Falling into the world of Worm isn’t conducive to one’s survival. Luckily, Moira Wild doesn’t end up anywhere near Brockton Bay. Unfortunately, opening a home for parahumans with nowhere else to go ends up dragging her into the thick of things anyway. As if being a parahuman wasn’t bad enough.
There’s always a way.

That’s been the motto of my entire life. Well, the second one, at least.

I graduated my local community college with a degree in nursing. Of course, I was the unlucky bitch that ended up with the laziest doctor in the program. That meant I was running around delivering his coffee more than actually taking care of people. My next couple years were spent backpacking in Europe. It was filthy, dangerous, and I went hungry more than once but I had the time of my life. But then, somewhere around my twenty-second birthday, I happened to stumble on a series of murder scenes. I high-tailed it to the police, reported everything I saw, and testified the bastard into prison.

It was a bad decision in retrospect.

My life as a wanderlust-stricken freeloader had some nice perks, but witness protection was not one of them.

As it was, I skedaddled and found a small island in somewhere in Polynesia to hang out on. After perfecting my tan and learning how to gamble for a living, I decided to go back to the good old States. Either my pursuers thought I was dead (heh) or they figured they could leave me be if I was going to stay silent.

But more problems awaited me.

There’s not a lot a person of my dubious background was good for. I supposed I could do some hopping around the country cleaning our casinos, but that’s not exactly healthy for someone trying to maintain a low profile. Just before I decided to cut to my losses and storm Las Vegas, one of my old friends contacted me. Turns out he got married – but dear old Betty always came home late and smelling of cigarettes to boot.

Since he’d put up with my mooching ass for a while, I kind of shrugged and began to stalk his wife. Turns out she was involved in a cartel. All in all, a month and two body bags later, I was on the run again feeling high on life and adrenaline.

I continued this line of work. One, two years passed and my rep grew. Underground, I was known a freelancer. ‘Freelance what?’ and I reply with ‘freelance anything’. Which may be a bit of a lie, but I liked being able to sleep at night, yeah?

It took a while for people to get the message, but it passed.

Still, I may have gotten a bit cocky over the years. Giving the slip to both the mafia and the cartel allowed me a sort of suicidal confidence that was, although sexy, very stupid. I got in a knockout brawl with some yakuza and ended up running from Japan sans most of my right kneecap.

Physical therapy was an exhausting 14-month procedure that had me jittery with cabin fever. I was itching to do something and my bad luck hadn’t ended there. I should’ve gotten a clue when I started to limp in the middle of a job. Instead, I tripped – tripped, ladies and gentlemen – straight into the rough equivalent of a fuck you’s worth of bullets to the face.

Remembering that death, I feel like rolling up into a ball of shame and disgust. Tripped, my god.
But less quibbling on that topic. The really important thing is that after I got my cranium turned into a red soup of brain matter, I didn’t quite die. Rather, my soul was yanked out just before impact and tossed quite roughly into a universe that didn’t fit with what was real and right. Because there wasn’t enough shit on my plate the last time around.

That’s right. I got dropped into motherfucking Worm.

...

I wake up with a twitch of deep irritation. There’s no reason for it… wait, never mind.

The loud clatter of falling pots and slaps of bare feet echo around the household like a death knell. I rise from my warm nest with a groan and then regain focus as I spread my range to blanket the house. Kitchens, common room, halls… there!

I started to dress myself as several things rose up in the air in the west wing of the house. A small whiteboard, an eraser, a marker, and a wet towel. They danced in the air until I located my targets. Once I found them, a smile spread across my face as they zoomed off with startling speed.

Two boys, both barefoot and looking immensely guilty, yelped as a towel dripping with water slapped them across the face. The towel continued its assault as I scrawled out a message on the whiteboard.

_Really? You two can’t make rice. How the hell were you going to cook breakfast, exactly?_

The taller boy succeeded in fending off the towel and conceded to his efforts. I let it hover threateningly in front of the pair as I waited for an explanation.

“Well, you know that P-Parker’s leaving soon…”

“And we thought we could m-make him breakfast before he starts living with the W-Wards…”

…right. _You do realize that Parker’s literally going to be living two blocks away? And you’re still going to be using the same bus route in the mornings? Not to mention going to the same school?_

They shuffled their feet a little bit more.

“… it’s not the same.”

Briefly, I consider whapping them with the towel again. But that wouldn’t stop their little hero worship anymore than the incident with the robotic unicorn and two Protectorate heroes. As far as these two were concerned, Parker Wild was God, the Pope, and Nelson Mandela rolled into one. Perhaps with a sprinkle of Gandhi.

I sighed, unseen, in my room as I moved the towel in a shooing manner.

_Just go._

They nodded despondently until they saw my continuation. Of course, I couldn’t see them, but I could feel the movement of their glasses as they drooped like sunless daisies.

