orphan with some cash and a *lot* of problems, on the run from the law and the gangs alike. The cash, and Lisa's introduction, had led me to the Number Man, a thinker who served as a sort of underground bank. I'd asked him for the name of the best lawyer he knew.

Quinn Calle had taken my case.

He'd taken the facts behind my problems (and some well-earned fees), and ensured the PRT wouldn't abuse my weakness. More, he'd ensured that they could no longer turn a blind eye to Shadow Stalker.

He'd taken some offhand comments about my armor and the care of bees, and made me independently wealthy. Given me a home of my own.

He'd taken a risk both personal and professional — broken his rule about only dealing with the *aftermath* of cape fights — to help me in unmasking Coil's infiltration of the PRT.

He was well on his way to taking my dream of a rebuilt — reborn! — Brockton Bay, and turning it into a blueprint.

He'd come closer than I liked to think to taking a blade in the neck from Mannequin back there, and that too would have been on my account. His actions in that fight were well beyond the call of duty: he'd recognized one of the Nine, but had neither panicked nor fled; he had instead calmly followed my instructions and taken two other civilians to safety.

Friend? I had no idea what the right word was for what we were, but I did know I *owed* him.

I'd sat through gentle interrogations from him. Watched him negotiate, an artist at work. Heard him give advice dozens of times.

I'd never seen him ask me for a favor before.

Then, I'd never seen him without his smile either.
As a friend, he had said, and all he was asking was that I keep myself... safe.

I gave him the gentlest answer I could.

"Someone has to go arrange the ship."

He shook his head. "Even after that, you won't be coming with us, will you?"

I remained still.

He paused, swallowed. "What if the Protectorate doesn't come in force?"

Again, he wasn't wrong.

Almost never was, in my experience. The Protectorate's victories against the Endbringers were always close-run affairs, and they might not care to hazard their greatest champions unnecessarily. Worse, with no knowing how Jack caused the world to end... they might deliberately choose to keep the strongest capes away for fear of causing what they hoped to prevent.

An interesting dilemma, really. I couldn't say which course they'd choose. Couldn't even say which they should choose, at present.

I scanned the horizon. Small fires starting in three more places that I could see, beyond the two conflagrations already blazing.

At least this rain would be good for something: we wouldn't lose the city to the spreading fires, not accidentally.

I spoke absently, slowly, giving the only answer I knew.

"I will not let this stand. Not in my city."
He shook his head violently. "Taylor, this isn't like Coil. The *Triumvirate* gave up on fighting the Nine, ever since they lost Hero to the Siberian a decade ago."

I shrugged. "They were worried about what might happen in the next Endbringer fight if they took another casualty. They have other responsibilities. I... don't have that problem."

Softer.

"Or that excuse."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Taylor, if you fight them, you will die."

In the distance, above the PRT building, three flares rose into the sky, blazing white against the thunderheads.

I felt my hand form a fist, felt my knuckles strain against the skin as my cheeks drew back in a smile.

"Maybe. But I won't die alone."
Robin opened one eye and glanced out the window.

Or, at least, where the window had been: one of those tidal waves had shattered it a week ago.

Not a bad view, really, though they weren't high enough to get a really good one. From here, he could see mostly other buildings downtown, and the transition from the first seven or so stories — where the waves had come through — to those above was rather striking. Like one of those anatomy demonstrations, where half the body was normal, and half was missing its skin.

The sky was nice today too: some dramatic-looking thunderheads moving in.

He'd always liked storms.

That childhood fondness had been increased by a miserable summer in Oklahoma, followed by three soul-crushing years in Kansas, where thunderstorms had been among the few events of interest.

Kansas! Quite literally flatter than a pancake, and almost literally as far from seeing the world as it was possible to get.

Brockton Bay was better.

Somewhat better. The Northeast wasn't really a foreign country, no matter what his mother said, and there wasn't a way out of this job at all.

Well, feet first maybe.

But aside from that, no way.

At least it had gotten him out of Kansas, even if he now had to run even more.
He lifted his head from his arms and resumed, as closely as he could remember, the position he'd held a subjective eternity ago.

With a wince, he shifted his focus and the deep buzzing drone in the background accelerated until...

"... of the supplies. After which, we proceeded on the preplanned patrol route, diverting twice to perform civilian assistance..."

A kid who'd gotten lost in the refugee camp chaos, and an elderly lady who had needed help opening her water bottle.

Who knew disaster relief could get boring so quickly?

Leviathan hadn't been boring, but that wasn't what he wanted either.

S-rank threats were no joke, no fun, and very definitely no way to make a living. A boring life, with occasional moments of terror... if he'd wanted that, he could have stayed in, instead of putting in his papers on the condition of joining the Protectorate.

No, what he wanted was a quiet life somewhere interesting. He could have requested a permanent change of station, but that would have involved committing to another term of purgatory... if he'd even gotten it approved.

"... concludes my report."

Robin got halfway through a sigh and then tried to swallow it.

A twinkle in Miss Militia's eye let him know that he'd failed; Director Piggot's face wouldn't give away anything either way; and Dauntless probably wouldn't have noticed if he'd yawned outright.

"Thank you." The director shifted some papers around before her, and then looked up again.
"We're modifying the patrol schedule further: we have credible intelligence from the New York office that the Teeth will be making a play to re-establish themselves in this city. As of now, all 'presence' patrols will be performed by Wards."

Director Piggot's gaze tracked across each of the three Protectorate heroes at the meeting, lingering a moment on each.

"You will continue to escort incoming supply convoys, but otherwise will remain on alert standby here, with the potential exception of reconnaissance. Day or night, five minutes after we get so much as a sniff of their presence here, I want to be able to land on them like an avalanche."

"The Empire?" Miss Militia's voice was quiet, but it carried.

"At present, they're not causing property damage, not dealing, not doing anything but sparring with convoy escorts... and having Othala provide healing. An extended conflict is inadvisable, given the city's state, and we do not begin to have the forces necessary for a swift victory, not without reinforcements from other cities."

She frowned. The Director frowned a lot, and the creases on her face from it were deep indeed.

"Such reinforcements... will not be forthcoming, not while E88 is so quiet. We can at least expect to have New Wave with us against the Teeth: names and members may have changed, but the old enmity between the Brockton Bay Brigade and the Teeth has not been forgotten."

"What about Butcher?" Dauntless, again asking a question with a completely obvious answer.

"Nonlethal measures only, even when full force might be otherwise authorized. For obvious reasons."

Heroes had killed a Butcher before, only to inherit the power — and insanity — of all the previous Butchers.

It hadn't ended well.
"Very well: I'm going to close the meeting. Miss Militia, you have the shift now. In happier news, the next obligation we have involves welcoming three..."

The insistent beeping as everyone's phone went off meant no one got to hear the good news. Typical. Robin had his open and read before anyone else got theirs out.

"We've got a report of a big monster setting things on fire out west of the Scar."

All eyes turned to the Director.

"We do have a kill order on Lung. Prepare to sortie once Armsmaster is ready."

"I'm awake." The voice boomed from her speakerphone. "Move out. I'll catch you en route."

She frowned, but nodded.

Robin stood, pulling his mask over his head again.

These 'occasional' moments of terror were making boredom look better all the time.

---

The PRT transport they rode out in was basically a very big converted armored truck. It felt empty, without the PRT squad that normally accompanied them, but Piggot had concluded that even well-trained normals would not be... helpful in any contest against Lung.

Maybe if they ambushed him, caught him when his strength and toughness were merely superhuman... maybe then.
Frankly, Robin wasn't really sure why he was even along at all. Lung, once the fury was on him, got stronger the longer the fight went on. Got tougher.

Got bigger.

He'd gone toe-to-toe with Leviathan for hours once. Japan wasn't there any more, basically.

Common sense with the guy was to run as soon as the fight was even... because if it went much longer, you'd have an honest-to-god angry dragon on your hands.

Even so, looking around the back of the van, he could see heroes who might have what it took to be a dragonslayer tonight.

Miss Militia, in green camo with an American flag scarf and matching sash sat across from him, eyes closed and features calm. She was one of the original Wards, and had been doing this since he was in kindergarten. Her power let her manifest weapons, and on the street she generally went for rubber bullets, beanbag rounds, or hand to hand... but then he'd never personally seen her cut loose. He'd heard some stories, though, and according them she could bring anything short of a nuke to a fight.

Hell, maybe she could do that too — not like he'd know, one way or the other.

Hopefully he wouldn't find out today, either.

The truck jumped a curb, or maybe some debris, and Robin slowed time, picking his moment and riding out the jolt smoothly. Miss Militia swayed with the shock, not even bothering to open her eyes. Dauntless... Dauntless clattered to the to the floor of the van, force-fields flaring white to take the blow.

He got to his feet sheepishly, checking his equipment before settling back onto the bench. Dauntless dressed like some Hollywood idea of Achilles: crested helmet, armor, greaves, shield, spear and all. The big lug pushed a little more into his gear with every day that passed, got a little
stronger... permanently. In the long run, everyone said he could be somebody someday.

In the short run, he could teleport, stand on air, make forcefields, and that Arclance of his hit like Jove's own thunderbolt... assuming he could put it on target.

Not all that much upstairs, which is why they went on patrol together: he couldn't be trusted to think quickly. Or, arguably, at all.

Still, there'd been a lot more muscle-headed bros in Kansas, and at least this one meant well for everyone around him. A little like a big golden retriever puppy, even down to the messes he made unsupervised.

They didn't have windows but... he slowed down time again, listening closely.

There!

The distinctive thump-whock of Armsmaster's big bike, slowed down until human ears could hear it.

Why sound got dopplered when he sped up, and light didn't, was one of those things that still had the white coats spinning in circles, and it wasn't as if he could explain it to them anyway.

The boss — except when Piggot was the boss — of their little team was grim, uncompromising, and kind of an asshole, actually. On the other hand, the man had taken rearguard against Leviathan, singlehandedly holding the Endbringer in play while everyone else fled. He was a demanding jerk to work for, but you had to cut a man some slack after trying something suicidal like that.

Especially when he pulled it off.

More, he was one of the most powerful Tinkers in the world, and if Armsmaster didn't have something special in mind for Lung tonight, miniaturized and loaded into his halberd, Robin would... eat that very halberd.
Which left... him. Velocity.

And what he could do was slow time down, or maybe speed himself up. Fantastic, if you wanted to do your own slo-mo examination of something. Pretty darn good if you wanted to get around: Robin could pull off a fair imitation of teleportation, with the caveat that he actually had to run the distance himself and that got tiring, real quick.

Thing is, the faster he got? The less he could affect the rest of the world. Moving at any real speed he couldn't even lift a glass of water, let alone do much anyone would notice... though it did make it harder for anyone else to hit him too. Going from normal time into acceleration, he could take a little extra mass with him: that was how he'd gotten Triumph's torso back to the PRT building and Clockblocker's time-freeze before the kid bled out.

Not fast enough to keep him from the brain damage, though.

He frowned.

Point being, the hardest he could hit Lung was not that hard at all. He could pick his shots — slow things down, take his time — and sometimes unbalance people.

Tripping Lung and running away wasn't a strategy. That was the setup for a joke, and the punchline was 'and then he died in a fire.'

Well, there was always a use for recon.

Armsmaster's voice sounded through their comms. "We're coming up on the site. Velocity, you're on recon and recovery. Dauntless, you've got two passes: if you're doing damage, I'll tell you to keep it up. Otherwise, withdraw and join Miss Militia, providing mobility and defense for her as needed. Miss Militia, your choice of weapon?"

She pulled her scarf up as she spoke. "I'll try HEAT to open. If that's not enough, I'll go for concussion or joint shots with as big a rifle as we need. Either way, please keep him off me."

"I'll engage in melee. Keep the transport well clear until we call for pickup."
"Roger."

Robin sometimes wondered what the PRT troops thought of the capes they escorted, and if they were trained to be laconic or if that was just a natural response to spending your day in faceless armor acting as the backup to parahumans.

The transport was slowing.

Not long now, before they went four to one on Lung.

They'd tried this before, with more heroes, when Lung first came to Brockton Bay, and lost.

This time, they wouldn't be fighting to capture.

The transport was slow enough: Velocity opened the doors, slowed time until it all looked still, and hit the ground running.

Two blocks at what felt like a comfortable jog to him later, and he was coming up on the site, the courtyard between two office buildings. He'd been there before, passing through, and remembered it as being a nice place to have lunch: grass and trees off to the side, and tables on the concrete between.

Not as nice anymore.

Lung was there on a rampage as advertised. Maybe fifteen feet tall at the shoulder, fang-filled mouth opening four different ways constantly swaying on a neck that had to be a dozen feet on its own, scales, wings filling much of the office courtyard he was in... not good news, not by any stretch of the imagination, but that was the problem they'd come for.

The other giant monster, though... that was a surprise. Long, massive, low-slung, with far too many legs and eyes, a black carapace above which heat-waves shimmered, sprawling his bulk through smashed walls...

He took a timelessly long moment to look the scene over, and then spoke into his earbud. To
anyone listening directly, it would come out as a high-pitched squeal, but the earbuds could handle slowing it down and downshifting it until it would sound right.

"Armsmaster, we've got Lung fighting some other giant monster the size of a shipping container. He doesn't look like the last intelligence update, but I'm guessing... Crawler."

With that, he took cover behind a building, let time speed up, and waited for a reply.

"We engage." Armsmaster's voice didn't have an ounce of hesitation.

Piggot's voice broke in. "This is outside the mission parameters. Return to base: we'll be back with reinforcements."

"Director, every minute we delay, Lung gets stronger. Worse, Crawler gets stronger permanently. If we come back later, we'll need those reinforcements, and more. We're in the field, and I'm calling it: target Lung first, on my mark."

Velocity spat. And people wondered why he'd never wanted more responsibility.

Well, if all he could do was watch — and being assigned to recon was just a fancy way of saying 'watch' — at least there'd be a show tonight. He accelerated, taking the time to open doors and prop them open, on his way to one of the rooftops.

Having to slow down to open doors in a fight was a really bad idea. And, sure, he could fake wall-climbing if he had to... but it made his upper body hurt something awful.

That put him on the rooftop in time to catch Armsmaster's entrance to the fight, and Velocity sped up his perceptions so he could catch each moment of the fight.

He rode that big motorcycle of his into the courtyard, and when it stopped on a dime he kept going, launching himself in between the two villains, drawing his halberd in mid-air. He landed in the midst of the melee, rolling under Lung's attempt to claw him, and batting aside one of Crawler's flailing tentacles with his halberd, always closing toward Crawler.
Two more tentacles struck from opposite directions as Crawler opened its mouth to welcome him, and Armsmaster amputated them both, before polevauling up above the beast. It twisted around to catch him, ignoring Lung for a moment, and the hero reversed his polearm in mid-air, striking Crawler with its butt, before using his grappling hook to zip out of the way of Lung's firestorm.

"Mark. This won't keep Crawler out of it long, so make it count: target Lung, repeat, Lung." The earpiece sped things up for him, and the words were audible enough... though the effect was as if Armsmaster was pausing for ages between each word.

More interesting was the fact that Armsmaster thought Crawler would be out of it at all: he had a paralytic that could affect Crawler? And was probably worried about the villain's regeneration disrupting it if triggered.

Armsmaster had barely begun speaking when the whoosh of a rocket sounded, and Lung screamed as an explosion shattered scales and shredded wings. Another rocket was already headed down range when a flash of white fire marked Dauntless teleporting in on the other side of the dragon, and the rocket's explosion came hard on the heels of the blinding glare of the Arclance unleashed. Lung bellowed again, twisting to unleash a torrent of flames that broke on the plane of white light manifesting before Dauntless.

Armsmaster was already running back into the fight, his power armor letting him turn in a performance that would put an Olympic sprinter to shame, despite the weight of all that metal, and when he came, he went low, his grey-glowing halberd slicing through one of Lung's rear legs entirely.

Crawler simply stayed put, unmoving, while the fight continued. Hell of a show, though.

Lung twisted around to snap at Armsmaster, and Dauntless took the opportunity to strike again, the brightness of the Arclance forcing Robin to shade his eyes. Miss Militia simply put another rocket on target, despite the way Lung was twisting about, and Velocity could see ribs, and viscera behind them.

Oh, Lung was already regenerating, but he was hurt. One leg gone at about the knee, if that's still what you called those backward-bending things, parts of his chest cavity visible from here, trying to drag himself to cover against Miss Militia's almost continuous stream of rockets...

This might actually work.
Velocity slowed time further so he could do a jumping fist pump without missing any of the action, which is why he saw another parahuman entering the fight from above, floating in the air to his accelerated perception, hovering just a dozen feet above and behind Dauntless.

Mouth dry, he hit his earpiece.

"Siberian. I repeat, Siberian is on scene and jumping into the melee."

Dauntless teleported clear, taking up a position with Miss Militia on another roof. Right — two strikes and then out unless Armsmaster said otherwise. That simple-minded attention to his instructions might just have saved his life.

Say what you like about Armsmaster — and Robin certainly had, mostly behind his back — but the man had ice in his veins and balls that must drag the ground when he walked.

"Stay on Lung. I've got the Siberian."

Right. Hero had been his mentor, once.

Lung continued to drag himself to cover, the endless stream of rockets almost cutting his entire bottom half clear, though his rate of regeneration was rapid enough that Velocity could see it, even with the world slowed down this far.

But for the next half-minute, the real show was center stage in the courtyard, as the Siberian and Armsmaster danced.

She landed in a three-point stance with the force of a meteorite, leaving a smoking hole in the courtyard as he flipped clear in a one-handed handspring, somehow twirling his halberd so that it never interfered. He landed in ready position, the blade toward Siberian, the butt placed against the ground to receive a charge.

She rose, a startlingly beautiful woman — assuming you could ignore the murders and cannibalism — all the more striking for the black and white striping that was her only color, and her only clothing. A bare moment passed, and she charged, footsteps leaving craters as she launched herself toward the blade of the halberd.
He declined the engagement, and sidestepped gracefully to let her cannon into the wall behind him. She turned on a dime, not even losing speed as she lashed out. Armsmaster spun clear in another display of acrobatics that Velocity didn't think he could perform unarmored, or even properly explain. Ghosting back before her clawed fingers, he led her at a run across the courtyard once more as they traded strikes that hit only air, the vast insectoid bulk of Crawler providing an incongruous audience for their fight.

They crossed onto the grassy portion before the shattered glass doors, Armsmaster's heavy boots leaving deep prints in the mud while the Siberian leapt from blade to unbent blade.

They were weaving in and out of the trees now, and the Siberian's strikes sheared through wood as if it weren't there, leaving a trail of splinters and trunks open to the heartwood behind her. Armsmaster dodged around an apple tree and took that moment when the intervening mass blocked her sight to strike, the grey haze around his halberd cleaving through the tree without slowing. But when it struck the Siberian, the blade that had cut Lung, that had cut *Leviathan*... shattered.

Siberian sprang toward the hero, and he turned his attack into a stumbling rightward dive that passed just beneath her. She inverted herself, impossibly quickly, landing sideways and upside down on a branch of the toppling tree, and then launched herself at Armsmaster, arms spread wide to rend.

The tree kept on falling in an uninterrupted arc, white blossoms scattering in the air.

He was still on his knees, one hand on the ground, but he thrust the remains of his halberd out behind him with the other, butt first.

The Siberian ignored it, reaching past it to strike him... but when the butt of Armsmaster's mangled halberd struck her in the stomach she vanished.

Velocity had time as slow as he dared take it, and there was no transition. One moment there, the next gone.

There was a lot of cheering, almost deafening. After a moment, Robin realized that it was actually just him.

A flash to the right marked Dauntless repositioning Miss Militia to get an angle on Lung, and
Velocity stepped through his frozen moment until he too could see her target. The handful of seconds that the cover had bought left Lung with his torso halfway healed, and his missing leg was more of a missing foot now.

Armsmaster was up and, after a glance at the still quiescent Crawler, running for Lung once more, who was bulldozing his way through the building to create more cover.

He had nearly reached Lung when a white and black striped arm reached out of the ground and removed his left leg above the knee. Armsmaster went down in an uncontrolled tumble that ended with him up on one leg and arm as the Siberian erupted from the ground, spotless despite the blood and mud fountaining about her.

He lunged forward on that one leg, thrusting his weapon before him butt-first, but she simply stepped around the halberd and took one hand and the other arm off with precise sweeps of her clawed fingers, before delivering a kick to his torso that launched him across the courtyard and into a wall, cracking it with the impact.

She began walking to him, something slow and feral. A big cat, playing with its food.

"Retreat." How the hell was he still conscious?

"No contact with Lung. Retreat order received."

Miss Militia sounded much calmer than anyone had a right to be.

Dauntless... if Armsmaster couldn't crack the Siberian, no way Dauntless could, today. Maybe ten years from now.

Miss Militia... no. Maybe if she really could do nukes, maybe... but even then, that might just give you an even meaner Crawler.

Who, he noticed, was beginning to stir.

Well, it looked like they'd reached the 'running away' part of the evening. Always nice to be
He tapped his earpiece. "MM — can you give me three seconds with her out of arm's reach of the boss, and get away yourself?"

A subjective eternity elapsed before her reply reached him.

"Go."

He glanced over, and saw that she'd shifted from HEAT rockets to some kind of enormous recoilless rifle, and put a round right into the back of Siberian's head. The metal smeared itself across her hair, and then slid off like it'd been a ball of mud instead.

Crawler began to rumble toward Miss Militia's roof, going directly through the walls, and he feared for a moment that the Siberian would simply leave it to her teammate.

But the striped woman turned around for a moment, locking eyes with Miss Militia, and in that moment the hero fired again, her power letting her ignore reloading constraints or jams entirely by just reforming the weapon afresh.

Ten feet of distance, looking the other way... it would have to be enough.

He pushed time as hard as he could, until he could see the third round headed leisurely toward the Siberian, the way the villain's hand was already rising to meet it, and then he set off at a dead run.

Down the stairs and out the doors, round the edges of the fight and to where Armsmaster lay.

That was the easy part done. A quick glance to confirm that the Siberian was still facing Miss Militia, and then he hunkered down. Took his time to think.

One chance to get this right, or die trying.

Armsmaster wouldn't be light, even without his armor... but there was absolutely no way to get him...
out of it. Not that he *should*, there wasn't any visible bleeding from those amputations, and if that wasn't evidence the bastard had prepared for this contingency too, Robin didn't know what was.

Lifting him in it... not easy. And that would be a more mass than he'd tried this with before.

Well, hell.

There'd been a lot of stuff in basic that was pointless or empty, lots of attitude and nothing there. But some of it *was* real.

And he'd never left a man behind yet.

He wrapped his arms around Armsmaster, shuffling his feet until he could come up in a lift carrying him bridal style.

This would be the dangerous part.

He let time around him speed up, returning fully to the sixty-seconds-to-the-minute pace of the mundane world, braced his legs, and lifted.

As soon as he had Armsmaster's torso off the ground, secured for the moment despite the dangling limbs, he *accelerated*, pushing the time difference as hard as he could before risking a glance behind him.

Crawler was knocking down the building Miss Militia had been shooting from, bricks and beams floating frozen in the air, and he couldn't see her at all.

And the Siberian?

She was looking right at him.

Velocity turned his back on the fight behind him, and *ran*. 
The run to the PRT building took me nearly an hour.

I spent the time thinking about the problems I had. Brave words to Quinn were one thing; actually having a plan to deal with the Nine was another, and if they were easy to deal with... it would have been done decades ago.

Rain-slick miles rolled by under my feet, the rhythmic movement almost meditative.

There were some viable options. Mannequin could, perhaps, be entombed in concrete. That wouldn't kill him, or even really inconvenience him, but it might hold him long enough for a more permanent solution to be arranged. Bonesaw, Jack, and Shatterbird were — at least as far as I knew — just as fragile as I was.

That would be worth checking in advance, if possible: I still remembered how my bugs had failed to pull the pin on Bakuda's grenade. Not the kind of mistake I could count on walking away from twice.

I dug a little deeper as I came to a shortcut over to Lord street, shortening stride and almost jumping with each step as I took the muddy hill without slowing. The choppier movement made my face pull against the crusted mass of blood closing my right eye, but I pushed on.

But Crawler and the Siberian... nothing I could think of would stop them. I could entomb Crawler, probably. At which point he'd evolve burrowing, and then what? No, I'd need some massive instant-kill trick, or to cut off his power directly.

The good news was that we probably had a power-nullifier in town. The bad news was that Hatchet Face was a member of the Nine. Not one of the veterans, not yet, but the combination of strength, toughness, and the ability to shut off the power of anyone else nearby made him a formidable threat to almost anyone but a geared up tinker.

And the Siberian was some kind of unholy combination of unstoppable force and immovable object, capable of fighting the whole Triumvirate at once and winning. Maybe there was something I didn't know, something about how to hurt her... but if the PRT knew her Achilles' heel, they probably would have put her down already.
Echoing in time to my footsteps, I heard Krieg's voice, whispering in my memory: "If you have an enemy you cannot beat in a fight? Then do not fight him."

Still good advice. He'd hoped to entomb Lung in a fuel bunker, and then detonate it. Trying that with Crawler would just make him stronger; trying it with the Siberian wouldn't do anything at all. I could try to bring someone who could find them, preferably someone expendable... but the whole problem wasn't merely that I didn't have sufficient force to handle them, but I didn't even know if sufficient force existed.

Jack handled them, somehow, kept them from killing each other. Mostly. If I could figure out what he did... of course, there was no guarantee that he had any secret technique. Maybe all he did was point them at atrocities they wanted to commit anyway, a tactic of, at best, limited use to me. I could use it to set up an ambush... but first, I'd need to have an ambush that would do something useful.

An explosive crack-crack pulled me out of my wonderings. I shook my head, and kept my legs pumping in rhythm, the splashes echoing back after each step. No point getting ahead of myself, not when the PRT building was finally nearing.

They had experience, they had numbers, and they'd have a plan. That was the great truth of what I'd told Quinn: I wouldn't have to do this alone.

---

The duty guards before the PRT headquarters were a comforting sight: one of the few things about the city that hadn't changed. Spit-polished and statue still, canisters of containment foam at the ready, they stood as a living promise that — despite disaster piled upon catastrophe — the PRT remained.

Even their blank-faced helmets remained unscratched, and the PRT's windows for the higher floors remained intact, despite Shatterbird's performance. I knew that it had it be because they had used some plastic composite instead of glass, just as I did with the eyes of my own mask, but it made the building stand out all the more against the urban desolation.

I slowed to a walk as I approached, and they let me pass without challenge. The inside of the
building gave the lie to the promise of its unshattered windows: the computer at the receptionist's desk was clearly trashed, and there were still traces where blood had been hastily mopped up by the desk.

Even so, there was someone at the desk to smile and say that the meeting would be on the fifth floor, in the main conference room.

The elevator wasn't working. I turned to the stairs, and then started up, slowly. This day just kept getting longer.

I had made it to the third floor before I realized what else was wrong: no lights. Anywhere. I'd been doing long patrols at night, with the Wards, and was accustomed to navigating the city by my nightvision and the senses of my insects... but the open lobby had been lit only by the waxing moon.

The fifth floor conference room was as bright and airy as a room could be in a building without power: what had been floor-to-ceiling windows, before Leviathan came, now gave an unobstructed view onto the city. The rain clouds were parting now, letting shafts of moonlight through, and a light breeze played through the room.

Gathered in disparate corners of the room were most of the Protectorate, most of New Wave, and a group of Wards or would-be Wards, conducting soft conversations or sitting in silence. Lisa was the first to notice me.

"Tailor! Step out of that shadow and say hi." Her voice was warm, but there was worry in her eyes.

I made my way over to where she sat by a wall. Brian was behind her, leaning against the wall, and I gave them a quick once-over. It would be hard to say much about their new costumes without seeing them in the light, but it looked like Brian was in a darkened version of the PRT trooper armor that unfortunately hid his muscles, and Lisa was wearing what looked like a suit... with a fedora.

Further along the wall were Browbeat and a shirtless metal sculpture of a man with remarkable muscle definition. Not as dramatic as Browbeat's, who was in any case cheating, but very nice.

"Sorry I missed your swearing in ceremony." I nodded to Brian and Lisa, and waved at Browbeat.
Brian raised a hand in reply, and Browbeat jerked his head sideways.

Lisa tossed her head. "Oh, you didn't miss a thing. Little disruption, you know how it goes. They swore us in, but the formal event with the pictures and press releases will have to be... later." The pause before 'later' spoke volumes.

The statue turned to me and spoke. "And you must be Tailor. I've heard some about you, from the Wards of Brockton Bay old and new. I'm Weld — I transferred down from Boston and, by virtue of seniority, was put in charge of the Wards ENE." He offered his hand.

I nodded and took it. "Welcome to Brockton Bay."

He smiled — he had a nice smile — and spoke. "Your friends said you'd be in. Not a lot of rogues would answer the call for one S-rank, let alone two."

Friends? I'd never had many. Certainly not in school. But Lisa had helped me from the beginning when I needed it, and Gallant lived up to his name. Even before he stood with me against Leviathan, in a fight neither of us had any chance of affecting directly... but neither of us could afford to sit out. Perhaps they were friends, or could be with time.

I shrugged. "The sooner they're gone, the happier I'll be." I glanced around, noting Miss Militia leaning back in a chair near the head of the table, eyes closed and body relaxed, a straight sword balanced across her knees. Behind her Velocity fidgeted as I'd never seen anyone fidget before, like a bad stop-motion film.

"Are we waiting on Armsmaster?"

Weld's face stiffened, if that word was even applicable to a man of living metal.

"Armsmaster is down. He received multiple amputations in a fight against the Siberian, Crawler, and Lung. Miss Militia has command."

I blinked my left eye — the right was almost completely crusted shut behind the dried blood stretching from forehead nearly down to my chin. I wasn't sure which was more incredible: that he'd pick that fight, or that he'd survived it. Still, amputations wouldn't slow him down at all unless...
"Panacea?"

"Bonesaw hit the hospital just before Shatterbird sang. New Wave went in to extract Panacea, and returned with Vista. She's... the injuries from the glass are mostly superficial."

I shook my head. No Panacea, no computers, and nothing glass... well it didn't eliminate every medical tool, but it certainly limited the options available. "Will he survive?"

"We don't know. He ought to have died an hour back, but his armor is doing something, and since he's the only one who could explain what... One of Dragon's mechs came in hard and fast, picked him up, dropped off what she called a hacked-together comm tower, and left for Mass. General at maximum speed. That was maybe fifteen minutes ago, and Director Piggot's been on the phone ever since, asking for reinforcements."

Reinforcements sounded good around now. I glanced over at the ones who had already come, using my swarm rather than my head. The Pelham branch of New Wave formed a small circle around Flashbang, who was sitting on the floor with his head in his hands while Dauntless knelt beside him, speaking quietly; seven feet away, Glory Girl was whispering to Gallant about something, heads so close together I thought for a moment they were necking. Panacea was a friend, of sorts, and I'd have greeted her if she were here, I'd met Victoria once, and worked with Gallant a handful of times... but no one else in that group knew me at all, and this wasn't the time to socialize.

"Do you think I could make a call?"

Weld gestured toward the table. "Earbuds are at the end of the table; Dragon's running comms."

I walked there, took one, and slipped it on beneath my mask before heading back toward the stairwell for some privacy.

"Dragon? Could you get me a line to Faultline?"

"I think I could do that, yes. Stand by." Her voice, with that trace of a thick accent, had responded almost immediately. I wished she was here herself, in a powersuit with a dozen of her attack craft, but having the greatest living tinker running comms couldn't hurt.
"Actually, do you have files on the Slaughterhouse Nine that I could study?"

"You know, I do. There aren't any working screens in your vicinity, though, except the maintenance screen for the tower I put on the roof. And, technically, Gallant's HUD."

I started climbing the stairs again.

"I'm on my way."

I made my way up the stairs to the roof, stomach grumbling in protest, and then over to what had to be Dragon's tower: an eight foot spike that, although perfectly straight, managed to look sinuous all the same with how the attachments hung off of it. Near the base, maybe three feet off the ground, there was a flat panel that lit up as I approached, and I knelt to read with my working eye.

I skimmed the files, skipping past the endless recitation of death and violence, looking for powers, for strengths and weakness, for an opening, an advantage, something upon which I could build a plan.

Anything.

Jack Slash could use a knife to cut in his line of sight, as if the distance weren't there. A small power for the man who'd end the earth, or for the oldest living member of the Nine. Beyond that, the file was a long, long, list of atrocities and of hairbreadth escapes from the heroes. He did, apparently, like to talk, and enjoyed playing various mental games with his pursuers.

I could use that. I would have to: that was as close as I was going to get to finding a weakness in his file. Finding strengths was easier: apparently, he'd taken gunshots before and kept fighting — the consensus there was on Bonesaw doing upgrades, rather than some long-hidden Brute power — and that meant it I couldn't count on any of my prepared tricks without testing.

Somehow, I didn't think he'd stay still and let me test new ones.

The Siberian's files were actively discouraging. No one had ever harmed her that we knew of. She could bull through all known substances, force-fields, whatever. In the case that she found
something she couldn't, they thought, but weren't sure, that she could also teleport. Oh, and she
could extend her total invulnerability to things she touched at will, sometimes using that with
improvised weapons like jump ropes or helicopters and sometimes using that to protect other
members of the Nine.

I just shook my head and moved on. I wouldn't have tried a head-to-head confrontation with her
anyway: this just upgraded things to not trying such a fight near her either.

Mannequin was... pretty much as I'd known already from the stories. An ambush predator and
skilled tinker, dangerous in part for his power and in part for his brilliance: the ruins the Simurgh
had left of a good man.

Bonesaw was actually worse than the stories. She considered herself an artist, and her palette was
human flesh. Mostly, she went for some sort of irony, like the time she'd made lovers into Siamese
twins, but sometimes she was aiming for shock. She was thought to have given her teammates
additional toughness or redundant organs; she was known to be able to very nearly raise the dead.
No kill could be certain, if she had the body. She also could create plagues, or dinosaurs, or things
that never had lived. I started looking into what she'd tried before, found the six months she spent
doing homages to H.R. Giger, shook my head, and moved on.

Crawler would actively throw himself at any danger presented, trusting in his adaptive regeneration
to let him gain from the trade. Twice now, people had attempted overkill attacks and left a scorch-
mark for dead; twice now he'd regenerated from some forgotten fragment and come back stronger.
The other five times they'd tried for overkill hadn't even managed that much. His tactics were
predictably straightforward in a fight, but his abilities only grew with each injury, and that did let
him pull out surprises more often than I'd like to personally experience.

Dragon's voice interrupted my review of the horrors they'd committed. "I've been trying different
numbers associated with her, and I think she'll pick up this time around."

Another voice intruded, clear and commanding. "Faultline."

I stood, looking toward the shore where my employees hid, and then raising my gaze to the ocean
beyond.

"Faultline, you told me your door would be open." I thought about naming myself as Skitter, but
Dragon could well be listening on the line. It was a pretty threadbare secret anyway, if someone
looked closely, but well... plausible deniability. Maybe.
"Go on."

"I'd like to hire your team. One million dollars, to be on a ship ten miles off of Brockton Bay, and pick up a boat."

"Trying to smuggle someone out?"

"Just trying to evacuate some people. The Slaughterhouse Nine are in..."

She laughed. I stopped talking, surprised and a little angry.

"There's not enough money in the world. Not for me, not for my team, not for any team."

"I'm not asking you to come to town, just to stay over the horizon and pick up a boat when it comes." I kept my voice calm, and my words crisp, but the effort cost.

"No. I wish you luck, really I do, but I will not take my team anywhere near this. If you survive, maybe we'll talk again."

The call terminated. I thought about calling someone else, but... she was right. However safe I thought it should be, if Shatterbird decided to take in the sea air, she could probably sink the boat in minutes. Or maybe Mannequin would slither on board and reassemble himself, or... well, there were a lot of ways it could go wrong.

Chartering a boat directly would be even worse: those who'd take such a charter could be neatly divided into the ones who wouldn't follow through, the ones too stupid to know the risks (clearly too stupid to trust), and the ones who would demand some kind of parahuman protection... which put me right back at trying to hire mercenaries. There weren't all that many trustworthy mercenaries in the first place, and mostly they made a living not doing suicide runs.

I shook my head. No point dwelling on it, especially when my current backup plan — get rid of the Nine faster — wasn't looking great either. I'd just have to find another plan to get Quinn out.
And for that, I’d need more information. I turned back to the tower, this time squatting to read, and the screen lit up obediently.

Shatterbird had a tendency toward dramatic, infrequent, wide scale effects, and was mostly known for singing to announce the Nine’s arrival. She could be drawn into duels with foes she respected, and if she hadn’t won all of them she had walked, or rather flown, away each time. With those exceptions, she just wasn’t active enough for the PRT analysts to hypothesize.

Hatchet Face tended to pick a target and play with them, letting them run a bit before chasing them down. The combination of a power nullification aura and his own minor Brute rating made him hard to pin down or fight with capes, and getting enough normal firepower in place would be difficult in the best of times. Impossible, with the rest of the Nine active.

Burnscar... Burnscar had the most interesting file. She’d been resident in the Mercy Asylum for Parahumans for several years. I couldn’t begin to imagine another of the Nine being held that long, except by choice. I pulled up those records in more detail: the doctors believed her power messed with her emotions, sending her into an escalating cycle of impulsive destruction. But while she was confined, there were only minor incidents: some injuries, some property destruction, but they’d managed to keep her from ramping all the way up, mostly by punishing her with isolation, mostly from another inmate, Elle. Now better known as Labyrinth, and picked up by Faultline’s crew in the raid that had broken out Burnscar too.

I was guessing that they hadn’t meant to let the pyromaniac out. Either way... I glanced out over the downtown. Well, the Palanquin was definitely in the right place to be one of those fires. If so, they’d paid for it too, though not half so much as Burnscar’s victims had.

Cherish was the newest member of the Nine, and was thought to have some kind of emotional manipulation power. And... that’s it. Almost nothing to work with.

I stood up from the comm tower and put my hand to the chin of my mask while I thought.

Six veterans; three new recruits. It would probably be easiest to pick off the new ones — that was how fights with the Nine usually went — put up enough of a fight that they would leave to go recruiting. So, focusing on them... Hatchet Face’s aura: did it nullify powers in a radius, or did it nullify parahumans in a radius? If the former, maybe there would be some way to lure him into a trap that he triggered by nullifying the power holding it back; if the latter, maybe he could be handled from range. Perhaps if I...

Six stories below me, I felt Director Piggot reenter the conference room, and I scrambled for the
stairwell, taking half-flights of stairs at a jump.

By the time I made it back to the conference room, she'd already taken a position at the head of the table, glaring about the room.

"We hold this position, for now. We lost Armsmaster by going in without proper planning. From here on out, we won't give them easy targets, and — when possible — we will launch targeted strikes in overwhelming force. We have confirmed reports of Bonesaw, Siberian, Crawler, and Shatterbird. We must..."

"And Mannequin." I added.

She looked at me as if I were personally responsible for her day so far, and then continued with a scowl.

"... and Mannequin. We must assume that all nine are in the city. Although they are personally formidable, they have lasted this long by running in the face of superior force. This is what we must, together, provide."

It was a blunt speech, but a better plan than I had at the moment.

Flashbang was on his feet. "And Panacea?" His voice was hoarse. "You'd leave her in their hands?"

Piggot turned her frown on him. "Mr. Dallon. We, as of yet, have no information on your daughter's status. Nor will I support a policy of splitting up to search, not when that would merely play into their hands. That said, if you will not trust my good intentions, trust that I do understand that Panacea is a critical strategic asset."

Flashbang's hands were cupped, and for a moment the room strobed as balls of light flickered into being in his palms and then vanished, only to repeat the cycle. Finally, he sighed and let his empty hands hang loose, turning his face to the wall once more.

Lisa came up beside me. "Mannequin?"
I frowned. "He got one of the civilians before I knew he was there."

She had the same grin as before, but with the fedora pulled low to hide her eyes, the effect was different.

"And after?"

"We fought. He got away." I would have liked to say that he wouldn't do that again, but I had no good ideas about how to stop him. Dismemberment was, demonstrably, insufficient; unfortunately, I couldn't exactly say the same about myself.

"Got away?" She had a finger to her lips. "No, that doesn't fit. There's something else..."

Gallant raised his arm, turning to look out the open windows. "We've got incoming. A group. More than six, less than a dozen."

The room tensed, the various hushed conversations dying away. Dauntless drew his Arclance, lightning fountaining out from the haft; Miss Militia was on her feet, stance balanced and hands open; all across the the ruined conference room, we readied for battle.

With the chatter silenced and my attention refocused, I could hear noises in the distance too. I wasn't sure how far away they were — sound carried strangely in a silent city — but they were definitely coming closer.

I extended my senses to my swarm, reaching through it and scanning the area through their vision. Resolution was poor — not enough bugs there yet — but I could make out nine fuzzy silhouettes coming down the road.

"Slaughterhouse?" Velocity shook, but maybe that was his power.

Tattletale — no, she was Insight now — replied.

"Nope. Nazis."
The Empire drew themselves up on our side of the building, forming a loose half-circle behind Hookwolf's metal form. The silver light of the moon washed out colors, flattened details... but I could recognize most of them regardless.

The three-story giantess behind and to Hookwolf's left could only be Fenja, carrying her slain sister's spear, with her own sword and shield slung across her back. She, like Hookwolf, had gone into melee against Leviathan barely a week before. Their continued existence said more than I ever could about their toughness.

A harsher white light darted down from the sky, dropping into a hover ten feet above one side of the semicircle. Purity, a blaster very nearly as strong as Legend at straight-up destruction, though with only a fraction of his speed, toughness, and versatility. Had she rejoined the Empire, or was this just an alliance against the Nine?

Below and to Purity's left, Rune's cowled robe stirred briefly in a passing breeze, the dark blue soaking up Purity's light. She was a telekinetic of enormous power, but she had to physically touch something before she could manipulate it. The end result was that, in a fight, she tended to play 'catch' with dumpsters, tractor-trailers, hillsides, and so on, at least when she wasn't imitating an orrery by using them as orbiting ablative armor.

To Rune's right, Othala ducked her head, raising a hand to shield herself from the sudden glare. Her bodysuit wasn't the tomato red I remembered, but rather a soft black that only emphasized the white circle on her chest bearing her crimson runic symbol.

The far end of Purity's side of the half-circle was Crusader, armed with a spear and wearing what looked like medieval armor, but with none of his ghostly duplicates in evidence. Sandwiched between him and Othala, directly beneath Purity, was a new face: a young man, overweight, wearing a ski-mask beneath a hoodie.

He went directly to the top of the threat scale: there is no cape so dangerous as the one whose powers you do not know. Had he triggered in the chaos following Leviathan, and then turned to the capes providing order, providing healing, providing additional food to his part of town? To the Empire?

I should have acted sooner, rooted them out more completely. Somehow.
On the other hand, if they were throwing in against the Nine, I'd be glad for the help... and there was no way we'd *all* be walking away from this alive, so there was that comfort.

At the center of the semicircle, beside Fenja, stood Stormtiger. His white tiger mask reminded me momentarily of the Siberian and his torso was just as bare, but the scarred chest and chain-wrapped arms were very clearly masculine. The last time I'd seen him, Lung had baited him, taking what would have been a killing blow on almost anyone else in exchange for igniting one of the blonde's trademark claws of compressed air, amputating that arm. Othala did good work: I couldn't see any difference between his arms tonight.

To Fenja's other side stood Night and Fog, their distinctive black and white cloaks all but touching as they marked out one end of the half-circle. Fog could turn himself into a living cloud of acid. Night... what, precisely, she did was unclear, but her kill count was cause enough for caution and I'd personally seen her recover in seconds from something that would have killed any normal.

Hookwolf paced back and forth before them a moment, and then turned to us and reconfigured himself, rising up like a tower until he was nearly as tall as Fenja, his human torso protruding from a pillar-shaped mass of grinding spikes and hooks.

"Little piggy, little piggy, let me come in?" His voice boomed out, and the chorus of laughter from Stormtiger and Crusader was buried beneath Fenja's immense chuckle.

Director Piggot moved to the edge of the floor, squat and solid as the building from which she spoke, and looked down the twenty-odd feet separating her from the villain.

"Your idea of diplomacy leaves room for improvement." Her own voice carried, filling the street beyond.

"Oh, come on, Piggy, I was being *nice*. Did I mention all the hairs on your many chin-chins? Or that 'little' is a, uh, pretty big lie?"

"Do you have a point?" She hadn't raised her voice, and if there was contempt in her stance, well... she *was* literally looking down on him.

"The Slaughterhouse Nine came to town, and — the way I see it — you got six capes to my ten. Or their nine. Now, I don't much like them either, and I thought we might perhaps... work together. Only, I figured a show of good faith was in order first. I was thinking... Alabaster."
The Protectorate had swept up the albino cape back when Hookwolf had been fighting Krieg for leadership of the Empire. Engineering that civil war had been my first attempt at bringing E88 down, but I hadn't reckoned on Krieg's skill.

"You want him released."

"You don't? If you don't need the help, we can break him out. Right now, even. But I thought I'd be polite and ask first." His voice dropped to a growl at the end, and I felt the stirrings of real fear. I fought them down, but this was the last time to be fighting anyone outside the Nine.

Around me, the other heroes were also preparing. Miss Militia was holding a rifle now, Gallant was glancing back and forth rapidly, and one of Weld's fists looked like it was transitioning into a massive club.

Lady Photon stepped up beside the Director.

"Big words from a barely thinking brute. Are you still so bully-brave if the numbers are even?"

"Lady, did you take the hand off an Endbringer in single combat? No? Then shut it. Bitch."

Manpower joined her at the edge, looming over her by almost a foot.

"That's my wife you're talking about. Care to amend your statement?"

" 'Care to amend your statement' — could you be any more of a pussy right now? You don't want your wife being talked to like that, then keep your house in order so she doesn't deserve it." Hookwolf turned his head and spat.

Gallant stepped forward, perhaps to speak...

But Lisa was faster, already standing where she could look out over the edge, and as she opened her mouth, my sense of doom intensified. "Y'know, speaking of keeping your house in order... more
than a third of your capes are wondering, this instant, how to split off."

Hookwolf spun around, collapsing back into his usual vaguely-canid quadrupedal form, sweeping a massive foreleg around the half-circle. "Which of you bastards is..."

Director Piggot, simultaneously, grabbed Lisa, pulling her toward the edge. "You're trying to escalate this into a fight, aren't you? Never should have trusted you, you smug little bitch..."

I felt intense anger at this bureaucratic, bigoted little woman, going after one of the few who'd helped me when I'd needed it. Wasn't she just another bully? She'd covered for Sophia, and had she ever been made to answer for that? I started pulling in swarms, in preparation for what I wasn't yet sure.

Brian started toward them, and that was when Gallant shot him in the back, followed by launching quick blasts around the room. I hit the ground just before one of Flashbang's bouncing orbs would have hit me, and started crawling toward the staircase.

New rule: friends or not, be ready for a fight on no notice. I had bugs on me, and bugs in the area, but I did not begin to have enough bugs on hand to deal with two dozen capes, and the reserves I'd been gathering were almost all outside, against the chance that the Empire had come for a fight.