_I think Parker’s sleeping in. Go and wake him up, yeah?_

I suppressed a chuckle when they began to race off, feeling the shudder of the vases scattered throughout the house. Yeah. Kid deserved it for trying to sneak some sleep in on the day he was scheduled for his opening ceremony as new hero.
It was nice, I suppose, what I did for this world. Definitely as exciting as my old life, with parahumans slinging around their strange powers like it was an everyday thing. In fact, I was one of those parahumans now. Small object telekinesis may not seem like much, but it had a surprisingly diverse array of uses.

Opening Wild’s Home for Parahumans had been an impulse decision on my part. I’d stumbled around the East Coast for some while after my arrival here, unsure of what to do because, really, how often do you seriously consider the possibility of falling into a different universe that had once been fictional?

I liked comics and superheroes as much as the next guy, but even this was out of my depth. I could do international human trafficking and drug smuggling – but this wasn’t just out of my league; it was a whole different ocean with the rules changing according to it.

So I grit my teeth and pulled my shit together. Turns out that holing up in Washington D.C. was one of my better ideas. Low crime rate and high number of parahumans allowed me to blend in like a snake among the grass. I managed anonymity quite successfully for a scant few months before running into who would be one of the first people I’d invite into my den of safety.

It was a choice of morals, and for once I picked the right way.

(Though I grumble about it time to time.)

…

I ran into Carly on a spring day in the park. She was doing yoga, I was jogging, we were both blind to the world. On my thirtieth lap around, she had changed spots to land in the middle of my self-made route.

Long story short, I tripped on who would be the first Case 53 I’d meet.

She had no skin. Instead, dark brown scales covered her body and her eyes were a solid black. She had no hair and I still maintain the fact that you can’t expect someone high on endorphins to notice a person perfectly blended with the path even when they’re doing the crab pose to 80’s fitness tracks.

Carly, thanks to her exceptionally flexible nature, rolled with the tumble to sprawl gracefully on her back. I, thanks to my just-reincarnated state, smashed my nose inward to leave a bloody stain on the path. The short trip to the ER happened was quite nice thanks to Carly’s presence. She had a very thorough grasp on Tolstoy’s works and I even managed a full speech on how Anna Karenina’s whole plotline could be seen through her dress – though it might not have been coherent as I was hyped up on painkillers.

Though you may be asking, how on earth did this woman manage to get on the ambulance with you if she was a stranger just a few minutes earlier?

Here’s where the delightful aspect of Carly’s power comes in. Her odd appearance aside, she also possessed an ability to Jedi mind-trick people. This came in handy around the time the hospital started asking very uncomfortable questions about my life.

On top of that, she’d even gotten me forged documents in which to prove my legitimacy. Which is something that, while I’d like to know, I don’t want to dig into. I like my neck the way it is. It’s a very nice one – especially when intact.

All in exchange for her husband coming down with a bad case ‘dead’. Win-win.
More time passed. Carly and I settled into a comfortable pattern of life until reality decided to throw another screwball at me in the form of a young orphan parahuman.

Partha Saradhi.

He’d been a homeless little kid on the streets, seemingly on the run judging from the way he jumped at shadows. I could see a little bit of myself in the hollows of his cheeks and the mat of his hair. On the spot, I decided I wanted to take him home.

He’d fought like a wildcat but it all turned out fine, even if Carly did hypnotize me into spending the night on the roof. Partha turned out to be a parahuman too, of all things. A Tinker with a bent for projectiles. He was on the run from something, I could tell, but I knew how it went. You don’t ask unless they want you to.

Plus, digging into his background revealed his family easily enough. Younger brother of the local Tinker villain, Cable, and has been dodging his brother for a long time now. It took a little effort to cover up his name from Partha to Parker, and even more to adopt him. In the end, with liberal use of hypnotism, it all worked out.

Even if the kid was a uptight little brat that openly joined Carly in her disapproval of me.

…

I stretched, feeling my range flex as I rifled through all the objects I could affect with my power. The sun was warm, the day was new, and best of all, Carly wasn’t here to force her yoga on me. I could happily terrorize the other people in the house, tease Parker until he turns red, and enjoy my new term in life.

There was a shriek as one of the parahumans in the house set the kitchen on fire. The shrieking got louder when a miniature tsunami swept over the flames before reforming back into a young black boy. The shrieks reached their apex when a young Indian man staggered down the stairs, two young boys clinging onto his arms like limpets, as he bellowed, “Moira!”

Ah. Yes. I inhaled deeply as a strategically placed bit of lego had Parker fall into another room with a resounding crash.

I may have fallen into a completely different world, gained a set of powers that surprised me constantly, and opened a shelter for literal superheroes, but you know what?

There’s always a way.
The hum of the charging ray-gun is damnably loud even through the sound of heavy traffic and honking horns. I breathe in through my nose, closing my eyes to shut out the piercing sunlight, willing myself to remain calm and keep my goddamn head down. This didn’t need to involve me. I should be keeping a low profile. I’d already been making waves that could affect the plot of the story–anymore, and Khepri never might come into being.

Someone tried to run the red-light and avoid the inbound villains. As did four other fellows driving on the other side. The resulting crash was jarring and I gritted my teeth. I was really toeing the line here. Parker’s ceremony began in forty minutes and the drive would take a minimum of twenty without traffic.