Whether or not that had been their intent, they seemed to have brought a fight with them. Outside, the villains were brawling indiscriminately among themselves, with the human-scale capes dodging Fenja's footsteps and Hookwolf's swipes. If they had factions, I wasn't clear on how they split: Stormtiger was trying to close on Crusader, dodging around his selectively solid ghostly doubles while Rune rained chunks of asphalt ripped from the street upon them both... right up to the point where a swipe from Hookwolf launched her across the street.

The situation was complicated by how Lady Photon and Laserdream were darting about to dodge Fenja's spear thrusts while launching lasers indiscriminately into the fray. Purity was staying low, and covering the capes near her, but she periodically loosed return blasts toward New Wave's fliers.

Inside, I wasn't quite sure what was going on. Skotos had covered the whole room in darkness, and while my insects could give me a sense of what was going on, I hadn't exactly carpeted the place the way I would have if I'd expected anything like this.
As best I could reconstruct it, the big fight was Weld, Gallant, and Glory Girl back to back, fighting against Dauntless, Velocity, and Manpower, with everyone flailing around blindly. Dauntless' Arclance had a fearsome range, and a chance blow catapulted a half-melted Weld out the window and into Fenja's back, before he fell to the street below; she retaliated with a spearblow that shook the whole building.

Dauntless' backswing struck Glory Girl, and she took that crackling blow without staggering before replying with a right hook that probably could have rocked Fenja... if it had hit anything. Gallant, more prudent or just less invulnerable than his girlfriend, dropped low and unleashed another series of blasts into the dark. He wasn't aiming in the right direction to catch anyone except Shielder, who'd picked a corner and forted up, his forcefield idly repelling every stray attack.

I couldn't really tell, not through the darkness, why Manpower just dropped — Gallant was facing in the complete wrong direction for it to have been him — and there wasn't anyone squared up on him, so I was guessing that one of Flashbang's bouncing balls had caught the largest target in the room.

Over toward the edge, Skotos had Piggot down, and was punching her in the ribs while Insight crab-walked away from the edge she'd so nearly gone over. In the still center of all this chaos, Miss Militia stood in some kind of martial arts stance, wielding what felt like a polearm of some kind.

Why had it gone so bad, so quickly? It didn't make any sense. But then, it didn't have to: this kind of internal fighting meant that we were doomed anyway: the Nine wouldn't have to beat us when we'd already beaten ourselves. I lay facedown on the floor of the stairwell, frustrated and despairing.

The same realization seemed to have reached the rest of the heroes, and I could see the way hands hung limp as Skotos let his darkness dissipate. Villains, too, as the brawl out on the street sputtered to a stop, leaving lots of new potholes, and what looked like a dozen half-completed statues rising from the asphalt.

Othala was kneeling by Crusader, who had a sucking chest wound, and though Rune was on her feet, she wasn't looking steady at all. Those looked to be the worst injuries: even Weld was getting to his feet — apparently, five story falls weren't much of a threat to whatever kind of metal he was.

How many seconds had that taken, to go from conversation to riot?

The near-silence was broken by a slow clap.
Another man walked into the pool of light cast by Purity. He was handsome, although leaner than I liked, with wavy hair, a smiling face, and a neatly trimmed Van Dyke.

"It's almost a shame to break this up, and I'm just as fond of a battle royale as anyone, but it's just wasteful at this stage in the game."


Purity and Lady Photon were considerably faster, each launching beams of what looked like light at him, their explosive impacts almost drowning out the crack of a rifle.

He was somehow already in motion, pirouetting, swaying, and stepping aside, and a second later there was an irregular crater where he'd once stood... and he was now standing just clear of it, a knife unfolding in his hand.

Not nearly enough of a threat to give any of us pause, not with twenty to one odds.

Nor had he intended it to. A white-and-black shape landed soundlessly before him, and the Siberian straightened from her crouch in a smoothly rippling motion, all sinuous grace and feral terror. That stopped everyone in their tracks.

"Ladies! I do like a little feistiness in a woman, and it warms my heart to see two mothers setting aside their differences but really..."

He flicked his hand, the knife refolding itself in a flashing display before vanishing again.

Laserdream put her hand to her cheek, and red welled out from between her fingers. Lady Photon darted in front of her daughter as the girl belatedly put up her forcefield. A second later, and Shielder's wall shimmered into existence where the conference room windows had been, providing some protection to most of us.

Not that it would stop the Siberian, or even slow her.
"... won't you please think of the children? I am, after all, only here to talk, though I can't really speak for my companion here."

He held up empty hands, and smiled. His pleasant tenor had never risen above a conversational tone, albeit one pitched to carry, and he spoke like someone trained to command a stage.

The way Quinn Calle spoke, actually.

Hookwolf was crouched to spring, and there wasn't a cape here who wasn't on edge... but with the Siberian right there? No matter what, the first to try for him would be the first to die for it. Assuming we could get past her, distract her... at best, we could injure Jack, force Bonesaw to treat him. Inconvenience him, in exchange for how many deaths?

"Well then. I do appreciate an attentive audience!" He clasped his hands before him. "We're not here in Brockton Bay to cause chaos, or at least not just to cause chaos. What with one thing and another, we are currently the Slaughterhouse Eight, and that just doesn't have the same ring at all, now does it? The sponsors have already contacted their nominees, and the tests have begun."

He shook his head. "So, until you're all invited, the rule is: a non-nominee helping a nominee dies." A finger to his lips. "Or goes to Bonesaw: the dear child has her art to think of." He snapped his fingers. "If you assemble enough capes that we cannot handle it in a civilized, personalized fashion..." He shrugged. "Well, we'll let you thin each other out, as you almost just did... only this time, there won't be a reprieve. It's not my style, personally, but there is a certain irony to it."

I wasn't going to start a fight, not with the Siberian so close... but maybe I could position insects on the both of them. I wasn't exactly sure how I'd use it yet, but it would be something. A tick for Jack, and a flea for the Siberian — I was pretty sure that if Armsmaster's halberd couldn't break her skin, a tick's jaws weren't going to do any better.

"Nominees can work together, but then their sponsors can too." He nodded. "There, that opens the game up — wouldn't want to bore any of you."

He spread his arms wide, gesturing at the assembled heroes and villains. "Fear not: there's still a chance for you to be nominated! The Siberian and I are here because we're neutral. We haven't found a candidate yet — or, at least, if she has, she hasn't said anything about it."

The Siberian twitched her head slightly, much as a cat might after something flicked its ear. She
was famous for never speaking — that was, in fact, the origin of the theory that she was a female sociopathic version of Scion — and she'd killed people for less than mocking her.

Jack's smile didn't even waver.

"Or, for the two of you nominees in the crowd tonight, picking up a second nomination lets you bypass the rest of your current sponsor's tests, and skip straight to the death tournament at the end — and you know we'll only bother with that if we need to bring the numbers down. Of course, to get that free pass, you'd have impress her. Or me. Odds are slim, folks... but I find people perform better with just a little hope, so there you have it!"

He was entirely too cheery for someone discussing a death tournament. On the other hand, that was the first time I'd seen a villain actually monologue, and he'd thoughtfully taken long enough for me to get a tick on him and embedded... at which point, it promptly died. Bonesaw's version of insecticide? Keeping the flea on the Siberian was all but impossible, like trying to balance on ice.

He waved one last time, and the Siberian grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and launched upward in the most astonishing leap I'd ever seen. If she couldn't fly, that wasn't far off: she looked bound for orbit.

I'd lost the flea as she leapt — no traction.

Well, at least it hadn't been a complete waste. I'd previously been planning to go for Bonesaw, and then around the Siberian somehow, but now? Whoever had incited that little riot would have to be dealt with first. Without coordination among the capes of Brockton Bay, this wasn't going to be a hard fight, it was going to be a horror movie compilation.

At least having clear priorities meant my next choice was easy, which made for a nice change.

I started down the stairs at the quickest pace I could manage: I needed to be out a side entrance and in place before the other capes here finished figuring out the obvious response.
Hookwolf hadn't left in a straight shot for Empire territory, but close enough. He was proceeding at a steady trot — and if you're a roughly canid shape assembled from pointy steel, ten feet high at the shoulder, a trot is still *fast* — when I made my move.

I pulled together a mass of bugs on the cross-street he was approaching, shaped them into something humanoid, and then spoke through the swarm clone's buzzing: "Fenrir."

It was a pretentious title for him to claim: credit for severing Leviathan's hand involved Flechette, Battery, and Armsmaster, at the very least, and Eidolon had done the other on his own... but then, Hookwolf wasn't shy about taking the spotlight.

He slowed, and stopped. "Skitter. Here to tell me how to hurt the Nine?" He growled it, but more warmly than when he spoke to the Director.

"Looking to help you hurt them."

The massive wolflike shape shook its head with a great screech of steel on steel.

"They're here recruiting, and..."

"...have promised to kill any non-nominee who helps a nominee. I know."

He laughed, the mass of metal within which he was embedded giving it an eerie, echoing sound. "Should have guessed you'd be lurking."

"It's why I approached you."

That gave him a moment's pause, and the steel wolf's head folded in on itself, his upper body emerging in its place, like some kind of hilariously misproportioned centaur.

"Who picked you?" His voice wasn't *quiet*, exactly, but closer to it than I'd ever heard him.
"Mannequin. You?"

"Shatterbird."

'I nodded. "A good trade. You might be able to keep Mannequin disassembled; I can meet her glass storms with my own swarms."

He rubbed his chin. "Worth a shot." He bared his teeth. "Besides, it's not like Mannequin can hurt me."

I made the swarm clone spread its arms. "Alliance, then." A real one, even: Hookwolf had been at the top of my to-do list, but that was before the Nine came to town. Weighed against them, he was definitely the lesser evil. Assuming I lived through this, I could get back to trying decapitate the Empire again soon enough.

He nodded. "For now. Can you keep up?"

'I shook my head. "Best to make a more permanent body, and ride."

At that, he guffawed. "Like a flea on a wolf?"

The swarm clone exploded outward, and I fed more bugs into the resulting cloud to mask the way I was really coming out of the alley, then covered myself entirely before walking out. The result, hopefully, looked like a bigger, denser swarm clone condensing out of the cloud... and nothing like the way my armor — Tailor's armor — normally looked.

"Something like."

He frowned a moment, and his 'tail' elongated, providing a platform for me, which then swept me up behind the reforming wolf's head. The 'hair' of the wolf was sharp and hard, but my silk was sufficiently tough to let me lie prone and grab hold without cutting myself.

He jounced back into a trot, and it was all I could do to keep hold.
"Where are we headed?"

His voice echoed back. "Krieg put something away for emergencies. This feel like one to you, or is it just me?"

I gave a buzzing laugh in reply and Fenrir surged beneath me, a steel wolf galloping down still and empty streets lit only by the sinking moon above.
Riding a giant steel wolf galloping through a post-apocalyptic city by moonlight was dramatic, and it was fast.

It was not, however, comfortable. Better than the trot, certainly, but still bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to using a bed of nails as a trampoline.

I was quite happy to reach our destination near where the Docks met the Boardwalk, and cautiously delighted that Hookwolf seemed convinced that I was just a mass of insects shaped like a person, rather than a mass of insects shaped around a person.

Less delightful was the way he chose to show it: by withdrawing all those hooks and knives and nails mid-step, transitioning with eye-twisting grace into a man walking up to the door of a building... and leaving me suddenly unsupported ten feet up, and still in forward motion.

I spread out the bugs on me into a looser cloud as I fell, arranging them for maximum obscurity in hopes of avoiding accidentally revealing my costumed self beneath. While I did that, I spun my own body around and dropped into a three point landing, which is how I found out why it is a favored dramatic stance for Alexandria packages: you need superhuman strength to pull it off.

Bruised and cradling my newly sprained wrist in my left hand, I followed Hookwolf into the remains of a small shopping center. Once, it had boasted a beautiful view of the bay, a quirk of geography giving it a commanding view over the several blocks separating it from the waterfront. There had been restaurants, and galleries, jewelry stores, boutique clothing stores... even a couple of offices. And a salon, once.

This was where Emma and I had gotten our ears pierced, half a lifetime ago.

I set aside those memories, once sweet, with an act of will. My bullies weren't here. Sophia was in juvie somewhere, probably glad she'd managed to miss what had to be the worst month in Brockton Bay's history. I didn't know what had happened to Emma or Madison, if they'd survived Leviathan's waves, but I wasn't going back to school anyway.

Their part in my story was done.
Hookwolf headed to the lower level, and then into a storefront. After sweeping a wall clear of debris with a lashing metal appendage that retreated as quickly as it had erupted, he moved to the corner and lifted a section of the floor, revealing a hole beneath into which he jumped.

I followed, taking the metal ladder instead, favoring my injured wrist. In the ruined shopping center there had been light, however faint, from the moon; beneath, there was only darkness. I spread out some of my swarm, feeling my way, trying to avoid letting my footsteps splash in the standing water.

Hookwolf had one hand on the wall, the other groping ahead.

"Need directions?" I buzzed.

"Couldn't hurt." A slight twitch in his shoulders was the only hint he'd been startled: his voice was as casual as ever.

"The tunnel goes about thirty more feet the way you're headed, sloping down, and then bends right. At that point, there's a door: looks like a bank safe door. Water gets deeper as you go, but not past about two feet."

He nodded. "That's where we're going."

He waded downward with determination, and I followed. The door itself had an old-fashioned combination lock, and proved to be over three feet thick when opened. Hookwolf was moving past it, following the splashing water when I buzzed "Wait."

He looked back — not that he could see me in this dark, or at least I hoped not — and snarled "What?"

"The air. Something's not right." The first few of my insects through the door were now on the ground, dying slowly.

Hookwolf rubbed his chin and nodded. "Right. Let it air out."
We retraced our steps up to the shopping center, where he took a sprawling seat in a corner, one leg up before him. I laid myself out on what had been a display table, putting my good hand beneath my head. A little hard for a mattress, and the assorted insects I had covering me weren't as comfortably warm as a bee blanket, but not too bad none the less.

For minutes, we waited there in silence.

Finally, he looked over and asked "What got you started in on the ABB?"

I thought about how my father died. Collateral damage from an attempt on my life.

"Lost someone."

He laughed, and I was furious. He raised both hands and showed his palms. "No need to buzz at me like that. I meant, they sure fucked up that call. You cost them Bakuda and Lee? And most of their unpowered lieutenants and muscle?"

He shook his head, still chuckling. "Clueless fucking slants."

I thought for a moment about trying to kill Hookwolf right now. He was on the list, and with good cause. A murderer, a drug dealer, a racist gang leader, a man who liked dogfights and pitfights and bloodsport in general. Odds were that there was still more and worse that I didn't know about. But, right now, despite all of that... he was useful against the Nine.

His time would come.

"I'd rather have him back."

He nodded at that, looking up at the sky through the broken ceiling. "Not in the cards."

I didn't have an answer to that, and we spent another few minutes watching the moon and stars play peekaboo behind passing patches of cloud.
This time, I broke the silence. "Still not enough."

He shook his head again, and I watched his blonde hair, worn long and greasy, whip across his face. "Never is. Revenge is all we've got for shit like that, and you did some sweet work with yours. Sent whoever it was a proper honor guard. Did 'em proud."

Was this his idea of comfort?

"Now, Lung's a bitch and a half to fight, but we've still got a few plans for how to take him down. Could invite you, if you want, next time we try one."

At that, I chuckled mirthlessly. "Planning to burn down a chunk of the city again?"

His laughter was cheerier. "You were there for that one? Sneaky little bastard, ain't you." Softer. "Don't know who you lost, but in that one fight... look, Victor and I had our issues, but he was one of ours. And Cricket... knew her for years, fought alongside her in the pits before we came up here and joined the Empire. Like a sister to me."

I'd thought Victor dead, but hadn't known for sure whether he had escaped the wave of burning fuel when Lung detonated their trap from the inside. I knew for a fact that Cricket hadn't: I'd left her handcuffed to a fencepost and unconscious after our fight, planning to call in a PRT pickup afterward.

At least she hadn't been awake to suffer.

"That wasn't the first time he took a white life, either. Lung owes a lot of deaths, and we will collect." His voice was firmer as he finished.

I knew it was a bad idea, but I couldn't help asking. "White life?"

"Second thing I learned in the pits: when the knives come out, only your own kind have your back. And not even them, if you don't do the same." He shrugged. "Let some nigger worry about the nigger lives Lung took; I got my hands full."
I was regretting raising the topic already.

"What was the first?"

"Eh?"

"The first thing you learned in the pits."

He stood up, stretching. "The only rule that matters in a fight is strength. You have it, you pick the rules. Those Slaughterhouse fuckers have us running around alone right now, playing their little game. And we take it, because we have to. For now. But I aim to find that master, and kill him, and then we'll see what the rules really are."

I ran along the chain of implications, considered the likely survival rates in a head on fight for both the Empire and the Nine, and found myself being completely honest when I said "That's a cause I can get behind."

He bared his teeth in a grin. "Think the vault's aired out by now?"

With a fragment of my attention, I checked. "I do."

Together, we descended once more into the darkness, wading through foul water to that thick iron door. This time, we stepped through.

Hookwolf fumbled for the switch and flipped it.

A crackling flash, and then a darkness all the bleaker for the giant purple spots dancing about.

There had been lightbulbs there once, but if Shatterbird's power could be obstructed by massed earth, there wasn't enough of it above us, and without a bulb enclosing them the filaments had simply burned up. I used my insects to trace the lines from the lights to a battery, and then fanned them out through the vault.
I found an armory in waiting. Guns, ammunition, grenades... enough for a small gang war, but not exactly the edge we needed against the Nine.

Once Hookwolf finished cursing his eyes, I told him as much.

"No. We have other stashes like that. Look harder."

I spread my insects more finely, re-examining what I'd seen. The shapes I'd taken for benches were wooden crates. I infiltrated them, felt the shapes within: RPGs, or possibly bazookas. I wasn't exactly clear on what distinguished them anyway.

More powerful; still not useful enough.

The vault was laid out in an orderly fashion, a repeating pattern of benches containing explosives, tables piled high with ammunition, and guns stacked against the walls. I examined every piece more closely, looking for differences.

Three benches down, I found it: one of those wooden crates, but none of the expected contents. I waded down to it and tried to open it. Nailed shut.

I reached behind me to my armor’s pack — a little harder to access, now, with the backpack as well — and pulled out the knife that old Pete Walker had insisted I buy, back when I got my taser and baton.

It did, in fact, work as a crowbar, although I was less than dextrous working with my left hand.

Inside there was a briefcase, made of something... odd. It looked like metal, and felt like leather.

"Is a steel briefcase what you're looking for?"

He shrugged. "How the hell should I know? Bring it up where I can get a look at it!"

I took it and followed his sloshing way back to the ladder, and laid the suitcase out on the display
table I'd used.

It was very tightly sealed, and stuck a moment when Hookwolf flicked the catches. Inside, I saw a stack of papers... and five steel canisters, carefully seated in foam shaped to hold them. On the cap of each a symbol I recognized from Newter's tattoo.

Hookwolf took them out, arranging them on the table; I glanced at the papers.

"There's not enough light here to read..."

"Don't need any." His voice was reverent. "I've heard of these. Didn't think I'd see one. Or five."

"What are they?"

"Superpowers. Drink one, and... poof."

I blinked my left eye and felt my right strain against the clotted blood in an effort to match it. "I didn't think it worked like that." I'd had the third worst day of my life and, as he put it, poof. No drinking involved.

He shook his head. "Not how it went for me neither."

Five more capes for the Empire. Now that was a contingency plan worthy of Krieg. Or... could existing capes get extra powers? I wasn't sure what was worse: the thought of Hookwolf playing discount Eidolon, or the thought of the Empire outnumbering any other faction by three to one, instead of two to one. I could — probably — nip this in the bud. Spill them, break them, something; I wasn't confident that I could take Hookwolf in a straight fight, but I doubted the canisters were as tough.

But with the Nine in town, should I?

Right now, fresh Empire capes were just more meat for the grinder. Was whatever was in those canisters really so dangerous? And if it was, wasn't that all the more reason to point it at the Nine and stand back? While I pondered which course to choose, the decision was taken from me.
The canister before me lifted, bobbing in the air, and then the other four did likewise.

Hookwolf stepped back from the table as I turned my attention outward.

"Krieg? You and your fucking sense of humor..." His voice was loud, but there was a smile in it.

That got my attention.

"Krieg's alive?" His telekinesis could do this, sure... but the last time I'd seen him was when I was disposing of those of his remains indigestible by insects.

They'd had a funeral.

I'd put nasturtiums on his cenotaph.

The canisters spun, and then flew single file out of the ruined shop and up the stairs. Hookwolf followed at a run; I paused to slam the briefcase shut and grab it with my one good hand. If Krieg were up there, then a) he was going to want me dead and b) I had no fucking idea what it would take to kill him.

If it wasn't Krieg...

My swarm gave me vision on the silhouette just as I felt Hookwolf come to a dead stop. A woman floated outside the shopping center's entrance, borne up by thousands of glass shards formed in the shape of a flowing garment that covered her almost completely. The moonlight lit her up with gentle sparkles, like a particularly murderous snowflake.

And if she was here... I cast my mind out wider, gathering larger swarms for combat while I searched for Mannequin, who had to be hiding somewhere, while I turned my body and moved for cover beneath the stair I'd just been bounding up. I hadn't yet tested my armor against one of her razor-storms, and I'd just as soon... not.
She was speaking. "...know these." One of the five canisters stopped orbiting her head, and dropped to float between her cupped hands.

I was really hoping that there was glass inside those canisters, and that she hadn't just been hiding the scope of her powers.

Hookwolf was calmer than I expected. "They're not yours."

She replied in clipped, aristocratically British tones. "No. Nor are they an interest of mine directly. I do owe their makers a debt of pain, for the poison that was supposed to claim my life. I think..."

A flick of her finger, and the canister before her joined the others in orbiting her head clockwise.

"I think I'll give them to Bonesaw."

Well. That put my little debate in perspective, and I was now perfectly certain what the worst possible outcome was.

A cloud of insects gathered in the sky behind Shatterbird. Hookwolf had to see it, but he didn't bat an eye: just kept talking.

"Winner keeps the prize?"

Shatterbird raised a finger to her lips, considering.

There!

Looking through their eyes, there he was... patches of that pearlescent white, hidden from my body's eyes by intervening walls, maneuvering around the insects I had in the area with disjointed jerks and inhuman precision... Mannequin.

"Hookwolf! Mannequin at your four o'clock!"
Even before I spoke, the swarm struck, engulfing Shatterbird. I went for the eyes, the nose, the mouth... she had fast reflexes, sealing her face into a glass helm — shards of glass fitted so finely I couldn't slip an insect between them — on next to no notice. I could still block her vision, and did so, covering every surface of that helm with chitin.

Meanwhile, the handful of bugs I had gotten in were free to try all the various paths to her lungs.

Hookwolf had taken my warning and reacted instantly, unfolding into his favored cross between a threshing machine and a wolf sized for Fenja, and pouncing on Mannequin's location as marked by a plume of insects above him. He'd caught Mannequin half-disassembled, and the tinker's pieces wriggled back and forth as Hookwolf batted at them, like a puppy playing with insects.

Shatterbird simply hovered there, still. I wasn't complaining: this gave me time to add to the swarm covering her, and begin looking for gaps in her armor. She wasn't idle, though: she used her glass shards to kill the bugs on her face, and even those inside her nose and mouth. Didn't — so far as I could tell — cut herself doing so, either: she had fine control to match her legendary range. She only used a handful of shards, which hopefully indicated a weakness somewhere, and if I'd been able to reinforce my vanguard, maybe... but against what she faced, she had enough.

Hadn't even lost her grip on those canisters, just kept them rotating like a halo.

That left her free to sweep storms of razor-edged shards of glass across the area. Even aiming blind, she was scouring the stone clean. I very carefully didn't lean out to look with my own eyes, and if she couldn't see to aim beyond the swarm clustering on top of her, the toll she took on it was astonishing. Thankfully, ground up bug guts blocked her eyesight just as well as living ones did... though they gave me fewer tactical options.

I turned my attention to the other fight. Hookwolf bore the occasional sweep of Shatterbird's storms with a hideous glass on steel screech, but otherwise ignored them. He'd managed to catch Mannequin's head in his jaws when there was a puff of gas, and Hookwolf recoiled, and starting swiping at the air around.

Mannequin didn't seem to mind that his head was still in the wolf's jaws. He reassembled the rest of his body and watched Hookwolf flail around blindly. At least, I hoped he was only blinded: Mannequin's gas could be anything from a hallucinogen to some kind of nerve agent. The steel jaws bore down ever more forcefully, until the 'head' squirted out like a watermelon seed, bouncing around inside the ruined shopping center. Mannequin did turn at that, moving to retrieve it.
From the other side of the fight, I felt a person approaching. Another of the Nine, come to spectate? I worked to concentrate enough bugs to get a better look, but that would take either time or diverting insects from my assault on Shatterbird, or from my forming attempts to deal with Mannequin while Hookwolf got his act together. Maybe it was foolish to think that they'd keep to the rules they'd made, but if they weren't... if that was the Siberian... then I was already dead. So I'd work on the assumption that this new arrival wasn't here to kill me: meanwhile, full speed ahead on the two that were.

I put bugs on the head, rolling it further away from the fight... but Mannequin could move in great flowing boneless strides when he wasn't trying for stealth, and that wouldn't buy much time. Shatterbird tried replacing her helm with a fresh one, which I matched with a fresh swarm.

Stalemate.

But only until Mannequin returned to the fight: Hookwolf might be able to ignore both of them and gallop blindly away to wash his eyes, but I didn't have that luxury. If either of them got in a clean shot on me...

If I survived this, maybe I'd move to Madagascar for a month. Waiting to import those Darwin's Bark spiders was clearly not working out for me. Maybe that was just grasping at straws: that armor might not be enough either.

While I lamented my lack of armor sufficient to shrug off forces capable of — as I observed that very moment — scouring concrete smooth, I simultaneously continued to play for time. Decoy balls of bugs didn't distract Mannequin: he could see through them, or maybe he had a tracker in his head. The fact that he hadn't simply emitted more gas to kill them suggested that he had a limited supply... or was trying to sucker me into committing more bugs.

Shatterbird had taken this opportunity to fix her eyesight. She'd pulled back outside my range (or at least what she thought my range was), and I'd let her trade out for a clean helm. I was not going to win a contest of range with someone who could blanket an entire city in broken glass, and the surprise might be useful later.

Assuming I made it to later.

Thankfully, she wasn't as perceptive as Mannequin, and was presently chasing a cloud of bugs that very definitely did not contain me. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she was chasing a succession of such clouds: bugs did not deal well with razor-storms. If she had ever dropped low enough to be within what she thought my range was, she might have been able to see
what was going on.

And while she was chasing shadows, I was gathering different bugs for another strike. Her helm had limits: it had to, to keep her breathing. It would take time, but if she just held off a little longer...

Unfortunately, Mannequin was now returning, head once again attached by magnets... or whatever tinker superscience he used to do that connected-without-a-physical-connection trick. And once he got here, I had no faith that he'd be deceived by this game of clones.

Hookwolf had turned himself into something like a very spiky hedgehog. If I was lucky, he was cleaning out his eyes out right now and would return to the fight shortly. Ideally, before Mannequin did.

I wasn't feeling lucky. I'd never been particularly superstitious, but this day was proving bad enough to get me starting to believe in that thing about Friday the thirteenth.

I could run... well, I could try running. Wasn't sure I could outrun Mannequin at all, and Shatterbird could fly. And I'd have to leave soon, abandon Hookwolf, if I wanted to have a chance of being outside of Mannequin's tracking range.

Might already be too late.

Or... or I could go back into that vault. Make them come at me through grenades and explosions and... no. Against Mannequin, maybe. Against Shatterbird... she'd just sweep glass shards through. Wouldn't even have to enter line of sight.

Ah. Hookwolf was reforming himself.

Time to see if round two went any better than round one.

Shatterbird wasn't releasing her helm, even though she was well above where I'd shown my range to be. Hadn't found any way in through the rest of her costume either. That just meant that I'd have to get creative somehow, and Mannequin had been kind enough to give me the idea.
Unfortunately, he was also smart enough to try and change the game. Instead of trying to pierce Hookwolf's metal shroud, he was simply trying to get around those crushing 'paws' and, while I couldn't be certain about his destination, it did seem likely that he was coming for me. Hookwolf had cut him off every time so far, but Mannequin was persistent. I took the risk, and was up and running through the ruins toward the farther set of stairs.

A minute earlier, and I would have worried about Shatterbird seeing me. But, at that moment, she had other concerns: I was enveloping her from behind with a cloud of bugs working in concert to bring up the scant dozens of bombardier beetles I'd been able to gather. This wouldn't leave much of my range hidden from her... but she probably wouldn't have fallen for the same trick twice anyway.

Either way, it worked the once I needed it to: they descended in a rush, painting her helm — and as much of the rest of her as I could manage — with a foaming, foul-smelling caustic. Any air getting in through there was going to carry that stench, and if she opened the helm to ventilate, I had other swarms coming in behind her to follow up and go for strangulation again. If she went for distance, I'd have time to get to fresh cover.

Either way, I was set.

She chose neither, exploding her helm to clear out my swarm and swooping down toward the shopping center, forming a lance as she went. My backup swarms were out of position, and she could fly a lot faster than they could. If her eyes had been clear, she'd probably have just skipped the lance and hit me with a razor-storm. Either that, or I'd earned a more personal death at her hands now.

On the other hand, I'd finally gotten a good look at that spectator, and if she changed her trajectory just a little...

I created a swarm clone, making it big and dark for her hopefully blurry vision, and she dove upon it, impaling that lance through it and at least four feet into the concrete, leaving her another ten feet above ground. She was fast enough to re-armor herself before many bugs got into her helm, too.

Focusing on the wrong threat is how people get killed.

A leaping figure blindsided her with a brutal smash that looked like nothing so much as a volleyball spike. She hit the ground hard, skipping across the floor until she came up against a wall.
Also, on fire.
A conference room sized to seat twelve around a table now held over twenty capes. Lars had seen worse ideas, starting with Kaiser's insistence that he be the one to personally kill Lung... but not all that many.

The last time he'd seen anywhere near this many capes in so tight a space, it had been the so-called North American Championship, and look at how that ended. Everything on fire, and Hook fleeing a murder charge. Bullshit, most of it: Hook had killed plenty of people, most of whom just needed killing, but definitely not that particular woman. He'd never complained about taking the heat for Lars' kill though — he was a friend like that. A friend out playing tag with the Nine, now. Lars' back itched at the thought, and so he found a wall and leaned against it, spreading himself through the air.

Jess took up a position before him, grounding her spear. She wouldn't be much use in a fight, not at her normal size and toughness, but he appreciated the gesture all the same. The view was nice, too: she kept in shape. Shame about Vanessa. Liz took up a similar stance, but even if she had anything worth watching, the cloak would have hidden it. Maybe in a few years... but for now, Jess — and her very fine legs — were scenery enough.

He took his eyes off her for a moment, checking the rest of his people. Hook had left him in charge, and Lars did not intend to let the man down. Teddy-boy was sitting with his cousin, the Stepford couple were in their own little world, and Justin was over outside the window with Kayden, who was still playing nightlight to keep her face hidden. At least that way, she kept it bright enough that he could see people's faces, mostly. The stark shadows she cast on the rest would have gotten the approval of an arena lighting manager.

Everyone fine for now. Everyone paired off, even... except for him. He got two. A pleasant daydream, not that he could afford to indulge it right now. Couldn't even start a fight to blow off some steam the other way.

The heroes were keeping to their side of the room, mingling and talking. Too damn many of them.

Hook had wanted to get Pete out of prison, and with Purity bringing her faction in from the cold, they'd had the numbers... but with New Wave on hand, and some extra Wards out of nowhere, they'd still be outnumbered by the heroes after Pete got up here. Numbers weren't everything... but it had been a long time since the Empire hadn't had the numbers in a fight.

Hook's instructions hadn't exactly been helpful either. "Don't fight them unless you have to. Don't
get anyone killed unless you have to.” What did that even mean? What if those two orders conflicted?

He didn't like thinking. Fighting, sure. Women, always. But Hook had trusted him with all of this, and if he fucked it up... accident, or not thinking, or just his temper, nothing deliberate... Hook would probably just forgive him. Again. He was a friend like that. And after all he owed the man, Lars would rather die first.

The bottle blonde with the extra weight went over to the walking statue. She'd really let herself go: he could see bone and wasted muscle beneath that would have done credit to a pitfighter, once. Even now, if she'd kept in shape, she could have been... interesting. Why would anyone do that to herself? And... now they were both leaving.

If this was going to turn into an ambush, that's *exactly* how it would go down. Get the normal out of the room with a bodyguard, run a distraction: everyone would be looking over to see if that was Alabaster coming out of the stairwell...

Wouldn't be the first time someone had tried just that trick.

Hook was undefeated in the ring, and about as unkillable as anyone Lars had ever known, a living storm of metal in any shape he chose, that same steel interwoven with his muscles even when he was walking around *looking* human. That strength and toughness made him a fan favorite, made him favored to win... made it really lucrative for him to take a dive.

That wasn't how Hook worked, and some of those shady figures took no for an answer... but plenty didn't. There had been one *hell* of a lot of attempts to fix a fight so Hook would lose, one way or another. Between him and Sam, they'd had Hook's back against poison and surprise, the same way he had theirs against brute force, and the same way they'd all stayed alive in the melee events.

Best team the circuit had ever seen, and well-ranked as individuals too.

A focused thought, and the air bore the sounds of the room down the hall to him.

"... tentatively identified as Cherish, Cherie Vasil. One of Heartbreaker's, with massive range and very precise emotional control. She's strong enough to force suicide, or make a parent kill their child: you saw what she did to us all as a warning."
"Yes, Ma'am."

"Did you experience any emotional disruption during the event?"

"No, Ma'am."

"You are permitted to refuse missions like the one I am about to ask of you."

"I know, Ma'am."

"You will not have any assistance available. Gallant cannot be spared, and we have no one else in the city whom she couldn't make her pawn. We will be launching a diversionary action to cover you, with E88's expected cooperation, but I do not know how many of the Slaughterhouse Nine we will be able to draw off to spectate."

Not a trap for the Empire, then, and something they were sure enough he'd like that they could expect his cooperation without even asking the question. This was going to be a pain. A straight up fight was one thing, but this...

Krieg would have loved this kind of plan-within-a-plan mess. Or maybe did love — the twisty nutcase had had contingencies for faking his own death, and everyone had cooperated to get the funeral done in a hurry after he vanished like that. If he had faked everything, he hadn't told anyone who was talking. If he hadn't faked it... well, he probably hadn't told anyone in that event either.

Personally, Lars was pretty sure he was dead. His family at risk from Leviathan? Krieg would have broken cover for that if there was any chance of reaching the fight in time.

"Any reinforcements coming in?"

"Not at this time. There's no one both immune to Cherish and..."

"Expendable."
Silence, for long enough that Lars checked that he hadn't accidentally released his whispering wind.

"Weld, you are permitted to refuse this assignment."

"I won't. As you said, there's no one else."

Going alone against the Slaughterhouse Nine... kid had brass balls. Maybe literally: the rest of him was metal, wasn't it?

"No. No there isn't. You have your earpiece, and should pick up a flare on the way out. The instant you can signal success, do so. They would not have bothered to deny us cooperation if they did not fear what we could do to them."

"I will, ma'am."

"Our sources believe she is currently located at St. Jude's. If their assessment changes, Dragon will update you. You will otherwise be cut off from comms, for your own safety and that of our sources."

"St. Jude's?"

"It's the hospital on the hill to the north and east of here."

"Right. Is there any other information I'll need?"

"She'll fill you in if there is."

Several seconds passed.

"Weld, you are hereby charged with executing the standing kill order on Cherie Vasil."
"Aye, ma'am."

The metal man passed the conference room interior windows on his way to the stairwell, and Lars took a moment away from admiring how Jess' legs went all the way up to watch him go and offer a lazy salute. The same gesture he gave whenever someone worthy was going into the ring, a touch of respect from one dead man walking to another.

Weld passed Pete in the corridor, and the albino's entrance to the conference room was met with celebration from the Empire's side of the room. The heroes were considerably less enthusiastic, and Lady Photon stepped out to join the director. Lars kept half an ear on them.

"... keep this many parahumans in one place for long, heroes and villains both, before a fight starts that will *level* this building."

"Mrs. Pelham, I have worked with parahumans before. We will need this kind of force to confront the Slaughterhouse Nine. In the meantime, I believe I have a solution to your concern, as well as..."

_Also_ not an ambush. He tuned it out to deal with Pete who had had worked his way through the handshakes, hugs, and backslapping, and approached with a bow.

"Are you the one whom I have to thank for my improved circumstances?"

Lars looked him up and down: same dandy-ish white suit, everything white right down to the shoes, except where the shadows cast by Purity's harsh light fell. White leather spats, even. Not a spot anywhere: resetting your physical condition every four or five seconds had advantages beyond ignoring wounds. Lars wasn't even sure if Pete ever had to shit.

"Fenrir made it happen," Lars grunted. "I'm just holding down his chair until he gets back."

He had to be more careful with the name, now that he was in charge — even if temporarily — and not slip up and use an older one. Changing names to sound fierce was old hat in the arena — that was how 'Larry' had become the harder-sounding 'Lars', a long time back now — and Hook had done his share of it too, probably more than Lars knew. The man had been Hookwolf before Fenrir, and just plain Hook when they'd first met. The whole animal theme for the three of them had been some promoter's way of hyping up their team for that match with those tinkers from Texas back when: super science versus animal fury or some such.
Animal fury had won, of course.

"Well, my gratitude for your intervention, then."

A corner of Lars' mouth turned up.

"Might hold your gratitude until you see how it turns out. They only let you out to fight the Slaughterhouse Nine, you know."

Pete smiled his creepy little thin-lipped smile in return. "When a man is immortal, he ceases to concern himself with such banalities."

Hook would have slapped him around a bit for talking like that — it wasn't like Pete would die from something like dismemberment anyway. Practically a game for the two of them. Lars had never seen the humor in it, himself, and just waved Pete away.

The director reentered the room with Lady Photon and took a position at the head of the table, opposite the Empire's side of the room, and gave an impressively shrill whistle. Lars could do better, of course, but then — he could cheat.

"Fifteen minutes ago, a group from the Teeth overran one of the roadblocks established by the State Police. An eight car convoy, carrying at least four parahumans, including Butcher, and at least a dozen unpowered gang members. No indication of any interaction with the Slaughterhouse Nine so far, and in fact no indication that the Teeth even know what they've gotten themselves into."

Jess, dependable calm Jess, actually laughed hard enough to interrupt, and the Director stared at her until she calmed down. Teddy-boy had a little smile, and so did Ophelia, but pretty much everyone else was looking as puzzled as he felt. The Schmidts just looked blank, but that was normal.

"Sorry." She let the chuckling die down. "The Nine wiped the Teeth from Brockton Bay the last time they came through: turns out hiring the Nine to kill your enemies is a bad idea. They didn't have a clue then, and they don't have one now."

"Right." The director's voice boomed through the room again. "The question I have for you is, is
the Empire interested in participating in a strike on the Teeth?"

Everyone turned to Lars, but the gaze he met was Director Piggot's. Flat, unblinking... whatever she'd been before the desk job, she'd seen fighting somewhere.

The Teeth were enemies of E88 from way before his time, the last two Brockton Bay gangs still active — even if the Teeth had fled the town in the aftermath of the Nine's purge. They'd bounced around, ending up in New York. Hook had been expecting them to make a move, and had wanted to stop them in their tracks anyway. Thinking about the orders he had... going along with this was the best way to prevent a fight with the heroes, and the best way to keep from losing anyone against them, the Nine, or even the Teeth.

Besides, he'd seen enough horror movies to know that splitting people up against the Nine was just asking for trouble.

He nodded to her, deliberately. "If you're volunteering to help us take out the trash... why not?"

She nodded back in turn, and if she wasn't smiling, she was... frowning slightly less. "A preliminary matter, before we turn to discussing strategies. You all know Gallant..." the young man in question raised an arm "... and you know that he can sense emotions, and affect them with his blasts. If he shoots you in a fight, it will be because he noticed that emotional master adjusting your emotions and is trying to counter her, and not a betrayal. Clear?"

Lars looked the armored boy over. That would be... useful. He still remembered coming out of a berserker haze and realizing he was trying to kill Hook. Worse, Hook was trying to kill him. Worst, Hook apparently thought half the Empire and all of the Pure had tried to betray him, and that... that he wouldn't forgive.

Hook was death on traitors. Literally.

He wasn't much for metaphors at any time, really.

Those had been a nervous few moments, before Jack showed up and took the blame for the mess.

Lars nodded. "Nobody touches him without answering to me." He looked around the room, catching the eye of each of his temporary subordinates. No one looked away, no one looked shifty.
He met Piggot's eyes once more. "We're clear."

"Now, the Butcher will be the most problematic of the Teeth to face... One moment." She raised a hand to her ear. Lars extended himself further, looking for the problem. Nothing he could hear, beyond footsteps in the stairwell, approaching at a walking pace. Smell... a man and a woman, recently bathed.

They stepped into the crowded conference room, dressed for an evening ball and masked for a carnival, the man in front and the woman in yellow a step behind.

Piggot's knuckles were visibly whitening.

The man rapped his cane on the floor. "I need to speak to whomever is in charge of this... situation."

Hook hadn't said a thing about any of the Boston mobs coming down here, but apparently they were making a play tonight too. Damn if this wasn't looking like the North American Championships all over again, and worse: this time, neither Hook nor Samantha were around to watch his back.

Lars shook his head.

When Hook had brought them up here, Kaiser had promised safety from the law, money, women, and fun. And he'd delivered, more and better than ever Lars had dreamt, and only asked that they fight under the banner of the Empire. Fighting? He'd have done that for free. Any of them would have: they'd all fought for glory, groupies, and free drinks before. The three of them talked about it, and agreed they'd be suckers not to take that deal.

Days like today, he knew who'd been suckered.
Enter Lung.

Arguably the strongest single cape in Brockton Bay, even accounting for the Nine. A mystery, in many ways: he had power enough to carve out a country in Africa; power enough to sit with the Triumvirate as an equal, had he gone hero; power enough to do... well... whatever he might desire. It was an abiding mystery that what he apparently desired was to run a pan-Asian gang in the low-rent area of a small northeastern city.

All the more so because there wasn't a pan-Asian ideology or cause, really. The Japanese refugees tended to hate the Chinese and vice versa, for reasons ranging from Kublai Khan's attempted invasion to Nanking to how the CUI handled Kyushu refugees. Heck, half the CUI refugees hated each other: the ones who fled Hong Kong and Macau ahead of the reconquest generally didn't get along with anyone from the rest of China, and the less said about the Taiwanese refugees and their grudges the better. And that didn't even begin to cover Southeast Asia, or the mess in Korea...

Still, one thing that everyone could agree on was that Lung was terrifying. That fear had been enough to keep the ABB in line right up until Bakuda got the bright idea of using cranial bombs to guarantee loyalty, set to explode on her death. If I'd known about those, about the other bombs she'd hidden around the city as insurance, I... might have killed her anyway. Maybe because she'd killed my father; maybe because I wanted to sweep the city clean of the gangs, rebuild it into the city Dad had wanted to see; maybe because letting her live would only have made the eventual toll worse.

I hadn't known then, and I could never know for sure what I would have done if I had known. I was pretty sure that mass-murder wasn't what Dad had wanted for me, though, and I wasn't sure that wiping out the ABB made things enough better to offset all those deaths, many of them innocent — the Empire had, after all, just expanded into the newly vacant territory, so it wasn't as if much had changed. Maybe arithmetically weighing up cost and benefit wasn't even the right way to think about problems like this.

I just didn't know.

At the bottom of it all, I did know that I simply couldn't stand to just do nothing... and I could kill villains. So I had.

I hadn't even taken the blame for the explosions: the rumor mill usually credited Lung with her death, simply because he was the sort of man who plausibly might have executed his entire gang
rather than suffer disrespect.

I wasn't sure if that was his true character. I didn't know him all that well, but I thought I knew more of him than most, by simple process of elimination. And from what I knew... he liked fighting. He liked being feared. He liked to enjoy the little things in life.

And he liked drama.

I'd seen him enter a fight the way he chose only once, and he'd made it needlessly dramatic. The way he'd dressed, shirtless with a longcoat; the positioning of the sun at his back; the early revelation of who he was, just so that he could send a wave of fleeing civilians to announce his presence... those things don't happen by accident. I'd later seen him crash a meeting of his foes called to discuss their efforts to kill him: he hadn't spoken a single word to them, just sat there and smiled. I could see where a little drama helped build rep, but anyone who can wrestle with an Endbringer for a day and a night doesn't need more rep.

Which meant this wasn't about need at all. Lung was powerful enough to do whatever he might desire, and he desired fear. He desired respect. And, as part of that, he desired to make his entrances memorable.

Knowing that, all I had had to do was set up Shatterbird near him, and he'd leapt at the chance.

Literally.

She was actually getting to her feet: that glass armor was considerably tougher than it looked. Then again, it wasn't really glass taking the blow — it was her will holding the glass in place, and she had will to spare. Actually... the joints weren’t moving right. That wasn’t her standing, that was her manipulating her armor to make her body stand, like a full body cast that she could control. Hurt, but not showing it. I could respect that.

More importantly, maybe I could use that.

She floated imperiously straight, addressing herself to the interloper with aristocratic disdain.

"Lung. You know that..."
He didn't bother talking; merely launched himself forward in a lunging tackle that turned the wall behind her to flaming rubble.

She was faster.

Forty feet up, canisters reforming into a halo, she tried again. "Lung. You know that this opens you to reprisals, to our cooperation with Crawler later, that..."

A firebolt launched upward as he stood, glanced off a hastily formed glass shield, and she drifted still higher in response.

"Why not now?" Lung's voice rumbled, but he still sounded mostly human. Scales were apparent, and flames flared up across his arms in no apparent pattern, but he wasn't yet the literal dragon he could become, given time and opponents enough.

Shatterbird glanced at Mannequin. Mannequin may have been glancing back, but who could tell? Hookwolf was switching between looking at Lung and looking at Mannequin. I was looking at all of them simultaneously, at the nearest exit with my body's eyes, and had my insects searching everywhere else I could imagine for good measure, in case Crawler shared Lung's sense of the dramatic and had been just waiting for a good straight line.

The good news was that none of the rest of us here were eager to play the undercard for a fight between 'escalates to no known limit' and 'gets permanently stronger the more you beat on him'. The bad news was that this was not a democracy. Or, if it was, it was of the apocryphal 'one man, one vote' kind, with Lung being the 'one man.'

A half-minute of silence stretched out, and then Mannequin turned, cascading himself over the precipice like a slinky, heading out to the Bay. Shatterbird flew higher, vanishing westward into the city. I had swarms tracking both of them, but without something forceful enough to hurt them... and of the two here who could hurt them, one was watching them flee with relief and the other with satisfaction. They might not have been fast enough to catch either, but they could have tried. Did no one else have their priorities straight?

Lung snorted twin jets of fire. "Cowards."

I wasn't sure that 'coward' was the right description for someone who didn't want to fight Lung, but
I didn't see any point in trying to correct him.

He turned to Hookwolf, then. "Are we fighting?"