He, Carly, and several others had already left. I got held up arranging the last minute additions to his gift and now I was deeply regretting not doing that the night before. I glanced at where the powersuit was tramping down the lane. I could just–

No. No, no. Keep my head down and attend Parker’s opening ceremony. The Protectorate would show up soon and take care of these fucking clowns. I didn’t need to be involved. Getting involved meant paperwork, questioning, another round of dodging recruitment efforts for two months, and Carly doing passive-aggressive yoga at me. As such, I should just park my ass for fifteen minutes and wait for legally sanctioned police forces to–

That motherfucker!

I screamed in fury when the reason behind the charging ray-gun was revealed. The road in front of me was obliterated. Destroyed. Nothing but rubble remained, along with several overturned cars that were beginning to bleed out their passengers.

There was absolutely no fucking way I was going to get there in time. I’d inevitably have to drive through the market’s road, weaving past stalls and tourists while waiting for tour busses to crawl their routes along with trolleys and…

My eye twitched.

The rubble began to float upwards.

Slowly, I stepped out of my car. My hair whipped in the wind as I stared with narrowed eyes at the dumb fuck who’ decided to crash in at this precise moment. Cable. Of course it was that asshole.

I rolled my neck as I began to pick my way towards where he stood in his powersuit, wielding a massive ray-gun with superhuman ease. Rubble continued to rise up around me, spinning in an lazy orbit as I tried to figure out how to kill him in way that wouldn’t be suspicious.

Self-defence, maybe. Or a fatal malfunction in his equipment?

The rubble whistled as I added a spin to their floating. They whirled like mad dervishes as I walked closer, finally coming into Cable’s notice as he whirred to face me.

“Wild. Fuck off or I shoot.”

His accent was faint but still noticeable. I drew myself up to stare at him, eyeing the spots where his brown skin was exposed. Stupid. Why make armor if it’s not going to protect you all over? The
rubble’s orbit got faster and faster, drawing momentum that could punch through bullet-proof glass like it was paper.

I narrowed my eyes as I slowly pointed at him.

“You fucking. Made me. Late.”

The rubble rushed towards him.

One of the aspects of my power was that – despite the limit in the size of the object I could affect – I could manipulate them to possess truly unholy speeds. I couldn’t imbue any special effects like Flechette could, but that doesn’t really matter when a piece of road hurtles towards your squishy body at the speed of sound.

There was a piercing crack that was infinitely louder than a gunshot as the rubble broke the sound barrier. I aimed them at three places.

His hands. His joints. And his fucking face.

Of course, collapsing someone’s skull wouldn’t win me any brownie points. That sort of thing was a big no-no, so I made sure the rubble was just slow enough to only knock out teeth and crack his jaw. It’d be tremendously easy to kill him. It would also be tremendously stupid.

I’d made enough stupid mistakes in my old life to repeat them now.

He roared when the rubble impacted his hands to crush the bones within and forced him to drop the ray-gun. The rubble I’d directed at his joints had less success – he’d learned from the last time I’d put sand and half solid glue in them to make him creak like a geriatric. But he had forgotten that I was a ruthless bitch.

And I’d teach him that lesson right now.

The rubble had broken down from the strain of sonic speed, but dust worked too. I sent it streaming down his throat, into his eyes and ears. I wouldn’t send it far enough to kill him, but I’d make it hurt real bad. Thank you, Taylor, for the ideas.

Cable gagged and clutched at his throat as I stood over him. I wasn't the type to let up lightly on a man like him.

Parker’s brother or not, he was nothing to me.

“Hey! Stop or we will treat you as a hostile!”

The dust retreated from Cable’s orifices, leaving no trace of its presence. It snaked down to rest around his body, a small threat of what I could – and would – do if he pushed me. I turned to face the incoming heroes, pasting a thin smile on my face when I saw who had arrived.

“Baldur. Jetstream.”

The leader of the pair, Baldur, landed in front of me in with a small rumble of earth. He was dressed like a classic Viking, but with gold-colored chainmail and a pristine white tunic. I’d tested to see if there was any correlation to the myth by pelting him with mistletoe around Christmas last year. To my disappointment, there seemed to be no such connection. Talk about misleading names. He was a classic Alexandria package, with minor invulnerability, flight, and strength.
Jetstream landed beside him far more lightly. She was a slender figure with short, cropped hair and recorded to be one of the fastest fliers on earth, falling behind Legend only because of his FTL abilities. At her side hung a veritable armory of Tinker-tech, all made to subdue villains as quickly as possible.

I gestured grandly at Cable. “Here’s your villain, wrapped like a little present just for you. Now I am must be going.”

I turned on my heel sharply, calling together rubble to shape a small platform to transport me to where the ceremony would be held. Maybe I could be a bit more theatrical and make it a throne…

“Halt. There are protocols to take when a known rogue takes action against a villain. Especially when the rogue is you, Wild.”

I gave him a look. Picked up a strand of my hair and examined the ends for split-ends. Dropped it and pointed at him. “I think I’ll pass. It’s not like you don’t know where I live, anyway. Gatecrash when I don’t have a important thing to do.”