The leader of the Empire had resumed his accustomed wolf shape... in case he had to run?

"No." Hookwolf's voice was steady.

Lung snorted again, but only smoke this time. In the absence of conflict, he was ramping down.

I shaped a swarm clone equidistant from each of them, but not directly between them, and kept my body moving toward the exit. Lung's senses got sharper as he got stronger, but I was hoping between all the loud buzzing and my quiet steps, he might miss me. Maybe he was here to help, and I'd have no need to flee... but we had history between us.

He was on my list, and I'd tried for him three times already. The first time, through sheer luck, I'd had five other capes help out: Armsmaster had taken Lung into custody at the end of that. The second time, I'd trapped him in Bakuda's workshop and set off some of her tinkertech explosives. Turns out that chain-detonation isn't like the movies. Or maybe he was just that tough.

The third time... well, the third time I'd set him up against the whole of the Empire. Maybe Kaiser could have pulled out a win against Lung, maybe not; personally, I'd been hoping for a mutual kill. Whatever might have happened if I hadn't been there aside, I had intervened in Lung's favor, disrupted the trap in which Kaiser had — briefly — confined Lung, and watched the dragon cut down the fleeing villains with fire and fang.

There would come a fourth time: I knew that. He knew it too. But in an open fight, without surprise and overwhelming force... not the way I wanted it to come.

"Strange pair." Lung's voice was an earthquake rumble.

"Yeah?" Hookwolf's voice echoed strangely through his metal form.

"You and her."
"Blame the Nine." I spoke through the swarm clone.

He tossed his head in what could have been agreement or disagreement and glanced over at the swarm clone, the outlines of scales fading beneath his tattooed chest.

"Are you going to try to kill me tonight?" This was the question I needed answered most, and I knew very well that 'tonight' was about as much of a truce as I could get.

"I will not kill you tonight." His voice was slower now, lazy. "Not you either." Spoken with a nod to Hookwolf. "My word is given."

Hookwolf wasn't shedding his steel entirely, and I didn't blame him. He did reveal his torso, speaking more directly.

"Then will you fight with us against the Nine?"

Another snort. "With her? No."

Hookwolf shook his head. "What, is this over Bakuda and Lee? Like I don't have grudges against you, or..."

"He wants to go his own way. Let him." Arguing with Lung didn't seem likely to end well: either you were going to lose the argument (in which case, why bother?), or you were going to win the argument (in which case, why risk rebuttal by dragon?).

Lung looked over at my swarm clone and his lips turned up just slightly.

"A poor choice." He whispered it.

"What?"
He turned back to the confused Hookwolf. "The Empire couldn't beat me before."

"Yeah? Did you drive off Leviathan while I hid?" Hookwolf was laughing.

At Lung.

I'd often thought that Hookwolf wasn't as smart as Krieg, and this certainly wasn't evidence against that. It did argue that he was remarkably brave, or possibly fearless... but then, I knew that already from his cheerful suicide run against Leviathan.

"Eidolon's victory, not yours. Thirty minutes more, and you'd have seen me as you have never seen me. Not even on that day when you, and all your 'Empire,' abandoned your Kaiser to his death for fear."

That was the longest speech I'd ever heard Lung give. Apparently, he didn't like being mocked any more than he liked being disrespected. Now, if I could ever find a situation when making him angrier would help, as opposed to make everything worse, that might be a useful fact.

Having delivered that line, he turned to leave southward: he liked his dramatic exits too.

He'd taken two steps when Hookwolf screwed everything up.

"I never fled, and you know it. You couldn't kill me either, that day, and you were a lot stronger then than you are right now. Do you really think we can't kill you tonight?" Hookwolf got colder when he was angry, and this was almost as calm as when I heard him accuse Krieg of perhaps betraying Kaiser.

I understood the desire to kill Lung, I understood why 'Fenrir' here would be offended by Lung's insults, and I could even understand the hope that a quick and devastating strike could actually kill Lung before he got too strong to fight. The threat, though... I could conceive of almost no situation in which threatening Lung would be helpful. Killing him, sure, but threatening him... why?

This wasn't going to end well. If the two of them fought... maybe, if I went for Lung with as much venom as I could manage, as quickly as I could manage, maybe... I started gathering insects with that in mind. The nose and throat would be good choices: he could burn the insects to ash, but that left ash in his airways. Also the eyes: similar reasoning.
Flames danced around Lung, flickering in and out in no discernible pattern but clothing him with inconstant fire as he stopped with his back still to Hookwolf.

"Gentlemen, please. This is not the time..." Neither of them were listening to me right now. Lung wasn't walking away, and Hookwolf wasn't letting him walk away. Which was nuts, for both of them. Even if they hated each other, didn't that just make it all the more reasonable to use one enemy against another? Did no one else understand these things?

"Now? When I have promised to kill neither?" His voice was soft, but it filled the sky.

"What, like you care about that shit?" Hookwolf's voice might be calm, but that grin he sported was more of a rictus.

Lung didn't turn around. He didn't even tense his shoulders. "Your friend tonight. You know that she killed Bakuda and Lee. You do not know that she killed Coil."

"That was New Wave, you lying motherfucker."

"The same way I killed Kaiser and Krieg killed Skidmark. She likes to pit her foes against each other."

Lung thought I'd arranged the Merchant ambush that had broken him out of Krieg's trap? I'd never even seen any of the Merchant capes before that night!

Wait, Lung thought New Wave were on my list? They were heroes! What did he think I was trying to do, manipulate literally every faction in Brockton Bay into fights with each other to decapitate them?

I hadn't manipulated New Wave into anything: I'd openly asked for their help! Carol had volunteered her team for the raid on Coil's base, and together we'd saved a young girl from slavery, rooted out corruption in the PRT, and freed Lisa's team to go straight. I guess New Wave had lost one of their cofounders under mysterious circumstances immediately after something I'd arranged... but I hadn’t planned that!
Hookwolf was quieter than I liked, and I particularly didn't like the glances he was shooting at my swarm-clone.

"I know you do not know she killed Krieg."

Fuck. There was no way Lung should know that. No way anyone should. Lisa knew, because that was her power, and Brian knew, because Lisa cannot keep her mouth shut to save her life... but neither of them would have talked about this to anyone else, let alone Lung.

That set Hookwolf back. He glanced over at my clone. "Is he lying?"

Before I could answer, Lung shook his head and spoke distinctly. "Not. My. Style."

A denial wouldn't help, and might only confirm things. An accusation wouldn't much help either. What would a me who hadn't done those things say?

"Tired of failing to kill me yourself, Lung?"

And... that wasn't going to do it, was it.

At some point in the future, when things were relatively calm, I was going to get a book on disputes, argument, and combat banter. Mostly, I thought talking during combat was a waste, except for occasional distractions, but right now I really wished I'd put some more thought into conversational contingencies. I'd hired Quinn Calle to deal with questions like that, and he didn't like being in situations like this: stuck between two gang leaders trying to decide whether to kill each other or me.

Understandable, really. But very inconvenient: I could have used him right about then.

Hookwolf wasn't even listening to me. He had his eyes closed, whispering. "You... you knew."

"Also, your Cricket." A distinct amusement colored Lung's tone as he caressed her name.
Hookwolf really was remarkably quick when he bothered to be, rearing up and slamming two legs larger than telephone poles down on my swarm clone. It dispersed in advance of his strike, letting his forelimbs pass through the cloud to make a pair of small craters coated in flattened bugs. I started the cloud northward, gathering in other bugs to it gradually, and periodically forming the shadow of a humanoid shape within. I also set a small swarm to buzz about his eyes, obstructing his vision — but not too much. He leapt north, knocking down a wall in passing, and swatted again at the cloud I'd summoned.

Lung had his eyes closed, a cat's smile on his face as he listened to the crashing noises marking Hookwolf's progress north.

After Hookwolf was two blocks off — swatting bugs with untiring fury — I formed another swarm clone by Lung.

He jerked his chin toward Hookwolf, then spoke. "Really?"

The clone shrugged. "I want the Empire gone too."

He coughed at that, bringing one fist up to his mouth — stifling a chuckle, I thought.

"Krieg and Cricket?" I was grateful for the near-monotone of the buzzing that made that inquiry sound less hysterical.

"No one claimed credit. Impossible to disprove."

"I thought you didn't lie, that it was... 'not your style.' "

At that, he smiled broadly, teeth showing. "Not when I could be caught. Besides... was I wrong?"

Not a question I wanted to answer, even if that was itself an answer of sorts.

"I will kill you." I wasn't sure if the buzzing really conveyed my tone, or how absolute a truth this was.
Oh, I'd committed myself to wiping out every gang in Brockton Bay, and to rebuilding it into the city my father had spent his life trying to make. And I would make that happen, or die in the attempt. But the ABB, and Lung, were *special*. He'd brought Bakuda here to serve him. She'd killed my father in the hope of pleasing him. He was the last of that gang left alive, now.

He smiled still, as Hookwolf vanished into the night. "Not tonight. And not with so weak a pawn."

I let the swarm clone by Lung disperse, and directed the one by Hookwolf through a grate and into the sewer system: let him chase that, if he could.

Lung waited a moment longer, then resumed his walk south with a relaxed, long-limbed stride.

Once he'd cleared my range, I left my hide and moved west. Hookwolf, a deaf man could hear coming, but even so... I had no desire to meet any of them again soon. Nor any desire to see what fighting the Empire was like when they were hunting me.

On the other hand, even a *disaster* like this wasn't without a silver lining. Shatterbird and Mannequin weren't trying to kill me — well, they probably still were, but not *right this second* — and that was a distinct improvement. Besides, I had an idea on one of my other problems.

I raised my right hand, wincing at my strained wrist, and tapped my comm.

Dragon answered, fresh and calm. Probably sitting in a comfy chair with a pot of coffee, or maybe tea. "I'm afraid you've been cut off from the wider network."

I sighed, putting one foot in front of the other and hefting the suitcase awkwardly. "The threat from the Nine? Non-nominees?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't seem to bother you." I could really use some tea. Or food. I really should have stocked up back the PRT headquarters before Jack laid down his ban.
"It's more dangerous for them." I supposed being the greatest living tinker, with a country-sized budget, gave her grounds for that kind of confidence. Or maybe it was just the fact that she was hundreds of miles away.

"Could you tell me what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, but no."

I nodded.

"What about an outside line? Faultline again."

"That... that I can do."

I covered most of a block in silence, thinking. I needed a new destination. No allies, not unless I could find out who else had been nominated, or until I could find a way to deal with that master.

Finding the master would be a challenge enough without being hunted all the time. Could I devise a trap that would hold Mannequin? Or find a way to breach his armor? Or should I just concentrate on evasion, and then dealing with a master who could control my emotions?

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice in my ear. "Faultline."

"We spoke earlier."

"And you just don't take no for an answer, do you?"

"New price."

"I told you then, there's not enough money..."
"Newter's tattoo, the symbol you asked me about."

That cut her off.

"You wouldn't come out here for money. Would you come in exchange for a suitcase with the all the documentation that goes with a delivery of those formulas?"

"You know who they are?" Her voice sped up as she spoke.

"Not my suitcase. At a guess, this shipment came through Gesellschaft, but I don't even know that for sure."

"The Empire's?"

"Krieg's, originally. Hookwolf was looking for a weapon against the Nine, and things got complicated."

There was a pause, and I let my footsteps beat out the seconds of delay, letting the silence grow. She had to feel the tension too — she had to!

"Do you have the formulas, too?" That wasn't a no. Just a little more...

"Shatterbird got away with them. I can't promise recovery."

"Shatter... I'm not even going to ask. You want us to provide an evacuation point off shore in exchange? How many people?"

"A handful so far, but if you're coming, I'll see whom I can add to the number... dozens at most? As many as I can send."

"Timing?"
"The sooner you get out here, the sooner you get the briefcase, the sooner you get gone."

"I can work with that. We'll be airborne in thirty, and on a ship in two hours even if we have to helicopter out... call it waiting offshore around dawn. You'll have your sealift, in trade for that briefcase."

I breathed out a sigh.

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me. And if this is a trick... Actually, I'm not sure I could do worse than put you in a city with the Slaughterhouse Nine, so never mind."

I laughed at that, and she joined me.

"And now, if we're going to be there on time, I need to move." She hung up.

I walked onward into the night, alone but for the moon and stars above, but smiling all the same.
I was walking exactly the wrong direction to get to where I needed to be next: at the docks with Quinn, handing him the briefcase that would buy his escape and that of my consultants. Unfortunately, every other direction had a decent chance of running into someone who would try to kill me on sight. This one did too, but at least it was lower... Shatterbird could fly, and had hopefully cleared the area long before I reached it.

Besides, of them all, she was the one I had the best chance of killing if it came to a fight. Her defense was apparently strong enough to deal with Lung at his weakest — which was more than I could say of my own — but even so, she was a glass cannon.

Pun not intended.

If she figured out which cloud of bugs was my body she could shred me; if I ever got more than a handful of bugs past her armor, I had a good chance of taking her down. Those weren't odds I'd take in a fight of choice, but there was no arguing that they were better than the ones I'd face going up against Lung, Hookwolf, or Mannequin.

It still left me moving in the wrong direction. Or, as long as I was avoiding Lung, Hookwolf, and the Nine, maybe I should spend the time getting other people to the evacuation point. Short of going to the main camps, I couldn't guarantee finding any real concentration of people, and if I tried that, I'd have to turn away a lot of people. I didn't begin to have enough boats to take those kinds of numbers out.

If I wasn't trying to evacuate the whole city — and I couldn't — whom did I need to get out? Whom did I owe? Whom did I even know?

I hadn't had friends from school for years, now, and family friends... maybe Kurt and Lacey? They'd been friends with my father, but I had no idea where they were now, no idea if they'd even survived Leviathan.

Lisa couldn't go since she was with the Wards, and I didn't think she had any family. Brian couldn't go either, for the same reason, and he wasn't exactly close to his parents anyway. Amy... her whole family was in the fight, and she wouldn't leave them, even assuming that she had any choice right now. She'd been missing ever since Bonesaw hit the hospital, and that was a whole series of nightmares waiting to happen.
Something else to put on the to-do list: find Panacea.

That left just trying to evacuate any people I found. Better than nothing, but a vexingly arbitrary solution.

Still, as I started southeast I was feeling relatively optimistic about salvaging *something* from this mess.

That lasted for a mile, until I felt a familiar tick enter my range, followed shortly by its twin.

Valefor and Eligos, of the Fallen.

Who, apparently, hadn't taken advantage of my generous invitation to leave, hadn't taken the hint from Shatterbird's glass-storm, and had instead decided to stay in my city. Well, I suppose I *had* given them until the upcoming dawn, and it might be considered unsporting to do anything about it early... but, after spending all of today running from the people who gave *nightmares* nightmares, it would be nice to deal with someone who wasn't so far out of my weight class that it wasn't funny.

I adjusted my course, turning onto Poplar to parallel them while I started planning out ambush points. If they kept heading east, I could take the stairs where Poplar Street dead-ended, and get ahead of them if they followed the road. If they were going to turn north, they'd be coming right to me. And if they were going to turn south, I could just follow them and take them from behind at an opportune moment.

I paused; they'd stopped for a moment. I was assembling swarms to put eyes on them, maybe get some close enough to hear, when the tick on Eligos began a rapid elliptical motion. He'd broken into a sprint... and in my direction. Valefor followed more slowly, but it looked like he'd picked up two thralls. Possibly more, but two with him right now.

Clearing the intersection before Eligos had line of sight was trivial — a brisk and silent walk sufficed, and I took up a position in a nearby alley instead. The fact that the traffic lights collapsed into fragments seconds after he *did* have line of sight, along with most of the facade of the building behind, was troubling.

I wasn't at all surprised that he wanted to kill me: he was a member of an organization whose charter called for the elimination or torment of all human life, in imitation of the Endbringers they
worshiped. I wasn't really sure why people signed on for that: maybe for the promise of a hedonistic spree without any guilt or restraint before the end, maybe just in the hope of being eaten last.

Besides, I had all but promised to kill him the next time we met.

Even the degree of force wasn't a major problem: it was night, clouds periodically obscured the stars, and a barrage was a perfectly reasonable way of addressing the difficulty in seeing his target. Besides — there's no such thing as overkill. Not when you're fighting a cape.

The fact that he had some idea of where I was, though... that was troubling. It was new, too: they hadn't had it the last time we’d met, or we'd have had this fight then.

Eligos wasn't moving, though, just standing two blocks away at the intersection, and turning to wait for Valefor. I moved more swarms toward him, and caught Valefor's shout: "Two blocks north, turn right, first alley on your left."

I already had my body moving, in that light sliding jog that was the fastest quiet movement I knew. Out of the alley, and then ambush him here? I could do that.

But there was a better way.

I turned east on Poplar again, moving quietly. The stairs were another hundred and fifty feet when I heard and felt Eligos' wind roar through the alley, if wind was the right word. It diced the dumpster and left a series of gouges, three inches deep, in the brickwork to either side.

He was turning around again, to get the next set of directions. If I'd wanted to taser him, this would have been the perfect time. Instead, I kicked into a run, letting my feet slap against the pavement. In the silent city, the noise carried like a gunshot.

His head snapped around, and he started sprinting towards me. I took the stairs at a run, dropping out of sight before he cleared the alleyway. He followed down the street. I raced down two flights. Three. He was faster than I was.

Good. Every step split them further.
I hopped over the railing, dropping the remaining ten feet onto concrete, while I formed a cloud of bugs with just the hint of a person almost a block away, on one of the grass strips (now mud) that fronted the sidewalks. He'd hear the sound of my footsteps on concrete stop — no way for me to fake that with bugs — but the conclusion he drew was something I could shape.

Halfway down, I realized that the briefcase might make a different and distinctive noise, forcing me into plan B. Left hand occupied with the briefcase, right wrist sprained from the last time I'd tried a three-point landing... this could hurt. I took it on my legs, sinking into a squat before rolling backward. For all the inconvenience of carrying the backpack around, and for all that I'd rather go back to just using the integral compartment in my spinal armor if I didn't need to carry so much, the sleeping bag in the backpack squished wonderfully. I even pulled the briefcase on top of me, keeping it from clattering.

This part would take careful timing.

As Eligos reached the top of the stairs, I ducked my decoy beyond the corner of a building. He clipped it with a wind blade, sending debris flying — very good accuracy for being on the run, actually — as he hit the stairs at a sprint... and, two steps later, hit one of the several ankle-height silk tripwires I'd strung across it.

I’d called Shatterbird a glass cannon, but at least she had her crystalline armor. Eligos, from what people knew about him, wasn’t any tougher than I was. He could cut with air, but not fly with it. At least, if he could, I thought he would have tried that rather than fall down the stairs the way he did.

He took two and a half flights to come to a complete stop, and when my swarms descended on him they found him completely unconscious. I rolled to my feet and checked Valefor’s position. Walking eastward, still the same two blocks south he’d been when Eligos started his pursuit. Lord Street would take him down this slope rather than dead-ending, and at that pace... I thought about how quickly I could gather swarms at different points, and picked my spot for an interception.

I gathered most of my swarms here to my person, and set off at a walk for our meeting. The swarm left on Eligos spun thick webs over his nose and mouth, rather than attempting to devour him from the inside out. I wouldn’t have a death-cultist running around my city trying to kill people, and he’d even refused my offer to let him keep his life if he left... but there was no reason for him to suffer as he died. This way, he’d simply never wake up.

While I walked, I thought. The only fast knockout I had on me was my taser, and I didn’t want to give Valefor line of sight if I could avoid it. Eligos could only have dismembered me; Valefor
could control me, if I were careless. At the same time, if I were slow, he might order his thralls to do something. I wasn’t terribly worried for myself, but he might order them to suicide... so I’d simply have to see he never had the chance. A noose from above? Some way to get insects in his mouth faster than he could speak?

Valefor reached the center of the intersection I’d chosen, and was looking about — proving, at the very least, that he couldn’t see through walls to the alley I had concealed myself within — while I pondered how to get to him without risking his thralls. Father and daughter? Hard to tell, with the moon behind a cloud: all I had to work with in the faint light was body-shape, and that meant I could only be sure which was Valefor by the tick he still bore from our last encounter.

Several blocks away, something disturbed the insects on a distant rooftop. A swirl of something, and then a new presence. Something... odd. Quadrupedal. Not human.

One of the Nine? Come to watch?

This would have to be quick, then.

I diverted a swarm to examine the newcomer, and sent the rest in at Valefor, fast and hard. He’d have a few seconds of warning, but unless he reacted instantly they’d be in his airways before he could speak. Hopefully, that would leave his hostages free...

As millions of insects descended on them, the girl dropped a small device from which some transparent gas billowed up, filling the area. My insects dropped, dying over slow seconds and littering the area with chitinous corpses.

The moon shone through a gap in the clouds, illuminating the golden curls and smiling face of Bonesaw. Greatest of the biotinkers, and someone who apparently had no difficulty whipping up a super-insecticide that didn’t, say, also kill the three people in its radius.

Tinkers.

To add insult to injury, the tick I’d had on Valefor died too. I was turning to leave — staying in the vicinity of one to three members of the Nine, plus Valefor, was a terrible idea, when Valefor spoke.
“Stay, or I have Bonesaw release a plague.” His high voice carried, and my feet stopped along with my heart.

Well, I’d been idly wondering what would be worse than having a bunch of murderous supervillains come to town intent on causing horror and death for fun, and now I had a good candidate: the same bunch of supervillains, brainwashed into causing the apocalypse. Bonesaw could easily recreate a smallpox/black death hybrid if she felt like it, but I thought — from what little I knew of her character — she’d probably find a zombie plague *funnier*. And she could do that too, or worse.

Since the girl was Bonesaw, the man was… probably Jack. That would be the worst case, and right now life wasn’t handing me any other kind of case.

If I’d missed my chance, if Jack Slash had already doomed the Earth by introducing Bonesaw to Valefor, I’d be somewhat furious.

No point in thinking like that. I’d assume that my actions still meant something, because otherwise I might as well give up…

And that was just *unacceptable*.

On the grave of my father, I’d sworn it.

We’d never spoken much truth to each other, not since Mom died, but that silent promise to him *was* the truth. *Would* be the truth.

I’d *make* it so.

Fine. Define the problem. Valefor is threatening apocalypse via epidemic. Options? Compel him to withdraw his orders, in case he had contingencies? Kill him too quickly for him to give the order to carry it out?

“She’s really a remarkably skilled Tinker, you know. I’d be perfectly safe, and so would she. But this city — *your* city, you called it — would die. Perhaps the Northeast too, I’m not really sure. Time enough to find out later, when *I* — herald of the Three — end the world. Only the chosen few shall survive… and I might be persuaded to offer you a place beneath me.”
From that speech, Valefor was probably not someone who’d considered or accepted his own death. Also, not someone who’d ever studied persuasive speaking: that was a terrible offer. Not that I was a great speaker either, but really. To be fair, he probably usually only had to persuade people to look into his eyes once.

Second option, then.


Silk would take time. Taser might disable, or might not: unacceptable risk. Melee, then. And that meant giving him line of sight. I could try to take him down from behind, quietly enough that he didn’t hear me coming… but he had been tracking me somehow. No guarantee he wouldn’t just turn around and hypnotize me, when he sensed me coming, however he was doing it.

He probably had a Bonesaw-built tracker of some kind. Tinkers. Mannequin was completely crazy, but in that moment I felt a warm understanding for his position on the matter.

This is why I needed to pick my fights. Letting them get the initiative was just a recipe for pain.

Looking into his eyes would give him control over me. He would almost certainly demand that I permit him to do that. Surprise by stealth was out… which left surprise by misdirection.

And in this case, that meant being able to look him in the eye and keep my mind my own. There was one obvious solution to that problem. Simple, even… but not easy.

I switched the briefcase to my right hand, suppressing an instinctive shiver. This was going to be tricky, but nothing I couldn’t manage… I raised my mask and pushed my thumb in to the corner of my left eye as if to rub sleep away. A firm gentle pressure, squishing, not too much lest the eyeball pop… a moment of piercing pain, and it popped right out, dangling down my cheek. Intact, too: score one for patience. I moved my hand over to my right eye, breaking the clotted blood with a thumbnail as I let insects swarm over my face to gnaw through the optic nerve of my left eye, and other bits of meat holding it attached. Then I turned them to spinning a spiderweb bandage within my empty eye-socket, filling up the volume until my eyelid no longer felt sunken.

Repeat that for the right side. The sharp pain was… worse for the anticipation. But it was necessary. Closing one’s eyes was thought to protect against Valefor, but it had failed before.
Maybe they’d blinked, maybe not… not the kind of chance could I afford to risk, with epidemics on the line. I would have needed to find Panacea soon anyway, and the ongoing pain afterward… was manageable.

I’d need some place to put the eyes… the briefcase. I set it down, popped it open, and laid each of them in one of the hollows where canisters had once rested.

“Come out, and slowly or… well, you know the rest.” He was practically sniggering.

No time to be upset over the mockery. I closed the briefcase and rose, pulling my mask down over the spiders still busily bandaging my eye-sockets with thick web. They hurt, with sort of strange aching emptiness that occasionally stabbed pain as I tried to look at something, but I’d deal with that later. Assuming there was a later, for me or for anyone. I stepped out of the alleyway, and turned to face him.

“Now… obey me. Don’t harm me. Bring that briefcase to me.”

I walked forward slowly, watching through the remnants of my swarm from the rooftops. I couldn’t be sure I’d have my swarm sense available in his vicinity — no way to know how long the insecticide lingered, or if Bonesaw would reapply it — and trying to navigate from a top-down view of myself was dizzyingly distancing, like controlling a character in a game.

“Hand it to me.”

The spiders I’d had bandaging my eyes were dying now, which was irritating — but did at least tell me that insecticide lingered.

What I wouldn’t give to have booby-trapped that briefcase — like a tinker. Was he just that confident? Then again, with Bonesaw standing right there, I wouldn’t be worried about injury either. That was a horrible thought: what if he left instructions to be revived?

Either way, we’d find out soon enough.

I raised the briefcase with my right hand, my left hand in the small of my back, reaching for the combat knife I’d bought so long ago. Neck? Or up through the solar plexus? The windpipe would stop him speaking; the heart and lungs would be a surer kill.
Bonesaw aside, of course.

He was fiddling with the catch on the brief case, I brought in a fly, settling it on his neck. It would have been satisfying, to let him open the briefcase, see the eyeballs, realize his mistake… but I wasn’t doing this for satisfying, I was doing this to be sure.

Besides, I wouldn’t have seen his expression through my rooftop swarm anyway.

The knife came out and around and into his neck, the fly marking my target — already beginning to spasm from the insecticide — making it as easy as touching my hand to my nose. He tried to speak, choked, and I took him to the ground, briefcase clattering to the side. If I could get to the brain fast enough, it wouldn’t matter if Bonesaw was trying to revive him.

There had to be limits on what a tinker could do.

He was still thrashing, but my armor shrugged off his flailing as I grasped his long hair with my right hand, ignoring the pain from my wrist, and jammed the knife through his temple. He was still moving, so I waggled it around, the way my mother had taught me to stir batter when we were baking a cake for Dad’s birthday.

He grew still after that, and I heaved myself to my feet. Neither the man — and, just from looking at the top of his head, I still couldn’t tell if he was Jack or not — nor Bonesaw had intervened. If I was very lucky, they’d sit there waiting for orders…

The man clapped, and when he spoke, I knew his voice. Had heard him speak not long before, delivering an ultimatum to the assembled capes of Brockton Bay. Jack Slash.

“And with a knife! I knew I’d like meeting you.”

I stood, wiping my knife on Valefor’s costume, assessing the odds. Two of them, at melee, where I couldn’t use my insects… not odds I liked at all. Which left running away — and Jack could cut what he could see — or trying to talk my way out of this. Here, I couldn’t even try to set them on each other! Not that that had been such a great success with Hookwolf and Lung, actually.
“Feeling grateful for being free of Valefor?”

It was worth a shot, but I had a sinking feeling…

He shook his head. “Never an issue.” He tapped his temple. “She set it up so we could disconnect our optic nerves with a thought.” He leaned forward slightly, tilting his head.

Dealing with people was hard enough when you could see their expressions! Maybe I could get a swarm down on ground level, outside the insecticide, at the right angle…

“But you… you found a different solution, didn’t you?”

“She gouged out her eyes!” Bonesaw sounded gleeful. She’d opened the briefcase, which had fallen near her.

I could see through the swarm I had on the rooftop, and was gathering others to try for a view which would let me catch their faces… but my attention had been on Jack. Without the usual network of bugs on most surfaces in my vicinity, I felt blind.

Also, I was blind.

I turned my head toward her, or tried. It was difficult to get the azimuth right, working from the angle of view I had. “Do you mind giving that back?”

“She could put them back in…” — “I could!” — “… you know. Wouldn’t take a minute. We do have a medical benefit package second to none.”

I thought about letting Bonesaw perform surgery on me, thought of that cheery smile above the bloodstained apron. Mom had liked Longfellow, and I could hear her voice now… there was a little girl, who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead… I shivered.

“Thanks, I’ll make my own arrangements.”
“Panacea? Please do give her our regards when you see her.” That same amusement, as if this was all a game to him.

Bonesaw marched up to me, holding the briefcase out at arm’s length with childish self-importance. I took it.

“Thanks.”

She stood before me a moment. Looking? Smiling? Frowning? I couldn’t tell.

“I think Panacea’s going to be a great big sister, but you might be fun too.”

“Thanks.” Not the kind of compliment I wanted, but I hadn’t yet figured how to kill them or even run away successfully, so… talking.

“Do you know where I can find her?” Worth a shot, at least.

“Oh, she wanted to go for a walk.” Bonesaw was relentlessly cheerful.

“And you let her?” I tried to hide my surprise.

“She had fulfilled Bonesaw’s first task, so why not?” Jack’s voice was smooth. Charming. Reassuring.

This did not reassure me at all. Fight, or buy time?

“Mannequin wasn’t exactly clear about my task.”

“Oh, he likes willful mutilation. You might have passed with this. Often he wants more, particularly if someone is… reluctant.”
He would want me to cut off my right arm or something, then. Fantastic. Well, I’d been planning to kill him anyway, but it was nice to know that there wasn’t an easy way to make him go away.

“Of course, that’s no longer an issue for you.”

“Yes?”

“Well, you’ve got a second sponsor now.”

I didn’t see the Siberian anywhere around here, so…

“I impressed you there?”

“No. Well, some, but really? I’d been looking for you since before we came here. Love your work over the last month.”

I wanted to throw up. I’d brought them here? This was my fault?

“We all looked — Cherish most of all — but we just couldn’t find someone running the city from the shadows. I thought perhaps you were at work somewhere else, the way Burnscar’s friend had left the city, but then… the gentleman here came along.” He waved an arm at Valefor.

“Most eager self-nominee I’ve seen in a while, and obsessed with finding this shadowy master that had warned him to leave ‘his city’. Your pardon, of course: Valefor was unclear as to your gender. Unclear as to everything, in fact, but the fact that he’d seen some insects in a park last night.”

This was my punishment for not killing them both last night, wasn’t it? Lisa was a dear friend, and maybe she was right about some things… but if I were ever going to kill them, I should have just gotten it done right off.

“So we played along — he might have had what it took, and besides… you should have seen the look on his face when we didn’t help him.” Jack chuckled then, and Bonesaw’s laugh belled
descant above it, high and free and filled with the kind of innocence that had never known what
evil was, or that it was any different from good.

“Which makes you a member, now — probationary until everything else settles out, of course, but
I doubt we’ll have more successful candidates than slots and need to run a death tournament this
time.”

“Slots? Plural?” I’d been assuming they were only down one, because we’d seen eight of them.
Had the heroes put one down? Had one of the other candidates? I could use some good news right
now.

“This looks like Crawler’s retirement party. He’s hard enough to sneak along with us as it is, and
after he gets the fight with Lung he’s been hoping for…” Jack spread his arms.

Emphatically not good news, then. One more thing to put on the list, high up: ‘stop Crawler’. Just
below ‘walk away from this conversation alive,’ and ‘figure out how the hell to stop Crawler’,
actually. Dead even with ‘stop Jack from ending the Earth’, given that a daily Endbringer-level
attack from Crawler might be the world-ending problem I needed to prevent.

“I’m rooting for you and Panacea. You can do it!” Great. Just… great.

Wait, there was another implication there.

“You can retire from the Nine?”

“Only after long service. Or in death.” That swarm was nearly in position, but without I could only
hear Jack’s smile in his voice. “That said, it does happen. Harbinger retired.”

Only one serious question left, and I’d like to be ready to go down fighting before I asked it. So… I
kept him talking just that bit longer.

“To do what?”

Right hand over to the taser. Incapacitate Jack, even if briefly, and then… run? Try to kill him? Go
for Bonesaw? I had no good options here, and it would just be a matter of picking the least bad one.

“You know, I’m still not sure what he’s doing. Something abstract, probably: he always was more of a thinker than I. Something… worldshaking.”

The parade of horrors was starting to numb me. I had no idea what one of the Nine considered ‘worldshaking’, but I knew enough to know I didn’t want to find out. Put that on the list too: ‘stop retired member of the Nine from ending the world’. Near the bottom, below everything that was already in my city and needed fixing right now.

If I lived. Last question, the important one.

“And if I say no?”

He laughed. “Oh, you have time to make up your mind. There are other candidates and — who knows? Maybe we will need that death tournament after all. Besides, if you say no then…”

He turned to Bonesaw, who put a finger and thumb to her mouth and whistled. A swirling puff of gray, and something appeared beside her. A… woman? On all fours, fingers now metal claws, face lengthened and reshaped, stitches and staples everywhere.

“Meet Murder Rat.”

Three to one odds. And a teleporter. This day was not getting any better.

“Jaa-aack!”

He bowed to her elaborately as she stomped a tiny foot, arms crossed and curls bouncing.

“This is my Murder Rat! I made her out of Mouse Protector and Ravager, kind of a mash-up. Kept both their powers, too!” Softer. “Mostly.” Again, with joy. “I’d show you Hatchet Face too, but he can’t teleport.”
A metal arm, long and thin and spidery, unfolded from her backpack and held a piece of glass before her.

“Annd… he’s apparently losing a fight right now. Jack!”

He laughed. “We’ll go look in on him then.”

He reached out and ruffled her golden locks before turning back to me.

“Well. Let me put it this way: death is no barrier to membership. I’m sure once you think it over, you’ll come to the right answer.”

My swarm was finally in position to make out faces. Jack was smirking. Bonesaw had her eyes closed, smiling up at Jack while he rested his hand on her head.

They turned to leave, and I let them. I’d made a mistake in letting Valefor live; and they’d made a mistake right here. I would kill them.

Jack paused, and turned around, grinning. “You’re an interesting one. I look forward to knowing you better.”

I gave no answer, and after a pause, he turned again and kept walking.

I stood in my personal darkness and pondered my proper reply.
The moment when the radio blew out in a shower of sparks had been the last straw.

Whatever that other transmission had been that overrode the baseball game he'd been listening to, before the explosion, it wasn't the prelude to anything *good*. He wasn’t enough of a fan of opera to recognize the piece, but his rusty German was enough to recognize words like 'hell', 'vengeance', and 'pain.'

Tensions in the camp had been running high anyway: the good feelings that came from surviving Leviathan had lasted a few days before reality set in. There wasn't enough food, and no one liked eating plain boiled rice and nutrient bars anyway, just as no one liked living cramped in with so many other people, especially when some were sick.

People were unhappy and looking to place blame. And some of them were not too choosy about where they put it, either.

Dan Nomura and Frank Danvers had half-killed each other last night. He understood why Frank was angry: both his kids had been out at Studio on a double date when Bakuda did her thing — one was dead, and the other would never see again. And Dan *had* been over the line when he suggested that Frank take his family and go see Othala like the Nazi he was sounding like, instead of talking trash in front of Kimiko... but it wasn't as if Dan had ever been in the ABB. He'd just been wearing the wrong sweatshirt when he made it to a shelter ahead of one of Leviathan's waves.

He'd wanted to go to Stanford, that's all, and the green tree on the red background only looked like ABB colors if you didn't know any better.

Peter had known them both for years. Frank he'd known most of their lives, all the way back from competing on rival teams in high school, through when they were out at Ramstein AFB together, to coming back home to raise their families; Dan from when his parents had needed some help getting settled a decade back, and the church group had put something together to welcome them to town with the other refugees.

A week ago, and he'd have said he *knew* them both still.

Now, Dan was in the medical tent with a cracked skull, still unconscious; Frank was being held in an improvised stockade for attempted murder while they figured out if his own stomach wound
would go septic; and the BBPD sergeant riding herd on the camp spent the morning talking about how they'd caught an associate of E88 — which was plumb crazy. Crazy because talk like that just made people more nervous, and likely to start more trouble in camp; crazy because it might lead Hoo kwolf to think about a raid to free his 'associate'; and crazy because Frank had never had anything to do with E88 in his life.

The whole city had gone crazy lately, and he wasn't sure that he knew it anymore, either.

So Peter stepped outside his tent, shrugged his windbreaker tight around himself, and took a walk.

The folks from FEMA meant well, but they'd never really understood what a 'secure perimeter' was, and a chain-link fence without lights, guards, dogs, and a cleared kill-zone just didn't qualify. There was a bit of the fence that didn't quite reach the ground, leaving a hole through which people could slip out for a bit of privacy, and sometimes smugglers would come in to trade cigarettes for food or favors. He hadn't needed to use it himself until now, but it wasn't exactly a secret: five minutes of searching and he'd found the gap.

Belly-crawling wasn't something he'd done since Basic, but it wasn't something you forgot either: six feet of muddy wriggling, and he was on the other side, standing up a little stiffly, but outside the fence. The rain clouds blocked the moon and stars, but he'd lived in Brockton Bay for more than fifty years of his life, man and boy, and he could have found his way blindfolded.

Peter picked a direction as close to a straight shot as the streets permitted and started walking at an easy pace: much more and his knees might act up. There was no point in borrowing that — or any other — kind of trouble: there was always trouble enough to go round anyway, and that was true now more than ever.

Maybe he should have taken his son up on his offer, and moved down to Florida to live with them. Ten years ago, Beth hadn't wanted to leave her parents... and now she and they were gone.

Three years now.

He'd told John a week ago, the last time he'd been asked the question, that he didn't feel right leaving the city where Beth and Jessica had lived, and John had asked him if the dead mattered more than the living.

There'd been angry words, the last time they'd spoken. It hadn't seemed like anything at the time,
but now that's what his memory kept coming back to. Not the kind of note you wanted to end things on.

The rain slicked his remaining hair down, and trickled down the back of his neck, but the chill ran all the way down his spine.

The windows were smashed in, and in some ways the darkness was a blessing. He'd put decades of his life into that store, and seeing it a soggy shambles would be heartbreaking. Still, whatever came next, he'd need equipment... and this was the best place to get it. The door was gone, and he stepped through the dark hole that had replaced it.

Almost no light inside, but... he turned to the left, shuffling his feet carefully to avoid tripping. Lots of debris on the floor. A tense moment passing aisle four, when his foot caught on some fishing line that had probably been swirled round the store by a wave, but soon enough his groping fingers felt the checkout counter. Mounted to the floor with steel bolts, and solid enough to serve as the backstop to a range, Peter had been pretty confident it would still be where he'd left it.

It was still nice to know for sure. He rounded the counter, feeling his way, and then reached under where the register had been. There, still bolted securely to the counter. He spun one of the dials, feeling the numbers etched on it until they read as his wedding anniversary, and popped the case open silently. He'd oiled those hinges once a week for years, and it showed.

Peter pulled out the pistol within, and the magazines, stowing them in his pockets. There were plenty of other guns in the store, but this was the one he'd trained with as a young man, the one he'd practiced with, and it was the one he'd take on his longer walk.

Probably completely unnecessary, but it was like umbrellas and rain: you only ever really needed one if you didn't have one.

Next up would be food, water, and a backpack, and from there he'd have a choice. Settle down here and wait for sanity to return, or strike out for his son's. A day of open country walking, two at most, should see him clear of the roadblocks, and from there the money in the safe would see him through to Florida.
He was halfway to the back room when he noticed a faint glow coming from under the door. Chem-lights, by the greenish tint. Looters?

He edged toward the door, hand wrapped firmly around the grip of his M1911. Under other circumstances, he'd just walk away... but that's where the food was, and the water, and the safe.

He reached out his left hand to the door, suppressing a shiver as the shadows flickered at the edge of his vision. One quick shove and he had the door open, clearing the angles and blind spots.

Nothing.

Oh, his desk was there — covered in papers he didn't recognize, scattered around an unfamiliar silver briefcase — and a half dozen chem-lights were scattered around the room, but no one visible. There were several rows of shelving, leaning at angles against each other to form a tangled mess where someone could be hiding, and a door that gave out onto the alley... but he was close enough that he would have heard that open.

Well, if they were hiding in here somewhere, they'd have heard him enter already. "I don't want any trouble. I just want to get some of my things from my store, and if you need things... we can talk."

Silence. Long enough to make him feel a little foolish at speaking to the air.

Peter put his gun back in his pocket — there'd be a holster somewhere in that mess — and turned to the papers spread out on the desk.

"Mr. Walker?"

He spun round, hand diving for his coat pocket. No silhouette in the door to the store proper, and that voice...

"Taylor?"
"You remembered my name?"

Definitely her voice. He didn't get so many customers like her — a good kid, paying for self-defense tools with wads of cash — that he would have forgotten her not a month later. Besides...

"Girl, I knew your parents. Not well, but enough to say hello to. And you were a customer of mine, so you get to call me Pete."

He took his hand out of his windbreaker's pocket and she stepped out into view, bypassing the debris with unerring grace, bringing her face into the green glow. There were open cuts on her cheek and brow, and she was squinting — the chem-lights must have been blinding after the almost complete darkness inside the store proper.

"Come on in. I was just going to get some food and equipment for myself, but I can certainly spare a few minutes to share a meal and see you outfitted."

She stepped in, and he could see that she was wearing some kind of home-made camouflage outfit, along with a black hiking backpack.

"Give me a moment and I'll clear out the desk, so we can use it as a table..."

"I'll get it. It's my mess, anyway."

She squeezed past him, and started reassembling the papers. Peter shrugged and turned to the shelving. He had various kinds of survival food here — dehydrated, freeze-dried, some of the canned ones that actually *would* last years — but if you couldn't count on having a camp stove to boil water, there was one choice that stood out. He made for the corner they *ought* to be in, and after some rooting about came back with two packets wrapped in tough metallic plastic.

She had the papers off the desk already, and gave a long look into the briefcase before snapping it closed as he approached.

"I can't promise much for taste, but right now hot and filling sounds fantastic to me. What do you think?"
That got a ghost of a smile out of her. He'd never had a daughter, but Peter had raised a son and half-raised a granddaughter, and it didn't even take a month of doing that to know that there was something special about getting a hot meal in someone tired, hungry, and wet.

"Mind grabbing something for us to sit on?"

She nodded and headed back toward the shelving, while he shoved the desk out, rotating it until its narrow edge was to the wall to make room on each side, cracked and shook a couple more chem-lights to serve as candles, and then busied himself with the packets. They were supposed to be peelable, but almost never were.

Taylor was back already with two storage buckets deep enough to use as seats once upturned.

"Trouble getting them open?"

"Going to need something sharp."

She produced the knife he'd insisted she take with the rest of her order, and he used it to open the MRE packaging, spilling an assortment of smaller packages onto the desk. Peter's eyes tightened as he noted a few spots on the blade, but he opened the second package without pausing.

"Tonight's menu is... your choice of beef stew and spaghetti with meat sauce, with mashed potatoes or applesauce on the side, and lemonade or tea to drink."

There were a lot of reasons a girl her age might have a cut on her face and blood on her knife, with the city the way it was.

None of them good.

"I'd recommend the applesauce, personally, but the others are all pretty much equally bad, unless you add enough hot sauce you can't tell anymore." He kept his voice light.

"I'll take the beef and potatoes if you'll give me the tea." She made everything sound so serious.
"Done deal. All we need now is water, and I had a couple of flats right here, but..."

"The more intact one is over there, about three feet in." She pointed at the tangle of shelving.

He glanced over, and darned if she wasn't right. Good eyes. He reached in through a rip in the plastic sheeting, fishing out bottles and handing them over to her until there were a round dozen stacked on the desk.

"Now we just..." he took one entree packet out of their boxes, poured a little water into one heater pouch, slid the beef stew packet in alongside the heating elements, folded the pouch top down and slid it into the entree box, all without burning his fingers. "... wait a couple of minutes." He leaned the box against the wall and repeated the process with the spaghetti, while she mixed the drink packets into bottled water for the both of them.

He sat down on one side of the desk, and she took the seat opposite him.

He bowed his head for a moment, steepling his hands and saying a quick grace, and looked up to find her watching him through the tangle of her hair.

"Not much for religion?"

She shook her head.

"Me neither." But Beth had cared, and keeping the little rituals that she'd insisted on... he should have gone first. That had always been the expectation.

Rather than think on that any longer, he opened the cracker packet and the jelly spread that came with it, loading a couple of crackers. There wasn't really anything else 'ready' to eat yet, anyway.

"Here."

She took it, eating with small bites, and then started in on her crackers, returning the favor.
He took a bite of what she'd passed him: jalapeno cheese. Not bad, though that might be the hunger talking.

"Life looks better when you're not hungry."

"My father used to say that too."

"A good man in a bad position, ever since the Boat Graveyard. I was sorry to hear about his death."

She didn't respond, and he cursed his insensitivity. A change of topic...

"Seems like the whole city's gone crazy lately."

"Oh?"

He found himself telling her about Frank, who he'd known for going on sixty years, who'd been a neighbor for fifteen, and how his two daughters had been in the wrong nightclub when Bakuda lost it. About Dan, who'd had his first job in this very store when he turned fourteen, saving his money to make sure his sister could go to Immaculata, so she'd have it better than he had. About how they were both lying between life and death right now, and over nothing.

She listened impassively. "I think I knew Dan, or knew of him. Was he a senior at Winslow?"

"That's the one." He shook his head. "I was born in the Bay, and always thought I'd die here... but I just don't know this city any more."

She hunched over slightly and he winced — way to go there, making things even more depressing. He extracted his entree packet, slipping the side dish into the pouch and leaning the box back against the wall. Taylor distractedly copied him, working with a deftness that belied the way she was staring out into the darkness.

He tore his pouch open, and started probing around with his spoon.
"What do you do if you've done something you can't fix?" Her voice was clear and quiet.

"I'm guessing you don't want to talk about the details?"

"No."

Peter thought about it while chewing some of the spaghetti and meat sauce. Something she felt guilty about? Her father? Whatever the story was behind the spots on that knife, and that cut on her cheek?

He took a stab at it. "Nothing wrong with self defense. Even in the commandments, it's really thou shalt not murder." Theology wasn't his strength, but that was the kind of distinction that the military was very clear on: Frank had lost his C.O. appeal over accepting that very argument, and if he'd never had to fight, they'd still spent a couple of years together in a logistics unit waiting for the Soviet tank divisions to roll through the Fulda Gap.

She remained still, head downcast, hair over her eyes.

Wrong guess, then.

He took a swig of his lemonade mix to buy time to think, and winced. Sour.

"Do better next time? Do what you can anyway?" Floundering platitudes, even if they were true.

"Besides, it's not like you have to fix everything alone. There are plenty of other people trying to make the world better, and for the biggest problems, we've got heroes sized to suit! Haven't seen much of Miss Militia or Dauntless lately, but I'm sure they're working on something important. They did some very fine work a week ago."

A pause while he smiled, and then he added "Armsmaster, too." He'd never liked the man, never thought he cared about the city and its people the way Miss Militia or Dauntless so clearly did... but he came through when it counted.
"Armsmaster is down."

He snapped his head up, spoon frozen halfway to his mouth, spaghetti unspooling back into the packet.

She spoke between spoonfuls of beef stew, pausing to chew after each sentence. "The Slaughterhouse Nine showed up. Armsmaster got caught in the middle of a fight between Crawler and the Siberian on one side and Lung on the other."

He forced himself to resume eating. That other transmission, the way the radio blew out... there hadn't really been any windows in the camp — transparent plastic, at best — but... Shatterbird. It was *true*. Not that he'd thought she was lying. She'd said it with as much emphasis as she might have pointed out that it was raining outside.

He still remembered the last time they'd come to town: they'd decapitated the local Protectorate — literally — and followed it up by killing most of the Teeth, then the biggest gang in the Bay. Whatever they were here for, it wouldn't be good.

Well, he'd been thinking about leaving town anyway.

"That's a hero-sized problem, all right."

She didn't respond, and he turned his attention to his food.

Taylor finished her entree first, and turned to her mashed potatoes. He followed a half minute later: the applesauce *was* better than the spaghetti. Or at least lost less taste from being processed — it was hard to tell.

The 'dessert', on the other hand, was something closer to an energy bar than the chocolate bar it pretended to be, and he only managed to choke about a quarter of it down.

"Well." He put his hands on the desk, preparatory to standing up. "Just as bad as I remember, though the applesauce was a highlight of the meal. What did you think?"
"The grape jelly was nice." The omission of everything else in the meal was a just verdict, and he felt his cheeks tighten into a smile.

Peter stood. "Now, I came here to pack up and walk out past the perimeter, and then make my way down south to my son in Florida. If you don't have anything planned over the next few days... would you mind keeping an old man company on his trek?" John would complain about the extra mouth when Sandra was expecting, but he'd understand, and Taylor could clearly use someone to look out for her... even if he had to phrase it as *her* looking after *him*.

She stood straight on the other side of the desk, a smile spreading beneath the curtain of her hair. "You want to leave the city? I think I have a better plan."
I walked through the wet streets, making my way toward the docks. In my left hand, I had a briefcase filled with papers on Cauldron. I still didn't have half a clue what they could do, but apparently they could give people powers... and Coil had feared them. Also, Bonesaw was probably going to start running experiments on their 'formulas' any minute now, so I now had to worry about her unleashing a superpowered zombie plague on top of everything else.

When I'd woken up this afternoon, I'd had a pleasantly short to-do list, mostly comprised of the Empire and reconstruction.

Now, my list had four potentially world-ending threats and counting: Crawler, Jack, Bonesaw, and Harbinger. Maybe five: whatever Cauldron was, selling superpowers in secret to people who wanted to make a Fourth Reich couldn't possibly end well. The only precedents were fictional, and not encouraging: the kind of thing that ended with moonbases and monologues, and quite possibly continent-scouring lasers. They went on the very bottom of the list, behind 'figure out what Harbinger's trying to do.'

It is a very bad day when you have more than one potentially world-ending threat at the bottom of your to-do list.

Behind me, Pete Walker kept a steady pace, slinging a pack loaded with food and water... and carrying a shotgun.

I'd asked what he'd thought that could possibly do against one of the Nine, and he'd just smiled and said "Buy time."

I didn't think that the few seconds it would take one of them to kill him was likely to matter much, and said so. He'd shrugged, kept smiling, and brought it anyway. I was pretty sure he was trying to take care of me, and — while it was sweet of him — that was exactly the sort of thing that would get him killed.

I'd had enough of losing people because they had my back.

Carol Dallon had died simply because our enemies could find her more easily than they could me. Aegis had sold his life against Leviathan, buying a bare few seconds more of survival for us; Clockblocker had taken that momentary grace, and done the seemingly impossible: found a way
for his entire command to make it out alive. We'd even gotten him out too... almost.

Both of those disasters were because I'd had a bright idea and hadn't thought through the implications. I hadn't thought Coil's Noelle could survive the implosion of the building above her, and I hadn't even _checked_. I had never dreamt that Leviathan could fight smart, that it had been _baiting_ Flechette until it could use her attack to shatter our morale, taking down Alexandria and Legend both in a span of seconds.

The flaw went back to the beginning: Bakuda's deadman switch had killed hundreds of ABB members, many of whom had only joined under the threat of pain and death to them or their loved ones. It had also killed hundreds more whose only sin was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, in one of the areas she'd prepared with a bomb for 'insurance', and I couldn't begin to count the other lives those explosions had rippled through. Pete's story about how one of his friends had nearly killed another, looking for revenge for Bakuda's bombs in the nearest Asian face... that was on me too.

If Bakuda had told more people about her insurance, if I'd only known the cost beforehand she might be alive today, if imprisoned...

But that was an excuse. I could have guessed that she must have such a switch from her recruitment campaign: I had enough information that I could have seen it, if I'd just taken a moment to _think_. Instead, I'd focused on revenge for Dad.

If I thought about it, _Dad_ had died because I hadn't been thorough enough, careful enough, and had stopped to banter with the Wards over a still-conscious thug.

My thoughts stopped there, and the next quarter mile passed to the hypnotic drumming of rain on asphalt, punctuated by the ground-eating stride I'd learned on patrol with Gallant.

I could hear Pete's breathing begin to wheeze, and I slowed to an easier pace. He was an old man, and I should be more careful with him.

Maybe I _should_ have worn my mask, or avoided him entirely, or herded him out of his store with insects, instead of showing up as Taylor... but he'd helped me when I first went on the run, and I hadn't wanted to betray that. That knife he'd insisted I take, 'just in case', had made the difference against Valefor. I might have improvised something — a silken garrote, a nearby rock, _something_ — but I hadn't had to do so, and that had been too close a call as it was.
The best way I could repay him was getting him clear of this mess before it got any worse — and it would get worse. The Nine were actively working to make that happen, and the heroes were largely sidelined for fear of what the Nine might do if they stopped playing around and started trying to destroy the city.

Or the world.

They'd come here, Jack had said, because of what I'd done. That made it my problem — not that I would have tolerated their presence anyway — and I'd just have to find a way to fix it. I was freer to act than anyone except my fellow nominees, but cut off from the allies or tools I might otherwise bring to bear.

Also, the Empire would probably be trying to kill me shortly. They might wait until the Nine left, or they might not. Depending on how much information made it back to the Protectorate, I might have the heroes after me too. Less of a threat to my life; more of a threat to my assets and my plans to ensure the reconstruction of the city happened... all in all, I'd rather deal with the Empire. Them, I could kill if needs must.

One problem at a time.

How could I take the Nine?

No. How could I arrange it so they fell? Much as I'd like to wipe Jack's smirk off his face — or add a second smile not far below the first — personal satisfaction wasn't the point here.

Saving my city — saving my world — was.

Quinn was waiting in the ruins of a brick-built boathouse that had weathered Leviathan's onslaught with unusual fortitude. The windows were gone, and the interior strewn with debris where the surging waters had drained back through, but the structure still stood and provided some degree of shelter. The small stack of bottled water next to him, and the larger pile of empties to the side, reassured me about how he'd fared in my absence.
The fact that he was alone didn't.

I quickened my pace, setting a group of insects to buzz several feet before his face, and then out the door. He rose to follow them and met us in the open. His three-piece suit was stained and muddy, but he walked with his customary grace and greeted us with the same professional smile as ever.

"Taylor. Glad you made it back safely. And this is?"

"Pete Walker — another one who helped me once, when I needed it. Pete, Quinn Calle. What happened to the others?"

Quinn nodded to the man behind me, who tipped his cap in reply. "Mr. Bernsheim grew impatient and left to find 'someone in charge.' His assistant, in a display of truly remarkable loyalty, left with him."

I winced. I might run across them in time, but my best shot at getting him clear was probably gone. Well, there would be other architects and — who knew? — he might even survive. And not quit afterward.

Something beyond my control for now.

"You hungry?" Pete's question elicited a flashing grin that crinkled Quinn's eyes.

"Immensely."

"I brought food and water. She wasn't sure how many would be here, or how many we could gather."

Pete settled down on a low half-wall, leaning the shotgun against it beside him, and began searching through his pack.

"I take it you found us a ship?"
I nodded, handing the briefcase to Quinn. "Keep that on you: I've got a ship coming in for pickup around dawn. They'll take however many boatfuls of people we can get out there in time, but they'll want that briefcase in return."

He took it with the slightest lift of an eyebrow.

I shook my head.

"Beef brisket ok?"

Quinn turned his head briefly. "Without exaggeration, that sounds delicious."

Pete laughed. "Save the compliments until you've tried it: the DoD doesn't do delicious. Most of the time, they don't manage edible, either." He had the package open, and was pouring water into the heating element.

"Hunger is the best sauce, and this... has been a trying day." He spread his arms, shrugging. "Hot food, of whatever provenance, is a godsend."

I smiled, thinking about my own meal some half an hour past.

"Eat up: you won't be stuck here long. Even if you have to row, you won't have to leave for a couple of hours in order to be over the horizon at dawn. That gives us a little time to get more evacuees together... if any are nearby. If we have boats for them. What options do we have?"

Quinn nodded.

"My zodiac is still intact, but that's a handful of people at best. After that... there were some boats in there..." he gestured toward the boathouse in which he'd taken shelter "... but they were pretty much smashed against the walls. Maybe we could fix one up, but it wouldn't be anything like safe."

"As opposed to staying in this city right now?" My voice was dry.
Pete snorted, and Quinn's eyes darted over to him before replying. "Just so."

I frowned. "It may not be a problem at all, depending on how many people we can even gather. And if it is... the ship will have its own boats. Sending them onshore wasn't part of the arrangement, but I can alter the deal."

Seeing Quinn's eyebrow rise again, I amended my statement. "Or have you negotiate on my behalf."

He locked his eyes with mine, or rather with where my eyes should be. I suppressed the wince as I tried to meet his eyes with mine, and his brow furrowed.

I turned to Pete. "Any ideas on where to search for more?"

"Many who could, left. Most of the rest are in the camps. Still... I might know of a few possibilities." He handed Quinn the entree to his meal, pulling Quinn's gaze away. "The dockworkers' union hall was built like a bunker and always had some preserved food on hand for when people had a particularly hard time. I wouldn't be at all surprised if some sought shelter there."

I nodded, thinking about the times Dad had picked up extra cans at the grocery store, “for those who need it worse.” I hadn't really managed to do anything for the union that had been his life's work, but I had hoped that fixing the harbor might revive their fortunes... along with the rest of the city. Getting some more of them out alive... would be good.

"That's a good prospect. Why don't the two of you check it out after Quinn finishes eating?"

He glared at me mid-chew.

"You're not coming?" Pete's voice was mild.

"I've got some other things to do first. I'll catch up."
I removed my backpack and set it down, pausing to extract my mask, and to transfer some of the energy bars to my armor's storage compartment. Whatever else happened this night, I wouldn't be sleeping again before it was done... and the extra weight would slow me.

Pete swapped in the side dish to cook, his hand brushing near the silver briefcase.

"I'd advise against opening it. Faultline was willing to trade for it; others might simply want to extract it by force."

"What's in it?" Pete's voice was deliberately disinterested.

Quinn's eyes tightened while I turned and fixed Pete with the sternest glare I could manage with my eyelids down. "Information."

And, technically, my eyeballs.

They weren't relevant right now. Either I'd find my way through this, and get them healed by one of the capes who could do that, or I'd be beyond worrying about problems that small. Still, that reminded me...

I plucked the earbud out and passed it to Quinn. "That should give you comms, too. You might get more use out of it than I can right now, though if the government's implemented a quarantine you might want to be careful about what you say. Ask for Faultline: her team is bringing the ship in just over the horizon."

He took it gingerly and slipped it into his vest-pocket.

"I'll be back."

I turned to go and Quinn was before me in a moment, outpacing me with long dancing strides.

"Taylor."
I kept my face turned down, let my bangs hide my eye sockets.

"Quinn?"

"Not going to come with us?"

I tried for a smile. "You handle the invited guests, and I'll take care of the uninvited ones?"

At that, his eyes darted to Pete, and then he closed them for a long moment. When he opened them, they were clear once more.

"You're the client. Does that meeting with Fortress on Tuesday still work for you?" His voice was light, and without any sound of strain. Remarkable: I really needed to ask him about how to talk to people some time.

"Work permitting. I'll be there." And I would be there, assuming I was alive and not on the run. Never mind that I had no idea how to manage anything like success in this fight against the Nine: the running tally for all my encounters with the Nine had me down by both eyeballs and five canisters of Cauldron's special brew.

"Also, I may need you for more of the problem I had when we first met." Maybe he could handle my impending Protectorate issues: he'd managed it once before.

He rubbed his forehead briefly. "Well, maybe we can cover that topic at lunch, after the meeting."

"That would be nice."

Neither of us spoke.

"Side dish is ready." Pete's voice broke the silence.

Quinn turned back, and I started forward.
I'd turned the corner, moving at a steady lope, when the swarms I'd left behind heard them speaking.

"Friend of hers?" Pete's voice was quiet.

"I am."

"You just going to let a girl her age go off on her own?"

"Are you?"

Pete spat, then dug his hands into his windbreaker for warmth.

"I've seen people who walked like her before. And it doesn't take that much to put the pieces together."

"Oh?" Quinn was much better at feigned disinterest than Pete had been; he looked like nothing interested him more than his soup. Then again, I don't think he'd eaten in the last twelve hours, so he had to be starving.

"Her father dies in an explosion, and she goes missing for days — and there were people looking. Hard. Some owed her father, and others thought that the ABB had dealt her a bad hand. But no matter where we looked, there wasn't a trace of her. Anywhere."

Quinn simply ate, looking out to sea.

"Then one day she shows up at my shop, looking for tools and weapons and paying with stacks of cash. Couple days later, the whole damn ABB goes up in flames, along with a bunch of innocents. Some of them my friends. That's the kind of thing that gives a man to wonder."

I winced, not breaking stride. Had I been that obvious to anyone willing to draw a straight line between explosions? In retrospect, I'd been very lucky that pretty much any rumor about Lung
would be credited: without him spreading (or at least not disputing) the story about how he killed Bakuda, people might have caught on much sooner.

A moment later, I caught the other implication.

He'd fed me, thinking that I'd killed his friends? He wasn't wrong there — if I'd been more careful, I would have known about Bakuda's deadman switch — but I'd been too angry, and in too much of hurry, and gone for the kill at the first good opportunity. Their blood, accidental or not, was on my hands. Pete had known that, and followed me all this distance, shotgun at my back... and I'd never suspected.

Had I been wrong to trust him? He hadn't shot me. Hadn't even made a move to try it, never even let the barrel point near me: I would have noticed, felt it through the insects I had dusting my surroundings, seen it through the swarms I assembled to provide vision from multiple angles.

At the time, I'd thought it just good weapons discipline.

Pete hadn't shot the Marquis either, when the villain stood on his doorstep to apologize for how his late henchman had killed Pete's granddaughter; hadn't been able to bring himself to commit suicide in the attempt.

But Quinn was no cape, and even if Quinn was younger and in shape, Pete was armed while Quinn wasn't. Would he really take my failings out on my employee? On my friend?

It had a cold justice to it. An eye for an eye; a life for a life; a friend for a friend.

Forget intentions. Think capabilities. His pistol was in one of those windbreaker pockets, and his hand was already on it. Could I stop him if he tried?

At those ranges... it would be hard to guarantee a takedown before he got a shot off. Very hard. I had a lot of tricks I could use for myself, to fake out someone's aim, but they relied on being able to coordinate body and bugs... and I couldn't expect Quinn to follow along on no notice.

Just like I couldn't expect him to be wearing body armor. We should have a talk about that habit of his sometime, if we both made it through this nightmare.
I'd need an instant takedown, and it would probably be best to foul the guns first. That wouldn't take much, but doing it subtly would take time...

I turned at the next intersection, paralleling the coast and holding them in my range, marshaling swarms about them as carefully as I could.

"I can see how it might." Quinn's voice was thoughtful, as if he'd never heard those events juxtaposed before.

"Still, coincidences happen. And jumping to conclusions is a dangerous sport. Heaven knows that girl had enough reason to be on the run without bringing some crazy cape war into it."

Or this might blow over, turn into something I'd have to deal with someday... but not now.

That would be nice.

I kept the spiders on the move anyway, tiptoeing them around behind the two, nothing more than another shadow in the dark.

Quinn held the remaining half of his soup up, drinking it from the pouch over a very long few seconds. "True."

"But then she shows up here with a working phone that fits in her ear, a mysterious briefcase, a parahuman mercenary extraction team inbound, and vanishes back into a night like this to deal with 'unfinished business...' I'm just saying, she's not exactly hiding it right now. Even if she was laying low before, low enough that I can't guess for sure which one she is."

"Problem?" Quinn's voice was as light as ever, but he stood up as if to stretch.

If this kicked off early...

Pete spat again.
"Hold your horses. She's trying to get people — strangers, even — out of this Charlie Foxtrot, and that's proof enough for me which side she's on."

I felt a wave of relief that I wouldn't have to kill the man who'd been kind to me, and then a wave of disgust that I'd been planning it. The spiders scattered in response, skittering away from the two men.

"Those deaths don't go away, and there might be another two friends of mine dying tonight from the aftershocks of those bombs... but I don't think she did any of that out of malice. I can even understand what she was aiming for, and why, and — who knows? — maybe it'll turn out for the better."

Looking out into the rain-darkened streets, haunted by the most notorious group of serial killers in the world — drawn here by me — I thought that it could hardly have turned out for the worse.

"I think I can even forgive what she did."

I lost a step there, and it took five scrambling yards to regain my balance. He could forgive me for the friends he'd lost? When I couldn't forgive myself for all I'd done, let alone all my failures? When I hadn't even begun to balance the scales, assuming that they ever could be balanced? When so many I'd hurt were dead, and couldn't ever forgive what I'd done to them?

"She was talking about making up for stuff you can't fix, and maybe this is something she needs to hear from someone who can say it. Thing is, you know her and I don't, and she doesn't know I know, if you know what I mean. So, as a courtesy: is that the kind of conversation a man walks away from? Because I could send her a letter from Florida if that'd work better."

"I think... that's a remarkable story." Quinn's tone was perfect... that of a man humoring another's delusion. I really needed to get him to teach me how to talk to people sometime, or tell me how he had learned himself.

Pete's smile was mirthless. "You were one of the tipoffs too. Apart from that kind of trouble, she's a little young to need a lawyer like you."

"Really?"
"You don't dress cheap. Don't talk cheap."

"Well, thank you." Quinn's smile widened.

"Don't talk about your clients either."

"They're not as interesting as you imagine."

A shrug. "Don't even say anything at all."

"What would you have me say?"

Pete laughed, and after a moment Quinn joined him.

"You know, you're all right. Ready to see who's left at the hiring hall?"

"It's a nice night for a walk. Shall we?"

Pete took Quinn's offered hand, and stood.

I smiled into the rain and stretched my stride, flying down the road.

It was a terrible night for a walk, and there were monsters aplenty abroad tonight. Still, as they fell out of my range, I floated onward — lighter by more than just the weight of the backpack I'd left behind.
I let my stride settle into a meditative pace, driving westward from the shore. The rumblings above told of thunder to accompany the rain, but I put the weather out of my mind, the better to focus.

How to remove the Nine?

I didn't like my odds of killing any of them straight out. Bonesaw's insecticide was *ludicrously* effective, and lingered, which meant I couldn't even go for ambushes. Also, she was willing to share it, which cut my options down to fighting with my body — which was a terrible idea against even Cherish or Bonesaw, and the punchline to a bad joke against any of the rest — or working indirectly. Trip wires, deadfalls, nooses... these were tactics I could use, but they weren't exactly things I was confident would do the job.

Still... neither Mannequin nor Shatterbird had used Bonesaw's formula, so it might not be in general use... but I couldn't assume that, going in. Why *hadn't* they used it?

The road I was following bent north to deal with the ridge, and my stride shortened to match the incline as I kept my pace and breathing even.

Mannequin might have refrained from some kind of tinker pride, refusing to use her products when he had his own (inferior) version. Unfortunately, being able to run him out of insecticide didn't leave him vulnerable; it left him his usual assortment of impenetrable ovoids. Assuming he hadn't improved his formula since our last encounter, which was a bad assumption.

Shatterbird, similarly, might be too proud of her own power to take Bonesaw's insecticide, or maybe it made her sneeze or... I had no way to tell. Still, the fact that her defense required deliberate action left me a window: if I could get surprise on her, maybe I could put her down. If not, she'd have her insect-proof armor assembled again, and I'd be hiding for my life.

Burnscar, like Lung, could simply shroud herself in fire sufficient to incinerate any of my swarms. Sufficient to incinerate *me*, too. Still — unlike Lung — she might be vulnerable to simpler things like heavy objects. Since she could also teleport through fire, the trick would be pinning her down. So... she'd be like Shatterbird, then: victory by surprise or trickery, if at all.

Cherish was some kind of emotion-controlling master, and one whom Jack had used to search through my city, meaning her power worked as a sensor too. Frankly, unless my range exceeded
hers — and I didn't feel like gambling anything on that bet, particularly since I hadn't picked up on her presence when she'd started the fight at PRT headquarters — I had zero good options against her even if she wasn't wearing Bonesaw's special perfume. Maybe a surprise attack, if she couldn't feel that coming too.

The crest of the ridgeline came into range, black against the lighter clouds above, and I started assembling swarms on it. The rain and the dark would make it difficult to see anything, but who knew: maybe one of my targets liked standing on a high place, looking dramatic.

Crawler and the Siberian were lost causes. I'd do better with delay and distraction tactics than trying for a kill using my own power. That would be great for evasion, but not very helpful for taking them out.

Question the assumption. Why did I have to do this with my own power?

Jack had threatened to have Cherish turn the heroes (and temporarily allied villains) on each other for his amusement if they didn't stand aside, making them hostages. Bonesaw hadn't released a plague before, but if she didn't have one on hand already as insurance it wouldn't take long to change that, and Shatterbird or Crawler could simply rampage, making everyone in the city a hostage.

Could I let that control my response? Give them the control they sought in making the threat?

Could I ignore it? They were more than capable of following through.

Set the hostages aside for the moment: there would be ruthless people in the PRT arguing for a decisive intervention anyway. Why hadn't they tried something? Was it just that it had only been a few hours since the Nine announced their presence, and it took longer to assemble a response? Or were they looking for their opening?

Cherish meant that sending unpowered humans, or most capes, in would only give the Nine more pawns. Shatterbird could sweep technology from the sky, possibly including tinkertech that wasn't specifically hardened against her. And the Siberian meant that Alexandria, or someone similarly fast and invulnerable, couldn't safely blitz Cherish or Shatterbird to open the way for reinforcements.

Fine. Pick off one of those three, and see if that changed the picture at all.
Step one, finding one of those three.

That meant the hospital, or...

I wasn't at the ridge crest yet, but I slowed to a walk, trying to process what I'd seen through my swarms nestled in the buildings along the ridgeline. I tilted my face up unconsciously, trying to verify it with my own eyes, and winced at the reminder of their absence.

That was the biggest fire I'd seen since Krieg's attempt to kill Lung put a tenth of the city to the torch; the most intense conflagration I'd seen since Alexandria grappled with Leviathan, holding him in the blinding heart of our ambush. On any combined scale, it was a holocaust like nothing I'd ever seen: a firestorm so great that I wondered crazily if Behemoth had come to finish the job where Leviathan had failed.

Insects saw differently: color, motion, field of vision, flicker fusion frequency — all different. Something in my brain compensated for that, and it was rare for me to even notice which set of eyes I was looking through. Right now was one of those rarities: recognizing that there was a fire before me let me realize that those weren't lighter colored clouds.

Those clouds were lit from below, despite the rain, and lightning flashed across a scarlet sky as a building toppled amidst the flames.

Thunder rolled, and I found myself moving toward the inferno at a run.

The fires formed a rough circle perhaps a mile in diameter, blazing up four stories high, and hot enough that I couldn't approach within twenty feet with my swarms, let alone my person. Lofting insects up and over was easy: keeping them coordinated enough to see through them, despite the rain and fire, proved impossible. Insects perched on local buildings only had the angle to see the curtain of fire, and occasional massive shapes moving beyond it that might be only flickering illusions.
I had to circle a quarter of the way around the blaze before I found it: a six-story building half a mile to the south of the circle, untouched, with a bonfire on the roof that blazed but did not consume.

I had my swarms coming up the walls — and through them, for that matter — while I took the fire stairs at a run.

Near the top, I paused. No sense in going out personally unless I had to; and the only reason to get this close was to have that last desperate option available. I had swarms assembled on the edges of the roof and could see clearly the two women standing there, about thirty feet apart and gazing out upon the arena below.

For that was what it was, now that I could see it clearly: an arena. A vast fighting ring of fire, sized to fit the two behemoths who fought within it. One might be Lung, an enormous beast easily thirty feet long before the tail, wings and claws and fangs flashing sapphire as he tackled his foe through what had once been a three story office building.

Not sapphire: there were flashes of red all along his body as debris landed on him, and he glowed yellow as the dust cloud enveloped him. That was fire surrounding him, burning hot enough to melt the asphalt beneath his feet and leave gooey clawed tracks sunk in the roadbed where he'd stood a moment past. Crawler was living up to his name, taking the form of a long worm-like creature with dozens of legs and tentacles, many regenerating as I watched, glowing like a sullen coal as it wrapped itself around the dragon in an anaconda's crushing embrace.

And here, above it all, surveying one of the greatest duels the world might ever see... two women. On the west side of the roof, standing in the heart of a blazing pyre, was a redhead in a scarlet dress that must be Burnscar. On the east side, I could see a girl my own age with a red streak dyed in her pixie cut... who glanced at the stairwell and beckoned me forth with a smile. Cherish.

Taking that hour or so off to eat and talk may have been a little more than I could afford.

No way to reach Crawler or Lung, let alone fight them. No way to get Burnscar, since she was already on fire — for fun, apparently. No surprise against Cherish.

I'd thought it before, but it kept getting truer: this was a really bad day.

In ideal world, I'd retreat and come back when they were asleep. In this one, if I didn't find a way
to fix this and quickly, Crawler might soon be beyond the power of anyone to stop — perhaps beyond the power of anything as well. It would be a bitter pill indeed, to have to hope for an Endbringer victory. And if not even they could defeat the monster he'd made of himself...

Well, perhaps the world would end in fire after all.

So, retreat was out. Attack was out unless I could think of something particularly clever. That left... buying time. Jack liked to monologue; Mannequin and Siberian never spoke at all. If I was lucky, Cherish would be one of the talkative ones...

I formed a swarm clone before Cherish, and watched as she raised an eyebrow at my body as if she could see through the walls between us before turning to it with a smile.

"Tailor, right? Jack said you'd made the grade. Welcome to the show."

I had the clone turn its head to look out over the view. "Crawler's retirement party from the Nine?"

She giggled. "Something like that. Jack was talking about 'emeritus status' and 'moving on to new fields' when we worked this out, so I'm not sure if he's really retiring, or just moving on to a solo act."

She paused, and tilted her head before continuing in a conspiratorial whisper. "Jack's not nearly as funny as he thinks he is."

I blinked, feeling a phantom flash of pain as my eyelids closed on soft webbing instead of eyes. What?

"This whole cheesy Friday-the-Thirteenth thing? His idea."

That startled a laugh out of me.

"I know! Who even remembers those movies anymore? But when you ask him about that, he just says stuff like 'you probably think the movies started the superstition instead of the other way round', and 'kids these days don't appreciate the classics', and then Bonesaw is like 'I do!' and he
starts ruffling her hair, and it's all creepy cute again."

I'd seen them do that, and she was right: it was creepy. And cute, but mostly creepy.

Crawler raked his tentacles across Lung's eyes, and the faintest flinch was enough for the worm to loop another coil around Lung, binding his upper body as well, leaving only the snakelike neck of the wyrm free.

"And then the Siberian wants to ruffle Bonesaw's curls herself, and gets out the ribbons because she thinks that's what little girls should wear braided in their hair."

The Siberian went naked, as Scion had for years, but for the stripes that seemed a part of her and — occasionally — the blood of her half-devoured human prey. The prospect of her styling someone's hair was just slightly less terrifying than the prospect of her offering diet advice, and surreal enough that I had one of my spiders bite me to see if this was a nightmare.

Tonight being a nightmare would explain a lot of things, actually.

No such luck.

Besides, most dreams I had about Lung being crushed to death would be happy ones — not that he ever went quietly in those either. Below, a combined thrust of arm and wing had dislodged a coil of Crawler and Lung pounced, snaking his neck and one limb out to pin it against the ground, ignoring the way Crawler had enveloped the rest of him.

"Meanwhile, Shatterbird watches them braid each other's hair over the top of the book she's pretending to read and thinks about how to get Jack to ruffle her curlies... if you know what I mean."

On the one hand, I was pretty sure I knew what she was implying. On the other, I had no idea why I was having this conversation — why this conversation even existed at all, in fact.

"Which is yuck. I mean, he's hot... but old. He must be nearly forty! Then again, it's not like we have any good options on the team, and the only cute boy who's even nominated this time around is my brother, so that's no good for me. Maybe... do you like the slender, pretty types?"
Apparently, probationary membership in the Nine involved more gossip sessions than I'd anticipated. Then again, maybe I should have expected that a gathering of the worst people on earth would naturally recreate the high school experience.

On the up side, plan 'buy time by distracting them' was working much better than I'd hoped.

As the encircling fire died down to half its height, I got an unusually clear view of Lung, still working away at that pinnned loop of Crawler, as if he were trying to gnaw his way through a gummy worm sized for subways — one that regenerated almost as quickly as he tore at it.

"I like some muscle on a man." When in doubt, tell the truth. I was pretty sure my mother's advice had not been intended to cover this specific situation, but I was a little lost right now and it was worth a shot.

"Mmm, I know what you mean. There was this tasty bit of beefcake at the hospital, but Bonesaw got to him first. Why are all the good ones taken or gay?"

I thought, very carefully, about what I must have done wrong with my life to be having this conversation. Also, about whether I had any lethal options available. Failing that, I needed to change the subject immediately, to something that she'd run with.

Something she was interested in.

Something she cared about.

Got it.

"So, tell me about yourself."

Not the smoothest transition, but maybe...

"Oh, it's the same old story. Rough family situation, ran away from home to find something better,
and... here I am!"

The idea that joining the Slaughterhouse Nine could possibly be better than whatever her home was like was... difficult to believe.

She continued, more softly. "My father is Heartbreaker, and..."

Heartbreaker was one of the strongest masters anyone had ever heard of. In his presence, he could impose or remove intense, directed emotions of his choice... permanently. Mostly, he used it to make women obsessed with him, both for his own pleasure and to support his very comfortable existence up in Montreal.

Growing up in that household could not have been safe. Or healthy.

"... well, I needed protection from someone scarier than he is. And I got it."

I felt a flicker of pity for her, along with admiration for her decisiveness. The course she'd chosen had very definitively solved her previous problems.

Granted, it had given her a whole new set of worse problems, but I could sympathize with that too.

A flicker in the bonfire, and Burnscar was gone. The ring of fire blazed up in a counterclockwise ripple, returning to its former height... and Burnscar again stood in the heart of of her blaze.

I jerked my clone's head toward the bonfire, and Cherish turned her gaze toward it.

"She's doing the ring around them. It's a nice touch, but she'd probably have done it without being asked anyway: she likes fire. I mean, really likes fire."

Why were they even bothering with the ring of fire? What would happen if it stopped?

I created another clone by Burnscar. Juggling two conversations would be difficult, but not impossible...
"Burnscar?"

No response.

"I was wondering if you wanted to..." A twitch of her hand and flame roared out, extinguishing half of that swarm.

Apparently, she didn't want to talk right now, and thought cremation was easier than saying “no.” People like this were why I didn't like to do anything with my own body if I could avoid it.

"Don't interrupt her when she's having her 'fire time.' " Cherish was whispering through her grin.

Unpowered psychologists had kept a force that great, wielded in the service of such obsession, safely contained in an asylum for years?

How?

I shook my own head, and refocused my attention on Cherish.

"You're being pretty talkative."

Keep it focused on her, however clumsily, and see if she let something drop.

"Well, it's not like there's anyone else my age I can really talk to, you know? It would be nice, to have a friend on the team." Her gaze shifted into the distance for a moment, before looking back to my clone. "I've never had that many real friends — you know how it goes."

I did know, all too well. I was considering how to tell her that I understood when a sound like a volcanic eruption rose up, jolting me back with an almost physical force.

Below, Lung severed Crawler completely, throwing the remaining loops off with a triumphant
roar. Now forty feet long, and with a tail his body-length again, he unleashed a line of fire so bright it almost hurt to see. When it passed, most of Crawler's bulk lay charred and unmoving... but the smaller segment was already regenerating with alarming speed. Lung seized it, and started trying to swallow it, which... was crazy.

Then again, Lung could casually regenerate from having Crawler burst out of his chest, so maybe he figured it was worth a shot, just in case. Put it like that, and I was curious too: would it just lead to a horribly painful death at the tentacles of the world's largest tapeworm? Or would Lung's internal furnace prove sufficient? Abruptly, Lung stopped mid-chew, spitting Crawler out... and then he backed up, tail thrashing.

Lung! Backed off!

I would have sworn that he wouldn't retreat from anything or anyone, Endbringers included. What...

Cherish turned back to me. "Sorry, you were about to say something?"

"You did that. Made Lung retreat."

"You noticed!" She sounded pleased. "Keeping him at just the right amount of anger, increasing as Crawler adapts, backing off when he's going for a win... it's trickier than it looks. Like simmering a sauce on a campfire."

That was clever. She'd be interesting to work with, and might even be a worthwhile friend.

As an enemy, she was a nightmare. If she could back down an enraged Lung, I really didn't have any effective offensive options. Instant overwhelming force was not my forte, and I'd only have a moment before she struck back. This wasn't a high enough building that I could even throw her off the side and be confident that she'd die, even if Bonesaw hadn't augmented her.

At least against Leviathan, I could try to fight. Right now, Crawler was evolving at maximum speed toward uncontrollable while I was stuck watching it happen on a roof with a pyromaniac, an uncomfortably likable mind-controller who wanted to be my new best friend, and no good combat options anywhere.
I couldn't even use my earbud and call for help in the hope that Dragon could intervene: Quinn had that now.

Whatever she, and the rest of the heroes were busy doing instead of being here, I hoped it was important.
Theo licked his lips again, mouth dry and sweatshirt soaked. Stuck in the back with those others unsuitable to fighting on the front line or in the air, he drifted over to Ophelia's side. They'd both had their issues with the family, but she'd always been... decent... to him, if never really close.

Besides, he only knew one other person on the roof, and spending time with Crusader — with Justin — was awkward, not least because it was painfully clear that he wanted to be with Kayden. In theory, that was fine: after his birth-mother had died, his father had married Kayden. Things like that happened, and had no real part in why he had hated his father.

He hadn't hated Kayden, certainly: even if she wasn't his biological mother, even if he didn't really like her that much, even if he knew she'd never love him the way she loved Aster... she was still the woman who'd raised him, still the one who'd kept him after the divorce, still and always the only mother he'd known... and loved.

Thinking about her dating — or having sex! — with someone was just never, ever, going to be comfortable, that's all.

In the distance, he could make out the roar of engines, oddly loud in a city fallen silent.

Insight had laid out expected paths for the Teeth to take, giving their destination with a cocky certainty, and Director Piggot had given the ambush a simple structure.

The goal was simple: immobilize Butcher. Without killing her, as so far no hero had managed to stay sane for long with the voices of so many villains whispering in their head. Technically, no villain not of the Teeth had managed it either: the first Butcher had founded the Teeth, and every Butcher since had joined (or refounded) the gang, or died to someone who would.

They had containment foam: Butcher could teleport, but some teleporters needed vision, or had to take what they touched… it might work. Miss Militia was carrying some tranquilizer rounds designed by Armsmaster, and Dragon was keeping an eye on Mass. General in case Armsmaster ended up as the next Butcher somehow.

And... that was it. The only other form of restraint available was the simple method of hitting her until she went down, and repeating as necessary when her regeneration got near to waking her up.
That was, as Accord had insisted at length, not a good plan. But Stormtiger and Director Piggot had backed it, and everyone else had fallen into line in the end.

Privately, Theo thought that it wasn't as bad as it sounded. Sure, keeping Butcher restrained was all but impossible, but they had decent odds of putting the rest of the gang down and getting her to... flee might not be the right word, but at least leave. Butchers had done that before, when they were the last one standing on their side: retreated to spend a few months rebuilding the Teeth rather than fight on to the death. That was how the Nine had chased them out of Brockton Bay, once; Allfather's dogged pursuit after was why they'd refounded in New York instead.

Family stories like that had filled many happy evenings, before his grandfather died and his father decided he was worthless.

He looked up as headlights turned a corner, a half-dozen blocks away, casting long white shadows before them on the wet streets.

Nearly time.

This would be his first real cape battle. He'd fought against Leviathan, sure, but that had been complete chaos. He hadn't even managed to do anything, really: the largest one he could form had been broken, casually, before it could fully emerge. In the end, he'd retreated with Crusader when Purity had called it, let her drape him over her shoulder in a fireman's carry and watched the fight disintegrate into a rout behind them as others got the same idea.

They'd been nearly a half-mile clear of the fight when both of their armbands began repeating in that blunt, mechanical voice: "General retreat ordered," and he knew then that the battle was lost, and with it the city.

The last thing he saw, before distance and helpless tears robbed the vision from him, was Armsmaster, Chevalier, and Dauntless fighting the monster side by side, buying time as dozens of other capes fled. The way his mother and he were doing, even before the order had been given.

Somehow, miraculously, Eidolon had pulled a victory out of that disaster (whatever Hookwolf claimed): they'd been about to take Aster and head for high ground when the armbands shifted from "General retreat ordered" to "Leviathan withdrawing." That instant was unforgettable. The frozen disbelieving joy on every face, the way even Aster's wailing changed to giggles as they bounced her... it was probably the only time he'd ever hug Justin and mean it but, even with that memory factored in, that laughing golden celebration remained the brightest moment of his life.
Eidolon wasn’t here tonight: probably watching over Houston, whose team he headed. Chevalier wasn’t here either: he headed the Philadelphia team. Armsmaster, the leader of Brockton Bay’s own Protectorate team, had fallen earlier tonight in another impossible fight, unable to beat the odds every time... but ever willing to make the attempt.

Dauntless was here, and he made an entrance worthy of the hero that he was: teleporting to stand in the center of the road before the oncoming convoy in a flash of white fire, the Arclance leaping out to carve a trench of molten, smoking asphalt before him. The lead car swerved crazily, braking and then accelerating straight at him until it struck the white fire of his shield and compacted into a crumpled ruin just before the line he’d drawn across the road. The others screeched to halt behind or beside it... and at the intersection behind them, Fenja closed the trap, leaping down from a building and growing to her giant size midair, landing on one knee with a spear over three stories tall sweeping down to stop the rear car from reversing.

Along one side of the street came a creeping fog — or rather, Fog. Silhouetted within it, he could recognize Fog’s wife Night, walking shoulder to shoulder with Alabaster and Manpower, and then Fog thickened, hiding them from sight and moving in to shroud the convoy itself. A moment later, once everyone’s attention was focused on that side of the street, there was motion from the other. Balls of light ping-ponged through the stopped cars, bursting in flashes of light and sound, painfully bright and loud even over the block separating his rooftop from the fight.

Above the fight, at the top of an inhuman leap, Stormtiger floated with his claws of compressed air glimmering on his hands. Above him the fliers took up position, Purity now lit up and flying formation with New Wave, launching a volley of lasers which raked the cars and street.

They weren’t firing at full strength: he could tell by the fact that the street was still there afterward. LadyPhoton and Laserdream could do serious property damage when they chose, and Purity could hit harder still. No one wanted to risk killing Butcher by accident, though, and this whole show was intended to put the other Teeth down as fast as possible, by fear or force.

Stormtiger dived into the fog, followed by a stooping Glory Girl, and the thunder-crack of his claws discharging turned into a blast of wind that scattered Fog, giving a clear view for a brief moment. Reaver had apparently ripped the door off of his car rather than get out the normal way, and used it to bat Manpower through a second story window. The strange red spiked tentacles lashing out were probably Hemorrhagia, and the mass of people was probably some combination of the unpowered Teeth and Spree’s self duplication.

The mass of bodies down or dead, and the figures being thrown out of the fog to bounce off buildings... were probably some combination of Spree’s self duplication and the degree of force that was being brought to bear. There was a very large range between ‘definitely won’t kill Butcher’
and 'safe for a normal human', after all.

A crack sounded loud in his ear, and Theo startled, noticing Miss Militia reloading her rifle with a glassy capsule. To his right, Crusader's ghostly duplicates were already floating toward the fight. Crusader himself was turning to Theo as Fog obscured his vision once more.

"Cadmus! Get in the fight."

Right. Can't just watch and think.

He raised one hand, feeling the drain as he drew out the slightest portion of his well, and six sparks flared into existence in his hand. He cast them forth, watching them follow the arcs he had imagined they'd take, until they alighted on the asphalt in the midst of the fighting near where Manpower had leapt back in. Where each struck, a manlike figure rose, formed out of the roadbed... and suddenly his vision shifted.

He grappled with a crazed thug with a bat until Stormtiger could impale him while he blindsided another trying to shoot the fliers down while he reached in a window and slammed a third into a steering wheel while he shoved himself through Vex's sharp, stacked forcefields while he felt a brutal blow from behind and saw no more while he punched out one coming up behind Glory Girl with a knife while he thought about how he did this anyway.

He shook his head, letting the warriors fight on with a corner of his attention tending to each.

He had no idea how Crusader handled it, but the man just clapped his shoulder, grinned, and said "Practice!" whenever he asked. Which was still weird. Crusader, Hookwolf, Stormtiger, Cricket... most of the Empire, really, had treated him like dogshit. Even the ones like Krieg or Victor, who'd been polite, had treated him like what he was: his father's disappointment, the Kaiser's shame.

Not even getting his powers, in that horrible moment when his mom came through the door trying to hold her intestines in, his desperate effort to bandage her up as Justin arrived seconds later, hearing her wheezing voice asking Aster not to cry...

When he had nightmares, now, it was of that day. Of getting it wrong and letting her die, of Lung following her home after he finished eating Kaiser alive, and killing the rest of his family, of...
They were bad.

Afterwards, powers and all, he'd still been treated like the kid who got picked last for sports. To be fair, he was the kid who got picked last for sports.

Part of how he'd disappointed his father.

Fighting Leviathan was apparently the secret password to manhood: Hookwolf had clapped him on the back afterward and told him that from this day forth, no one would say a thing about his weight or anything else.

And it had been true.

Which was bizarre, since he hadn't even managed to do anything effective in that fight. He showed up, fought, and ran... that was it.

At least they'd waived the normal Empire initiation of beating up or killing some 'subhuman', since he really didn't think he could have done that.

Unless it were Lung... and, in a different way, he really didn't think he could have done that.

Still, the man had killed his father, and if Theo had hated his father for what he'd done, the disappointment wouldn't have cut so deep if he hadn't loved him too. Somehow. Lung had also nearly killed Purity, and if Theo thought she was racist, shallow, and even dim... she was his mother. Lung owed a debt, and someday — somehow — he would collect.

That line of thought terminated as another of his sown warriors disintegrated. At the back of his mind, he could feel the way they'd continued fighting, how resistance was diminishing, with most members of the Teeth either unconscious or dead. (Piggot had said "Only nonlethal measures are authorized: this is for your own protection as well, considering Butcher"; Stormtiger had followed it with "If it's them or you, make it them" and gotten the most amazing glare for it.)

Now, the street was carpeted with the unconscious or dead and it was down to two centers of resistance: Reaver was still holding out inside a shell of Vex's forcefields, and Butcher was walking through the chaos, launching Alabaster away with a casual shove and pulverizing one of his warriors with a backhand. They weren't the strongest he could make, but they were still asphalt
walking, a pothole given form and bloodlust... and she just went through one without really noticing on her way to Night.

Fog drew back, giving a clear view of the scene for a moment: Butcher was tall, especially for a woman, and wore some kind of stylized Asian-looking armor. In one hand, she carried the largest gun Theo had seen outside of a movie; in the other, she held Night up at arm's length, palming her skull like a basketball.

Night dropped a flashbang grenade, and Theo had to shade his eyes. Moments later, as he blinked the purple afterimage from his eyes, he saw the ground around them scored as if dozens of sawblades had passed through. Butcher's left arm was missing its armor, but for some tattered fragments hanging near her shoulder.

Night herself was still held fast, her face in Butcher's hand.

Moments later, a containment foam tank guided by Rune's telekinesis reached Butcher's back and a pinpoint shot from Lady Photon shattered the tank, letting a self-expanding sea of white foam splash up around them, encasing Butcher almost to the shoulder and locking Night in there with her. It was designed to hold even superhumanly strong parahumans, and Theo could see Butcher's right arm twitch twice without pulling free.

Butcher's left hand made a fist, and a corpse sagged into the foam.

Fog rushed toward her, uncovering Reaver and Vex. The fliers opened fire on those two, with a concrete chunk from Rune following the barrage of lasers. Laserdream's beams wove around Vex's myriad ovoid forcefields, and Purity's hammered straight through, but they both vanished into the shadows that cloaked Reaver. The concrete chunk he simply cut in half, and Vex rebuilt their shelter in seconds.

There was a strange sort of muted boom, and motion at the corner of his eye. He looked up to see Butcher on the roof across from them, foam-free and gun in hand.

Theo flinched and strangled a shout as Shielder's blue light flared up at the roof's edge, and the boy with the blue-dyed hair glanced over at Theo and winked. The bullets left tiny ripples in the force field, and it was rather like looking at the surface of a pond in a very loud rainstorm... from beneath.
A high-pitched screeching noise sounded, and Shielder reeled, the forcefield dropping. Another glance showed Animos, taking the shape of something scaly and six-legged, clinging to the roof's edge. His power-disruption trick wouldn't last forever... but as everyone on the roof dove for cover, the gun was already tracking back toward Shielder. Theo calculated desperately how quickly he could sow another warrior.

It wouldn’t be in time. He tried it anyway, two more man-size figures beginning to emerge beside him… not quickly enough.

There was a blur beside Shielder, and then the boy was pushed away and Velocity was standing in his place for a bare instant before being launched backward by the impact of multiple bullets. The gun tracked over, and Shielder's body jerked in its arc before dropping. A flash of white light, and Dauntless stood on the air above the street, the incandescent rings of his forcefield shedding the bullets without strain.

Dauntless had been specifically forbidden by the Director from attacking Butcher, under any circumstances whatsoever, up to and including the death of everyone else there... and so the Arclance sparked restlessly by his side, the crest of his helmet nodding back and forth as he stood there and bore the attack.