I crouched and jumped lightly as the rubble under my feet launched me upwards. More rubble came to join me to shield my body as I positioned myself roughly in the direction of where the ceremony would be held. Baldur jerked upwards to fly towards me, but he was too slow to even dream of catching me. Jetstream on the other hand…

She flew in pursuit of me with bird-like grace, coasting the wind with enviable ease.

“This is only another strike against you, you know.”

I peered at her from the corner of my eye. I liked her. I genuinely did. She was smart and fought outside the limits of her power with a creativity that might even rival Taylor. But she was also far, far too taken with the Protectorate. To her, I was a strange, stubborn rogue digging the hole deeper at best. At worst, I was an active revolutionist, poaching potential recruits before they could.

I shot her an easy grin. “I don’t think I broke any laws. All the damage was Cable.”

She inched in front of me, ignoring all laws of aerodynamics as she mimicked a fully standing pose with her arms crossed to glare at me admonishingly. I raised a brow at her. Heh. Fuck physics, amiright?

“You could do so much more, Wild! All the action you ever took against the villains in this city was solely to protect your own self-interests. And now, they’re too afraid to even touch you! Your headquarters –“

I cut her off there. “No. Not headquarters, not even base. I opened a shelter. A place for parahumans whose powers make them unable to lead normal lives. For parahumans who don’t want to fight. For parahumans who want another shot at life without being press-ganged into a war game,” I cleared the rubble around my face to give her a clear view of my face. I scowled. “I’m not going to pretend to be a better person than I am. I didn’t open a center for people who want to train to become a soldier, nor am I their active leader. I protect my own and that’s it.”

“Then what about Torpedo? He’s your adopted son and he’s officially becoming a Ward.”

“Oh, so you do realize where I’m going, huh?” The ceremony’s area was coming into view and I checked my watch. Yeah, fifteen minutes left! I pumped my fist before beginning to lower myself to the ground. As cool as sailing down to greet Parker on a throne of rubble and gravel would be, I didn’t need to make his time with the Wars harder than it already would be. He was going to be on
the Director’s shitlist, anyway, for having me as an adoptive mother.

Jetstream didn’t bother landing. Instead she casually floated besides me, her short cape fluttering out behind her in small waves.

“As much as the Protectorate’s spies impress me, I’d rather you didn’t say who he is in public,” I said pointedly as I started to meander over to the grounds. Jetstream looked away, projecting a feeling of sheepishness. “And he’s, like, sixteen-ish now. I figure that it’s time for him to start making some decisions on his own, yeah? I can’t be around for him forever, and several people have told me he’s remarkably mature for a boy his age.”

The ceremony came into view, along with the growing crowd. Ceremonies for new Wards were publically held, introducing the new hero to the community, PR, and all that. I, technically, shouldn’t be here.

The crowd around me parted like school of fish around a shark. I grinned as the pinched face of Director Rodriguez came into view and waved to get his attention. To my glee, his sour face became even more disgruntled. In my past life, I’d been diagnosed to have problems with order and authority.

But looking at the Director’s face… I simply enjoyed being the nail that stuck up. Furthermore, I enjoyed the fact that very few people could nail me down. In fact, I was pretty sure that was what led to my demise. If I only hadn’t teased those yakuza…

Oh well. It happened. I wasn’t any less cocky than that time but I was going to be far smarter about it. I had a feeling rebirth was going to be a one-time only chance for me here.

Jetstream left my side to join the honor guard that was present beside the Director. Heimdall, Baldur’s brother, was on his other side, standing tall in his golden Tinker-tech armor. A Thinker-Brute mix that he doubled in lethality by utilizing a spear in combat. Very dangerous and way, way more tolerable than his brother. At least he laughed about the mistletoes. Baldur had thought it was some kind of convoluted threat against him.

I shuffled into the front of the crowd, laughter alighting in my eyes when the Wards began to march out to stand behind the Director in a strict line. I could see Parker in the middle, dressed in light, Tinker-tech armor with projectile-based weaponry arranged around his body. His face was covered fully – my influence, I thought smugly – by a futuristic mask with a strip of tinted plastic for the eyes. His suit was a primarily matte silver piece with white edges as highlights. Tracing all over it were lines of light that coalesced into a missile pointing upwards in a circle.

I resisted the urge to whistle. Damn, introducing Tron to him may’ve been a very bad, or very good, idea. He looked kick-ass, to say the least. But up-keep on armor that good would be murder. Plus, D.C. was in a dearth of Tinkers. It was one of the reasons why the Wards accepted him so readily even with his association with me, and his skills were going to be in constant demand.

And Parker had a bad habit of working himself to the bone. It didn’t help that his personal hero was Dragon, the greatest Tinker in the world. He seemed to think that if he worked long enough, he could stand on level with her.

Unless, he turned himself into an AI, that wasn’t going to happen.