The woman in the ball gown with Accord had moved to the roof's edge and was gazing at Animos, who was limned with a golden light as he scrambled for safety along the wall of the building — something Theo could only vaguely perceive through the eyes of the one of his warriors helping Alabaster keep Reaver and Vex pinned.

Another crack broke up the roaring chatter of Butcher's gun, and Theo's eyes darted to Miss Militia, shooting from a prone position. Butcher's gun sparked and spun from her hands, coming down in two pieces. She paused, reaching down to the rooftop, and drew a sword of stone up from it. Her face, too, was stone, neither smiling nor frowning... and then an explosion obscured her features.

Another explosion nearby, and Butcher was on the rooftop with them, striking downward at Miss Militia, who rolled clear and leapt to her feet with the aid of the staff she suddenly carried. Butcher struck again, strangely. No wind up, no follow through, weight always centered under her: she simply moved her arm as if she expected to face no more resistance than air.

Looking at the hole in the roof where Miss Militia had lain, perhaps that was a reasonable expectation. Theo started to rise, calling a dozen fresh sparks to his hand.

Skotos had his hand out toward Butcher, but Insight grabbed it, hissing "She's a sensor too!"
Miss Militia dodged the second blow, not even trying to parry it, and then Theo felt **pain**, collapsing once more, the sparks evaporating. Everyone else on the roof convulsed too, and he heard a high pitched scream from one of the Wards… but none of the others were down. *Again*, he had to be the weakling, his warriors down and spasming alongside him or in the street below. The woman in the ball gown kept her gaze fixed on Animos regardless, and suddenly he was a man again, falling three and half stories down.

Even if he survived that, Manpower was racing to meet him... but Glory Girl caught him in mid-air, and did a right-angle turn for the ground. They landed hard enough that the pavement cracked beneath him and when both members of New Wave headed for the rooftop, Animos didn't get up.

Crusader slammed his fist against the roof in frustration, and two more ghosts rose from his body to fly at Butcher. She ignored their strikes — what did she care that they bypassed her armor just as they could float through doors, when her flesh was far tougher than any armor? — and continued with another slow, inexorable, strike at Miss Militia.

The acting head of the Protectorate ENE grimaced and her footing was unsteady, but she managed to twist sideways to dodge a third strike before skipping backward. Butcher lunged forward for the first time in the fight, pressing her advantage... and Miss Militia *moved*, dropping into a low spinning advance which let her slide the staff behind one knee and before the other before coming up behind Butcher to kick her in the back. The staff snapped, but held long enough for Butcher to trip, and green light flared in Miss Militia's hands as a pistol took form. She loaded it with a tranquilizer syringe as it materialized, then aimed and fired in the same flowing motion... but hit only dissipating fire, empty air, and the concrete of the roof.

Theo, half-staggering, stood and watched as Othala ran to Velocity and Shielder. Manpower and Glory Girl reached the roof, fists clenched and ready for a fight, only to find that they'd missed her again.

Dauntless vanished in a flash of white light, and the two warriors Theo had pressing the siege of Reaver and Vex with Alabaster witnessed his arrival... along with the single blow of the Arclance that laid them both out.

One of the new Wards (Insight, he thought) shouted "She's got a bow!", and Theo clenched his fistful of sparks in frustration, spine itching as if an arrow were already flying.

There was a humming through the night, and then a stone arrow struck Dauntless' back. White fire fountained up from the impact, but he didn't even step forward to catch his balance: simply shook his head and looked around.
"Spread out and search." Lady Photon's voice was clear and commanding, and the fliers scattered in response. In the distance, he could see Fenja's silhouette blotting out the stars as she turned back and forth, looking. Miss Militia produced something like a mortar and launched three quick rounds to the southwest.

The first was a star-shell, and it illuminated the roofs beneath; the second two bracketed Butcher, backlighting her with fire as she loosed another shaft, this one flying unerringly toward Miss Militia. Laserdream shouted, and a forcefield in her characteristic red appeared... and shattered just as quickly, the arrow falling in pieces to the road beneath.

Purity and Lady Photon unleashed a stream of firepower that blinded, but an explosion atop the hunk of concrete Rune was using to fly showed that Butcher had been quicker. Rune herself was launched out into empty air a moment later, falling with the boneless grace of the unconscious or dead; Lady Photon dove for her body while Glory Girl hit Butcher so hard the concrete beneath her exploded, leaving Butcher falling free... momentarily. Soon enough, another explosion behind Theo marked Butcher's renewed assault on the back line.

Gallant was spinning toward her as she appeared, and staggered her with a deep blue blast, but she simply shook her head, took a half-step forward, and backhanded him off the roof. Which left the two new Wards facing her alone... as a half-dozen points of light, glowing like captive suns, settled in around them.

This time, he was fast enough.

The resulting absorption of material collapsed that half of the roof, but one of the fifteen-foot tall giants that resulted tossed both Wards across to the stable part of the roof while the others tried for a game of kickball with Butcher.

Butcher was winning that game.

One of his giants had crumbled before her fists in a five second rending climb, and if he'd so much as given her motion sickness he couldn't tell.

Again, the fliers arrived, pouring out a lightshow that rivaled the lightning from the storm in the north of town... again, Butcher vanished in an explosion.
Theo felt the hot wind at his back and closed his eyes, tears forming at their corners.

Then a colder wind blew, and he staggered forward from the force of it.

A hand clapped him on the shoulder, and he heard Stormtiger speak softly. "They're yours, for the moment."

More loudly. "Nice work baiting her in like that!"

Theo turned, shaking slightly, and saw Butcher... or what was left of her.

Then he turned again, and saw Stormtiger — Butcher, now — standing in the middle of the roof. Saw the way Miss Militia and Accord were both squaring up on him, how New Wave had come to a hover above the roof, Lady Photon dropping Rune down by where Othala knelt over Shielder before rising to a position above and behind the interim leader of the Empire.

Miss Militia held up one of the tinkertech syringes, the red light from the incidental fires glinting against the green of the glass. "Will you go quietly?"

He rolled his neck, and then reached down and pulled a good imitation of a backless camp chair from the stone beneath, upon which he sat.

"Hell of a thing, you know. Not the kind of thing I thought I'd ever get to feel."

Behind him, the shadow of Fenja loomed, wisps of Fog curling up around her shoulder. Alabaster was still on the streets below, but was as close to invulnerable as made no difference anyway.

Theo was acutely aware of his mother coming to a hover above, shining her white light across the distance and giving the half-ruined rooftop the illumination of a full moon on a clear night.

Glances were being exchanged, alliances redrawn, and Theo was not at all sure which side of the imminent fight he'd be on. Nor even which side he wanted to be on: the Empire included a bunch of racist idiots, and an overlapping bunch of vicious criminals, but it also had the last of his family... and the man who'd just saved his life.
"Commanding a dozen capes made the Empire a force to be reckoned with. I figure I'm now, what... fourteen capes myself? Fifteen?" Stormtiger was drawling, something he did when nervous. Were the voices already shouting in his head?

Insight, oddly enough, spoke next, standing up from where Theo's giant had thrown her. "Oh, don't flatter yourself, tough guy. The previous Butchers' powers are watered down versions, weaker. Call it... six capes, tops." The tall Ward next to her elbowed her, and she glared at him but shut up.

Stormtiger nodded at that. "Six capes." He closed his eyes and inhaled.

With an exhale, Butcher XV stood. "I fought in cages for the thrill, but I do not much like the idea of living in one. No..." he shook his head "I do not believe I will go quietly."

Miss Militia was fast, and the tranq was in the air before anyone else understood what he'd said.

Butcher, forewarned by one of those dozen-odd powers, was faster still.

An explosion marked where he had been, and another — above even the fliers — marked his reappearance. His voice carried impossibly clearly on the night air as he floated, arms spread and air-claws forming.

"Behold!"

A convulsive twist, and he put his hands to his temples.

Then the claws of compressed air released, explosively.

The body tumbled loosely, falling to the street beneath with a wet thump.

For a long moment, there was shocked silence.
Fenja slammed her spear against the ground, three times, and then spoke with a booming voice that filled the sky.

"Cattle die / kindred die..."

Theo blinked as Othala took up the chant.

"Every man / is mortal..."

He raised his own voice, joining theirs, keeping the thudding, relentless pace so different from modern poetry.

"But I know / just one thing..."

It had been a favorite of Allfather's; and here were the last of his descendants gathered, excepting Aster. The last of his blood who had heard him recite this, or any other part of the sagas he loved.

"that lives past / endless death..."

Miss Militia, of all people, chimed in for the final line, her voice clear and carrying.

"a man's name / great deeds done."

The second silence was deeper.

To the north, a pillar of fire rose into the sky.
“… so, y’know, having siblings wasn’t all bad, though there were times when…” Cherish trailed off as her face turned to the south, swinging like a compass to a magnet.

I shook my head as the stream of chatter faded away, and then blinked lids shut over soft webs, wincing in phantom pain. I stretched, leaning back against the wall of the fire stairway where I’d concealed myself… not that walls or distance were any barrier to her senses. What had her attention now? What proved more interesting than the fight between Crawler and Lung and her discussing her favorite topic (herself) at length with her new friend? Actually, how long had I been listening to her?

What had she been doing to me?

_Had_ she been doing anything to me?

She'd acted like a girl my age, stuck living through a parade of horrors, who could _desperately_ use a friend… and I sympathized with that. It was, so far as I could tell, entirely true — for both of us. Where else was I going to find someone I could talk to about what I did?

Normal girls talked about their shopping, or their classes, or boys… I wasn't entirely clear on what, exactly. Probably due to being ostracized for my entire high school career. I was quite sure that they _didn't_ talk about the best ways to kill different capes, or how to most elegantly start a civil war within a gang. Even Lisa, one of the closest things to a friend I had, did _not_ want to talk about my hobbies.

Quinn would just dodge the subject, citing 'professional ethics', and probably urge me to take a vacation yet again, spend time on a beach somewhere... to which I'd inevitably reply that I'd _take_ a vacation when my city was quiet. So far, that hadn't really happened yet, but he assured me that this kind of turbulence was “unusual.” I'd believe him when I saw quiet.

I even tried to imagine having that conversation with Panacea, and failed utterly. With all her worries about becoming a villain, those topics would go _nowhere_. Unless Jack or Bonesaw had talked her round into being less neurotic about things, in which case… maybe. Actually, she might be joining the Nine too: they needed two to fill in right now. I wondered if she'd get along with Cherish, too…
I shook my head. Thinking about Cherish wasn't going anywhere useful.

Withhold judgment on Cherish for now: find a way to stop Crawler. Also, Jack. Also Bonesaw. Also... actually, one world-ending problem at a time.

Crawler first, then.

I focused my attention through my swarms, looking down at the fight beneath. Crawler now had a tripartite mouth filled with triangular teeth, and his legs had mostly gone in favor of tentacles so numerous that they looked like cilia. He was again trying to grapple with Lung, and they were crashing through buildings and leaving a trail of burning wreckage behind them. Neither flame aura seemed to be giving the other an advantage, but it was pretty hard for me to tell what — if anything — was going on beneath the fires clinging to them both like second skins. Lung did exhale a bar of fire so bright that it looked like a flashbulb going off... but Crawler didn't react that I could see.

Burnscar was smiling like... well, like no one I'd ever seen. It seemed wrong to call an expression that unreservedly joyous by the same word used to describe the face a waiter wore to ask what you'd like for dinner. She looked rapturous, or maybe ecstatic, in the calmest and emptiest way I’d seen. Maybe that’s what nirvana looked like.

Or insanity.

Direct action against Crawler was out: he was fighting Lung on what looked to me to be a fairly even footing. Cherish had spoken of stopping Lung when he was going for a win, but if I knew Lung at all, he considered his inevitable victory to be a universal constant. If she was getting a feed directly from his emotions, her conclusions would be no better than her data.

This was about four times as large as I'd ever seen Lung get before, when he almost singlehandedly put the assembled Empire to flight. And he was still growing. Crawler was keeping pace, getting larger and hotter as the fight went on... and he adapted as he healed.

Unless Lung had some kind of fancy plasma trick up his sleeve, or his thermokinesis scaled all the way up to fusion, Lung’s offensive options boiled down to bite, hit, and burn... and then do it all again, but harder. Depending on how Crawler adapted, he might reach functional immunity to those categories of threat soon, and at that point it really would be too late.
It might have already passed that point.

I'd seen Lung scorch Crawler before: now, even with hotter flames, there wasn't any effect I could see... on Crawler. There were plenty of effects on the landscape, mostly involving things burning and melting that I'd never known *could* melt or burn. Or both, simultaneously, and I had the suspicion that some of those gases rising from the fires were the asphalt and buildings *sublimating*.

Give it half a day, and the two of them might melt their way down to see Behemoth.

Indirect action... Cherish was regulating Lung for him. Cherish, along the Siberian and Shatterbird, and maybe Bonesaw, was also interdicting reinforcements. Cherish, not Burnscar, was the one who could find me if I tried fight from range.

Cherish was the keystone here.

I'd have to remove her... or at least incapacitate her. Did I owe her the chance to live through this? Just because I liked her? She hadn't really *done* anything yet, beyond scare some people back at PRT headquarters.

What could I do to *her* directly? She might or might not have one of Bonesaw's insecticide devices on hand. She did have an ally in Burnscar, whom I couldn't even *hurt* unless she got careless. She did have master powers of some unknown, but very strong degree: the near riot that had pitted hero against hero and nearly started a civil war amongst the Empire was proof of that. If I'd had a power like that...

Well, a *lot* of things would have been simpler, starting with high school.

It was strong enough that I'd seen her turn friends on friends; subtle enough that I wasn't even sure if she'd done anything to me then or now. Those emotions — that bemused, tentative swell of warmth that I'd felt — no matter how I turned the memories around, they felt real.

They *were* real.

And she could sense emotions, too, so even if I went for indirect action, she could probably see it coming... and without surprise, everything in life got *so much* harder.
Indirect action... she wasn't relying on anyone right now. No enemies I could whistle up and point at her: who had she even nominated?

Her brother, right.

Whoever that was: which one of Heartbreaker's kids was living in my city, and what had he been doing that earned him a nomination to the Nine, but escaped my own notice? Did I even have time to worry about problems that size right now? He went to the the absolute bottom of the list, at least unless and until I came across information that marked him as a world-ending threat too.

So. Direct or indirect action, it would have to be done with no hostile intent beforehand... and could not be something I could recall once set in motion, if she made me regret it. Something decisive: either extremely swift, or utterly beyond my power to restrain once unleashed.

What I would not give for the simpler problems of even two weeks past.

Brian believed in rep. Lung called it fear, the art of combining certainty and uncertainty to maximum effect. Quinn put his faith in surprise and leverage. Carol’s answer had been preparation. Krieg would have redefined the problem, and seize victory somehow.

I looked back through the advice I’d gotten. Neither Brian’s belief in rep nor Lung’s faith in fear would be much help here: those paths required showing hostility and then giving her a chance to react. Against someone who could probably adjust my fear with less effort than twirling her hair, giving her the initiative was not wise.

Quinn’s advice about disrupting expectations might help, if I could identify any of her assumptions. Were there things she thought true that I could make false? Assumptions I could guide her into forming? She already knew that I had a body, and where it was, which ruled out most of the tricks I’d usually try for.

Carol’s suggestion that I be better prepared was excellent… but not what I considered immediately helpful, since retreating to make more preparations in this case was likely to result in the end of the earth.

Krieg's advice, about how fighting wasn't the only way to beat a foe... still sound. But how?
I looked back at her through the swarm, noting the innocent smile on her face as she looked through the distance at something her power was showing her.

Make a friend of her?

That ended her existence as a foe, certainly... call that one plan A. Maybe I should think of that hereafter as her plan, the one she’d been trying to run on me. Or maybe it was Jack’s plan. Would it be possible to talk her out of it? Could she simply have not noticed that this was the kind of thing likely to leave the world a charred wasteland? Unlikely. Whatever reasons she had for doing this, I’d have to assume they were weighty enough that a friend of a few minutes couldn’t persuade her otherwise.

Which meant I’d need a plan B. Also, preferably, plans C through Z... but that desire conflicted rather strongly with the need to fix this situation now, before my city was destroyed. That is, even more of it than had already been turned to ash and embers. Idly, I tracked across the panorama of the city, noting all the places that had gone up in flames already tonight...

... and smiled.

My father had told me once, after a day at work, that if you have one problem... you have a problem. If you have two problems, well... sometimes you have no problems. Mom had laughed and swatted his balding spot as she walked by, and he'd gotten up from the table to embrace her.

They hadn't always been that happy, and I treasured every memory I had in which they were.

*Thanks again, Dad.*

Plans B and C, ready for action.

The night wasn't getting any younger, and Crawler wasn't getting any weaker. I spoke through the clone by Cherish.

"Hey, Cherish?"
"Yeah?" She turned back to my clone.

"Is there some reason you're setting up Crawler to destroy the world?"

"Jack asked me to. And while he's not as funny as he likes to think, he is exactly as scary as you'd expect." She shivered.

I shivered in sympathy. I'd met him, and had hated him... but I hadn't found him terrifying beyond reason. Did that say something about her perception, or something about my stubbornness? Or both?

"Do you think you could not break the world? We both live here, you know."

She shrugged, and then cocked her head at me, hand on hip. "It's not like he'll really end the world, you know. He'll just rampage a while, and then some hero or other will stop him."

I nodded. She was right about that too.

Only problem was: no heroes here tonight... which left me. And I couldn't afford to fail, not in this.

Plan A down.

Time for plans B and C. I formed another clone by Burnscar.

"Why do you ask?" Cherish was watching my clone carefully right now, and I focused on my desire to do Burnscar a favor while I juggled the conversations.

"No reason." I "You know, Elle came back to town."

I'd looked on the ruins of the Palanquin and remembered, from Dragon's files, just how those psychologists had kept Burnscar in check.
"Really, you're not getting cold feet over this are you? The group has issues, sure, but it's the experience of a lifetime!" | "Where is Elle?"

Cherish hadn't noticed it instantly. I felt confidence flood through me: this could work!

"The last experience?" | "On a ship — Faultline had a job. The only problem..."

"Don't be such a downer. We're young, cute, and going to live forever! Right?" | "What?"

I smiled at her irrepressible optimism, feeling its warmth and wanting to share in it. High school might have been fun, even, with a friend like her.

I could still stop this, still step back from the course I'd set myself.

Still change tack, and try to befriend her more thoroughly.

But a budding friendship was, set in the balance against my city and my world... so very little. Emma had been my best friend, until she turned on me so thoroughly that I nearly died. I did go insane, temporarily: trapped in that locker with such filth. She was only alive today because, for all her malice, Emma was just a schoolyard bully. She'd wanted me weeping, not dead.

And I didn’t want to kill innocents.

Cherish's smile might be innocent, but she wasn't. None of us on this roof were: we all had innocent blood on our hands.

Maybe mine most of all.

And so it was with regret that I pulled the pin on Plan B.

"Not both of us, no." | "... is that Cherish doesn't want me to tell you."
While they were processing those statements, I launched plan C: a swarm engulfed Cherish, joined by other swarms from the roof's edge, and went for the fastest kill I knew.

She screamed, high and piercing, and I wondered why I'd done something like this. I'd skipped right past trying to talk to her — she was the first person I'd met in years who just wanted to talk to me, who might have liked me as I was — and gone straight to trying to kill her. But that's who I was: a killer. Had she killed anyone? I'd killed hundreds. More of them innocents than not. More of them *accidental* than not. I'd told myself that I'd do better: that I'd fix what mistakes I could, and atone for what I'd done somehow... and here I was, killing again.

What was *wrong* with me?

I'd killed my mother. By accident.

I'd killed my father. Through carelessness.

But if I killed myself, it would be *deliberate*.

The best way was probably what I'd planned for Coil, what I had tried on Cherish just moments past: a swarm through the eyes to the brain. I didn't have the ideal bugs on me, not really: spiders have surprisingly small stomachs. But they’d do, and I...

I shook my head. Above me on the roof there was only floating ash and Burnscar. Who was calm, if quite loud.

"Where is she?" She was still smiling that blindingly brilliant smile, too, which made me... somewhat uncomfortable.

I thought about picking a fight with her as I uncurled from the fetal position, every muscle tight with spasm. The thing with Elle had been nothing more than a lever, and one that had worked better than I'd dreamt possible.

I couldn't take her in a straight fight, but it wouldn’t *be* a straight fight. She would never find me unless I let her. I thought about snares, and trip-wires, and nooses; about the flames that
surrounded her, and what she might do if she could draw on the inferno to our north; about what I might gain if I won, and then about all that was at stake if I lost here, with Jack still free.

Finally, I thought about these last few moments, about the friend I almost might have had, and the crippling guilt and regret that had followed my choice. I didn't feel the impulse to suicide any more... but the thoughts I'd thought about myself hadn't been false, or even new.

Just truth told darkly.

I thought about the lives I'd taken so far, and the ones I'd likely take in days to come. In the hours to come.

And then I rolled the dice.

Another swarm clone assembled itself on the edge of the roof. "She's on a ship: there's a boat going out to meet her soon. Go to the jetty where Sutler's dead-ends into Bayside, and you will find..."

I closed my eyelids, not that that did anything to blot out the world. It hadn't, even before I'd plucked out my own eyes. Was this betrayal? Of whom? Or was it of all sides?

"... a man in a suit with a briefcase. Tell him..."

He wanted to be the best. It was practically the only personal thing about himself that he'd discuss. And this... this would give him the chance to do what none had ever done.

Or die trying.

"... tell him that Tailor referred you. Tell him the password is..."

Such a gamble. It could go the other way so very easily...

"... M'Naghten or Davy Jones. And then tell him to take you to Faultline: Elle's with her. He'll have a boat for you."
Or it could spiral into disaster. Was I really sending a member of the Nine into a refugee evacuation because I couldn't spare the time for another fight?

She turned toward the bay, and then hesitated a moment. "Jack..."

Well, apparently she could feel something else in her psychotic state beyond obsession with Elle… and it was fear of Jack. What did they know that I didn't?

"I'll tell him. The hospital, right?"

She nodded. "With the metal man."

She called fire about her and vanished, stepping out of the ring over a mile away.

Out of my range, now. Too late to take it back and just try to kill her instead.

I'd have to put my faith in Quinn. And hope Faultline lived up to her reputation, one way or another.

Actually... they'd probably rather hear about this from me before Burnscar showed up.

I started making my way down the fire stairs.

Well, at least I'd gotten a lead on a replacement earbud... and it was just where I'd planned to go next anyway.

By the ground floor, I was running again.

Crawler was beyond my strength: I couldn't even get bugs within twenty feet of him right now, and he was only getting hotter. I'd removed Cherish and Burnscar from the conflict, and would have to hope that — without their interference — Lung could finish the job.
But Crawler wasn't the only world-ending threat in town tonight, and I hadn't exhausted my options against the others just yet.

So I ran south toward St. Jude's... and Jack. The man who terrified terrors.

It was about that time of night for my regular Ward Patrol stop there anyway. I smiled at the thought, a tight-lipped grin that didn’t reach my eyes.

Not that any of them did anymore.

I pumped my arms, settling fully into the run. Behind me, I heard Lung roar — in pain or triumph, I could not tell — and a vast jet of fire shot upward, lighting the road before me like daylight until it died away.
I kicked coming up the hill to the hospital, and then slowed to a walk as the slope lessened, looking upward. I didn’t think I’d need to run for my life in the near future… but no point being unprepared. The hospital’s eight stories weren’t so tall for this part of town, but the site had been picked back when hillside air was as an effective treatment as people had for a lot of illnesses, leaving the building with the views of one twice its size.

That had preserved it better than most, when the waves came; made it the center of treatment in the aftermath. Made it into a target for the Nine, when they came.

The rain had stopped: good for getting insects in the air; bad for fire. Without Burnscar’s control, the ring that had enclosed Lung and Crawler was burning outward. A momentary focus through a swarm on a rooftop, and I could see two titanic figures grappling briefly, before one slammed the other to the earth and a cloud of dust blocked my view, leaving only the occasional flare or crash to make it clear that they were still at it.

Something beyond my means.

The hospital was darkened now, all power lost after Shatterbird’s song. Darkness had meant very little to me for months. Now, it meant nothing to me — ever since I’d plucked out my eyes — but it was something else about this place that was wrong. Even when the rest of the city had been shadowed, there had been lights here — spotlights, even. The brightest building left in the skyline.

I reached out to the hospital, feeling through it. In the lower floors, I could feel patients and staff huddled behind barricaded doors… not that that would stop any of the Nine who wanted to enter. Still, rather than do nothing in the face of annihilation, the staff of the hospital had done what they could, setting up makeshift barricades and offering what treatment they could.

It hadn’t been enough.

Even without forming a concentration of insects sufficient to see through them, to hear through them, I could feel far too many bodies still and cold in the ICU. The story wasn’t much better in the inpatient sections, in Cardiology, in Pulmonology… or in Pediatrics, where barely twenty four hours past Browbeat had entertained the kids up past their bedtime.

I flinched from examining those losses too closely and turned my attention upward. The other
floors had similar tales of woe, of a handful of doctors and nurses fighting to save whom they could, working in darkness and speaking in whispers, lest they attract the attention of the horrors abroad this night. The uppermost floor was a a blank spot, hazed with Bonesaw’s insecticide. Not so much that I couldn’t get any insects in, but enough that I was constantly losing my exploratory bugs.

_Tinkers._

Well, the good news was that I’d almost certainly found where the Nine were lairing; the bad news was that I might be completely blind when I went in.

I’d send my insects up the side of the building, then. They might not be any use where I’d need them, but I’d have them nearby… just in case. I could set up eyes on the surrounding buildings — no substitute for being able to see myself, but at least I’d have vision wherever windows permitted. And… I’d set them to making silk. _Lots_ of silk. At least until Bonesaw modified her gas to make silk dissolve, or something completely ridiculous like that, I’d still have _something_ that I could use through her clouds of insecticide, even if it did mean working from a distance.

Also… I surveyed the surrounding neighborhood, and then nodded. Precautions.

Just in case.

I took a deep breath, and walked through the main doors of the hospital. They were, normally, automatic doors. Maybe they’d swing freely in the absence of power, maybe not: no way to tell. They were scattered across the floor, and the overturned desks and man-sized depressions in the walls told a similar story: a brute had fought here. I felt the outline pushed into the ceiling with my bugs, and shook my head. The dampness before me was blood: more than one brute had fought here, and fought someone strong enough to hurt them. Badly.

The trail of blood led to the elevators, and I followed it. It terminated in three bodies — none of them familiar to me. At least, I _thought_ it was three bodies: whoever had done this had crushed them almost beyond recognition, cratering the floor beneath in the process. The remains were about right for three people, but the blood… that was a _lot_ more blood than any three people could hold. The hallway was nearly a quarter-inch deep in it, almost out to reception, and spreading in the other direction too.

It didn’t seem Siberian’s style, and I wasn’t sure who else in town would have done that. Or even could have.
I made my way to the stairs and started upward. At the third floor, the signs of fighting resumed. Handrails ripped out of the wall, and then impaled right back into the wall, this time perpendicular; fist-sized holes in the wall and floor; a couple of places where someone had clearly been thrown through the central wall and down onto the previous flight of stairs… and one spot where the fighters had managed to take their battle straight down through the treads, leaving a hole that I had to inch past, clinging to the handrail and bracing myself horizontally against the opposite wall.

Finally, I reached the eighth floor and stepped out of the stairwell. From what little I could see from the outside, there was a single lit window on the north side of the building. Lacking any better ideas, I set off in that direction, feeling my way along the wall with one hand.

Fifteen steps down the corridor, and it turned right. The end of the corridor was open to the night, the full-length window that had capped it destroyed in another one of those brutal confrontations whose traces I’d seen throughout my ascent. The breeze smelled clean, blowing away an underlying odor of rot and death and terror that I hadn’t even realized had filled the hospital, replacing the usual sharp antiseptic scent.

I didn’t have a good angle on the lit window from the surrounding buildings: enough to see the light coming out, and that the roof of the room was some kind of off-white, but no more. Still, I had my swarms coming up the outside of the walls, and while I hadn’t given up on surprise for this encounter, it wouldn’t be the kind where they didn’t know I was here.

The kind where they thought they knew what I doing — the kind I’d used against Cherish and Valefor — would be my only shot, if it came to fighting.

I filtered my bugs along the edges of the window and glanced outward. This window had apparently been chosen for its view of Crawler’s retirement party, and I could see two figures still fighting, white-hot amidst the duller red of the inferno that surrounded them.

Then, I filtered them over the edges of the window and looked inward. On a table set before the window, a sculptured head. Beyond that, golden curls above a cherub’s smile, examining some glowing instruments ringing a heroic statue cast in steel. Past her, framing the doorway to either side, a mismatched pair: to the right, imperiously straight, a hook-nosed woman with smooth olive skin stood; to the left, a girl folded in on herself, hunched over and hiding from the world.

I stepped into the doorway and completed the tableau.
Bonesaw reacted first, turning to face my body. “Tailor! Come on in.”

I couldn’t really see her expression, given my vantage point from the swarm directly behind her, but she sounded like she was smiling. Still, she’d turned her head, and I could use that, if I could keep her distracted…

“You mentioned that you wanted to show me your work.”

“That’s so nice of you! But this big meanie broke them, so I don’t have any to show you anymore besides Murder Rat, and you’ve seen her already.” She shoved the statue, which didn’t even wobble. Weld. What was he even doing here? At least it must have been quick…

“It’s really interesting though, so that makes up for a lot. I haven’t really figured out how he works, and he doesn’t want to talk…”

“He’s alive?” That was… that was a nightmare in the making.

“I know! Interesting, isn’t he? I think his head is trying to absorb more metal, and make a new body. But every time I let him talk, he just starts swearing at me.”

I tilted my head.

Again, I could only see the back of her head… but judging from the hands on hips, the stomp, and tone of her voice, it was with a pout that she said “There’s no need to be rude about these things.”

“Courtesy is important, yes. We met when you were keeping company with my nominee, I believe? Shatterbird.” She turned, book down to her side and one hand extended, no sign of the injuries Lung had given her earlier: Bonesaw did good work.

“I shooed it. No point starting a fight just yet — at least two of the Nine here, plus Murder Rat, and fighting inside would leave me without my swarms. Already, I was having to bring in new bugs to maintain the swarm around the window frame as some of the poison that clung to Bonesaw like a perfume drifted out. Still, a single bug sent in lasted long enough to confirm that Weld still had his earbud in… and that his face was still moving. I didn’t have the angle to see, nor enough bugs in place to feel, his expression, and perhaps that was a blessing: the finger marks on his body’s throat filled out as much of the story as I cared to know in detail.”
“Ooh, introductions! Tailor, this is Panacea — she’s the maybe big sister I told you about. Panacea, this is Tailor!” Bonesaw had darted between us, and was gesturing back and forth.

I turned to Amy, who seemed determined to compact herself out of existence. “We’ve met.”

“Taylor.” She didn’t raise her face, but I could make out puffiness and tear tracks on her profile nonetheless.

“Tailor’s already through the testing phase: remember when I was telling you about Jack’s missing nominee? It was her all along!” A pinging noise came from her instruments, and she turned back to them as a needle sized for a drinking straw began to descend on Weld’s torso. She was humming a lullaby as she worked.

“I must ask: why the anonymity? Why not take the credit that you so richly deserved?” Shatterbird sounded polite. Interested, even.

I turned and shrugged. “Fame wasn’t the goal. Getting things done was, and…” I smiled mirthlessly “… as you’ve shown, the credit turns up eventually, no matter what.”

She cocked her head at that, and then nodded. “Greater for the seeming show of reluctance. I will think on this tactic.”

That wasn’t actually what I’d been trying to say — at all! — but I didn’t really see a point to arguing with her.

“Mind if I have a talk with Panacea?”

“Have fun!” Bonesaw waved without looking up from her project. “Her next test isn’t until tomorrow anyway.”

I gestured at the doorway, and she stepped through, still clutching herself.
As I moved to follow, Bonesaw spoke again, making some adjustment to the apparatus. “Almost forgot! Make sure to see Jack before you go. He’s been waiting on the roof with your friend.”

I stumbled as I followed Panacea out. “I’ll do that.”

I steered her toward the corridor with the window missing, so I could see. She looked like it had been a very bad day for her too.

We stood there for a moment, looking eastward toward the bay. It was a dark night, made darker by the clouds, and the only light visible came from the battle to the north, a fiery red that flared and dimmed according to the rhythm of their conflict.

Above me, now that I was looking on the roof, I could see Jack standing behind a girl sitting in a chair, a hood over her and a knife in his hand. Not Quinn, then. The size was right for Lisa, and I couldn’t really think of any other friends of mine who fit the description: Amy was, after all, right next to me. Unless Bonesaw had built an elaborate meat-puppet duplicate and — while she certainly could do that — I didn’t see why she’d bother. That… that was going to be a problem.

Assuming they wouldn’t just let her go because I asked nicely, and that seemed a safe bet.

Finally, I broke the silence. “Do you want to talk?”

She shook her head, then paused. “No. But maybe I need to. D… did you really set up Noelle to go after Mom?”

I closed my eyelids on webbing. Not a good time to ask for a favor, then. “No. All I knew was that there was someone dangerous in Coil’s base; that’s why Brandish had Shielder cut off the corridor leading to her. After the self-destruct… I didn’t think Noelle could have survived. I didn’t check, and I should have. I’m sorry.”

“And the rest?” Her voice wavered.

“I don’t know the rest of what they told you. At least some of it, probably.”
Again, silence.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “My father. I told you once that my way of coping had issues; now you know what some of them are.”

“So you murdered people?”

“Killed. Murder… is more. When Brandish killed Coil, it wasn’t murder.” When I killed Krieg… had it been murder? One question I’d never had the courage to ask Quinn: I was afraid I knew how he’d answer.

“Killed people.” She shook her head. “That’s what she wants next, you know. For me to kill someone. With my power.”

I thought it over. “Whom?”

She turned toward me, spreading her arms. “Does it matter?”

I cocked my head at her. “Could you kill Bonesaw? Or Jack? Crawler’s… probably too hot for you to reach, right now.”


That was a surprisingly reasonable question. “They’re the ones most likely to end the world. The Siberian’s the most dangerous in combat, but those three are the ones who could depopulate the city or, well, worse.”

“Jack?” She shook her head. “No, I meant why kill anyone?”

I thought about that. “Is it the Hippocratic oath?” I could respect that kind of dedication, especially considering the pressure she was under, even if it was inconvenient right now.
She brought her right hand up to her face, covering one eye and her forehead. “Sure. Let’s go with that.”

Why had I killed people? “Revenge, self-defense, defense of others, trying to break the gangs’ stranglehold on this city…” I thought about it. “… that pretty much covers it so far.”

Now she had both hands up, covering her face. “So far… look, let’s change the subject. They let you walk around freely?”

I nodded. “There are periodic attempts to kill me, of course, but other than that… sure. They don’t let you? Bonesaw had said…”

Amy laughed, but there was nothing of laughter in it. “She let me go for a walk. And if I wasn’t back in time, whomever I was found with? She’d take her time. Get creative.” She shuddered.

Hostages. Well, I’d thought I had few enough of those left myself, but Jack had apparently found one somehow. Another reason to be careful, at least until it was perfectly clear that this wouldn’t be running to the rules Jack had laid out… at which point, the gloves would be coming off.

For all of us.

Amy continued bitterly, “And then Weld came. Bonesaw had these monsters, dead capes walking or stitched together…” she shivered “… patrolling the hospital, killing patients or doctors or nurses if they were in the corridors… and Weld fought his way up, killing the two that were here. I didn’t see most of it, but I heard the struggle.” She gestured at the empty frame of the floor-to-ceiling window. “Here’s where he finished Hatchet Face: broke his back, crushed his skull, and cast him down. For a moment there…”

She sighed.

“For a moment there, I had hope again. That if her minions could be beaten, the Nine could be beaten too. He was here hunting for Cherish, you know, asked if I knew where she was. And then…”
“The Siberian.” I’d seen the finger marks left in metal.

“The Siberian. And… and now his disembodied head is sitting there, watching Bonesaw play with his body. Likely her next pet. He deserved better than that. It… it’s just dark, you know? Unfair. What’s the point, of any of it? Of any of us?”

I thought about that for a while, looking out at the lightless city beneath us. “I don’t know. Maybe there isn’t one. But I swore on my father’s grave that I wouldn’t give up… and I won’t.”

“It’s that simple for you?” She seemed to be trying for a smile, but that looked more like a grimace, like she was about to burst into tears.

I shrugged. “They can be beaten: Cherish and Burnscar are both gone. I don’t know what the other nominees have been up to, but that light-show to the north is definitely Lung. He’s still fighting.”

A thought, and a bug came up before her, floating around chin level.

“I’m not done, either. And — even here — you are not alone. I’m going to need some time upstairs, but… take a moment by the view, clear your head? We’ll talk again afterwards.”

I reached out and, awkwardly, hugged her. After a moment, she hugged back with one arm.

Then I released her, turned, and made my way to the stairwell, and my second meeting with Jack.

Behind me, the firefly I’d left for her lit up with a faint yellow-green glow.
I stepped out on to that dark rooftop, lit by no light from above, and felt the wind whistle by. Before me, on the east side of the roof, a girl with a hood over her head huddling in a chair set near the edge. Behind her, leaning down to whisper into her ear, hands on either side of the back of the chair, open knife in his left… Jack Slash, the reflectionless bay spreading out behind him, and the growing fires to his right.

He straightened as I emerged and waved me over. I watched him from every angle, bugs along the entire rim of the roof. He was squinting against the same fierce wind that blew even my dense and curly hair out before me, but remained the same well-groomed man as before — though the stubble was beginning to fill in the designs shaved along the interior of his beard, and his hair was greasy.

No more greasy than my own, I thought, and started toward him.

“Tailor. Glad you could make it.” His voice carried over the wind, a tenor both light and resonant. A voice made for radio, as much a well-tuned instrument as Quinn Calle’s was. I stopped, leaving perhaps fifty feet between us.

“The last conversation didn’t really resolve anything.” I kept my voice level, filling my lungs to carry across the distance and wind. There wasn’t lingering insecticide up here, but he almost certainly had more such devices on him. Or something else that made him confident enough to try this.

At that, he smiled. “My thoughts exactly.”

“So you took a hostage?”

He blinked, raising his left hand, and scratched the back of his head with the tip of his knife.

“Hostage?” He looked down at the hooded girl between us.

Then he laughed. “No, taking hostages only works against people who let their fears rule them. The technique has its uses, but it’s no way to treat a colleague.” A grin. “Well, unless you’re trying to provoke them into a reprisal… but that’s different.” He shook his head and then looked back at me, eyebrows raised. “Whatever gave you the idea…”
“Bonesaw mentioned you had a friend of mine here.”

“Ah.” The knife came up again, this time tapping his lips. “She’s remarkably creative, you know. Precocious beyond her years, in so many, many ways. Still, at the end of the day, she is a child. An understandable confusion.”

“Oh?” A fight here… with Shatterbird and Bonesaw so close beneath, and perhaps more… it would have to be fast. I’d need a fast exit, too, or some way to do it without alerting anyone. But for now, he seemed happy to talk, and I could certainly use the time to plan.

“Talking to someone’s friends is… well… have you heard the saying that ‘happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way?’ ”

I nodded. Tolstoy, maybe? Mom had used it, had promised to show me the book when I was older. She hadn’t lived long enough.

“Well, if you want to know someone, you don’t look to their friends, you see? You look to their foes.”

I tilted my head. Who of my enemies was even alive? That certainly wasn’t Hookwolf sitting there, and Lung was visible to the north, trying to use his four immense wings to lift an even larger Crawler off the ground.

Jack continued, smiling tenderly. “Because everyone lies, in their own way, and the lies of friends are predictable things: no information in them.” He pitched his voice up. “‘He’s a good friend because he helped me. She makes me feel better about myself. We’ve spent a lot of time together.’ ” A derisive snort, and he continued. “Empty noises like that won’t get you anywhere in life. The lies a foe tells, though, those… those can tell you something useful. Better than talking to the person himself — or herself,” he nodded to me, “— since people lie about themselves more than anything.”

I thought about that for a moment.

“It’s the same reason, if you want to see where someone’s going, you don’t look to their plans… you look to their past. People lie about their plans all the time: ‘tomorrow, I’m going to start that diet’ or ‘next week, I’ll look for work’ or ‘I will love and cherish you, until death do us part.’ ” The
knife traced slow curves in the air, illustrating each mocking example. “Their past, on the other hand... get to the truth of that, and their futures become clear. People don’t much change their courses, once set.”

“So you looked for an old enemy of mine.” I’d give him this: his monologues were more interesting than Cherish’s. Less fun, maybe, but certainly more thought-provoking.

He nodded, and that grin of his grew savage as he whipped the hood off, revealing a shivering Madison Clements, eyes tight shut. Which was... when had I last even thought of her?

“Not a very interesting specimen, is she? Even after putting both halves of your career together, it took some work to find an enemy you hadn’t already removed. But it’s always the exceptions that tell the tale. The anomalies.”

“I’m not sure I follow.” He thought Madison Clements understood me?

“Shy?” His knife traced a line from the corner of her left eye back to her temple. “You needn’t be. Madison here understands that she will never, ever, speak of what happens on this rooftop... or I will come for her a second time.” He straightened, then flourished the knife at me in a sort of half-bow. “Unless you get there first, of course.” A thin red line welled up on her face, and a dark patch spread through her pants.

I focused on Jack. “You went after her earlier tonight?”

He nodded. “Our first meeting — the confirmation that you were also the one I’d been looking for — well, it prompted a bit of a rethink. The information we’d pulled together on the rogue beekeeper Tailor, well... it looked different, in this new light. School was never my favorite activity, but I do remember the importance of consulting...” The flat of his knife tapped the crown of her head, twice. “… primary sources. The refugee camp security wasn’t, ah, much of a barrier.”

No, I couldn’t imagine that it would have been.

Contingencies spun through my mind, and at least one of them required that I be on the east side of the roof when this conversation turned full-contact. I took a slow step southeast rather than make a direct approach on Jack.
He grinned at me a moment, and took a bouncing step to the northwest. Fine. If he was willing to play along…

“So, what did you conclude?” Another step, matched by him.

“She really didn’t pay that much attention to you, you know. Thought of you as Emma’s project, just a way to reinforce who was on top by making it clear who was… not. Wondered why you didn’t do anything about it, why you stayed in the role of designated loser as long as you did.”

I fought down the pulse of anger, and stepped. “So she told you I was the designated loser?”

He shook his head, still smiling. “She told me that she’d had a hand in some of the worst times of your life… and that she’d forgotten about you. Didn’t even think she should be worrying about you: figured you’d transferred to some other school, had a makeover.” He continued to match me.

“A makeover?” Another step.

“I know! Or maybe I don’t — Bonesaw and the Siberian sometimes include me in their hair-braiding exercises, but I’ve never seen the point, really. Regardless: as if that would fix anything.” He sidestepped again, always balanced, always facing me.

I pictured him with braided hair, or maybe dreadlocks, and the bandanna and mascara slid into place without conscious direction. He really did look like that pirate in the Earth Aleph movies. I wondered for a moment if Bonesaw or Siberian was the fan here… and then refocused.

“So you concluded, what, she’s shallow? I’m not seeing the point here — you said it yourself: she didn’t pay that much attention to me.” Another step southeast.

“She was alive to say it.” He waved his arms as he stepped northwest, and I tensed… but no slash came. “That’s what was out of place.”

“You expected me to kill her?” As I edged sideways, I spared a fragment of attention for Madison. She was shaking: short, sharp, twitches and, while her eyes were tight shut, her mouth was moving silently. A prayer? A curse?
“You’re willing to kill: we both know that. I might be wrong about some of the events I had to reconstruct, but I saw what you did with the Fallen.” He paused a moment, making a stirring motion with his knife as he repositioned, and his face grew serious as he continued. “Nice work there, by the way.”

“I wasn’t doing it for the audience.” Another careful step.

“Exactly. Why were you doing it? That’s the interesting question — ‘why’ usually is. ‘What’ can be good, and ‘how’ tells so very much, but ‘why’ is the best.” He was grinning again.

“Is this the part where you tell me?” Not even a quarter rotation yet, and I didn’t have anything useful to say.

“Why not? The ‘what’ is easy: for the last month, Brockton Bay accounted for over twenty percent of cape casualties nationwide. Before Leviathan’s visit. Not to mention the bombings, the fire, that office building downtown… call it, well, a lot of civilian deaths, too.” He was ticking items off on the list one by one, tapping each freshly raised finger with the flat of his knife.

“You think I did all that?” I called back, continuing to circle. I didn’t have to talk: I just had to keep him talking long enough. Thankfully, the man did like the sound of his own voice.

He tilted his head as he matched my movement. “I think you did… enough. Which brings us to the ‘how.’ There’s never anything attributed to you — hell, there’s hardly anything that’s even a mystery: every event with an identified cape or capes behind it, claiming credit. All of it tied up with a bow, neatly framed by a narrative of the gang wars spinning out of control.”

“But you don’t buy it.” Another slow, shuffling, step. Nothing to set him off just yet.

“Ehhh…” He wobbled his free hand back and forth. “I think they actually did do most of that fighting and you just… steered things along. Let enemy fight enemy until none remained. That’s your ‘how.’ That’s your past, and that’s what you’ll do again if you get a chance. To us.” His smile was showing an uncomfortable amount of teeth.

I didn’t freeze at his words.

I just didn’t move, holding myself very still. In the open, with him knowing where I was, without
surprise… not the fight I’d choose. He could cut what he could see. My armor might block his knife. Might. He’d cut through concrete before — not in one swipe, but even so, not the kind of chance I liked to take. This wasn’t where I’d been planning to fight, either: our circling had only put me in the southwest corner, barely a quarter of the way to the swapped positions I’d been angling for.

I watched him carefully, looking for the twitch in his eyes, in his hands, that would signal the beginning of the fight.

He held his arms out to his sides slowly, palms up, and took a skipping sideways step to the northwest.

“Come on, come on: the game’s not over yet.” I could hear laughter in his words as he waved me onward, but if he wanted to delay things, play games like this… I’d take the time and make him choke on it.

I resumed my circling, this time matching his movements.

“So there you have the ‘how’ and ‘what.’ Now… now we can approach why.” He took a half-dozen steps in silence, watching me, and I kept pace, watching him.

“All this brings us back to our guest tonight, Miss Clements.” He pointed at her with the knife and she flinched, and then froze. “She’s alive. And she’s not alone: the other two girls most involved apparently left town. Also alive. A dozen capes dead, over a thousand civilians gone, with never a hint of your hand… and yet, of the ones who tormented you so… they all live. It isn’t because you won’t kill, or because you cannot kill tracelessly. So, why is it?” He sounded fascinated.

I kept moving, step by cautious step. “Wasn’t this what you were going to tell me?”

He laughed. “And I shall! You didn’t choose your prey with reference to yourself, or she’d have had an… accident. Your pattern, your words to Valefor… it looked like someone running the city from the shadows, plucking enemies out one by one. Many try it, few succeed. But these enemies…” He pointed at Madison again. “… you left alive. The exception. The anomaly. The…” he laughed. “… curious incident of the dog in the night. And, as ever… that’s what tells the tale. You weren’t trying to rule the city — you were trying to cleanse it. And in the service of that ideal, you have been both relentless and ruthless.” He paused. “I mean that as a high compliment, of course.”
“Thanks.” It wasn’t the kind of compliment I wanted, but every sentence bought time. He half-bowed at my words, never ceasing his movement northwest.