I leaned forward, allowing myself to enjoy the ceremony before the inevitable shit-show when word of my earlier tussle got out.
Interlude I

Four years ago…

Jonathon Cramer walked slowly back to the shelter, humming with a bulging bag of baby products on each hand as he trudged along under yellow streetlights. His face was concealed by a light grey hoodie but anyone who looked closely could note the odd yellowish tint it had. The plastic bags rustled as he shifted them, trying to eke out the last dregs of his strength before he had to rest again.

He grunted as he set the bags down after another block. Jeez, who knew babies needed so much shit. The shelter was at least another three blocks away, locating right on the outskirts of what counted as the ‘bad’ part of town. But it was a good place. Joining it hadn’t been a decision he’d regretted. Wild – Moira – could get a little intense at times, and she had a bad habit of disappearing for days on end but she was good people. Had to be, to take someone useless as him in.

After all, she didn’t care that he had no memories or useful skills as Case 53 and that his power seemed to be the most useless thing to exist – a dynakineti so weak that the most he could do was make lights slightly brighter, hot water slightly cooler, and the like. In return, he got a face that looked like someone had scrawled on it with a highlighter and a bioluminescence that essentially made him glow-in-the-dark. Useless enough that even the Protectorate was stumped as to what to do with him. Then Wild stepped in. Just in time too. He’d been on the verge of hiring himself out to villains or appeasing the darker side of cape fantasies.

Cramer hefted the bags up and enjoyed the cool night air on his face.

Yeah. He could live like this.

Then somebody grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked him. Cramer had no breathe to scream with as he felt both suffocated and squeezed at the same, falling endlessly in a whirlwind of vertigo. Then he was suddenly on the ground, completely winded, and staring up at the night sky. There appeared to be someone standing over him but the black spots in his vision impeded his view.

“Hey, now, what’s this? A little boy out on his own?”

Cramer might’ve protested had it been any other situation. Fifteen was certainly no ‘little boy’ territory anymore. But as it was, he was a bit caught up in the fact that someone appeared to be waving a throwing knife in his face.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?”

“I-I-” gasped Cramer, blinking rapidly as he tried to scramble onto his feet. He stilled when a booted foot pressed down on his chest and a blade to his cheek.

“Hey, your skin is a little funny, isn’t it? Painy, isn’t his skin funny?”

Cramer realized there was another person just as he stepped into view. He was clearly a man, dressed in a grey body suit with a jagged black line running down his front. Capes. Not just capes… villains.
“Yeah, Cutter,” the man said genially, “His skin’s real weird. You a parahuman, kid?”

Suddenly, he was hauled up by his hoodie to slam against a brick wall. Cramer hissed as his hood fell down and his head impacted the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the entrance to the alley they took him into. In fact, he could see his bags full of diapers and baby formula. They were on their sides, spilling their contents on the dirty pavement.

“Now, now,” the voice drew his attention once more. Cutter was a woman dressed in light blue and her upper face was covered by a mask. Platinum blonde hair fell around her in a curtain as her mouth curled into a leer. “No getting distracted. Answer the question, yes?”

“Y-yes,” stuttered the teenager, shrinking from the blade still level with his cheek.

“That’s nice!” the woman chirped. She leaned in closer, close enough that Cramer could smell the faint, fruity perfume wafting from her skin. “You got an account on PHO?” she inquired.

Cramer jerked his head up and down shakily.

The knife dug into his skin until it broke and blood welled up. Cramer winced from the pain as the cape leaned into him. “You know who we are?” she asked softly as the knife scraped away from the cut to rest on the inside of his arm.

“I-I please, d-don’t… no, I j-ju –“

“I’m Cutter,” she said, “And that’ Painbreak,” she gestured at the silent man standing a little ways off.

Cramer didn’t reply, heart hammering in his chest as he shrunk back from the flickering knife. “P-I-please, don’t… I –“

“Painy,” Cutter said gently, “Show him what you can do.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw the grey-suited man twitch his hand.

And then… and then Cramer screamed. Pain exploded where the cut had been and the woman ran another cruel slash down his forearm, the injury worsened by the heightened agony. Cramer jerked and writhed as it tore through his body, muscles spasming so violently that he vomited.

No! Make it stop! Stop!

He screamed as the seat of his pants became wet with piss, tears pouring as he shrieked until his voice grew hoarse. The side of his face was now soaked with vomit along with his hoodie. If he’d been coherent, he’d have heard the whispered conversation between the capes.

“Cutter, we have to leave. They have to have heard him by now. Come on!”

The woman jerked her arm out of the man’s grasp, eyes trained on where Cramer laid sobbing and screaming in turns from the agony. “Give it a moment, Painy,” she said back. “In fact, let’s just take him with us. Gotta educate him further.”

Cramer stopped screaming, simply twitching in place as his nerves began to overload. A rivulet of drool escaped his gaping mouth as he stared with glassy eyes upwards.

“Cutter!”

She whipped around just as another cape fell into the alley to confront the two, brandishing a long
spear in their direction. Cutter laughed wildly as she snatched up the man’s hand, pressed a finger to Cramer’s head, and suddenly disappeared. The hero cursed as she reappeared on the other side of street briefly before disappearing again with both males in tow.

Heimdall rushed out of the alleyway to catch another glimpse of Cutter as she reappeared nearly a full kilometer away. “We got Cutter and Painbreak on the move from Aven’s and Scott,” he said into his comm, “Most likely headed towards…” he squinted at the tiny dot in the distance, “Hearth Av. They’ve got a hostage, most likely male, dressed in a grey hood and grey sweatpants.”

There was chatter as the dispatcher replied. Heimdall glanced around the empty street, eyes alighting on the discarded bags with curiosity. His armor made no sound as he walked towards the bag, crouching to examine the contents directly.

“Baby products,” he murmured to himself. “Shit.”

…

Carly slid out of warrior pose when the front door to the shelter was suddenly banged on with incredible enthusiasm. She padded towards it warily, aware of the quiet that swept through the house at the intrusive noise. Cramer was the only one out and he didn’t knock like that.

“Yes?” she said as peeked through the spyhole. Her ‘s’ sounds always came out sibilant, a quality further emphasized by her reptilian features. It served as a good way to intimidate new people, although Moira always cracked up about ‘dark lords’ instead. There appeared to be a woman – a masked woman, but not any hero she recognized.

“This is Wild’s Home for Parahumans?” asked the female.

Carly blinked. “Yes,” she said as she cracked open the door.

The masked woman stood at the door innocuously, a wide smile on her face as she grinned. She blinked once, twice at seeing Carly’s unusual skin but recovered quickly. “Hi,” she said amiably. “We have something of yours, you see, and thought we’d drop it off for you.”

“Ah, right,” Carly replied cautiously, eyes narrowing as she studied the woman’s face. “Thanks, I guess.”

The woman turned around and… disappeared?

Carly stepped back involuntarily as she vanished, her solid black eyes widening at the power display. “What the – hey!”

The woman suddenly appeared again, this time with two others. The grey-suited cape was propping up his companion, and he smiled at Carly’s expression. “I believe,” he said politely, “This is yours. Do keep a better watch on your little ones.”

Then he threw his companion forward. Carly darted forward to catch him, almost buckling under the dead weight. The two capes held hands as they disappeared again. The snake-like woman scowled at the empty porch as she shifted under the heavy body. From the sitting room, Hestia walked in tentatively.

“Who was that at the door?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” Carly said. “Here, help me with this guy, will you?”
Hestia nodded and gripped the body. With her Brute rating, it made hefting the body easy. Her eyes then widened as she caught sight of the face. “Carly! Carly, it’s Cramer! He – he’s bleeding!”

Ah. Shit. Carly thought as she stared at the dark stain spreading all over Cramer’s clothes. Moira’s going to be pissed.

…

Moira stormed out of the house in a flurry of loud stomps, levitated bricks, and mismatched clothing. Carly was left behind to watch the shelter while she and Hestia mobilized to get the boy to the hospital. The bricks that normally paved the front path lifted from their spots as Moira slammed open the door. A makeshift platform was quickly made and Hestia gingerly stepped onto it with Cramer’s body held aloft in her arms.

“I’ll be back soon,” Moira yelled over her shoulder as she began to lift into the air, “Watch the house and tell me if that crazy bitch comes back again, you hear?!”

Carly’s reply was lost to the loud clatter of shifting bricks as Moira set out. Hestia held Cramer tighter, shutting her eyes as the vertigo got too much. Moira stood straight, eyes riveted to where the hospital was. They were well above the skyline of most of the buildings in the area when they shot forward, a small wall of bricks protecting them the chill night air.

They were nearly upon the hospital when Arsenal, a cape from the Protectorate, flew level to them. His black and red costume flashed from beneath his heavy cloak as he tailed them until the hospital. Moira was pulling Hestia up before they hit they hit the ground, and the woman nearly stumbled when the brick platform fell out from her feet to reveal pavement instead. Moira pushed her to the entrance of the hospital.

“Get him in,” she said softly. “I’ll handle our cape friend here.”

Hestia nodded sharply before loping up the great marble stairs of the hospital. Moira watched her go with unreadable eyes before looking over her shoulder to regard Arsenal coolly.

“Cutter. Painbreak. Local villains, yeah?”

“They started out just recently,” Arsenal said as he approached her. “Who was that kid?”

“Jonathon Cramer,” Moira murmured. Then she turned to face Arsenal fully, her heart-shaped face looking unusually grim. “I think we need to talk. On the roof, preferrably.”

She didn’t wait for him, simply stepping onto a rapidly forming platform of bricks that lifted her as soon as her feet touched it. Arsenal stared after her retreating figure for a moment before moving to follow. Unlike Moira’s smooth upward climb, he flew with all the grace of a swallow, dipping and turning acrobatically around her impatiently until she was on the roof.

“So he was their victim, huh?” Arsenal said just as he touched down. “Heimdall was the one who found them. They took off before he could do anything, though.”