“And since your interests aren’t personal, we need to have a different sort of conversation than most. Compelling your participation in our little game with personal threats of fear or force… well, Bakuda tried that, and the results were dramatic. Your past response to such a threat makes your future actions in that event predictable, but… ah… counterproductive.”

“So now you’re going to tell me you’ve figured me out, and gloat before you kill me?” I hadn’t really met anyone who went in for that, but the man monologued like no one I’d ever seen. If I could get him gloating, that would buy another minute, easy.

“Not in the least.” He came to a stop with the north side of the building behind him, lining us up so that he was silhouetted by the surging red light beyond, where a seven-headed Crawler now reared above Lung… vomiting what appeared to be lava from each mouth. “Now I’m going to tell you why you will take my offer.”

Halfway there. I changed direction as I continued to circle, now working my way northeast. “I don’t think I follow your argument there.”

He started southwest, mirroring me. “For you, no argument: just facts. You want to cleanse the villains from this city — from this world? That’s hardly a problem: did you think we had moral compunctions about killing villains? We all have our various quirks, our little Quixotic crusades.”

“Yeah? What’s yours?” Cherish had certainly taught me one thing: people like to talk about themselves.

“Oh, I just want to keep things interesting, that’s all. Most people drift through life and never do anything worthwhile. Never shake things up.” The wind was blowing his hair across his face, right to left, but his eyes never wavered.

“So you hang out with people who do?” If he wouldn’t take the obvious bait, focus on him at one remove: talk about his work, on the Nine he’d built over the last two decades. No one spent that kind of time on anything without caring about it, and people talked about their obsessions.

“The veterans mostly qualify. It can be hard to tell.” He continued circling, catlike.
“Really? How so?” Just a little more time…

“Take Mannequin. The thing you have to remember about him is that Alan Gramme was a genius. I don’t mean the way people typically talk about tinkers or thinkers as geniuses — that’s more like having blueprints or a calculator on hand all the time — I mean the real deal. Smartest man I’ve ever met. His trauma’s obvious, but what he’s doing about it? Obscure. The man’s mind is a maze. Could be the obvious, or maybe that’s misdirection for revenge on the Simurgh, or… hell, I don’t know.” He shrugged.

“If he’s so smart, why isn’t he running the Nine?” That’s more like it.

“Doesn’t even want to. Funny thing: the Siberian’s another genius. Better insight into capes than anyone: she’s the one who kept Bonesaw from mixing up those cocktail drinks Shatterbird brought back, before Weld got the kid’s attention. Anyways, smarts aren’t everything — I’ve certainly killed enough people smarter than I am to say that with confidence, and I’d guess you know what I’m talking about here too.”

I thought about Krieg, and found myself nodding. Jack nodded back.

“Right. Now, I don’t spend a lot of time thinking deep thoughts about the world, but the fact that two of the smartest people I’ve ever even heard of independently decided to spend their lives mute and murderous… it makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” His delivery had slowed, reflective, and his pace had too.

Mostly, it persuaded me that Jack had a point with his ‘smarts aren’t everything’ argument.

His voice picked up again. “But I digress. Some of our recruits, I talk about who they could become, if they joined us. Take Amelia: she’s not very happy with who she is. Something we can fix.”

“But not me.” Three quarters of the way there: Jack and I were aligned northwest to southeast now. Not much longer now.

“No, that’s not the argument for you. You don’t need an argument, just time to think things through. You will join us because of who you already are. You’ll join for the same reason you helped the Empire take temporary control of this city: because you like the thought of turning villain on villain, of arranging battles where every death is a gain, every outcome a victory. Of
having a knife you can wield freely to cut out the rot.” His tenor was smooth, even seductive.

I didn’t answer, continuing to maneuver for the eastern side of the roof.

“That’s your past, the course you’ve set, and it tells your future to come. And, let’s face it, you will never find a blade more perfectly suited to your hand than the Nine. None sharper, none more deserving of your attentions — imagine what you could do with us.” He was gesturing with his own blade, his eyes intense.

Sweeping the Empire aside, for a start, would be an evening’s work. Ending the struggle to the north before it consumed the city might also be possible: the Siberian was one of the vanishingly few who might be able to defeat either of them.

It also offered a better chance of dealing with the Nine themselves, wearing them down over time. The one victory I’d had against them had employed their strength against themselves, turning Burnscar on Cherish.

“And you’d be happy to place yourselves in my hand, I suppose.” I put as much skepticism in that sentence as I could.

Jack shrugged. “Why not? We don’t mind killing villains, being the thing that the monsters of the world fear. Oh, we all have our own quirks and habits to work around, but that just means you’d have to be clever about how you employed us. And you are clever, aren’t you?”

Was this a ploy?

Of course it was: what kind of ploy, though? How to test him? “Cherish and Burnscar are gone, you know.”

Jack’s smile widened. “I had noticed the ring going uncontrolled, yes. You say that as if it makes you a less attractive recruit. Those empty slots… surely you could find other villains who’d deserve to be your ally.”

We paced onward in silence, as new plans spun through my mind.
I found myself behind Madison, at the eastern edge of the roof, felt my hair carried out behind me like a banner. This was the position I’d been aiming for, but…

“So? What do you say? Still need some time to think it over?” Jack was standing relaxed and ready with his back to the stairs, knife dangling loosely in one hand and his hair blowing out before him.

I set my hands on the back of Madison’s chair, and thought.
John leaned back in his chair, and looked at his cup of coffee. Running low again, and the meeting was no closer to useful resolution than it had been when it recessed two hours past, or when it reconvened half an hour ago. On the screen before him were the men and women responsible for the other nine largest cities in the US, and the woman in charge of the besieged city of Brockton Bay. Collectively, they commanded almost two hundred parahumans; the PRT as a whole held as many again, and could draw on some international alliances at need.

It was, without question, one of the greatest concentrations of force in the world, matched only (perhaps) by the CUI’s secretive Yangban. No other organization had fought the Endbringers so many times, or with such success, attending to not only the defense of this nation but of every nation in the world. Without exaggeration, humanity might no longer exist were it not for the efforts of the PRT over the last two decades. He was proud to be a part of it.

His eyes turned to the top right panel of the mosaic of images set to the right of the current speaker: Deputy Director Cowen, sitting in for Chief Director Costa-Brown. Normally, a meeting like this would have ended by now, with a decision from her and the rest of the Directors falling into line — out of respect for the office in part, but more for the woman who held it. She’d founded the PRT, built it into what it was today, and her calls were not often wrong.

Cowen was a nonentity by comparison. Able enough, when given direction, and an excellent XO… but not the man to choose a course on his own, let alone persuade the other Directors. John let his eyes return to the focus screen, currently displaying “Director Piggot — Audio Only.”

“… captured or eliminated, including Butcher, perhaps this time for good. An on-site thinker confirms that none of the strike force received the Butcher infection, followed by pinprick tests to verify. Casualties include Velocity, as well as two E88 capes.”

Director Tagg interrupted. “Commendably decisive. New York thanks you: the full lancer squad began deploying on the Teeth’s known haunts in sequence after our last meeting. By morning, we’ll have finished the job.”

“Does this mean we can expect Legend overhead in Brockton Bay?” Piggot’s voice sounded grim — but then, she always did.

“Absolutely. Even without this, you know I’ve favored stricter…”
“We can’t.” Director West, out of Philadelphia. “Legend is a major strategic asset, and one vulnerable to the S9’s Cherish. Until we have an answer to that problem, sending him in could only worsen things. Unless Alexandria…”

Director Kendall shook his head, tanned face taut with stress. “As I have already said, she’s still recovering from the injuries sustained against Leviathan. We’re optimistic that she’ll be combat-ready for the next Endbringer but even that is uncertain. Sending her in against the S9 is asking for another Hero incident.”

There was a moment of silence while everyone recalled that this made it only the second time she’d been injured… and the first had come at the hands of the Siberian, when Hero had fallen.

“Which leaves Eidolon.” West’s voice was heavy, and he sounded tired. They were all tired, as much from the intractable problem as the time of night.

Director Wilkins was a weedy sort; balding and with a forward head posture that made him resemble a turtle; his perennial caution didn’t hurt the resemblance either. “Eidolon has informed me that he can engage… but that the degree of force required to restrain Crawler and Lung as they are already would likely involve major collateral damage.”

“How major?” Tagg, as aggressive as Wilkins was cautious. John had always thought that Costa-Brown had intended that balancing act when those two were appointed in quick succession.

“Major enough.” A moment, and John realized that he had spoken. “We’ll find a way that doesn’t involve writing off the population of an American city.”

“Director Armstrong, how do you feel about writing off the population of multiple American cities?” Director Daniels, from Atlanta. “If you won’t act now out of some sort of fear…”

“Shut it.” Tagg, again, blunt and forceful, followed quickly by Director Hearthrow’s more measured tones. “Martin, please. This is unbecoming… and unproductive.”

John nodded at both of them. Army versus Navy was a rivalry old and deep, one resurrected in the New York - Boston joint exercises he’d proposed, but the fastest way to get those two old foes to pull together was an outside enemy like the CUI. Or a posturing civilian who’d never faced combat himself, questioning the character of those who had.
They were all civilians, now.

His left thumb reached out, felt the Academy ring on his ring finger, crest in and seal out. He remembered Jen baptizing that very ring at the Ring Dance, and her joke about whether there would be room for another ring on that finger as she slid it on, before the kiss. He’d laughed and responded that he might be married to the Navy now, but there was nothing wrong with a little bigamy.

That had been a happy night.

She was gone, almost twenty five years now, and her parting words had been that the Navy would always come first with him. Well, he’d proved her wrong in that much at least.

Director Daniels spoke next, eyes focused once more. “Think outside our own resources: could Dragon carry out the kill order?”

Director Raeder, blonde and brassy, answered. “Without a precise location on the target, it’s impractical. We could ask Dragon to commit her suits to a manhunt in the city, but against Shatterbird and the Siberian, she could lose all of them very easily to no result. We could assemble every tinker with remote attack capabilities in the Protectorate, and they wouldn’t materially boost our chances. Dragon’s the heaviest distance hitter available.”

“Short of ordering a missile strike.” Hearthrow’s tone was measured, neither approving nor disapproving.

“Short of that, yes. But if things have gotten that bad, we might do better to let Eidolon try first. That would guarantee losing the civilian population.”

“What about the thinkers? Do we have anyone who could locate her precisely?” Daniels didn’t give up — a virtue, most of the time.

“From that distance? Under the circumstances, our best bet would be Insight in Brockton Bay. Emily?” John answered, as he so often did on questions of power limitations.

The main screen went blank once more as she answered. “Insight is confident that Cherish is focusing her attention on controlling the Lung/Crawler engagement, but is also confident that
Cherish has a very large range: large enough that we’d have to search the whole city… and she can almost certainly sense those within her range too. Best case, she has to be paying close attention. Worst case…” In other words, no dice. Cherish wouldn’t be found unless she wanted to be found.

“What about the existing attempt on Cherish? Do we have any word from him?” Kendall was the biggest ditherer John had ever seen, a man who owed his rank to politics and his position to the fervent prayers of Chief Director Costa-Brown (and every other Director who’d met the man) that Alexandria would be able to keep the LA branch running despite him.

Piggot’s voice replied. “I’ve had no word from Weld for almost two hours now: his last report was that he’d defeated two villains at the hospital, and would be attempting to exfiltrate with Panacea. One moment.”

“Dragon confirms that his earbud is still active, and never left his ear, but it is still in the hospital and hasn’t moved in any way for seventy-two minutes now. He did not respond to inquiries. She’s activating it remotely now to listen in, on my authority and despite the risk of being traced but… I am afraid that we must presume him lost.”

John closed his eyes.

He’d never had children. He wasn’t ever likely to, at this rate.

He’d given himself to the Navy, and the Navy had rewarded his zeal, his talent, and his luck. Between the below zone promotions, selection for the College of Naval Command and Staff on reaching O-4, the way he’d distinguished himself in command of the USS Chandler, covering the Taiwanese refugee flotilla against probes from the CUI’s infant Navy… oh, the star of his career had ridden high indeed. There were those who had thought he’d be the first of their year to make Admiral, instead of (as it turned out) Howard. Not that he begrudged her the honor: she’d earned it.

Besides, those rapid promotions had meant that he’d pinned on the silver eagles of a Captain just in time to serve as chief of staff to CVBG-5, the battle group built around the carrier USS Kitty Hawk… and based out of Yokosuka. Vice Admiral Natter’s orders to get to sea immediately had saved most of the battle group when Leviathan came for Kyushu in 1999 — the waves had been worst there, but by the end had been felt almost everywhere on Honshu — but the ensuing months had been nightmarish. Even with most of the Pacific Fleet arriving in support, there was never enough sealift, never enough supplies, never enough…

They told him he’d done the impossible with what he’d had to work with, that the battle group had
ensured that hundreds of thousands had lived to make it across the ocean. That what they had done together was fit to stand with Hungnam and Dunkirk, and be kept fresh across the generations as a glory of the Navy.

They’d even given him a medal for those haunted months.

John never wore it.

He’d resigned his commission, after, and made his way to the PRT, in the hope of making a lasting difference. He’d spent a decade as he rose through the organization, studying powers and their uses, holding out hope for a way to unlock them for wider use, or the discovery of some power or power combination that could — at last! — put down an Endbringer for good. Lately, he’d spent most of his time working with Flechette, on temporary loan from New York, and had some hopes for the next fight.

Given his research interests, perhaps it was natural that he dealt with more Case 53s than any other Director. Given his relatively quiet city, perhaps it was natural that he had more Wards than most cities. Given the failures of his personal life, he had done nothing which had deserved the arrival of Weld.

John had no idea who the boy had been, no more than the boy himself did — massive retrograde amnesia was one of the signatures of a Case 53. But he knew who Weld was now: diligent, caring, and brave. Deprived of sleep by his power, he’d turned to music, reading, and training, bettering himself in the lonely hours of the night. Inevitably set apart from the rest of humanity by his metal body, he hadn’t turned inward but instead had reached a hand across the gap, volunteering his time for dozens of charities. And, remembering nothing on this Earth to fight for, he had unhesitatingly taken up the burden of a hero, championing those who had no one to fight for them.

There were good reasons why Weld was being groomed for command of a major city’s Protectorate team someday. Inhuman form or no, he stood for the best of humanity. If John had ever had a son, he would have wished for one like this… and for three happy years he had thought himself so blessed.

Not twelve hours ago, he’d sent this young man off to Brockton Bay to take command of the Wards there, in the belief that he needed to come to manhood somewhere else, under a Director less partial to him. John had been conscious of the irony of sending Weld off to handle relief work following Leviathan, and he had hoped that what had broken him would be the making of his protege. Instead, that protege was dead, or — perhaps worse — a captive of the S9.
Right now, he had to bury those hopes and the sorrow that followed their loss, and do his job.

He blinked, long and slow, and when he reopened his eyes he was ready again. “There are two parts to the problem. How to deal with Cherish, and what to do when she has been dealt with. The first requires a parahuman immune to her, by range, power, or tinkertech. We’ve all checked our rosters, and we’re repeating the arguments from the earlier meeting. Can we focus on the second problem for the moment? I can have seven from the Boston PRT office on site with half an hour’s notice. What else can we prepare against the real threat?”

He left unspoken the fact that, of those seven, there was only one who could hope to hurt Crawler, and that the rest would be woefully outmatched against any of the S9. He wouldn’t have ordered them into this nightmare, but then he hadn’t had to: they’d all volunteered.

Weld had been well liked. No — it was too early to be sure of his death.

He was well liked.

Tagg spoke first. “My most mobile heroes are running mop-up on the Teeth right now. Legend could be there in seconds. For the rest… forty-five minutes to an hour, at least. I’d feel more comfortable cutting more loose once we’ve cleared out the Teeth, but…”

John nodded. James wouldn’t want to deprive his capes of backup: no one sensible would.

Director West spoke next. “I have three who could make that distance in about ten minutes, working together, but none of them would have any impact against Crawler and Lung. For the heavy hitters… there’s a plane on standby. An hour to cover the distance, and I have four volunteers, including Chevalier, waiting on board.”

Director Hearthrow shook his head. “Two hours of flight time… and no one whom I’d send in against the S9 beyond Myrddin himself. I’m sorry, John.”

Director Raeder pursed her lips. “Three hours, and I’ve got problems of my own in Miami. I’ll pull my teams if it’s graded S-rank, but otherwise… if I do, that the mess in Little Havana will spill over, and I’ll have half the city on fire. Possibly literally. It won’t do us any good to reinforce one city and lose another.”
Director Daniels nodded. “I can have five there in two and a half hours.”

John shook his head. “A moment, please.” He turned away from the table and hit the button that temporarily obscured everything from his side, standing stiffly and turning to the door leading to his outer office. He opened it, and saw Hunch sitting uneasily in the chairs arranged for guests and sized for baseline humans.

The young man looked up, twisting against the curvature of his back and the thick knots of muscle that were half the reason for his name. “Director?”

He nodded. “Hunch, what do you think about sending in heroes to deal with Crawler in half an hour? In two?”

One of the oversized eyes closed, and Hunch bit his lip in concentration. He was, despite appearances, a surprisingly powerful thinker… and good humored, to boot. That would be the other half of the reason for his name.

“Very bad and… worse. A lot worse.” His voice was high and thready, belying his size.

John closed his eyes again for a moment.

With an act of will, he forced them open. “Thank you, Hunch. And thank you for staying up, and enduring the headaches from your power.”

He’d turned to reenter his office but paused as Hunch called out. “Weld’s a friend. If it’ll help you get him help, what’s a little pain? You will get him out of this, won’t you, sir?”

“I’ll certainly try.” On those empty words, John closed the door and resumed his seat.

A quick tap brought everything live once more. “Hunch doesn’t deliver the clearest indications, but he has informed me that things have changed: sometime in the next hour or so, Crawler gets a lot harder to handle. I’m not sure we have time to call in reinforcements anyway. In that time frame, we’d have the Boston, New York, and Philadelphia teams on site if they dispatched immediately… but no one else.”
Silence followed that.

Wilkins cleared his throat awkwardly. “Strider is still resting from the Leviathan fight, but if we grade this S-rank…”

Cowen spoke up for the first time this session. “Save him for the next Endbringer: we have never had enough teleporters, let alone ones of his scope, and the Chief Director’s instructions regarding the fatigue of strategic assets are clear.”

Which they were. But John knew Rebecca, and she had never been afraid to overrule her standing orders, never afraid to take a gamble in order to achieve victory. With her absent… Cowen had the authority, and he wouldn’t use it beyond his instructions. At least he wouldn’t interfere if the other Directors exercised their discretion.

Piggot spoke then, harsh and uncompromising. “Then we’ll break this open with what we’ve got. Cherish will turn us on each other if we run or if we fight, and since waiting just gets us death by Crawler… we might as well go out fighting. I’ll send whoever will go against Crawler, and hope to draw Cherish from cover in the process. Piggot out.”

Tagg spoke up, glaring into the camera. “If Cherish goes down, I trust there’s no other complaint about committing Legend to the fight?”

No one spoke up in reply, until Raeder asked “And Eidolon?”

Hearthrow shook his head, his voice measured and musical. “No. If Crawler adapts to Eidolon, we have an extinction level event. If Eidolon goes in, he has to go in as hard as possible from the very beginning. And, from what we’ve heard from Director Wilkins, we might as well be ordering him to kill the city. If the city must die… better it be by missiles. Leave Eidolon with someone else to blame.”

John watched the nodding spread across the mosaic, and couldn’t bring himself to disagree. If one of the Directors had psychological problems after killing a city, that could be a major problem. If Eidolon ever lost it… disaster untold. An extinction level event of its own. Avoiding that risk was, John feared, worth the collateral cost to clear the field for him to engage. The consequences, political and personal, would be incalculably severe for everyone on the call — perhaps even fatal — but they all knew the stakes. Even Kendall: either he’d find his spine, or he’d dither too much to dissent. And then that would be that. In a situation like this, their united recommendation carried force: the president would almost have to authorize the strike.
Kendall spoke up, almost white beneath the tan. “We don’t have to make that decision now: we have time. Perhaps an hour.”

John had never been more glad to hear that man delay or dither. Because in less than one hour’s time, unless Crawler could be stopped, he’d have to support sending nuclear missiles against Brockton Bay… and even if Weld had survived whatever had happened so far, he wouldn’t survive that.

Nor would anyone else in the city.
I let my hands rest against the back of Madison’s chair and thought, feeling the wind pull my hair back with uneven gusts.

Jack had offered the Nine as a tool to my hand, and a potent tool it would be. The Empire tonight. The Adept, the Teeth, and the Silent Sisters tomorrow. If we kept working our way down the seaboard… maybe even Nilbog. If they could be directed to my purposes. I didn’t doubt Jack when he said they had no moral compunctions about killing villains, that they enjoyed making those whom others feared fear the Nine in turn — but that wasn’t why they did what they did.

Why was it?

Jack had said they each had their little crusades, and his — if he could be believed — was the avoidance of boredom. Mine, as he’d diagnosed it, was to cleanse this city. He wasn’t wrong there, and with his knowledge of my aim, he believed he’d found the handle with which to move me to his will. Was he wrong about that?

Did it matter if he was right, as long as his manipulation served my purpose? I thought… not, though I’d need to be alert should that ever change.

How could I learn to do the same to the other members of the Nine? Quickly enough, deftly enough, to keep them on task, to avoid fratricidal confrontation, to avoid them turning on me… was that his hope? That one way or the other, my struggle to master the tool he’d built over half his life would keep him entertained? That I’d keep him entertained?

Did that matter either, if the tool could do the necessary work? Not in the least: his self-indulgence would be the opening I needed.

What kind of obsessions served as the handles for the rest of the Nine? What purposes would I have to feed to make them feed my own in turn? And what would I do if our purposes ever were opposed?

Could they be anything but opposed, with the Nine on my list and Jack heading it? Any temporary truce must in time give way to renewed conflict… how could I best position myself to take advantage when we fell out? I couldn’t begin to assess those risks as well as I’d like, not quantitatively nor even qualitatively. Too many unknowns; too many unknowables. I could reduce
some of them, refine my thoughts, with time and inquiry, but…

A flare of red to my right caught my attention, and I saw Lung wrench one of Crawler’s heads free, devouring it and leaving a whipping neck joined to a thick trunk that an offhand snort of fire scorched. This hydra would not be so easily beaten, however, and the stump regrew as I watched, forming a new head that vomited something upon Lung’s torso before joining the other heads in attempting to gnaw through Lung’s scales.

One world-ending threat to my right, and one before me. I needed to stop them both, as soon as I possibly could. How? Nothing I had would even touch Crawler, and if the Siberian had been eager to kill him, it would have happened some time over the last several years. Assuming the Siberian even could: for all I knew, he’d adapted to her attacks a long time ago.

Fine. Put Crawler to the side for the moment, and deal with the threat I currently had options for: Jack.

I had committed to stopping Jack from ending the Earth. What else needed to be said? What price could be too great? I might like better plans than I had in place — I hadn’t even considered joining the Nine as a path to defeating them — but if needs must, I’d improvised before. Even waiting to think this through more carefully was a decision of sorts: while I waited, Crawler grew stronger.

A whimper from between my hands reminded me that Madison was here. I’d never particularly liked her. I hated her, to be quite clear: the fact I had larger problems now, things more important to me than her petty bullying didn’t erase those years of casual cruelty. Even so, this had to be the worst day of her life… and all because I hadn’t killed her, or taken revenge on her in any way.

There was a certain satisfaction in that.

And what of Amy? I could feel her beneath me, looking out the window and cupping the firefly I’d left her. She’d lived in quiet despair as long as I’d known her, but even so… today was probably also the worst day of her life. She didn’t deserve anything like the horrors that had come looking for her.

I couldn’t leave her to face this alone.

I thought of my other friends, few though they were. Quinn came to mind, lips pursed, head tilted, a single eyebrow arched. For all the flexibility in his choice of clients, he held a harshly procedural
faith in justice. It was one thing to say ‘better ten guilty men go free than one innocent be imprisoned’, quite another to live it. He wouldn’t approve, I was certain, though I was equally certain that all he’d say on the matter would be to repeat what he’d told me when I went up against Coil. I could hear his voice now, that flowing tenor clipped and tight as it so rarely was: “I can get you out of jail. I cannot get you out of a morgue.”

Lisa’s face appeared next, popeyed and mouth open. Not her usual self-satisfied smile, but the face she’d worn on learning of Krieg. I felt sure that she’d react similarly to me joining the Nine, and smiled. That wasn’t itself a good reason to join, but there’d been too few smiles in life of late. Her outraged voice, rising in pitch as she went on, rang through my memory: “But this is the kind of thing that’ll get you killed!”

Pete’s face floated up afterward, gray and worn, with smile lines bunched behind his eyes. Was he a friend? He’d helped me, more than once, when I’d badly needed help. Had tried to care for me, offered me shelter with his family in Florida, even when he’d thought I might have done… what I had done. I could hear his soft voice telling Quinn the words he feared to say to my face: “I don’t think she did any of that out of malice… I think I can even forgive.”

I’d often told myself that I could never make up for what I’d done — and I couldn’t. Maybe making up for it was the wrong way to think about things, and forgiveness was a better model, one that let me focus on what to do next, instead of retracing my many mistakes. Jack had just told me that my past had determined my future, bet his pitch on the belief I couldn’t change. That I wouldn’t even want to change. That I’d rather justify my past than consider my future. In that, at the very least, I could prove him wrong: I would resolve to choose better than before, each time the opportunity offered.

So I looked at Jack and, instead of thinking about how to turn this around on him, I considered the future if I went on as I had begun, and took his invitation, or if I changed my course… and rejected it.

Playing his game, manipulating the Nine, arranging more villain on villain fights until the day came when we found out which of us would kill the other first… or just skipping straight to that final question. When you got right down to it, I wasn’t sure which course had better odds of staving off apocalypse, let alone the less urgent questions in play. There were risks in life I could estimate, and other perils which were simply uncertain. I didn’t begin to know enough about the problems I’d face on either course to make a calculated decision either way, and it might not even be calculable at all.

If any calculation of my odds would be false precision, that left more basic ways of making the choice, and there… I knew which course I preferred. Part of it was the company I’d be keeping, in victory or defeat, and part of it was the simple fact that I didn’t like the idea of letting Jack win. In anything from ending the world to this recruiting pitch. Maybe he was clever enough to use that
defiance to maneuver me, maybe he was secretly aiming to engineer my rejection… but a spiral of motives like that could go on forever.

Besides, I didn’t think he was that smart. That didn’t make him any less dangerous: as he’d said, he’d killed enough people smarter than he to know that smarts weren’t everything.

Beneath me, in that corridor open to the wind and the moonless night, two more fireflies joined the one cupped in Panacea’s hands, forming a vertical line of light before her, as my spiders formed a darker line along the spine of my armor.

Jack’s head tilted. Had he seen something in my posture?

A group of spiders swarmed into the corridor below and covered Panacea’s torso. She twitched and shied away, but then forced herself to be still as a thin column of flying insects approached.

“No questions?” His tenor voice was light and conversational, carrying clearly despite the wind whipping between us.

I reached out and Madison twitched again, eyes tight shut, as I gripped her shoulders until my knuckles whitened. Jack smiled.

“Just the one.” I kept my voice steady, despite the rising adrenaline.

Another group of spiders came in through the window toward Weld’s head… they died quickly, but enough lasted to reach it, and achieve my aim. Bonesaw looked over at the window and frowned cutely.

The top firefly before Amy blinked off.

“Oh?” Jack’s voice was velvet, smooth and dark as the night above.

The middle firefly doused itself.
“How often does that speech of yours actually work?” I didn’t pause to savor his momentary expression of puzzlement, the half-furrowed brow, the slightest gape of his mouth.

The last firefly before Amy, the one I’d left her to begin with, winked out as I tightened my grip on Madison’s shoulders and launched myself straight backwards, across the two feet of roof remaining and into space.

It was particularly satisfying to watch Jack’s eyes widen as we dropped out of his sight and the swarms came up over the edge, spreading out into a buzzing cloud that swept in on him. Oh, I’d try to put him down here, but I’d settle for blocking his vision a little bit longer.

Madison was screaming as we fell, a high keening sound that had nothing of thought in it, and grabbed my arms in a death grip tight enough I was glad they were armored. There might be bruises afterward, regardless.

A jerk marked the moment that Amy was pulled out the window to join the exodus, her shriek joining Madison’s in a two-part harmony, and the wind about us howling to swallow them both.

Not thirty minutes before, I’d looked up at this building, contemplated the confined quarters, the insecticides, the villains who were within, and the many, many, ways for a fight on this ground to go badly for me. I’d turned my swarms to making silk for offense, but I’d also turned them to providing me a fast exit at need… as a precaution.

I felt a sharp jerk as the silk linking my armor to the cable I’d strung across the city grew taut, and our fall slipped out of the vertical plane and began following the drape of my improvised zipline. Another marked the point where the line I’d attached to Weld’s head tightened, sending it snapping out of the northern window, and then trailing along behind us like a flail with a ludicrously long chain.

We were slanting away from St. Jude’s, already dropping below the lip of the hill on which it was built, and still picking up speed. This was, I thought, faster than I’d ever gone in a car… but it was a difficult comparison, in part because silk stretched — meaning we were now bouncing up and down as the tether and cable reacted to the initial falling impulse — and in part because of the spinning, and the way that Madison and I kept bumping into Amy like a primitive Newton’s Cradle. The screaming was another distraction, but I focused on the immediate problems.

On the rooftop above, Jack had activated one of Bonesaw’s insecticide devices and was even now walking forward to examine our fall, letting the insecticide clear a dome around him. Perhaps I could fake an edge to the roof… an eight story fall might not kill him, but it wouldn’t be a bad
start. Certainly, it would be better than the tripwire I had arranged back at the stairs.

I arrayed my insects in a plane, some covering the edge of the roof back to the chair, and others continuing on, hovering in as tight a formation I could manage. Bonesaw’s poison would kill the first as he approached, but their dead bodies might lend credence to the second set, and it would all be worth it if he took one step too far.

We’d reached the bottom of the curve, the line stretching until I (and my two screaming passengers) were barely thirty feet above the road, and moving quite fast. I heard the thump as Weld struck a streetlight, momentarily catching somehow and checking our forward momentum slightly, as well as setting us spinning in the opposite direction.

Not much farther for Jack now… five feet. Three steps, perhaps.

Two steps. One… but then he simply smiled, reached down to set the abandoned chair upright, and turned for the stairs, moving with unhurried swiftness.

From here on out the gentle rise up to the edge of my range began to slow us, not that the shrieking abated as we ascended once more. We weren’t falling, we weren’t speeding up, and most of the bouncing oscillations had damped out already. Really, it was just the spinning and bouncing off each other that were left… but this was the point that Madison picked to start trying to thrash her way loose, which was puzzling. Did she think that hitting the street below from this height, at this speed, was somehow preferable?

Either way, she wouldn’t be getting free unless she released her grip on me, and those fingers were still clenched in a vise-like grip on my arms which held her in turn. It wouldn’t be much farther until we stopped… but the Nine were already responding. Shatterbird taking flight through a window was easy: cover her helmet to reduce vision. Mannequin’s disconnected waterfall leap out of the window where Amy had waited was more troublesome: he hooked onto the cable, balancing it across one of his forearms, and slid after us.

Still no sign of Siberian, which was about as good a result as I could hope for, and — from what I could see through the window — Bonesaw looked to be in her lab, talking to Jack. As we rose past the roof of a four story building, following the cable up to the seven story bank building that anchored it, I had my spiders cut the cable at both ends.

The drop onto the roof and the rolling skid that followed were considerably lightened by watching Mannequin drop to the ground and scatter like a spilled jar of marbles. Amy was first on her feet, helped by the fact that she didn’t have a Madison clinging to her, though she soon realized she was
on the ground and released me. I rose and went to Amy, patting her back as she emptied her stomach.

My good hand went to my mask, and I skinned it off as I spoke. “Sorry about the surprise there, and I’m still ready to talk if you need that… but we may not have much time.”

She straightened, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “What?”

“They’re already inbound. I’m pretty sure I can delay and confuse them, and the only fight I’m looking for is Jack… but best if you’re away by then.”

Jack was, I thought, moving down the hospital stairs very rapidly indeed, though it was difficult to tell.

She shook her head again. “Yes, but…”

Madison wobbled over from her own pile of vomit. “You’re crazy, you…”

I glared at her, and she sat down. Hard.

“Sorry, you were saying?”

“Your eyes.” Amy whispered it.

“Right, I’d meant to ask if you had time to take a look at them.”

She reached out a hand, resting it on my cheek, and I felt the pain in my wrist cease, the cuts on my face close, and a thousand minor aches and pains vanish. Finally, I felt a swelling behind my eyelids, and opened my eyes for the first time since before midnight.

The color balance jumped, and then the rest of my view of the city adjusted as I saw the world through human eyes once more. It was… richer in color. Fuzzier. Less precise about movement. I felt a strain I hadn’t noticed ease as I looked around.
Mannequin’s component pieces had no sooner come to rest than they began to try and reassemble themselves. I set swarms on them to pull them away, to shroud them in silk and tie them to lampposts. One of them had his insecticide, another something — perhaps sonic — that I couldn’t quite perceive, but which nonetheless killed the bugs swarming around it. This kind of offense would, at best, buy me time.

Time was what I needed most, right now.

While I was looking around, I turned to the strands connecting my armor to Weld’s head and pulled them in until it rested at my feet. I lifted it — it must weigh thirty pounds! — and plucked the earbud from it before settling it in my own ear. I turned it to face me, and spoke.

“I’ll get you home. Bonesaw seemed confident you could build a new body… I hope she’s right. I couldn’t get your old one out this way, and didn’t want to leave you there.”

His mouth was sealed shut around what looked like a butter knife, but his eyes were eloquent.

Amy was over tending to Madison, who was standing again, if unsteadily. I passed her the steel head and she caught it, staggering backwards. “Take both Amy and him to the PRT building. It’s almost straight south from here, and I’ll have cover for you for most of that. I recommend moving as fast as you can.”

Madison just stared back at me, her face white. I turned to Amy. Her color was better, but she still bore the signs of our landing on the roof. Even so, she nodded… and her eyes were fiercer than I’d seen since Leviathan.

“Go.”

They made for the stairwell as I put my mask back on, turning west to face the hospital. Jack, Bonesaw, and the Siberian were emerging on the ground floor, and Shatterbird was rising rapidly, attempting to get her helmet clear by exceeding my range. She could almost certainly create an actual telescope with trivial effort… and if she could see me, she could kill me.

I could work with that.
For combat, for exerting force, for biting, for poisoning, for so many uses, I needed the tightest group of bugs I could muster, something so dense and physical it could pass for a person should I shape it so. For distraction and delay, I needed only a thick fog... something through which I could spread my swarms much thinner.

I looked across the distance at the villains coming for me, and felt fists form. For blocks around me, insects rose up in answer to my will, filling everything beneath fifty feet with a buzzing, choking cloud of insects.

This time, they would come to me.
The Siberian. Bonesaw. Mannequin. Shatterbird. Jack. Five to one odds — six to one, if Bonesaw committed Murder Rat to the conflict. Impossible odds for me, when I would be hard pressed to hold my own against most of them in a fair fight.

Good thing I wasn’t here to fight fair. In fact, for most of them, I didn’t even want a fight right now.

A flicker of attention tracked Amy and Madison, running for their lives through a small bug-free bubble that I maintained around them, shaping it to keep guiding them south toward the PRT headquarters and away from the oncoming villains to the west.

I started down the stairs at a walk. The time for running would be soon enough, but right now I needed to let the two girls generate distance, and catching up with them on the stairwell wouldn’t help that. Besides, I’d be drawing the villains east, and I didn’t want to do that too early — for four, almost five, blocks in any direction, the streets buzzed with insects, shrouding well over a hundred acres with a blinding, living fog. But that wasn’t the whole of my range, and there were tricks I could use yet, at the bare edge between what I’d shown and what I could do.

Instead, as I descended, I tapped my earbud. “Dragon, this is Tailor. Cherish and Burnscar are out of play.”

“How sure are you?” Her accent thickened slightly when she was excited.

“Watched Cherish’s ashes scatter on the wind.” Burnscar, on the other hand, I wasn’t sure of yet. That would be the next call. Either way, not something I wanted to misrepresent.

“Excellent.” The line cut off before I could ask her another question — an unusual discourtesy, but then she was probably busy with something important.

I reached the ground floor and stepped outside. Bonesaw and Jack were now within my fog and purposefully moving towards me. Or possibly the center — hopefully, the center. Right now, I was near the center, but I wouldn’t leave it that way: too easy to find me from above. I honored the threat of their insecticide by clearing a bubble around them — one I periodically tested by sending in a lone bug or bugs. No point letting them have the benefit without forcing them to spend the resource.
The Siberian had simply leapt in, landing on the side of the bank building that I’d anchored my escape cable to, and was clinging to the side of it, looking down into the roiling cloud of bugs beneath, head tilting back and forth as she searched for me. I was really hoping she didn’t have enhanced senses: the fact that Lung did was unfair enough.

Not that the world had much to do with fair unless you made it so: Mannequin’s survival, completely dismembered, was proof enough of that. He was even — literally — pulling himself together despite my efforts to thwart him: insects just couldn’t exert the necessary degree of force to stop his movement, and anchoring him to architecture with silken cords only delayed him until the blades came out.

Shatterbird was sweeping streets with a glass storm, something which would concern me more if her target was nearer to me or the running girls. As it was, my flying insects were light, and not pinned against a surface. As the cloud of razor shards approached they could flow around and through it, or — if struck — let it carry them backward for a moment before resuming their place.

She wasn’t clearing the fog so much as stirring it. Given time, she might adopt more effective means: airtight cages that compacted, or something like the whirling maw of a disposal. Even then, tying her time and attention up with the fog would be a win for me, though one which occasionally called for taking shelter as she scoured the area I was in.

Bonesaw had the potential to be the most dangerous. Given an hour in her lab, I wouldn’t put it past her to find a way to extinguish every insect for fifty miles.

So her lab was where I’d strike. The lingering insecticide there meant I couldn’t simply send my swarms in and expect them to last long, but unless she’d left a fogger active when she left — and the thirty-second survival of my first exploratory probe suggested she hadn’t — I could use some bugs to run in lines of silk… and pull.

Turns out even a tinker’s lab is full of breakable little things and what I couldn’t break, I could spill. I had no idea what she’d wanted to do with Cauldron’s formulas, but I’d bet she’d have a harder time unmixing them from a puddle on the floor than she’d had sieving the glass from them. Murder Rat just stood there watching until the first beaker shattered, and then looked around for someone to kill. Bonesaw just hadn’t programmed her zombies for insects.

Above, a line of light flashed across the sky to a point above the ongoing brawl between Crawler and Lung, and then from that distant floating form a silver beam lanced downward to strike Crawler, leaving a trench carved into his torso large enough to be visible from here.
Legend had arrived.

Where he went, Alexandria and Eidolon would not be far behind. If the Protectorate was, at last, going all in… then the odds had just changed, enormously. The Siberian might be tough enough to face them head on, might even be able to shield her comrades, but could she do both at once? Even if I hadn’t seen it, if the Triumvirate were coming in then they thought they had an answer to her at last. Already, I could see other fliers rising into the sky: Purity’s harsh white light illuminated three of New Wave keeping pace with her as she moved toward the fight.

I tapped my earbud once again. “Great to see reinforcements coming in; think you could connect me to my old earbud?”

Dragon’s voice sounded distracted as she answered. “On it.”

A moment later, I found out what she was focusing on: the distinctive double-boom of transonic flight cracked by as three different craft streaked overhead in close formation, passing low over the the fight and leaving rippling smoke where Crawler had slithered. Seconds later, the boom reached me, a pressure wave strong enough to feel. Lung roared angrily and shook his head, but plunged into the smoke while Dragon’s craft banked around to circle the fight, weapons swiveling to port to bear on target before resuming fire.

The double-beep of a connection sounded, and I heard Quinn’s voice. “Quinn.”

“Quinn, Taylor. I wanted to warn you about Burnscar…”

The Nine hadn’t failed to notice the heroes coming in hard. Bonesaw, rather than retreating to fix her lab, had recalled Murder Rat to her before sending her forward. She joined the Siberian on the side of the bank building as a grey puff dissipated. Between those two and the steadily advancing duo of Jack and Bonesaw, Mannequin was steadily reassembling himself despite all I could do: on finding a thoroughly webbed up thigh — it had been one of the pieces that had difficulty moving on its own, and I’d gone overboard in response — he produced a flamethrower. As if I needed another reason to avoid melee.

“Mmm-hmm.” Quinn sounded remarkably relaxed about the warning, or maybe it was just that I was tense.
I had reasons to be tense.

The Siberian had picked a target, correctly identifying the building I’d been in as the center of the swarm, before leaping down through the building to the basement and then shattering the structural pillars with a terrifyingly offhand swipe of her clawed fingers.

I kicked into a steady run east as the structure collapsed behind me, sending out a wave of dust that pursued me down the road. Mannequin had already reassembled himself, and was moving toward me with a deceptively slow-looking slinky bounce. At least his notorious silence prevented him from telling the rest where to find me… but I wasn’t looking forward to it when he himself did.

Shatterbird floated above my cloud, this time having surrounded herself with a glass bubble outside her armor. It made her look disturbingly like Glinda the Good, but it also made it impractical for me to try bombardier beetles or anything similar again. She was strong, perhaps strong enough to threaten Legend or Dragon in a fight — but she wasn’t picking that fight just yet, and she’d even stopped the razorstorms. What was she planning?

“I sent her your way. She’d been contained at the Asylum for years, safely, before Faultline attacked it. Might be a good case for an insanity defense, and…”

Murder Rat apparently did have enhanced senses: her latest teleport put her barely six feet in front of me, and those claws whipped out at head height as I dove beneath, pulling my baton out of my armor and coming up facing her. She was fast, and didn’t even blink — literally — as I sent insects at her eyes to block and devour them, instead pursuing me in an awkward two-legged advance, claws out and rending.

She had been human, once. Two humans, technically. Now she wasn’t even bipedal. Or, I hoped, aware. She was, however, lethal, and only a desperate backward skipping defense let me get clear. Whatever she was using in place of sight, it worked better than I liked. She would go for the first resistance she met, which was always my baton, and that would have made this easy but for the fact that she took chunks out of it with each swipe. Nor had she needed to blink: her eyes were tough enough to resist insect bites. I kept the bugs there covering her eyes and shifted some to asphyxiation, while I swept the shortening baton back and forth with each backstep.

“Yes?” Quinn sounded bored. Enviably bored.

At last, Murder Rat’s leg tugged forward and met resistance: the silk I’d looped round that hind leg and tied to a lamppost had run out. While she paused, I pulled out my taser and fired.
She snapped at her belly where the darts had struck, then at her trapped hind leg, but didn’t — for example — twitch and fall over. I turned and ran, shifting the center of the cloud as I did so that it swung further south of me. At least that way, I could to keep Amy and Madison in cover a little bit longer.

“Taylor?” He spoke my name with idle curiousity.

Of course, leashing a teleporter didn’t work all that long: with a swirl of gray dust, she cut me off again, appearing six feet before me. Frustratingly, she hadn’t taken any of my bugs with her, which meant I couldn’t deal with her by slow degrees.

And… claws now, think later. I tossed the stump of my baton in her face as I lunged to the right, turning south. The seconds that she took to disassemble it with claws and teeth were enough let me get by… but not much more.

In the distance, Bonesaw and Jack turned south when I did. Well, at least that gave me an idea for how Bonesaw had been tracking me so far, though what Mannequin had been doing was still beyond me.

“Hello?” Mild concern.

Bonesaw was skipping out ahead of Jack, who watched her with an indulgent smile, until she hit a tripwire and fell. At the pace she was moving, I’d be lucky to have skinned her knee with that… but every delay helped. Jack helped her up and patted her head before they resumed coming after me, this time hand in hand. I’d rather have caught her with a noose… but for that, I’d need a drop or counterweight.

Meanwhile, the Siberian was in the air once again, a great leap that would place her ahead of me… at that building coming up on my right. A hazard of faking south and then actually going south was that the center she was aiming for was much closer to me than I’d intended. But that was also an opportunity…

I shifted the cloud due east at a running pace while the Siberian was still in the air above it.

A hastily strung line tangled Murder Rat in mid-leap, and gave me another dozen feet of lead on her. Ahead to my right, the Siberian plunged through the building as if were built from soap-
bubbles instead of stone. This time, when she started the demolition, she added an extra step… and 
*shoved* so the building fell east. She had, apparently found her solution to the problem of it being 
hard to pinpoint me: drop buildings in my direction until one hit.

“Hello?” Now Quinn just sounded frustrated.

Thankfully, I could use that. I came to a stop, judging the distance carefully… and Murder Rat 
materialized six feet before me. She had time for clawing lunge that I jumped back from, just in 
time to clear the falling building that crushed her. The impact spalled chips of stone everywhere, 
and I felt dozens of sharp impacts… but if one of my mask’s lenses crazed, the armor held.

Another razor storm materialized, centered on the Siberian’s latest target and steadily expanding. 
Ah. She’d been planning to follow the Siberian’s lead, complementing her melee with some 
broader damage. Air support could be dangerous, and I wouldn’t have minded some of my own 
about now. With all of the Nine but two using my bug cloud for cover, it would have been 
straightforward. I could open it up, expose them, even paint targets… but all the fliers were busy 
up north with what was, frankly, a bigger problem.

Literally.

As I sprinted east ahead of the expanding tornado of glass, I gave thanks once more that I’d gotten 
plastic composite lenses for my mask. I was at the middle of the block, meaning I was running 
straight at a building… but Leviathan’s floods had washed out the doors, making it simple to duck 
through a building that had an east-west lobby running its length as I moved the center of my cloud 
further south. The interior was quieter than the streets — not enough room to get glass up to a 
proper speed, and the storm followed my cloud’s center as it went. The inside of the building was 
filled with trash — worse than the streets outside, even — but with this many bugs everywhere, 
every step was on familiar ground. By the time I made it to the other side, I should be in the clear.

Or at least as in the clear as I could be, considering.

“Sorry about that, Quinn. Anyway, I thought that there was a chance you could get her back in the 
asylum — and that would definitely be something no lawyer had ever pulled off, getting a member 
of the Nine out from under a kill order — and, if not, the best place for a fight with her is the open 
ocean.”

“Ah.” He was being unusually terse today.
“Anyway, when she shows up, do you think you could get her out to sea safely?”

“Sure.” This wasn’t the way he normally spoke at all, unless…

“She’s right there in the boat with you, isn’t she?”

“Right.”

“Ah.” Well, at least she hadn’t killed him. Yet. He was certainly earning his fee today! “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” His voice was the driest I’d ever heard from him. The connection cut off as I reached the street again and juked north. That razor storm was still going on, and I’d rather keep my distance if possible.

Jack and Bonesaw continued to stroll — he was even swinging her by the arm as they walked — and if I ran faster than they walked, eventually I would be trapped against the bay. That was fine — that was, in fact, one of the ways I hoped to deal with Jack. Unfortunately, it looked like I’d have to deal with his associates before I could get him alone.

With Siberian content to level another building a block off of where I was, I could count her safely distracted. Hideously dangerous in confrontation, but unless she were led to me, not a problem.

Amy and Madison were approaching the southern limit of my cloud. I opened a corridor for them all the way to the boundary, and spoke through the insects surrounding them. “Try to stick to the western side of the street: that’ll make it harder for Shatterbird to see you. Good luck, and keep moving.” Neither really replied beyond a gasping inhalation that told me they didn’t run nearly enough for days like these.

Still, with them clear, I didn’t need to play decoy any longer, and could turn my thoughts more to offense. Jack was the one I wanted, but he wasn’t yet near the place I’d picked for that fight. Which meant my immediate problem was… Mannequin.

He was gaining, covering fifty feet with each slinky-like waterfall forward. I wasn’t sure yet how to stop him for good: I’d just dismembered him for the second time in twelve hours, and I wasn’t sure if that had even made him angry. Still, if he was going to move predictably, set himself on a
ballistic course for several seconds, I’d try to find a way to use that. So far, he’d also been content
to treat my swarms like the fog they resembled.

I could definitely find a way to use that.

Mannequin’s next piecemeal waterfall met silk thread, some at the top of the arc where his pieces
didn’t follow the same line exactly, and some where he landed. Simultaneously, the bugs
surrounding him set to work. He fell in scattered pieces that quickly reassembled. At least after he
got up, he was retaining his human form to run. Slower than he had been moving, but still faster
than I’d like… but if he had pulled those connections tight, that offered opportunities of its own.

I ran onward, setting new traps before him. Delay could buy me much, but to end this I would have
to find a way to strike at the vulnerable tinker instead of the impenetrable armor. Or find someone
to do it for me, which sounded much easier now that I thought about it.

A fragment of my attention continued to work on trapping the oncoming villain while my jaw
dropped at the fight to the north. A crowned giant, easily ten stories tall and broad despite its
height, had joined the fight. It said something about how the fight was going that — though it was
the tallest thing there — it didn’t have to punch down to reach either Crawler or Lung, who were
pushing sixty feet at the shoulder. One of those titanic arms shoved Lung clear while the other
reached in and grabbed several of Crawler’s necks like a man bundling sticks — or, considering
the way they writhed and spat, perhaps a man bundling snakes.

Was that Eidolon entering the fray? I hadn’t seen Alexandria arrive, but she would be where the
fighting was fiercest and might just be obscured by flame and dust both. Either way, the various
fliers were adding their firepower in and a line of light sliced across the gathered heads, severing
them cleanly. The giant’s fist tightened, and then a sheet of flame from Lung obscured the battle
once more.

Mannequin’s leg caught a tripwire and he tumbled, going loose and scattered once more. This
wouldn’t stop him… but it was interesting that he’d gone loose. Dismemberment wasn’t a problem
for him, it was a way to absorb impacts, and he’d used it here. Did that mean that an impact with
the road at that speed, accelerated by the way he rotated to faceplant, was potentially dangerous to
him? Or was it merely reflexive for him to choose the lesser of two evils, even when neither could
seriously threaten him?

Either way, I could hinder his every step this way. Since I’d begun focusing on him, I’d gained an
entire block on him, and Jack and Bonesaw were gaining on him too. I could simply repeat these
and other tricks, force him to waste time reassembling himself, until after I had my showdown with
Jack.
Or… or he could simply start climbing buildings with remarkable rapidity, finding or making holds in bare concrete. It took seconds before he was above the cloud I’d set up: he was nearly as fast straight up as he was on the flat. Height alone wouldn’t take him out of my range, not unless he could fly — though, for all I knew, he could do that too. *Tinkers*. What it would do, I wasn’t sure…

But I was prepared to believe he had *some* kind of plan.

That was fine.

I had a plan for him now too.
Amanda stood one pace back from him and one to his left, aware of the disorder all around but focused on the one still point amidst it: as always, he held himself to a standard still higher than the ones he set.

The night would have been dark even to her eyes but for the fire to the northeast. It burned bright enough now to turn the clouds red and even illuminate this miles-distant rooftop with a dull red light. Now and then a great silhouette would pass before it on the horizon, casting a shadow still larger than the beast itself, as the two villains fought on.

Miss Militia and Fenja had taken the brutes and fliers off on a fool’s errand: what force could do to Crawler, force had done already. It was plain to see if one looked — so very much of the world was thus. Yet, though Fenja’s judgment might be clouded by vengeance, Miss Militia was no one’s fool. Disciplined, prudent, and relentless, she was the sort of woman who might have earned a place beside Amanda, had she chosen to so apply herself. It might, perhaps, have simply been that Director Piggot had given the order.

Perhaps.

It was one thing to order a suicide mission, and another to order a *futile* suicide mission. As presently composed, unless someone had been hiding a dragon-sized ace up their sleeve, they would add nothing useful to the fight. And while Amanda thought it possible — likely, even — that Miss Militia did have something reserved against her final desperate day, it seemed more likely that something else was in play.

When was a futile suicide mission not futile? When you would die either way regardless. No, the more likely possibility was that this city was about to be erased, and evacuation was not practical. Her mind turned smoothly to the problem of escape, never hitching on the prospect of her own mortality — just as she’d been trained.

Amanda said nothing of these thoughts, of course: it wasn’t her place. Speaking out of turn would be as grievous a failure as being unprepared to answer when called upon. Indeed, it would be unusual to be called on for such a problem as this — he preferred to handle most such matters himself — but that was no excuse for being unprepared.

Not that there ever was an acceptable excuse, for any shortcoming: “Excellence neither needs nor makes excuses for itself.” In another mouth, it might have been a dismissal; in his it had been invitation, promise, and absolution all at once. The fire lit in that moment still burned within.
He stepped forward and she matched his stride with carefully practiced grace, following him as he moved to address himself to the small group of Wards.

“Insight.” He inclined his head to her as he spoke — not quite the angle he’d use for guests, nor yet the one for equals, but still more respect than he’d offered to anyone tonight since Miss Militia or their client. Then again, this girl was a thinker, and if her suit was a cut last fashionable in the 1940’s, it at least acknowledged the truth that if a cape desired to display her power by her clothing, she should at least dress like those who held power.

Instead of in, say, spandex.

“Yeah?” Amanda closed her eyes momentarily. Unfortunately, whoever had raised the girl had not covered proper speech.

“It must be as clear to you as it is to me that this strategy is both inefficient and almost certainly ineffective.”

“No shit.”

“Insight!” Gallant, thankfully, was more sensitive to the nuances of social interaction. “Accord, I apologize for my teammate.”

He acknowledged the effort with a curt nod, but continued speaking to the girl. “I take it that you cannot pinpoint the location of Cherish at this time?”

Insight shook her head. “If I could have, we’d be hitting first.”

“Disappointing.” His tone was severe, though whether it was a judgment on Piggot or Insight was unclear. Perhaps both.

“Then…” He paused, one hand up as a woman’s voice spoke through their earbuds.
“Cherish is down. Target Crawler, I repeat, Crawler.”

“Interesting.” He kept his composure, of course. “Was the Director keeping something from us?” His tone was perfectly neutral: that could imply offense at the deception, or approval for its results. She’d have to be prepared to support him either way.

Insight smirked. “No, that came as a surprise to me too, and that means it came as a surprise to everyone. And… wait for it…”

A line of light sliced across the sky, bright enough to etch afterimages where she’d seen it.

“Here comes the cavalry.” Insight was grinning now, a fierce feral smile.

A closely spaced double-crack marked the overflight of three transonic attack craft.

A handful of seconds passed in silence before he spoke once more. “No Alexandria, and no Eidolon. Problematic.”

The brim of Insight’s hat shaded her eyes as she spoke. “You can’t make a plan to deal with two overgrown lizards?”

His cane tapped once, sharply. A gesture she knew well: irritation, on the verge of action. If this turned into a fight… Amanda surveyed the Wards. Clustered like that, it might be possible, but it would be chancy. The Empire contingent would probably sit this out — they were down to the kid with golems and the healer — and Shielder was still healing up under Othala’s care.

The other new Ward — Skotos? — had eased into a position just to Tattletale’s side. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but that was no assumption to make. Honestly, it was comforting seeing quiet competence, even from potential foes. The world was all too full of the alternative.

None of that showed in his voice as he replied. “Under more controlled circumstances, I’d recommend shaping his adaptations into a dead end. In our present position, that plan is not precisely viable. What this calls for is a powerful trump who could close with the beast: Eidolon, in a word.”
“Is that all?” Insight’s grin was wild. “You’ve got a trump right there…” She gestured at Amanda. “… and if you’re worried about getting in close… hey! Nazi-boy!”

The boy — so new to this that his costume consisted of a ski-mask and a hooded sweatshirt — jerked at her call and then approached.

“I’m not…”

“Don’t care. Family drama some other time. You’ve got a reserve of some kind, right? Ever gone all out?”

Cadmus nodded. “Once, against Leviathan. I thought about trying it once they got big, but… the warriors I sow aren’t any tougher than the materials I draw them from. Leviathan shattered the biggest one I tried before it was even out of the ground, and… both of those are larger than he was then.”

“For crying out loud…” Insight started walking toward where Othala was tending the fallen Shielder, motioning Cadmus to follow. Once the boy had, she took him by the hand and forcefully shoved Othala’s off-hand into his. “You, think invincible thoughts. You… let’s see what your limit really is.”

Othala looked up, taken aback, and the ski-masked boy looked back at her. Then the boy’s grip on her hand firmed, and in his other hand a light grew. When he’d raised his golems before, he had cast sparks as might fly from a fire; now… now he was holding ball of light larger than his torso. Then he threw it down, and the whole rooftop glowed momentarily in answer.

For a long moment there was silence.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the earth began to drop away as the rooftop rose up, folding and stretching as if the building beneath had merely been painted on the surface of reality and now a vast hand was pressing up, outlining palm and fingers against the fabric. Then the roof tiles began sliding away, and people staggered — attempting to brace themselves against a sliding movement the eyes perceived, but which did not touch those standing on the roof. Rather, they had to reposition to fit themselves in a shrinking circle, as the fingers closed in and more of the building dropped away. If before the roof had seemed like painted fabric, now it seemed like the surface of a pond… and something was surfacing beneath their feet. Something big.
As they rose further, the shapes became more defined. The circle ceased shrinking at around eight feet in diameter — close, but not uncomfortable quarters for the number gathered — while the fingers resolved into battlements. Or… not battlements. The tines of a crown.

“Cool.” Shielder was first with his laconic verdict. The boy was on his feet, though the way he clutched his side and the unnatural floating lightness to his stance spoke of unhealed injuries.

Insight wheeled around, hands outstretched. “Good enough?”

Another cane click. “Eminently satisfactory. Cadmus, if you would get us as close as possible?”

The giant beneath them lurched into motion, a rolling walk that rumbled into a jouncing run.

“Citrine? Please remove Crawler.” He didn’t look back at her as he spoke, knees flexing just enough to hold his position without bracing against the battlements, and so she allowed herself the smallest hint of a smile as she replied.

“Sir.”

Amanda looked through the battlements at the fight before her. Lung and Crawler grappling, while lines of light traced downward from the hovering fliers and from Dragon’s orbiting strike craft.

This would be a sizable challenge. He had picked her, alongside Samuel, to accompany him on this trip. As bodyguards, as aides-de-camp, as trusted agents… as his Ambassadors to the world. As those he trusted to surmount whatever task he set them.

It was a role open to each of his employees, should they apply themselves to the work he set before them. Each task seemed impossible in prospect; each task seemed easy in comparison to what followed. At the end of all his trials and tests there was a vial awaiting those who proved themselves. Within it, superhuman powers… and with them, a fresh set of impossible tasks, now sized for their new capabilities.

Many parahumans lacked discipline, judgment, or initiative. Most lacked allies or support. Almost all let their powers dictate their solutions to problems, approaching every challenge in the same old way. The Ambassadors were, as a body, some of the best trained and most broadly capable parahumans in existence. Amanda was accounted skilled among even them, and proud that her
record meant that he could trust his Citrine with whatever task needed doing.

Tonight, he trusted her to kill something that might exceed an Endbringer in strength… though not, it was to be hoped, in toughness. There was a theory that each of the Endbringers had been a parahuman, once. Perhaps the stakes were higher even than they seemed.

The giant’s run had brought it within the circle of fire and ash that surrounded the battleground, and it slowed to a walk. The whole platform swayed as it took a step and caught on something, then straightened and moved on.

“Sorry. I… I think that that may have been a patch of molten rock.” Cadmus’ voice was uncertain, but steadied as the giant beneath them did.

Molten rock? It was already uncomfortably hot, and growing hotter as they advanced. Not the sort of heat one felt in the sun: closer to the kind of heat felt when reaching into a hot oven. And there was a half-mile still separating them from the fight!

A quick glance up confirmed that the fliers were all orbiting at greater distances, and then everything on the platform took on the yellow-golden hue that had led him to name her as he did. Instantly, the air temperature dropped to a comfortably cool breeze. That provided a solution for the moment, but though she could affect her chosen area in almost innumerable ways, she couldn’t both defend the platform and strike at Crawler.

“Shielder?” Her voice was calm and unrushed, as an Ambassador’s must always be.

“Ma’am?” Politeness in the youth of today — what a pleasant surprise.

“Would you kindly take over shielding the platform?”

Shielder tossed off a lazy salute — not that mannered, apparently — as a blue dome sprang up to cover them.

“Thank you.” It was generally best to be polite, even if those around you did not return it.
The giant’s strides carried them ever closer. Normally, she could target the whole parahuman, but Crawler had grown so large that her normal tactics didn’t apply. How did you find the brain of something that had seven heads? When you couldn’t even see his skin for the flames that danced about him?

“Insight? Can you identify the location of his brain?” Whatever her thinker power proved to be, she’d displayed more understanding of Cadmus’ power than the boy himself had — if they were lucky, she could do the same for Crawler.

She chewed her lip before answering. “Given time… probably. Start by taking off heads, and I’ll look for reactions.”

“Then Cadmus, if you would gather some heads together…”

He nodded at her, eyes tight shut, and the giant leaned forward to shoulder Lung out of the way, stiff-arm ing him clear before reaching out to gather necks. He soon had four such, all hissing at the giant’s neck and spitting something that smoked the air green as it passed. Legend and Purity unleashed a barrage that scorched and battered each head in turn, leaving pink stumps behind. A yellowish haze shimmered over each stump in turn as Amanda concentrated.

The necks did not regrow as the giant released them — this was not the first time she had fought a regenerator — but neither did the monster falter. Crawler hurled himself forward, striking the giant at mid thigh, and all standing atop his head staggered back as the giant stepped back twice, and then caught its balance. An immense kick met the next charge, and while Crawler coiled for another strike Lung leapt on him.

A savage ripping brawl followed, with each taking chunks out of the other before Lung backwinged clear of Crawler’s attempt to encircle him with a constricting tail. They paused a moment to contemplate each other, their wounds closing with visible speed. Worse, those four stumps were being repurposed as spiny tentacles of some kind. Crawler was adapting.

Amanda narrowed her eyes. She would simply have to adapt as well. Process of elimination said… “Try the other three.”

Cadmus nodded and the giant reached out, grabbing a serpentine neck in each gigantic fist, then squeezing until each popped off. Yellow gold glittered briefly where the pink insides showed, and the giant released its hands and stood back. One head remained. It enlarged itself and reared up like a cobra. As the giant moved in once more, it spat something startlingly green which covered much of the force field and clung, smoking and sputtering.
The force field remained as unalteringly blue as the dyed hair of the boy sustaining it, but the boy himself twitched and closed one eye. A second, larger blast came — aimed lower — and the giant leaned into it, reaching for the lone head. This one didn’t reach the platform or the bubble protecting it, but it did land where eyes would be if the giant were a man. Cadmus opened his eyes and yanked Othala toward the rim while the giant tried futilely to wipe the gunk away. Crawler’s third spitting blast was larger still, and if the giant swatted most of it out of the air as a man might a mosquito, some of the splashing drops still reached the shield and clung.

Skotos wreathed himself in shadows and stepped forward to the blue glow between two of the battlements and tapped the field once. Twice. On the third tap, a gap opened and darkness shot forth, clinging to the head it struck. The gap closed almost immediately, but the air within the bubble was noticeably hotter from even that brief exposure.

The fourth time Crawler vomited his venom forth, he missed entirely… but they had seconds, at best, before he had fresh eyes elsewhere, and Skotos’ darkness would interfere with their own targeting as much or more than Crawler’s.

In the corner of her eye Insight continued to stare, silent.

“Insight?”

“Nothing I’m sure of. I don’t think it’s any of the heads… it may be buried in the trunk where they meet, or maybe he has backups. I don’t know.” She sounded like she didn’t much like not knowing.

Amanda nodded. Cadmus was already directing the giant to crouch and lean into a grapple, one hand wrapping around Crawler’s bulk while the other clawed at his torso, tearing chunks of flesh away. A golden-yellow glitter flitted through the wounds, ensuring they lasted just a bit longer while the giant reached around inside. Crawler thrashed and screeched blindly, and then the fire sheathing him flared up. Where it touched his blood — or what passed for his blood, these days — a firestorm erupted.

Shielder winced, and the blue field flickered brighter. Worse, Amanda could no longer see her target. And if she couldn’t see…

She could feel the giant beneath her move, ripping onward still, feeling its way through the regenerating monster before it. Her power could quell fire in its area of influence — the ability to adjust the laws of physics, to some degree, in a defined space was of remarkable versatility — but
nothing on this scale.

Bright golden light flared, and the firestorm was gone in an instant.

Insight jabbed her finger, shouting. “There!”

Amanda focused, and her field sprang into being where the thinker pointed, thirty feet beneath where the once-heads had sprouted. And this time, when the giant’s fist withdrew, nothing healed. Lung again took a wing-assisted leap onto Crawler’s back half, and between them the giant and the dragon ripped Crawler in half. He still moved, still spat defiance… but without his healing, this was a fight that could go only one way. She ignored the details of the struggle, the biting, clawing, and ripping, in favor of keeping her focus in the right place, tracking Crawler’s snakelike body as it writhed to escape or was battered by the giant.

Others on the platform were shouting, pointing at the golden man who hung above the battlefield. Scion, first and perhaps greatest of all parahumans. Silent, relentlessly driven, and singularly unconcerned with whether he saved one life or millions, he had missed the Endbringer fight here just one week past, but he was here today.

This too she ignored.

Amanda had a job to do.
I continued east, keeping a corner of my awareness on Mannequin. He was simply waiting, clinging to the side of the tallest building in the area covered by my swarm as if he could look through the insects. Maybe he could, which was why I had buildings between us — not that I had any idea what he was using to navigate the world, but it seemed like looking through stone and concrete would call for something different than looking through air, even air filled with bugs.

Tinkers. Either way, I’d keep out of his line of sight. And if he was willing to stay still…

While I worked on that, I hit my earbud again. “Any chance you could put me through to Faultline?”

“Hold.”

A few seconds passed while I looked at the different options to descend from the ridgeline I was moving toward. I could follow the road as it curved down, duck through a hotel with entrances on both levels, or take the stairs in a straight shot. The hotel would afford me the most cover for Mannequin, and after that it would be a slight slope all the way down to the beach.

“Faultline.”

“It’s me again.”

“We’re on station, and it looks like your first boat is on its way.”

“About that…” How to explain this? There were several ways it could go.

Also, the top floor of the hospital wasn’t there anymore. No visible debris, just a fading golden glow… and was that Scion joining the fight between serpent, dragon, and giant?

Huh.
I’d wrecked her laboratory hoping to distract Bonesaw. In retrospect, that was probably much more of a risk than I’d really understood, if it drew Scion’s personal attention. On the other hand, it was hard to argue with the results: Scion might be able to end Crawler tonight. If it’s stupid and it works…

“Problem delivering on your end of the deal?”

“No, the information is with the man in the boat. The other passenger, however, is Burnscar.”

“People don’t usually call ahead for a betrayal. Facing the Nine was never a condition of our agreement. In fact… it was something I explicitly refused to do.” Fine. Hardball it was.

The Siberian was leaping once more, this time aiming for a building that was one over from the center. It would have been too much to ask for her to keep chasing the false bull’s-eye I drew, but unless she could anticipate the shifting offset I used, still not a problem.

“Betrayal? I’ve just done you a favor.”

Mannequin had his knives out, and was tilting them back and forth rapidly. Why…

“I’m not seeing how ambushing me with a killer like that is a favor.”

The Siberian’s head was twisting around in midair. Ah.

“Relax. She just wants to see a friend — there’s an excellent chance you can take her alive. Get her back in psychiatric care, pick up a reputation for doing the impossible. And if she doesn’t… well, you’ll be fighting her, prepared, in the middle of the ocean. Who’s ambushing whom there? And how much would you have charged to set up one of the Nine for an ambush?”

“I don’t take jobs like that because facing people like her can get my people killed.” More distantly. “Captain!”

A building crumbled and a razorstorm sprung up, but the Siberian was already in the air again, headed toward the tower to which Mannequin clung.
“Do you think you can escape this by running? She’s hunting you. Burned the Palanquin to the ground looking for Elle. Remember Elle? The little girl you kidnapped from the asylum in the same attack that let Burnscar loose? The alternative to facing Burnscar like this is letting her pick the time and place. That’s the kind of thing that will get your people killed… if you turn that ship away. I ask again: what price would you have paid to ensure you met her forewarned, and on favorable terms?”

Silence, but I could hear the background noise of the ship.

Mannequin’s arm swung out to point, and the Siberian leapt again, taking Mannequin with her and casually snapping the silken threads I’d attached to the tinker. I’d have to wrap this up quickly.

“I could tell you you’ll do this because you know you screwed up when you cracked that asylum open without a care for where the crazies went. But we both know you’re not a hero. I could tell you you’ll do this because the alternative is worse for you and yours. For we both know that’s the truth. Fact is, the reason you’ll actually do this is simple: you’re a mercenary. And if you do this you will get paid.”

Quinn would have been proud. Disrupt their expectations, show them that their alternative is worse, then dangle the carrot once more: the very basics of hardball. He’d always said the trick was doing it without making lasting enemies, because at that point you closed off all your options but hardball. On that count, I wasn’t really sure that I’d pulled it off… but I knew I didn’t have time to do better.

I tapped my earbud to end the conversation. The hotel I’d planned to use wasn’t going to work: the Siberian would be on it in moments. I juked right, breaking into a run toward the stairs. Above, Mannequin kicked free — impossibly, the Siberian’s trajectory was unaffected — and pinwheeled down. Toward the stairs.

I kicked into a full sprint — the timing on this would be tricky. Mannequin landed just before the stairs, bouncing and reassembling on the fly. I didn’t slow. His hands came around, blades extruding, as I leapt into a tackle. The last time we’d fought, his blades had simply pushed us apart, and if I moved fast enough…

I felt a line of fire across my side. Mannequin had anchored himself into concrete, his feet sending out multiple little rods, and one of his blades had come around in time. The tackle still knocked him backwards, as he choose to go to pieces once more rather than take the strain on what passed for his ankles, and I fell down the stairs accompanied by a shower of bouncing white ovoids.
To my left, the hotel collapsed in a grinding crash, and I could already feel a razorstorm forming around it.

Falling and spinning was a lot less disorienting when you could see yourself in three dimensions and feel every surface around you firmly in place, and perhaps that was why the fall seemed curiously slow. I couldn’t afford to get tied up in melee against Mannequin — not with the Siberian so near. Against the tinker, I might eke something out. Against her? Not a chance. Throwing Shatterbird into the picture was just overkill.

I reached out with my right hand as I came down toward the steps, let my palm go flat against the surface, and pushed. The pain in that wrist went unnoticed in comparison to the eye-twisting agony in my left side as I somersaulted, taking the landing on my shoulder and rolling to my feet in time to stumble down the next set of stairs in a controlled fall, one hand on the guide-rail.

On level ground once more, I continued my run, left hand reaching down and plucking out the foot-long shard of Mannequin’s blade embedded between my ribs. Every stride sent a pulse of pain, and I was just thankful that his cut hadn’t gone deeper: a punctured lung wasn’t good for running. The sprained wrist, although less serious, was more annoying — I’d just gotten that fixed! Behind me on the landing, Mannequin stood reassembled, inspecting his shattered forearm blade. Then he raised his head to track my path, ejecting the remains of his blade with an offhand twist of his arm.

I set spiders to sewing my side shut — not as easy as it sounds while at a limping run — and thought. Six to one odds had been survivable, while I could turn it into a series of one on ones, or try to arrange some fratricide. Five to one, with Mannequin guiding the Siberian and Shatterbird right on top of me? And, at this rate, Jack and Bonesaw would be catching up soon. No, this wasn’t going well at all. I reached up for my earbud once more without breaking stride, speaking between breaths.

“Dragon? Engaging five of the Nine right now. Any chance of air support?”

Mannequin was again moving for high ground and the Siberian was already perched atop another building, scanning the horizon for him. I kept the top of the cloud of bugs flat even as the ground beneath it slanted down to the ocean — it meant giving away a little more of my range, but Shatterbird was far too high to reach anyway. Given the way building heights got shorter as they approached the shoreline, it did sharply limit the number of buildings that either could perch on, thus hopefully limiting their chances to coordinate above the cloud. I could have raised the cloud still further without introducing a curvature that would be another clue as to my location… but no point giving all my range away, even now.
Besides, leaving them a known and limited set of options was better, in some ways, than offering them none. Mannequin would have to go for… that tower.

A new voice crackled in my earbud as Mannequin broke through the surface of my cloud and looked around for my body. “Purity here. New Wave and I are moving south to you. Targets?”

A flicker of attention checked the horizon. I could see no sign of Crawler, but the giant was facing off against Lung, with Legend floating directly between them and all three Dragon-craft orbiting around the standoff. Well, much as I wished he was coming to my assistance right now, I couldn’t blame his priorities.

Mannequin and the Siberian were the next best thing to invulnerable, and Shatterbird’s armor had withstood a direct hit from Lung. At his weakest, perhaps, but that was still nothing to take lightly. No, the targets would have to be…

“Highlighting them for you now.” Looking at the oncoming fliers, I judged their path and speed and set up a series of concentric circles, narrowing as they got closer to the top of my cloud. “Jack and Bonesaw are…”

A beam of white light larger than I was lanced out, followed by a smaller blue blast from Lady Photon. Laserdream’s red contributions wove in and out and around in a snaking, spiraling display of control. The intervening insects making up my cloud were simply annihilated.

A deep crater smoked where Jack and Bonesaw had been skipping moments before, with Bonesaw — or most of her — thrown almost sixty feet back along the road. Jack, even with no warning, had repeated the improbable dodge he’d achieved in their last confrontation before the PRT building, and was standing by the crater’s side looking up at his attackers with that damnable smile. He twitched his wrist absently, and Purity’s smooth flight turned jagged. A second more, while his knife flick-flick-flicked… and Laserdream spiraled down into a skidding rooftop landing that left her scraped and limp, but breathing. And bleeding heavily — I set my bugs about her to bandaging what they could. Lady Photon returned fire, but he anticipated her strike and sidestepped again, offering a mocking salute as the insects obscured his vision once more.

The Siberian was in the air, leaping toward where Mannequin pointed. The tinker tried to leap as well… but this time the silk threads held, and he left his feet behind on the tower’s side.

Bonesaw was already rising on spidery mechanical limbs which unfolded from her red backpack. Or possibly her spine: I couldn’t tell, and the insecticide kept me from getting a close inspection. She was, at least, far enough from Jack that I closed the cloud in between them. Jack shrugged at
the barrier, and resumed walking east after me. He was even whistling as he came.

Mannequin continued his pursuit as well, running even with his feet dangling from the tower above. Or perhaps dangling was the wrong word: they were actively extruding those rods, applying force against the side of the building and spinning themselves around.

I had other problems at my body: the Siberian was almost upon me. I kept running, shifting to the side to run on the grass. I had as dense and noisy a concentration of bugs as I could manage covering her head — it wouldn’t hurt her, but it might make it harder for her to find me. Altogether, that confidence only lasted seconds.

The Siberian simply brought one fist down on the ground at her feet. The impact didn’t launch her upwards, but there was abruptly a foot or more separating her from the ground. By the time she landed, she had to stretch to her full height to get her head above the rim of the crater she’d created.

The shockwaves caught me in mid-stride and sent me into a tumble, and I could already feel Shatterbird pulling together a razor storm as I slid to a stop against a fence, side flaring in fresh agony.

Right. I pulled myself upward, wheezing harsh breaths. Time for a new plan. I’d heard more tonight than probably any outsider in the world knew as of yesterday about the inner relations of the Nine, and that might just be enough to buy a few more minutes of my life.

Two more sets of targeting rings materialized, one defining a line between Lady Photon and Bonesaw, and then another between Purity and the tinker. They laid down a barrage that would have done credit to Legend.

Simultaneously, the bugs surrounding the Siberian buzzed. “Bonesaw’s alone and under fire from above.” The black and white striped woman paused momentarily. “Jack left her. Crawler’s gone too — and you’re losing this game of hide and seek.”

I thought I’d seen the Siberian in a hurry before, but apparently she liked to play with her prey. This time, when she jumped, she jumped again and again in mid-air, pushing off of individual bugs each time, and she gained in speed without even bumping them an inch.

That wasn’t how physics worked. At all — but then, superpowers.
I lost a second to astonishment before I hit my earbud. “Siberian! Get in cover! Laserdream alive; Panacea at PRT HQ.” Or almost there, hopefully.

Lady Photon evaded straight down into my cloud before the Siberian was halfway there; Purity went straight up into the clouds above, arm tight across her chest. I cleared a path for the head of New Wave to reach her daughter while I staggered along, supporting myself by clinging to the chain-link fence. Shatterbird was already turning to follow the Siberian — who was running across the top of my bug cloud — and the razor storm died before it quite reached where I’d fallen.

I resumed running east — or at least as close to a run as I could manage — wincing with every other stride as my side continued to remind me that I had actual stitches in it. Improvised ones, done by spiders. Even slowed by that as I was, I was expanding my lead on Mannequin who was — after all — running without feet.

Though perhaps for not much longer: his feet managed to time their spinning well enough to cut the threads binding them with the rods normally used to anchor Mannequin, and had assembled themselves into a surreal spinning yin-yang. It rolled onward at the center of an invisible wheel, rods flicking out blindingly fast to make contact and propel it onward.

I’d need an answer for him, and fast. And… there. To the northeast was a building that might suit. I headed there at the best speed I could manage, and began to gather more insects and lay preparations.

Lady Photon had scooped up Laserdream, reshaping her forcefield to cover her daughter, and then gone straight up before making a right-angle turn toward PRT HQ. Shatterbird, now facing that part of the battlefield, was on them almost immediately with a hailstorm of glass. Worse, the Siberian was turning to engage them, changing the direction of her run over ninety degrees with an instantaneous turn that would have blown out my ankle if I tried it at a quarter of her speed.

I tried dropping the bugs she ran on out of the way, and that bought a few precious seconds of flailing before she adapted and started leaping from building to building. Shatterbird was well above my range, where I could do nothing… and it looked like a shoving match had broken out between the dragon and giant, with Legend darting frantically between them and Dragon still orbiting overhead.

A deep thumping boom rang out. Then another, and Shatterbird’s bubble exploded. Shatterbird herself jerked sideways and fell a hundred feet before beginning a twisty evasion routine. To the north, well beyond my range, I saw Miss Militia in the City College’s clock tower with the biggest rifle I’d ever seen. She put two more rounds in the air as I watched, and if neither hit her darting target, they kept Shatterbird’s mind on dodging and off of New Wave.
A rotating helical beam of light descended from the clouds to strike at where Bonesaw had been earlier — the girl herself had retreated further west, outside of my range, but not my vision — and the Siberian turned again, heading for the targeted area. Lady Photon was clear, for now, and a falling meteorite steadied out into Purity rejoining her in formation.

I would have smiled, if it weren’t for the fact that Mannequin had regained his feet and was gaining on me with alarming speed.

I hopped the rail with my good hand and descended the stairs before ducking in the basement door at a run. This would be the risk… I worked my hand underneath my mask and removed the earbud, tossing it into a corner behind some bulky industrial equipment. Long seconds later, and I was out the other side of the building, where I slowed to the quietest walk I could manage.

Mannequin disassembled himself to go directly through the gaps in the railing and ran into the bug-fogged basement, head turning back and forth.

I spoke through my buzzing swarms. “I’ve been thinking about you. Jack has this theory about how to predict people’s actions.” He slowed to a walk and listened.

“He thinks people’s futures are extensions of their pasts. Now — your past? Not something I can really fathom, even without trying to second guess the Simurgh. But your methods… those I can understand.”

Mannequin stalked through the basement, head rotating back and forth.

“You’re an ambush predator. I’m one too, which is how I saw it: you strike by surprise, from unexpected angles, and aim to win, not to fight. The Siberian draws things out — not you. So that’s your past, your M.O. And that’s why you’ll leave.”

He tilted his head — or the ovoid currently assembled in that position, anyway — and shrugged, the perfect picture of puzzlement.

“A straight up fight? That’s not how either of us do these things. No, you’ll back off. Find another time, another place, and try to catch me off guard once more.”
He folded his arms, one hand cupping the curve where a chin would be on a face… and then held out a hand. A blade extended from one of his fingers, and he waved it back and forth chidingly.

“Fair enough. I didn’t really expect that to work anyway.” And with that, I flooded the room with insects. His reactions were inhumanly fast… but he leapt toward the earbud, not the exits, and I put the handful of seconds to use.

He’d already proven he could operate in a thick fog of insects: this would test if he could operate in something denser. I’d gathered around this building so much of my swarms that the rest of the cloud was perceptibly thinner, and I intended to pack that room until it was solid, bugs pouring in through the doors, vents, drains, and every other entrance to the space.

He deployed insecticide — but for these purposes, dead bugs were almost as useful to me. Besides, his formula wasn’t a tenth as effective as Bonesaw’s: slower to kill, and no lingering effects. He couldn’t spray like that forever. The flamethrower came out, and I tried to choke the nozzle with bugs. Couldn’t manage it: the man had a flair for design. Still, the fuel was limited, and he wasn’t halfway back to the door he’d come in through.

The tide of bugs couldn’t push him back — not when he could anchor himself to the concrete beneath — but it could ensure that his every step was taken against a forceful stream of insects. Every time he stopped to reanchor, I could pack the room ever more tightly full. Eventually, he stopped moving. Untrusting, I added still more bugs, and then silk across the doorways and drains and air-conditioning vents, for good measure. If I could have, I would have sunk him in concrete: until I could get a cement mixer, this would have to do.

I put a hand to my side and looked up toward the ridgeline. To the north, the dragon and giant had renewed their standoff. Bonesaw, the Siberian, and Shatterbird were falling back to the west. Jack was descending the same stairs I’d come down with a smile on his lips and a skip in his step. Two blocks between us, and about that much to the shore from where I stood.

Twice, we’d met tonight. Once, he’d walked away. Once, I’d run.

Third time pays for all.
Waiting took longer than I’d expected. Jack was a fast walker, but he was still walking a distance over which I had run. Every breath I took where I waited — on that same jetty where Quinn had once moored his boat — stung painfully in my side where Mannequin’s blade had lodged and broken, and I could feel a tiredness deep behind my eyes. I didn’t feel tired, but beneath the bright adrenaline buzz there was a deep-seated weariness that fit right in with the low red light from the north.

It looked like the dispute there was over, even if the standoff wasn’t. Dragon’s strike craft still circled, and Legend had been joined by another flying figure. Alexandria? Eidolon? It would have been nice to have that earbud still… but no. Mannequin out of play was a bargain, even if it meant facing Jack alone. I would be glad to get that started, in some ways, just to come closer to rest: tonight had been very rough.

Rougher even than the simple stresses implied: this was, in great part, my fault. They’d come here because of what I’d done over the month previous, and I hadn’t even begun to fix the problems from that, let alone the fresh problems the Nine added on top. For all I’d done, for all the running and terror and improvisation, I hadn’t yet managed to kill a single member of the Nine myself. Though I had Mannequin, I couldn’t hold him forever — just until the rest of the Nine came looking. I hadn’t even managed to evacuate many, if any, refugees: Pete Walker was crouched in the boathouse fifty yards to the north, packed in along with a number of other civilians who were taking shelter from the storm of insects. Quinn might have taken the first boat out, but it looked like everyone else preferred to take their chances in this haunted city rather than get in a confined space with Burnscar. The rescue of Panacea and Weld would only matter if the Nine retreated… otherwise, the Siberian could casually recapture them.

No, most of what I’d managed so far tonight had been to buy people time. That might be enough, and it might not. It certainly didn’t feel that way. Reinforcements from the Triumvirate and Dragon were nothing to laugh at, but I couldn’t help comparing the response for Leviathan to the horror of tonight, and the scant few who had come to help. The boast I’d offered Quinn as farewell when I first abandoned him this night — that I wouldn’t fight alone — had proved achingly hollow. I wouldn’t give up — I’d sworn that — but the victories I’d scraped out so far felt tenuous, and I was all too conscious that the world itself might somehow be in the balance, in several different ways.

Still not the worst day of my life so far… but then, it wasn’t over yet.

I couldn’t overwhelm Jack the way I had Mannequin, either: Bonesaw’s insecticide still kept me from getting my bugs within about ten feet of him — which just meant I’d have to get creative. The trick for the moment would be keeping his attention on the threats I couldn’t carry through, and off of the ones I hoped to surprise him with. Also, on the conversation, instead of the fight.
Fortunately, at least that second part shouldn't prove a very difficult proposition: the man did like to talk.

I’d slowly expanded the dome about him to thirty feet in radius, which meant that was about the distance separating us when he finally saw me, a faint shape shrouded by my fog of insects. He stopped his whistling and gave me an offhand wave.

“Taylor! You left before I could finish my case.” He actually sounded… cheerful.

“What about my last answer was unclear?” I could have raised my voice to carry over the buzzing of the cloud; instead I modulated the buzzing to reinforce it.

“Well, a rhetorical question isn’t exactly a no, now is it?” He was still smiling, or perhaps smirking. He made it look a lot more dangerous than Lisa did.

I began stepping back slowly. “You’re down three now. Four if you count Crawler, and the night isn’t over yet.”

“Who did you get this time?” He matched my movements again, just as he had on the rooftop, the only clue belying his casual affect in the way he held his knife: for all his seemingly-loose grip, the blade never wavered no matter how it swung.

“Mannequin.”

He paused a moment, tapping his knife on his chin. “Really? How?”

“Entombed him in several tons of insects.”

Jack laughed at that. It seemed like the thing he might do, and I’d timed that sentence so that it caught him mid-stride, as my insects brought up and fastened off a tripwire across where the jetty joined the sidewalk, just inches ahead of his oncoming foot.
The knife in his left hand swung loosely, and the tripwire parted before him. He stepped through without looking down, still laughing.

Three times tonight, I had seen him dodge lasers. For something like that, reflexes weren’t enough: you had to be in motion before the attack was sent. Whatever his power or powers might be, the knife at a distance trick he showed off was just a fraction of the whole: he had to have a danger sense, or precog, or be some other kind of combat thinker.

The tripwire wouldn’t have done much if he’d hit it, but a moment’s distraction and a fall… I would have tried to exploit those openings. It did confirm that I’d have to do this the hard way, and the fact he was laughing only drove the warning home. I wasn’t even sure if he was laughing at Mannequin’s fate, or my own attempt to set a trap.

Maybe both.

He wiped his eyes — one at a time, the other open and staring at me — as the laughter finally wound down. “Oh, I wish I’d seen that.”

I shrugged. “There’s a time for being sneaky, and there’s a time for brute force.” That was, in fact, how I was hoping to handle Jack himself: get him into a situation bad enough and all anticipation would buy him would be an additional interval of dread. With the tripwire, Jack had shown that I couldn’t count on surprise… so I’d just have to hit him with something where it didn’t matter if he saw it coming.

Jack nodded, eyes fixed while his head bobbed. “An argument I’ve had with the man often enough myself, though never so — ah — decisively expounded.”

I continued my slow backward movement, carefully balancing each step against the chance of the fight beginning early — halfway to the end of the jetty already. “Hadn’t thought brute force was your style.”

“Oh, I’m a Jack of all trades.” He smirked as he spoke.

“Seriously?” I couldn’t keep the incredulity out of my voice.

He just shook his head and furrowed his brow with the first frown I’d ever seen on his face.
“That’s the really funny part: of all the things I do, all the people I kill… people complain most frequently to my face about the jokes. The obvious ones, anyway — they usually never even notice the good ones.”

“Like Friday’s date?” He was walking after me, casually matching my retreat step for step.

At that, he smiled again, open and joyous in all the ways his usual self-satisfied smirk was not. It was something as unexpected as the sun rising in the west and I saw, for just a moment, what Shatterbird must have seen in him. “See? You get it. It’s not enough to just go through life… you have to go through it with style. Keep things interesting.”

“You must get bored easily.” I just had to keep him talking a very little longer — I was almost to the end of the jetty now.

He shrugged. “What can I say? There is no hunting like the hunting of man, you know… as I expect you do, in both senses of that word. Can you really tell me that you haven’t felt more alive, facing the challenges of the last month? Of the last day?”

“It hasn’t been dull, no.” Just a few more steps…

He stopped. Well, he was far enough along the jetty that I thought I could swarm him if he tried to run.

“See, this is exactly what I mean about the past determining the future.” He was tapping his knife on his thigh.

“Oh?” I’d gathered as many crabs as I could unobtrusively, but if he gave me more time… well, I could gather still more.

“You’ve backed yourself into what looks like an inescapable situation, using that and your conversation to distract me from your escape. We just did this!” He sounded faintly insulted.

That was the whole point of this exercise: keep him watching for the great escape, and maybe he’ll miss the last-ditch offense. Maybe.
He tilted his head. “Or…”

I was watching his left hand, the one with the knife. Maybe that was why I missed it when he underhanded a small canister at me with his right hand. My reactions were still fast enough to swat it aside into the water, but gas spewed out from it. After an instinctive half-gasp, I shut my mouth… but it didn’t burn. Insecticide? I could feel the insects I kept on me dropping away, and even the crabs were…

No. I could feel all my insects, everywhere, fading out of existence. Or rather…

I was blind, and the world was filled with buzzing. No, not blind: the world had shrunk to a yellow-tinted view of bugs less than an inch from my eyes. Bugs I couldn’t see through. Couldn’t control. Couldn’t even feel.

Couldn’t feel my bugs; my body I could feel all too well. My wrist throbbed with a low ache, but my ribs… my ribs burned, with a fire both hot and cold at once, flaring brighter with every breath until it was almost all I could focus on.

Long seconds passed while I wiped the lenses of my mask with my right hand, setting the pain aside with firmness born of panic, and put my left behind me, on the hilt of my knife. I didn’t think much of my chances in a knife-fight against Jack, but whatever he’d done hadn’t left me with many good alternatives. I crouched slightly, tensing and preparing to strike, waiting for the first hint of his silhouette looming through the buzzing swarms.

It didn’t come.

The fog, without my will actively substituting in fresh insects for old, thinned out as wings failed or exhaustion set in.

Jack stood exactly where he had before, cleaning his fingernails with the tip of his knife… but as the fog cleared his eyes met mine, and a smile spread across his face once more. He hadn’t even tried to kill me.

“Why?” Mannequin had fought to win; Jack… Jack was playing a different game. And while I didn’t intend to play his game, I might need to know it if I hoped to maneuver him into losing mine.
He shrugged. “Oh, Bonesaw uses this — along with a paralytic, typically — when she needs to operate on people like, well, us.”

“Tinkers.” I put every bit of venom I could muster into that word. She was halfway across the city, not even here, and still a nightmare to fight.

He chuckled. “Perhaps Alan picked better than he knew! Still, most of them couldn’t have managed anything close to this: she is, after all, the best in the world at biology, and what she lacks in expensive lab equipment is more than made up in the freedom to conduct any experiment she might be curious about. As she tells it, at the end of the day we all have an extra couple of structures in our brain. Very difficult to replicate or understand, but not nearly as difficult to jam up. You should be back to normal in an hour or three, depending, but in the meantime… I wasn’t done with the conversation.” He paused, and I tensed once more. “Have I mentioned that you picked a good knife? I do like someone who has taste when it comes to knives.”

“The storekeeper recommended it. I wouldn’t have known which to get.” Keeping him talking for an hour — or three! — would be a very tall order. Even assuming he was telling me the truth there. No, this was going to have to end here, and soon. Eyes or temple. Ears? I was almost certain that Bonesaw would have armored the throat, and was hopeful that she wouldn’t have, say, relocated his brain to an armored box in his abdomen.

“Well, then you got good advice from him. Variant on the old Fairbairn-Sykes: one of the classics. With which you’re planning how to kill me right now — would you much mind putting that on hold for a moment? I’m still not done with the conversation, you know.”

“Telepathy?” The Simurgh was theorized to be the only true telepath, but at this point, I wouldn’t have been surprised at any trick he showed.

He looked at me incredulously. “You’re half crouched with your hand in the place from which I saw you draw a knife on Valefor earlier tonight.”

Right. No need to jump to exotic explanations when simpler ones were at hand. I straightened slightly, still keeping my hand on the knife. “You’re taking an awfully long time about killing me.”

He shook his head and blew out an exasperated breath. “If I just wanted to kill people… I’d…” he tapped his chin with his knife for several seconds. “Actually, I’d probably just tell Bonesaw she can do a pandemic, but just this once. Sweet girl, really — understood immediately once I explained it in terms of sharing: how it would be selfish if she did all the killing, and left none for the rest of us.”
Fantastic. Move Bonesaw up on the to-do list, immediately below ‘Find some way to kill Jack before he kills you. Without powers.’

“No, killing isn’t the point. Life and death are high stakes, and stakes keep things interesting… but massacres? They can be interesting, but really — they all blend together much more quickly than you’d think.”

"Wouldn't know." My voice sounded quiet, almost weak, without the chorus of bugs backing it.

The tapping stopped as he eyed me. "Wouldn't you? Would you say that the deaths of all Bakuda's victims affected you more or less than, say, the death of... Brandish?"

I didn't answer, because he wasn't wrong. Also, because even if my powers weren't coming back in time for this... maybe Legend or Dragon would look down and help. Long odds, but I didn't have any other kind to play.

"That's the thing: one death is a tragedy, a thousand deaths... just a statistic. Never was interested in statistics — that was Harbinger's schtick." He sounded fond. Nostalgic even.

Personally, I would have been terrified if there was any room left for it in me. The idea that Harbinger had retired from the Nine because they were too small scale for him was... well, right in line with the rest of the night, actually. Jack now, other problems later.

“You’ve been interesting, and I doubt you know how rare that is. Most villains are boring. Unimaginative. Walking appetites who want little things and then take them in a crude, repetitive, meaningless way: barely sentient beasts who are satisfied with the simple sensate pleasures of animal life.” He waved his knife toward the north.

I had to squint now, using my own eyes. Lung was flying off, more east than north, and large enough that I still wasn’t sure if my eyes were playing tricks on me. When he entered a cloud, it glowed from within as though a red moon had risen to replace the white one that had set so recently before.