Moira hummed noncommittally. Then she suddenly whipped around and stepped into Arsenal’s space, moving close enough that she could see the small patches of missed stubble on his chin. Her eyes bore into the eyes of his mask, unblinking as she stared into them like hawk. Her face was devoid of blood and jaw was set. She looked utterly and totally furious.

“Normally,” she said slowly, “I don’t try to mix myself up in the affairs of heroes and villains. But what they did this night? It’s fucking crosses the line. You don’t hurt children. You don’t fucking
cut them up.”

Moira bared her teeth, paying no mind to the way Arsenal backed up warily. “Tell me, what would happen to these two if they were… captured?”

“We’d process them and most likely send them to Birdcage,” he said guardedly. “There’s been more than once case of these two kidnapping civilians and returning them damaged.”

The woman glowered at him, scanning his face for any hint of a lie. Finding none, she turned away and began to stride towards the edge of the roof. “If you want a statement,” she said, “Go ask Carly Helmway. Don’t pester Cramer until he’s cleared.”

Her foot was on the raised lip of the building when Arsenal called, “What’re you going to do?”

She remained silent for a beat, before looking over her shoulder at him. Her hair was blown back by the wind and her eyes glinted dangerously as she smiled thinly.

“Hunting.”

And then she disappeared over the edge.

…

That night…

Bitch’s name is Cutter. What she look like? – MW

Skinny, tallish, platinum blonde hair in a bob. Her costume was blue with white sides. What are you going to do? – CH

I’m gonna teach them why villainy is never a good life choice. – MW

What? What do you mean? – CH

You there? – CH

Next day, morning…

PICK UP. –CH

Cramer’s out of the hospital. – CH

MOIRA -CH

Night…

Moira, answer me. –CH

Why aren’t you picking up your phone? –CH

Two days later…

Please be safe. - CH
Interlude I (part II)

I sat on my throne of floating bricks high above the skyline, absently gnawing on a platter full of sandwiches as I overlooked the slumbering city. Snatching the plate had been a hit-and-miss thing at the shelter, but I’d successfully levitated it out without anyone noticing me. Whenever I pulled a job, I went in without any distractions to fuck me up. This was the same, though I was doing it for personal reasons instead of money.

The wind blew through my hair as I began to chew on a cold cut with mayo on whole wheat. I flexed my range experimentally, stretching it down to the buildings below me to feel out all the objects I could affect. I got to nearly seven hundred meters before my head began to hurt from the concentration. I could push on, but I didn’t want to alarm people with objects suddenly levitating from their position.

My power was versatile and almost over-powered – because honestly, the speeds I could accelerate objects at were insane. But the great flaw of it was the toll it took on me mentally. The farther I tried to stretch my telekinesis or larger the objects I tried to influence, the worse my control got. Vibrating objects and spontaneous levitation was the just the beginning… the few times I overextended lead to things shooting way off trajectory or simply shrugging of my power to fall uselessly.

Plus, anything that managed to break my concentration automatically made me lose all control. Compared to Taylor’s ability to direct any bug within her range even while unconscious, I was substantially weaker even with a wider range of controllable objects.

The plate in my hand moved to settle beside me. I licked the few crumbs stuck to my lips and levitated the rest away. I stood up as the clock struck nine. Cutter and Painbreak were new capes, surviving only due to their powers. He used his pain enhancement to disable capes and she used her teleportation to escape. But they had yet to learn of the more important rules of proper villainy.

I’d been a mercenary in my former life and the same principles applied.

You don’t keep to regular schedules. You always had more than one escape route. And you never fucked with someone meaner than you.

I leaned forward, my arms spread-eagle as I prepared to drop down to earth. The metal disks inserted in sewn-on pockets dotted all over my motorcycle pants and summer parka shifted as I used them to support my weight as I gently half flew, half glided over the city. The brick throne lost its form as it followed after me, making no sound as it followed in a great swarm.

A smile crept onto my face as I began to track Cutter and Painbreak.

The hunt was on.

…

I found them around midnight. They weren’t toting around anyone but appeared to be arguing amongst themselves on a rooftop. I stealthily glided to stand in the alleyway below them, straining my ears to listen in.

“… can do more!”
“We are fine on our own, we don’t need anyone,” the woman hissed back, the knives encased in the belt on her hip glinting as she moved closer to Painbreak. “Stop fretting so much, Painy.”

“I just want us to be better than this, better than pretty crime. Our powers could make us big. Greater than the Slaughterhouse Nine or –“

“Fuck them! Remember that little kid we got? He fucking pissed his pants screaming – “

And that’s enough. My lip curled as two disks floated out of my arm pockets. They didn’t spin – I didn’t need that level of lethality for these two. Instead they floated to the other side of the building to clink gently against the fire escape. Immediately, Cutter’s knife flickered out as she pointed it at the noise. Her other hand grabbed Painbreak’s arm.

Both villains stood there, breathing fast as they frantically looked around.

Nothing came until and Painbreak relaxed a fraction. “It’s nothing,” he said lowly. “But’s let’s move away from here, just in case.”

Cutter didn’t move to agress. She just stepped forward. Before her foot could impact the roof, they vanished. Immediately, the trace amounts of sand I’d scattered all over the area found her two roofs over. I floated towards them.