A silent thunderclap of golden light drew my eye back to where the standoff had been, and fires throughout the city simply... ceased. The kind of power that only two or three capes had ever wielded, centered on a black silhouette against a sky lightening toward royal blue. Scion.
“And the heroes are, if anything, worse! So much effort put into preserving the way the world is; so little thought given to how the world could be. Put out a fire today, and there will be another tomorrow. Fight an Endbringer today, there will be another one in three months. Boring. No art, no genius… not even any change. It’s all very depressing — can’t think how they manage to get up in the mornings.”

“And what you’ve done has changed the world? To what end?” This was more emotion than I’d seen him show yet, and that had to distract him. Didn’t it?

“Oh, I don’t care about ends. I just care that the time along the way be interesting. You revised this whole city — that’s not boring.”

“That wasn’t about amusing myself.”

He smiled knowingly. “And you didn’t enjoy the challenge? The killing? Getting revenge on the people who had hurt you or your family?”

I stiffened. “I lost the person closest to me. And I could have gone out and massacred people… but you found Madison alive, remember? I didn’t do this… just… for the revenge. I did this to make the city better.”

An eyebrow arched. “Better how?”

“The villains you call boring have been killing my city by slow degrees. I watched my father pour his life into this city, and then be murdered by someone who thought he — and I — were insects, unworthy of her personal attention. I didn’t find that boring in the least. I found it… intolerable.” I bared my teeth behind my mask in a smile that wasn’t. “He was all I had left. Everything I have done since — everything — has been in the hope that this could at last be the city he’d sought to build. Even if he didn’t live to see it, I know what he would have wanted, and will see it through in his memory.”

Jack shrugged. “Still not boring.” He glanced to his left, and then back at me. “Fun as these talks are — not as fun as the fighting, but still — I’m afraid I’m on the clock here, and I’m going to need a straight answer from you soon. Are you coming with me? Plenty of other cities out there that could use the scalpel.”
I risked a quick glance past him and knew hope. The light that filled the sky with the beginnings of color was turning everything on the ground into a black silhouette, but the clouded skies were more visible by contrast. I wasn’t sure where Legend or Dragon were, and Scion was just hovering in the sky, head cocked as if listening to something only he could hear. Had he come for the Nine? To clean up after Bonesaw’s lab? Or for one of the other thousand acts of charity he felt driven to perform, almost constantly?

I tightened my grip on the knife and then, with conscious effort, loosened it into some approximation of Jack’s relaxed firmness. I’d made my choice already, and to abandon it now… that would be giving up.

“No.”

“Pity. Knife to knife then — no powers. Keep it interesting, shall we?” He dropped into a crouch, hands out.

“Knife-proof armor.” On the jetty, we couldn’t circle each other. I approached him instead through careful tiny steps: an inch or two at a time.

“Base of your skull. The hair adds some real flair to your look, no question, but…” He could have been discussing the weather, but he was right. I had left space behind my mask for the hair to flow through. It was my mother’s, and the one thing about me I thought was halfway attractive.

That had seemed more important when I was making the costume than it did now.

Jack lunged, and I skipped back, felt my side tighten in pain. He recovered so smoothly it looked like a dance. No, I wouldn’t be winning a knife-fight with Jack Slash, powers or no powers. Besides, he probably had better armor under his skin than I had over mine… but mine was pretty good.

Perhaps even good enough for what I had in mind.

I edged in again, and this time I launched into a lunge, ignoring the tearing sensation in my side. Much of knife fighting — of fighting — from what little I knew of it was about misdirection and control. I knew nothing of how to fight with a knife, and my lunge must have been obvious. He parried it easily.
At which point, I dropped my knife and grabbed the blade of his with both hands.

Maybe he’d planned for that too: he was stronger than I was. Strong enough to pull me closer and deliver a hammerblow to the side of my head. I held on. Another followed, and still my grip held, despite the line of pain traced across both palms that proved my armor wasn’t as tough as I’d hoped. I couldn’t defeat him this way… but I could keep him busy.

Two loud cracks sounded, and he stiffened and dropped limp. I straightened up with his knife, reversing it so I could hold it by its handle. Before me stood a large man with a still larger beard, wearing a tattered suit and holding a shotgun from which faint smoke wafted, jogging toward the foot of the jetty.

I’d felt him, crouched in the boathouse with Pete and the others who were emerging even now, and I’d seen him when I glanced past Jack. I’d hoped he could intervene, tip the struggle my way, but this... I reached down and felt for a pulse on Jack's neck, leaving a bloody smear behind from the cut in that palm.

I stood again, bewildered. Could it have been that simple all along? Had the villain who had beaten cape after cape in two long decades of cunning slaughter fallen to a random normal?

The man stopped well short of me and moved the shotgun away so I was out of line. “Are you all right?” His voice was almost incongruously high, given his size.

That was a question which I hardly knew how to answer. I took a step toward him over Jack’s body, wondering why this man looked familiar, when I might have seen him before. He stayed where he was, but held the gun out behind him in one hand for balance and reached out to me with the other. "Pete said it looked like you could use a hand."

I caught his hand with my own and grasped it, letting him pull me in. "He was right." The adrenaline was starting to fade, and the weariness remained. My body, despite the wounds I’d taken, was still fresh — Panacea did good work — but even if no surgeon would ever find a scar, phantom injuries still tingled everywhere, little itches that scratching wouldn't fix. My eyes... there was so much that I'd set aside, to worry about later.

I had never been entirely sure I'd live to see later.

"Thank you." The politeness was a reflex, divorced from the gravity of the situation, but it was
sincere nonetheless. What now? There were still three of the Nine free, though how I would begin to track them without my power was beyond me. They might have already fled. Perhaps I could leave them to Dragon, Legend, and Scion — I was so tired.

Still, looking at the three dozen people walking toward me from the boathouse, and at the city beyond — no longer on fire, and with a chance to survive and rebuild, despite all the odds... I thought that maybe today could be a good day.

That was when one of the women screamed. I tried to turn, but the bearded man shoved me down and spun, shotgun rising... only to drop from nerveless fingers and clatter off the jetty into the ocean. I looked up from where I'd been thrown and saw him put one hand, and then the other, to his throat, as if to strangle himself. Bright red blood fountained out from between his fingers in rhythmic spurts, dyeing his beard scarlet.

He fell by stages, first to his knees, then to his side, and finally rolling onto his back with a dull thump.

I tightened my grip on Jack's knife and looked back up the jetty. Jack was standing, laughing, looking at the fleeing civilians, and occasionally clawing the air. Some fleeing fell, and not all rose again. I gathered my feet under me, staying low.

Jack noticed me and raised a hand in acknowledgment. "I know, I know... but you should have seen his face!"

I looked down for a moment.

I could see his face. See the rapid back and forth movements of his warm brown eyes, the way his barrel chest strained to breathe, hear the gurgling coughs as he fought not to drown in his own blood. It wouldn't make a difference: that was a severed artery there. That made it a race whether he'd bleed to death or suffocate first, and as I watched he grew still, the blood seeping forth instead of spurting. Dead. And for what? He could have stayed in hiding or walked away. But he had thought I needed a hand, and so set himself against one of the most feared men living... and in the doing, died.

Jack had turned his hand around and was inspecting his fingernails. As I rose from beside the body of a man whose name I had never known, Jack kissed his hand to me, and then slashed it down as I charged. I felt parallel lines of pressure across my torso, but the armor held. He met me straight on, and I sunk his knife into his stomach, feeling a moment of resistance before it penetrated.
He grabbed my shoulders, and lifted one hand to hit me again. My armor — good as it was against knives — didn't do all that much to prevent concussion, and our first encounter had shown he was the stronger. My legs never stopped moving as we met, but they did change direction... and in that moment I could seize before he set himself once more, I took a deep breath, wrenched him sideways, and we fell into the ocean.

The Atlantic was cold, even in summer, and though the tide was rising there were barely five feet of water before the sandy floor. Low enough I could stand up comfortably, if I chose, and wade.

I did not so choose. I kept us both underwater and tried to rip the knife across his stomach, but even that knife — which had cut my own armor — sliced only fitfully. It was like trying to saw through a chain link fence with a butter knife, and if the man in my grasp felt pain, he didn't show it.

Jack simply ignored the knife and grabbed me, holding me under water even as he stood up himself. I grabbed and kicked, jerked the knife back and forth, but to no avail. If not for my mask, I would have tried to bite him too. Perhaps I might have managed something with leverage — even if he could switch off pain, and even if his organs were so armored he could mostly ignore the knife, his joints still had to bend for him to move — but I knew little of wrestling, and less of trying it underwater. Besides, he was stronger than I.

A sense of pressure built within my lungs, and I fought the urge to breathe almost as desperately as I fought Jack, using the knife as a lever to twist myself around and add force to my kicks. He took them all — even the one between his legs — unflinchingly, holding me beneath the waves in a firm grip which I could not break.

At last I inhaled, felt the wet silk of my mask press firmly against my mouth as the sea water rushed, coughed, sputtered, and coughed some more, thrashed and twisted and choked, blood thundering in my ears... and then gasped air sweeter than any I'd tasted, spat salt and skinned the wet mask off my face. I opened my eyes and took a wave full in the face, sputtered clear and saw Jack half-floating beside me.

I'd seen that game before.

I took him by the heel and towed him in to shore facedown. The street, swept clean of wreckage the day before, now had several bodies dotting it — some still, some moving. All of them too far for me to make out in any great detail. I stretched him out across the water line, face down, blowing bubbles in the surf with his feet anchoring him to land, and extracted his knife from his stomach with a series of wrenching jerks. Cradling my right wrist, I straddled him and thrust the knife down where the neck becomes the head, bearing down with all my weight.
The first half inch was difficult; the second impossible. I had to grab a loose stone off the beach, as heavy as I could heft, and use that to hammer the blade down through his neck. The waves beat a quiet accompaniment to the struggle, splashing up over his head, and draining off in rivulets that pulled his hair along, or flowed over the three raised metal scabs near his right temple.

Two waves broke in rhythm to my pounding with the rock before I recognized those scabs for what they were: bullets. Not small ones either, but not enough to pierce the skull — not after whatever Bonesaw had done to him.

At last, a convulsive effort wrenched his head completely free of his neck, and I rose with head in hand. On the jetty, Pete Walker lay sprawled out with pistol in hand, a trail of blood marking his crawl from the sidewalk where he'd first fallen. I went to him and helped him rise, letting him brace himself on me in place of his freshly crippled leg.

Together we walked, limping, west into the shattered city while behind us sky whitened toward dawn. Abandoned amidst the pounding surf, the hilt of a knife fixed deep into the sand could be seen for a time before the rising tide swallowed it.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, Bibliothecary.

You are viewing:

• Threads you are following.
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page.
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

You have zero infractions and zero warnings. You have never been banned.

Topic: S9 in Brockton Bay: WTF?

In: Boards ▶ News ▶ Events ▶ America

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Posted on May 13th, 2011:

Last time I put together a thread on this city, I wrote that something felt funny. This time I’m throwing up my hands: does someone upstairs hate the place? One week after Leviathan, and the Slaughterhouse Nine come to town? It’s going to be a long night for everyone out there.

Update: No idea if this is reliable, but there’s video online now showing what they say are giant monsters fighting in the ruins of the city. Not even Endbringers get that large.

Update: More photos and videos emerging. Best view is on Uber and Leet’s stream: this is real, folks.
Update: **Statement** from the PRT that this is *not* the emergence of a fourth Endbringer, but rather a fight between Crawler and Lung. Stay calm, people.

Update: Fight’s over! Brockton Bay is still standing. There’s footage of a giant joining in before the end, and reports that Scion himself was on the scene (but obviously no footage), and footage of a light in the clouds that may or may not be Lung leaving.

Update: **Unconfirmed chatter** on Stormfront (yeah, I know, but if you want to know what E88 is up to…) says Night, Stormtiger, Rune, and Shielder all died in a fight with the Teeth. (The Teeth are there too?) Story is that Stormtiger took out Butcher and suicided — would that even work? They’re also claiming credit for the giant, who is apparently some new cape named Cadmus, possibly related to Fenja.

Update: **BURNSCAR IN MANHATTAN!** Use that thread for discussions of what’s going on in New York; use this one for discussions of whatever happened in BB, including whatever **Faultline** did to pull *that* off.

Update: Buried in a **statement** from the PRT NYC about their series of strikes on Teeth hideouts last night is a note that, “between these successes and the battle between PRT forces and the Teeth in Brockton Bay, we have taken most of the Teeth into custody, and Butcher is tentatively believed to be eliminated.” I think we have to take the Stormfront rumors more seriously now.

Update: **Statement** from New Wave thanking the Protectorate and everyone else who rallied to the fight against the Slaughterhouse Nine. Confirms that they made it through without casualties; specifically calls out Velocity as having saved Shielder at the cost of his own life. Condolence thread here. Godspeed: the man died a hero.

Update: Brief **statement** from Accord (WTF?) recognizing the cooperation of E88, New Wave, the Guild, and the Protectorate in helping his Ambassador deal with Crawler. At this point, I’m wondering who wasn’t in BB last night.

Update: **Statement** datelined PRT ENE reports four of the S9 are dead (Cherish, Crawler, Jack, and Mannequin) and the rest fled. Casualties: Velocity, dead; Armsmaster, critical condition; Weld, stable condition. Thanks everyone who fought. Calls out Velocity as having saved Armsmaster’s life as well as Shielder’s; thanks Dragon for coming down from Canada.

Update: Unofficially I’m getting word from one of my sources that at least two of the Fallen were spotted in Brockton Bay last night, specifically including Valefor. It may not be over yet, folks!
Update: And I’m going to sleep now. Let me know if someone else makes sense of this.

(Showing page 210 of 267)

► Grinner
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
We don’t know anything about the other kills, though, and that’s what’s surprising. Nobody on Stormfront and none of the official releases have gone into detail. So who got whom?

► Pegasus
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
If you believe the rumor about Faultline taking her team in to extract Burnscar, that helps explain Cherish. You can’t control minds if you’re on fire!

► Ekul
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
@IDoLater
The only actual mind-controller in the city was Cherish, and she’s dead. Give it a rest!

► Giant Sprite
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
I’m betting it was death from above: we’ve got those verbal reports of Purity + New Wave strafing the city, and none of the three question-marks are tough enough to tank that kind of firepower.

► IDoLater
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
@Ekul
I wasn’t talking about Cherish! I’m just saying: the Teeth come to town, the Teeth get slaughtered. The Nine come to town, the Nine get slaughtered. The Fallen come to town… what do you want to bet that they turn up dead too? And who benefits? E88, again. What do we really know about this
Cadmus anyway?

► dd:bb
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
@LandLord

He’s confirmed stable at Mass. General, but that’s all the news we have.

► Calluna
Replied on May 14th, 2011:
@Giant Sprite

If New Wave had gotten any of them, it would be in their statement. If Purity had, it would be all over Stormfront. And if the Protectorate had, they’d be trumpeting it too. So who?

Got to be a rogue, right?

► Solzi
Replied on May 14th, 2011:

Setting aside the fact you’re assuming it was one person behind each of those… someone who doesn’t want to make themselves a target for the rest of the S9?

Seriously, stop overthinking this.

► Prism (Verified Cape)
Replied on May 14th, 2011:

First, I don’t know anything special about who did what or how. But if anyone involved wants a little peace afterward, I say they deserve it. Speculation like this can only hurt people.

► Tin Mother (Moderator: News)
Replied on May 14th, 2011:

No infractions yet, but this is getting near some of the lines. Focus on the thread topic, please.
Rebecca glanced at the screen and then looked aside, gazing out her window at the sea of light below. One hand rose, tracing out lines against the city below. Patterns. Places where, already, villains were attempting to set down roots, testing whether the city’s defenders were weakened without their leader.

That wasn’t really a concern: she’d trained them all, and they’d do fine. The window, and the internet, were merely procrastination in the face of fear… and it had been a long time indeed since she’d had to fear anything but failure. The answer to such challenges didn’t change: she’d just have to face her fear.

She looked at the back of her hand once more, eyes providing nothing that her memory couldn’t. Her skin was smooth, but for the handful of faint cuts across it, each of them just as half-healed as they had been for the last week. A vulnerability revealed, in the time it took for her invincibility to reassert itself… but an opportunity also.

For a scant few hours before her body locked itself into a fresh immutability once more, that tissue had been mortal once more, able to age and heal. With the right surgeon, the right scalpel, it might be possible to shave off a thin edge of tissue and heal outward from there.

Perhaps.

It had taken a week just to establish the possibility, and the execution would take more than one parahuman to pull it off. Even the best case she’d have to trust someone to shave off a fraction of her brain: when the Siberian had clawed out her eye, she’d reached deep. Deep enough that Rebecca had wondered, from time to time, if her thinker power was all that let her retain continuity of identity. Any reconnection and healing would be… disruptive.

Brain damage of its own, in a way. There was no guarantee she’d emerge on the other side who she was now. Still, she had taken that leap of faith once before… and done far worse to others. No turning back now. After all, with all of humanity at stake, what else could she do?
She lowered her hand and spoke to the empty room. “Proceed.”

Sunday, 5/15/2011

The penthouse door creaked open and Cass opened one bleary eye, looking up from the couch where she lay. Someone in a suit? With an effort, she propped herself up on an elbow. The beginnings of a headache made it hard to focus, but the darkness outside the empty window-frames said it was night again, and about time to get up.

She didn’t recognize the woman in the doorway, but anyone putting that much effort into dressing up these days had to be ready to party… and things ought to be kicking off again shortly. Whoever it was walked in like she owned the place, heading straight for the master bedroom. Technically, she could be looking for any of the people in there… but Cass thought she knew which it would be.

The dryness in her mouth reminded her that she was thirsty and she got up and staggered toward the kitchen, filling a plastic cup with bottled water and drinking it. As she refilled it, she glanced across the counter at the room. The moon was almost full, and the place had been designed with full-height glass doors opening onto a patio, so she could see almost as well as if they had light and power. It… was a bit of a mess: cups, sheets, cards, pillows, all strewn across the room.

Still, fifteen minutes to shove it out of sight, and they’d be ready once more. They’d gone through the last of the box wine last night, and all the sound systems were broken… which left the pills. Or other kinds of fun. For now, Cass picked her way through the debris of last night out to the patio, and laid herself out on one of the tanning chairs set out there. The breeze was nicer there.

A click, and she saw Etienne step out onto the balcony with an unbuttoned white shirt over slim black jeans. His curly hair, frustratingly, was perfectly tousled even after waking up. He made his way to the railing and leaned back against it in what had to be a carefully calculated pose. The woman in the suit and hat followed him, shutting the door behind her.

“I don’t suppose you’re here for the party?” Etienne’s voice was smooth.
She snorted.

He continued, unruffled. “Then what brought you to my little nest?”

She stepped to the railing and moved to put her hands on it before pulling them back and glaring at Etienne. He smiled back at her, in one of his rare displays of emotion, and Cass felt a momentary pulse of jealousy: he hadn’t smiled for her, last night on the balcony.

She shook her head. “Call it a friendly warning.”

He raised a finger to his lips in a gesture of calculated artlessness. “Danger? Pour moi? From whom, I wonder? Not from you, not while they wait to see how you two work out.”

She swept an arm out across the city. “There’s a lot of uncertainty out there right now. And your past hasn’t stopped looking either.”

At that, his face smoothed out into his customary neutrality. “Eh. They’ve tried before.”

The woman shrugged. “Well, if you need help dealing with them…”

He tilted his head. “Dealing with them? Too much like work.”

“And if you do nothing…” The woman raised her voice for the first time, pausing as Etienne raised a hand toward her, palm out.

“Just because there’s a problem doesn’t mean something must be done. Doing nothing isn’t just the easy way out… sometimes it’s the best way through.” His hand swept out over the view of the city to the north. “As you see.”

“Only because someone else stepped up.” She bit the words out.
He shrugged, an elaborate rippling movement. “Even so. How’s the rest of our old gang doing?”

“Enjoying camping out and getting used to following orders, respectively.”

He shook his head, curls bouncing. “I never could figure out why he took the deal alongside you.”

The woman raised her hand, opened her mouth to speak, and then paused. “Huh.” She shook her head. “Look, I need to go. Stay safe.”

One hand, pale and perfect, rose in a lazy salute. “You too.”

The woman made her way back out of the penthouse and down the hallway toward the stairs, footsteps faint against the carpet, as Cass stood and stretched. Etienne’s maddeningly distant gaze caught hers, and he jerked his head before going back inside. She drained her cup and followed with a smile.

The penthouse door closed softly.

---

Monday, 5/16/2011

It was a warm day, more appropriate to summer than to spring, made warmer by the cloudless sky. Central Park thronged with joggers and walkers, picnickers and tourists, and though the people were so many tiny dots from this distance, Brian thought he could make out his wife among them, out for her pre-dinner circuit with the stroller before her.

It was a perspective that could be had nowhere else in the city. Even set among so many famous skyscrapers, Memorial Tower stood out by virtue of its sheer size. The architecture was monumental rather than graceful, the product of a committee rather than any singular vision. It was, in the eyes of many, ugly... but for all that, beloved.
The Post had run a front page picture of it on the day of its completion, almost twice as tall as the buildings immediately around it and shot from an angle that implied the gesture unmistakably, with the headline "NYC to Behemoth: UP YOURS!" That didn't make people think the building any prettier, but it did lead them to embrace it as an iconic symbol of New York grit, and an emblem of the city's resurgence after the Endbringer's attack.

The panorama from the top was appropriately astonishing: to the left, the sun setting toward the Hudson and New Jersey; to the right, the East River and Brooklyn; before and beneath them one of the great cities of the world laid out in miniature. If their hosts were going to make them wait — and they'd now been waiting almost an hour — at least they'd provided a room with a view.

A slight sound alerted him and Brian turned, smiling at the man entering the conference room. Carl had been two years ahead of him in college, and the friendship struck up then had lasted through law school and the decades of practice since. Carl's career looked promising even before he'd left the firm to take a position as in-house counsel with what was then still J. B. Fielding & Sons Construction. Today he still had the same job, though the title now was Chief Legal Officer, and the responsibilities were vastly larger.

They shook hands, trading inquiries about their families, and then Carl introduced him to the man who'd followed him in: Justin Fielding, COO of Fortress Construction. He was heavy-set and deliberate in his movements, but his eyes were piercing.

He was also not the man they'd been scheduled to meet. Carl stepping in was one thing — an old friend visiting while Brian happened to be in the building — but this was looking like the meeting might be turning into something more than discussing the terms of a hypothetical equity investment in a development deal, complicated somewhat by Fortress' announced intention to do some pro bono reconstruction work in the area.

Which meant... "Quinn?"

The man at the far end of the room turned, the bright sky outside leaving him a black silhouette against the window. Color crept in as he approached, until he was once more a man in a tailored suit, white smile against tanned skin, and a face too perfectly symmetrical to be quite real but for the vivid scar that twisted one side of his face slightly off true. Fitting, in some ways: he only came in for cases that were somehow crooked.

A round of greetings was exchanged, and then Carl got down to business. "I'm sorry to have kept you both. The issue is simple: in view of the recent extensive damage to the city, Fortress needs to reassess the viability of the tentative reconstruction plan. I should have had them call this morning
"... that someone would already have an effective plan, accounting for the recent damage?" Quinn broke in, tenor cutting lightly but irresistibly through Carl's baritone. He reached back to the conference table, long fingers extracting a bulging ring binder easily four inches thick. "This must be your lucky day." He handed the binder to Justin, who took it and then handed it off to Carl before facing Quinn directly.

Justin was the shorter and stouter of the two, but his very solidity made him seem immovable, and his deep bass voice added gravity to his clipped words. "What Carl's trying to say is that recent events have raised the possibility that there will be no public attempt to rebuild Brockton Bay. Fortress cannot afford to undertake the reconstruction alone. We remain committed to the Fortress Global Reconstruction Initiative. Because of that, we cannot afford for its first effort to fail. It will not embark on a project that is doomed to fall short. Nor could we, in conscience, accept an equity partner for a project in which we did not believe."

Quinn's head tilted for a moment, and then his smile widened. "I understand completely. Well, if that's how it is, I'm overdue at the PRT headquarters anyway."

It was all Brian could do not to twitch. Deals died all the time, for any reason or none — that wasn't the surprising part. Quinn Calle walking away was: before he'd made his current reputation, back when he still wore the face he'd been born with, he'd been known for his calm relentlessness. The last time they'd worked together, on the FR construction liability litigation, Quinn had almost singlehandedly turned the case around with a marathon series of depositions that delicately pried forth admissions about the limits of various government thinkers' powers, and all the ways they could interfere with each other.

Still, this was Quinn's client. Brian picked up his bag, went through the pleasantries, and began the walk to the elevator bank. They'd gotten halfway there when Carl cut off a discussion of when they might find time for a squash match to listen to the conversation behind them as it shifted from the possible reconstruction of Sydney, and the profits to be had there, to a more immediate topic.

"... held you?" Brian hadn't been willing to ask the question; Justin had less shame, or perhaps more curiosity about how the 72 hour psychiatric hold had gone.

"Oh, that wasn't the risk. The risk was that they'd carry out sentence before I could get it stayed pending appeal."

"Do you think it likely you'll succeed?" Justin sounded more at ease than he had been in conference.
room, and curious about what was already shaping up to be the trial of the century.

"It's too early to tell, but I do think we have some good facts." Quinn's tenor was warm and friendly... and relaxed. Brian had been to a lot of pre-construction meetings in his career; up until now, the worst that he had ever even heard of coming from one of them was an argument. The sort of thing that could lead to a lost client, or sleepless nights of work, or something like that.

Quinn Calle lived a different life.

Like his clients, he seemed a little bit larger than life: when Quinn Calle attended a construction meeting, the Slaughterhouse Nine showed up and started killing architects. The fact he’d escaped the meeting and gone on to personally row a tiny boat out of the city to survive was impressive; the fact he’d taken an insane serial killer along for the ride was astonishing. And here he was at a scheduled meeting, making small talk. Perhaps last weekend was simply another day at the office for him; perhaps he merely knew the advantages of keeping up that pretense.

"Well, if anyone can pull it off, you can. Good luck with the PRT, though: I'm surprised they haven't executed her already." Justin was smiling. "I'm sorry to have missed meeting Tailor, and perhaps there will be another development deal which works out better for her investment aims."

Quinn turned as they reached the elevators, facing Justin with one foot slightly advanced. "Well, I'd been telling her to take a vacation for a while now... actually, Tailor's why I'll be at the PRT today. It's somewhat relevant to you, you know — she'll have more to invest once the bounties clear."

He reached back and tapped the elevator call button in the ensuing silence, then looked up with the same easy smile as before. "I'm thinking... another meeting a week from today? We can review the viability of the project then, see if you've gotten any inspiration on how to make it work from Mr. Bernsheim's plan."

Carl clutched the binder to his chest.

"Cyril Bernsheim is..." Justin spoke slowly.

"Difficult to handle, I know. Still, my client wanted to make sure you had the best available. Speaking of which... is there anything else we can do to help you with the Brockton Bay project?"
An elevator dinged.

Quinn gestured Brian into it before stepping in himself. "Until next week, then."

The elevator doors closed on their whitened faces, the mirror finish throwing back a blurry reflection of Quinn Calle’s smile.

---

Tuesday, 5/17/2011

Director Piggot stumped through the hall of the small clinic within PRT ENE, face set in her typical determined frown. On the one hand — for once! — there were hardly any cameras in the city; on the other, her demeanor had never been primarily intended for the cameras. There were cities where the job of PRT Director was primarily PR; Brockton Bay had never been numbered among them.

She had ordered her people to their deaths before, and likely would again. Perceived hesitation on her part would get them killed — every moment they spent second-guessing her in the field put them at risk, and the best way to discourage that was to project certainty. Even and especially when that certainty was impossible: delay killed, and "a good plan violently executed now" was still the right standard in any fluid situation. Perfection was for the parade-ground, not the battlefield.

Minimal casualties was a very long way from no casualties. She drew herself up before the door, knocked once, and then entered without waiting for acknowledgment.

"Director." The head and shoulders protruding from a pile of metal turned from looking out the window at the golden afternoon.

"Weld." She nodded curtly. "We've been unable to recover the rest of your body, and we're currently presuming it vaporized along with everything else on that floor, when Scion hit Bonesaw’s lab."
His shoulders rippled in what might have been an attempted shrug, hindered by the fact that his body currently terminated four inches below his neck. "Thanks for checking, ma'am. Even without it, give me another week of vacation and I'll be my old self again."

A lie, but one she could respect. He would never be his old self; no one who survived such a trial could be. His limited ability to shapeshift the metal he absorbed might let him avoid the physical consequences that had ended her own field career, but the mental scars wouldn’t pass so quickly. Or at all. There were still nights when she woke up in a cold sweat, dreaming of Nilbog’s monsters and her team dying around her.

"We'll need you back on the streets as soon as you can manage it." She knew well how little pity was wanted at such a time, and how much purpose was needed. At least she could offer him a return to the field.

"Aye, ma’am." He even smiled. "The Empire is on the move?"

Emily shook her head once. "Not yet, but this split between the Pure and the Pack won't stay quiet forever. If they fight, it will be our problem to clean up. If they make up..."

"That will be our problem too." Weld's eyes were distant, but his voice strengthened. He looked at her. "Any transfers?"

She shook her head. "Aside from Browbeat transferring out? The official word is that we clearly don't need help, given how the weekend went." She snorted, and — judging by the twitch — Weld suppressed a matching one. "Battery and Assault will return to duty tomorrow, but that’s all we’re getting until Armsmaster recovers."

Weld closed his eyes, steel lids sliding shut over steel eyeballs with the faintest hiss, then opened them.

“Can we recruit back up?”

"Right now Gallant is riding herd, alone, on two ex-villains who may or may not have reformed themselves completely."

“What about Tailor, ma’am? She was patrolling with Gallant and Browbeat beforehand, wasn’t
Emily’s frown deepened as Weld unknowingly put his finger on perhaps the largest problem she had. To the public, Tailor was a relatively weak cape, a rogue selling honey and cloth on a small scale — civic-minded enough to help out in a crisis, but otherwise uninteresting. But whatever she had been posing as, the girl was no minor-league tinker. There were frustratingly few hard facts available about her activities Friday night in between leaving PRT ENE after Jack threw down his challenge and returning with his head. Those who knew more weren’t talking — mostly because they were dead. Analysis of her comm traffic didn’t help either: it alluded to conspiracies and kidnappings involving Faultline, but nothing that tied back to Tailor herself.

Well, nothing aside from the headache Director Tagg was facing right now, with the very public surrender of an unconscious Burnscar in Manhattan. The photo of a shirtless Newter carrying her down the gangplank, bridal style, was already famous. At least, for a change, someone else was dealing with the biggest PR problem the PRT had. Even Weld’s testimony, supplemented by earbud recordings where they existed, only showed that Jack had nominated Tailor as well as Mannequin… but offered nothing concrete as to why.

Personally, Emily had her suspicions. Armsguard had theorized that there was a single shadowy figure behind the last month of chaos, the thinker Calvert had warned of and the stranger Brandish had trusted… both now dead. Those deaths, along with the others, were coming under fresh examination, and what might have passed as chance in a single instance looked less plausible when heaped upon other such ‘chances.’ Jack, beheaded with his own knife? Mannequin, buried alive until Dragon came for him? Cherish, killed by a friend?

In the worst case, she had just been toying with them all. Even in the Leviathan fight… she’d told Flechette where to find Hookwolf, and he’d gone on to make an opening for Eidolon to drive off the Endbringer. Earlier in the fight, she had arranged the experiment that wounded Alexandria. She was presently, and likely profitably, involved in the reconstruction even now beginning in those areas laid waste by fire, flood, and then fire again.

Coincidences?

All of them?

To those cleared to know, she was credited with personally managing to kill or capture two of the Nine in a running fight. A notable achievement, and one she wasn’t taking credit for. She’d opted for anonymity in each case, and gone so far as to split the bounty for Mannequin’s capture with Dragon and the bounty for Jack’s death with some random civilian. She hadn’t even discussed the bounties for Cherish and Burnscar. Cherish’s was going to Burnscar, nominally. But Burnscar left the city with Tailor’s lawyer, and turned up in New York in the custody of mercenaries hired by…
Tailor. Whoever killed Cherish, whoever got the official credit, Tailor had been pulling the strings for that, and for Burnscar’s capture too.

Even Crawler… Accord had been in town, and one of his Ambassadors proved critical in dealing with Crawler’s regeneration. Another ‘coincidence?’ The PRT knew he had been coming: they kept track of his Bernsheim persona, and Director Armstrong had passed a warning… but the standing policy was that any time Accord spent trying to make exquisitely manicured gardens was time he wasn’t doing something worse, like trying to end world hunger.

She shuddered momentarily. *That* plan called for the blackmail or bribery of over half of the heads of state. The families of another third had been marked for kidnapping. It was a recipe for conflict on an unheard-of scale.

The worst of it was that there was no discernible purpose to her actions. She wasn’t taking territory, as the villains did; she wasn’t taking credit as a hero either. The deaths of Bakuda and Coil had destabilized the gangs; what had the death of Brandish bought her? Continued anonymity? She’d said she intended no revenge over Shadow Stalker… but two weeks later, most of the Wards were dead.

*Why?*

Maybe some of this was coincidence. Maybe most of it. But the PRT couldn’t turn a blind eye to it… and they couldn’t go directly at her, either. Setting aside the PR issues with Shadow Stalker and Calvert, setting aside the lack of hard evidence… the last intelligence appraisal on her had suggested that two squads of PRT agents would be more than sufficient to arrest her if necessary. *That* was due for revision.

Without some way to confirm she didn’t have *other* surprises somewhere, any straight up fight would be… risky. Any secret surveillance would be riskier: Calvert had overseen a major revision of the PRT Master-Stranger protocols. Those protocols hadn’t stopped New Wave’s ‘friendly stranger.’ If Tailor *had* been behind that, the PRT wouldn’t see her coming either. Just two weeks past, Emily herself had been singing Tailor’s praises to the other Directors: taking credit for the prospect of better armor for the troops, without the hassles of tinker maintenance, at a price competitive with current supply? For that, Hearthrow had joked that he’d sell his soul.

Now, Emily wondered if she’d sold her city, or at least her Wards.

And yet… none of it proven. Perhaps none of it provable; perhaps none of it even *true*. 
“Ma’am?”

Emily considered trying to explain this to Weld, to a boy so painfully upright that he had offered her every courtesy as she sent to him to his probable death and actual decapitation. She weighed the value of telling him against the risk that her suspicions would leak… and found it wanting. It was bitterly painful to send her people into the city in ignorance of what they would face, and she wondered for a moment if a similar decision had sent her team into Ellisburg blind.

Thankfully she wouldn’t have to lie to him outright. At least, not today. She could instead answer him with a truth that would calm him even as it terrified her: “We’re not quite sure where she is right now.”

Wednesday, 5/18/2011

John walked back to the gate, carrying a large cup full of ice begged from the McDonalds further down the concourse. Sandra hadn’t wanted to eat ice before, but she certainly loved it now… and it was a small enough thing for him to do, with her ankles swollen as they were. He’d asked if she’d prefer to stay at home, but she’d insisted… probably because she wanted to go the extra mile for the in-law. Truthfully, she had less to prove than he did: the old man had loved her for loving him, but relations between father and son had been strained ever since that terrible day when they had buried Jessica.

He reached her and handed over the cup and she took it with that same surprised smile that had caught him off-guard four years past, and though he’d sworn he’d never marry again after the divorce… he smiled back and squeezed her hand, then sat down beside her. The flight had been delayed twice already, and the wait could be another hour.

A female voice spoke over the PA, scratchy and distorted. “TWA 361 now arriving at gate D2.”

Or it could be right now. He checked the clock — just after noon. There were already staff bustling
around the door. Then they opened it, and a steady stream of people emerged, many already
dressed for the beach in bright pastels or tight clothing. John stood, craning back and forth as he
scanned the crowd for his father.

There! A slow moving-knot in the crowd, and John saw his father. Bent, walking with a cane and
the support of another passenger, face lined and looking old. It had been a few years, but he’d
never dreamt… the old man had always sounded so strong…

He stepped forward, shouldering a few tourists aside and reached out to his father. The tall girl in
the baseball cap yielded the arm she’d supported, and John led his father over to where Sandra sat.
She tried to rise as they approached, but his father waved her down and smiled, reaching out to
place a hand against her belly before sitting down next to her. She smiled back, radiant —
whatever they had had to say to each other hadn’t needed words.

John stood before the two of them, hands free and uneasy with it. Surely there was something more
he could do… could have done…

He settled for standing a little straighter and looking at the man who’d raised him. In these latter
years, they’d argued — often and bitterly! — but to see him weak like this was terrifying and
heartbreaking all at once, a betrayal of the earliest truth he had known.

“I’m glad you made it, and I can get an electric cart to get you out to the baggage carousels, and
then…”

The old man shook his head, smiling. “I brought nothing but what I have on me.” He was wearing
a leather jacket — not even a backpack!

John closed his eyes and felt his hands form fists, then forced both open with an act of will. “I’m
just glad you made it out of that alive. We’re glad. We have a room made up for you, and you’re
welcome just as long as you’d like. As long as you live. Please.”

Even now, he couldn’t bring himself to apologize — why was that so much harder than begging?
Why hadn’t they talked? Sandra was smiling at him too now, beaming almost. Something to work
out later, once the problem at hand was addressed.

His father looked past him, then waved. John glanced back, but saw only the crowds of vacationers
moving toward the exit. He turned back to Peter, brow furrowing, and was met with a headshake
and a smile. “She kept me company on the trip. I asked her to join us for dinner tomorrow.”

John nodded. His father had always picked up strays like that, taken strangers in and brought them home for Mom to feed with total unconcern for what the rest of the family might have planned. This was… this was more like the man he’d always known. A smile twitched about his lips as an airline employee approached with a wheelchair.

His father placed both hands on his cane and stood, straightening his back with visible effort. “I’m injured, but I’m not dead. I’ll walk. And while I’m not sure about moving down here for the rest of my life…” he smiled “… I think three years is far too long to let things lie.” One hand reached out and up, patting John’s shoulder. “It’s good to see you, son. It’s good to see you.”

John blinked back tears and turned to help Sandra up, and the three of them moved down the concourse together with slow, careful steps.

Thursday, 5/19/2011

The gymnasium for Clarendon was as good a gathering place as any. The flood hadn’t done it any favors, but it remained a large enough space to host the eight who would assemble here. The roof damage even permitted some of the morning sunlight through, dotting the court with patches of sunlight, though no room would have been dark in the company here today anyway. Ophelia looked up at far wall, eyes searching for the banner that proclaimed them state champions in volleyball one year. She had been a substitute then, but… that had been a good year.

The memorial was gone, washed away when Leviathan came.

This year had been a bad one, and she doubted that its scars would vanish so easily.

It might get worse still. She had family on both sides of this meeting, and if it came to fighting… she shook her head, and then stilled herself, feeling Kayden’s gaze on her. They were all assembled here: Kayden, Justin, poor Theo one step further up on the bleachers. He’d never wanted any of this, had disliked it even more than she had herself.
The doors slammed open and Brad stormed in, stopping at the foul line. Behind him trailed Jessica, Geoff, and Peter. They formed up into a loose semicircle behind him as Brad glared up at the waiting group. He always looked so *angry*, and her hand twitched as she reached out for comfort from one who couldn’t offer anything anymore.

Brad twitched his head sideways and then spoke, rough voice booming out to fill the empty space like the performer he had once been. “Cadmus.”

Theo’s voice was thin by comparison, but it didn’t crack as he replied. “Hookwolf.”

“Don’t know about this new direction you’ve been talking about. Don’t care neither.”

Half a minute of silence followed, broken by Theo’s question. “Then why call this meeting?”

Brad shrugged. “You know me. I’ve only cared about two things: fighting, and friends. Three if you add fucking.” Behind him Jessica stifled a smile, and Ophelia’s eyebrows rose. Really?

“I can lead. And you’ve been fat and useless as long as I’ve known you.” This time it was Peter’s turn to smile, and he didn’t bother to hide it either.

“But Stormtiger saw something in you worth his life. Krieg saw it too, maybe. And then you ran Lung off, which ain’t exactly a fucking cakewalk. So, I figure, fuck it, maybe you are your father’s son after all. What I’m saying is, we can end this. Here. Today.” He took a step forward toward the group on the bleachers, stepping into one of the shafts of sunlight and squinting momentarily.

“How?” Theo’s hand was out, keeping Kayden’s arm from rising any further.

He snorted at that, matted blond hair shaking. “Give me *one thing*, and I’ll bend the knee. Everyone who’s with me, too. The same terms I had with Kaiser, the same deal I had with Krieg: you have my back against the law; money, women, and fun. That’s not the thing, though. That’s normal.”

Theo shook his head. “What do you want, then?”
Brad rolled his head from side to side, fists forming. “I… this isn’t the thing either. I can crush what I can see. But the sneaky fuckers out there? That was when Stormtiger and Cricket would show me what to hit. And they’re gone now.”

Silence again, as everyone waited for him to continue.

His voice began quietly, but grew louder as he continued. “Stormtiger went out like a champ. And you did right by him then. I won’t forget it. But Cricket…” He shook his head. “Cricket got stabbed in the back. And Krieg, crazy limey fucker that he was… Krieg too. You want to know my fucking price?” Brad was shouting now. “Give me justice!”

The gymnasium echoed his cry back.

He was breathing heavily. “Give me revenge. Promise me the bitch who killed them, and I’m yours. I don’t fucking care if you want to go all neighborhood watch or whatever: there’s plenty of fighting that way too. But…”

Theo was walking down the bleachers, taking careful steps as he went. He made his way to stand before Brad in the sunlight, looking up at the mountain of muscle before him. He was tiny by comparison, and overweight. His costume was pieced together from the back of his closet, something more befitting a thug than the man who might be heir to the Empire, and the sunlight showed the stains on it all too clearly. He should have looked ridiculous, standing there.

“I knew them too.” Theo’s voice was high but steady. He reached out his hands…

And Brad knelt.

Friday, 5/20/2011
She drifted, warm and comfortable in a pleasant fog. There might have been noises, and she turned that thought over absently. A shift of attention, and some of it came into focus.

“… another routine day, if you trust the schedule. Morning patrol west and back, afternoon on standby, then an evening patrol south and around before calling it a day. Still quiet, and we’re all hoping it stays that way.”

She twisted slightly — there. Her back was a little warmer that way.

“Things keep moving on. Weld’s back in action and says he’s fine. I don’t know — can’t read him — but he’s at the very least putting up a good front. They’re talking about recruiting rogues again. Maybe Parian: she’s been doing some incredible stuff in the tent cities.”

The voice was naggingly familiar. A warm tenor. Who…

“It would be nice to have you back. Since Browbeat quit, we’re the only ones left from before. I miss you.”

The name was on the tip of her tongue. Frustration fought with lazy comfort.

“I miss Carlos, Dennis, and Chris too, but… well. Until then, sweet dreams.”

Blurry light as she blinked her eyes open. There was a figure silhouetted in the doorway, helmet cradled by his side. What was it…

“Dean?” Her voice was a croak.

The helmet dropped, bouncing as he turned.
In distant space far beyond the moon’s orbit, a golden figure stood on absence, contemplating the several options before it. Power, without purpose, was meaningless. His original purpose was frustrated. Perhaps a solution would emerge, in time. Until then, three options had been offered him.

Benevolence. Violent change. A memorial to the lost, the world she would have wished to see.

Which?

A blue orb glittered in the distance, lit by the sun beyond. Even now, the light spilled past his form and over the site of his latest intervention. Much information had been gathered there, a rich harvest for the interrupted cycle.

Did those three purposes have to conflict? Perhaps…

Decision made, the figure vanished in a blink of light. Only starry void remained where he had floated, and the blue marble upon which he had gazed, a tiny splash of color against the endless black.

---

Sunday, 5/22/2011

It was a quiet home in a quiet bedroom community suburb, with green grass and flowering trees outside and an acre of distance to still any neighbor’s noise — not that any would come on such a quiet morning, beyond perhaps the distant cry of children playing at the Gibson’s down the street.

Within, it was quieter still. Of the seven figures there, only three were awake and each, for their
various reasons, saw no reason to speak. One was reading. One was thinking. And one never spoke at all.

This companionable silence was broken by a knock at the front door. None rose to answer.

The knock repeated, and then the door opened, letting a shaft of weak morning sunlight into the hallway, illuminating a clean white carpet accented in scarlet... now darkening to carmine. A man stepped in, wearing glasses and a neat button-up shirt with short sleeves. His pants were creased, his shoes shined, and his step sure as he entered the house.

He looked into the living room, but found none among the living. Passing onward, he looked into the kitchen, and found three astonished pairs of eyes looking back.

He smiled a thin-lipped smile and spoke to the reader. “I offer you answers.”

He turned to the second and nodded. “It has been too long.”

Finally, he knelt to put his eyes on level with the smallest. “Did Jack never speak of your Uncle Harbinger?”

A book snapped shut.
Timeline

All dates 2011

1.d Friday May 13th (pre-dawn)

1.1 Friday May 13th (pre-dawn)

1.2 Friday May 13th (afternoon-evening)

2.m Friday May 13th (evening)

2.1 Friday May 13th (evening)

2.2 Friday May 13th (evening)

3.r Friday May 13th (evening)

3.1 Friday May 13th (evening)

3.2 Friday May 13th (evening)

4.1 Friday May 13th (evening)

4.1 Friday May 13th (evening)

4.2 Friday May 13th (evening)

5.1 Friday May 13th (evening)
5.p Friday May 13th (midnight)

5.2 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

6.1 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

6.t Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

6.2 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

7.1 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

7.2 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

7.j Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

8.1 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

8.2 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

8.a Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

9.1 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

9.2 Saturday May 14th (pre-dawn)

9.E Saturday May 14th through Sunday May 22nd
Author's Note

This closes my second effort to write a novel. In part, to settle the question of whether it was repeatable, and in part to work on some things I’d like to do better than I do, in part because it’s been fun and fascinating both... and in part because I needed some scenes out of my head to make room for other things.

The interlude-heavy structure and the frequent action scenes reflect the decision that I needed work there and — as always — with getting readers to see those moments when Taylor is (wrongly) convinced of something. There’s still plenty of work to be done: for all the different voices that I tried out in the interlude, they’re not as distinct as I’d have liked. Additionally, bringing the Nine in almost forces a genre transition to horror, and that too is something that needs practice.

Structurally, this could have done with more ramp up and more follow-through: the isolation, loss, and desperation of that night only show in contrast to before and after… and there’s little before, and less after, in place. Something to learn from, for next time.

Still there are some things that line up more neatly than I could have hoped — check Clockblocker’s advice to Taylor back in 1.5, and then look at the timeline, for amusement.

It’s worth repeating that this is Wildbow’s world, and a debt is owed for its foundations — as well as a greater one to the straightforward approach to writer’s block so effectively modeled in its creation.

The response to Cenotaph was humbling and inspiring both. I’m not sure what I will write next, but I will write something… and hope that some fraction of you will enjoy that when it comes. It’s been surprising pleasure to write, and a continuing delight to see others enjoy the fruits of that work.

Thanks for reading this.

[Comments will have responses, but not likely before AO3 gets around to implementing PMs.]

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!