“… told you it’s nothing…”

The disks shot out and hit Cutter in the side, shoving her away from Painbreak roughly. Immediately, sand gathered to shoot into his throat, making him fall down shrieking as he scratched his neck futilely. Cutter teleported to his side and hauled him to her back as she fled.

I followed silently, tracking her three roofs to the east. She immediately jumped again but it was useless against me. Cutter needed time to reorient herself and a line of sight. I could follow her at any speed as quietly as I wished. Painbreak was gagging now, the sand in his windpipe ripping up the delicate tissue as I shoved it down mercilessly. More flowed into his eyes, making him cry from both pain and irritation.

Cutter was clearly panicking now; she hadn’t expected this much ruthlessness from any cape. She tried evading me by going to both the roofs and streets, ducking behind corners and objects with mindless terror, but it was no use.

“Stop!” she finally cried. “Stop, why are you doing this?!”

And that’s my cue.

I rose up, bricks orbiting me as I stared down at her. This was both for effect and to deflect any possible attacks. “Not so fun when it’s you, is it?” I said coldly, drawing the sand away from Painbreak’s throat and eyes. No need to permanently cripple him.

She backed away as I moved closer. With Painbreak on her back, she couldn’t use her knives. Judging from the fright in her eyes, she knew this.

“Let’s play a game,” I said pleasantly, grinning from the recesses of my dark hood. “We’re going to play tag. I’ll be ‘it’ and you’ll… run. There’s going to be one safe spot for you, okay?”

“What? Where?”

“PRT headquarters. You turn yourself in, I leave. But if you lose…” I let myself trail off there,
enjoying the quickening of her breathe. I wouldn’t actually going to follow through with that threat. But I’d lord it over her like the Sword of Damocles.

“The game begins now.”

Cutter whirled around, already gunning for the headquarters just a few blocks away. However, it wasn’t going to be so easy for her. The lesson needed to sink.

They appeared five roofs away. Unfortunately, there was sand lying wait for her. It spiked up, bypassing her shoes to sandpaper the soles of her feet into a bloody mess. Cutter screamed, staggered, and jumped away from her chosen route.

I’d been missing for nearly three days now. Three days and nights spent tracking and monitoring these two to set up my trap. Carly knew I was out there as I kept stealing from the kitchen and clearly realized what I was doing. I could recall every text she’d sent me. I never replied, but I read them religiously.

Cramer won’t leave his room. – CH

I drifted after her, keeping an eye on Painbreak. I couldn’t risk him recovering enough to disable me. Should that happen, I pretty much fall like a downed bird. And then, they’d know my weakness.

Five minutes passed before I upped the challenge from simple sand. The two disks were joined by several bricks and shot out to punch her in the side.

The first night back, he started crying during his sleep. I went in to comfort him. Now he locks his door. - CH

Already bruised from the earlier shove, Cutter nearly fell when it hit her. More bricks launched themselves at her, but this time she jumped away to avoid them. I was careful to time my shots to give her just enough time to jump away but not enough to move towards the right areas. She nearly teleported herself into empty space and only a moments of quick thinking allowed her to land on the street.

He had a panic attack during dinner. Saw the knives in the kitchen. – CH

I herded her expertly, keeping away from patrolling heroes and pressing her enough that she had no time to strategize. I watched from up high as she took a moment to adjust Painbreak, took a crushing blow to her thigh, and jumped away. Clearly these two had some kind of attachment to one another, since she was adamant about not abandoning him.

Well then. A disk started to move faster and I added a spin to it. It shot forward when she reappeared and sliced a thin line on the back of Painbreak’s thigh. He made no sound but Cutter clearly knew what happened.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” I said to her. “Or your friend’s gonna get hurt real bad.”

We have to hide the knives now. – CH

“F-fuck you,” she gritted out. Her constant teleportation was tiring her quickly, as was carrying Painbreak while taking a beating. A brick shot to her hands and she released the man. Her metacarpals were surely broken now, but I paid her no mind.
Sand crawled over Painbreak, leaving bloody rashes in their wake as they moved towards his mouth. He was beginning to recover, using his power to try and reduce Cutter’s agony. I even felt a few small twinges that flittered away whenever the woman jumped. Clearly, he needed to be put down again.

He started to thrash as the sand clumped into a large ball and clocked his airways. Cutter made to teleport to him, but any attempts to grab him and move was cut off by me pelting her with bricks. They moved only a scant few meters before Painbreak finally fell unconscious. I pulled the sand out and let Cutter rush to him.

“You killed him!” she yelled. “You bitch! You f-fucking killed Painy!”

He hates the dark. Says that ‘she’ got him only because it was dark. – CH

The bricks drew around me as I watched her. “Don’t be stupid. He’s alive, but he won’t be if you don’t shape up soon. The PRT awaits you.”

Cutter looked at me and Painbreak. She wanted to hurt me dearly, but he was in need of medical attention. He was bleeding out, had a concussion, and his throat was torn up. And Cutter was rapidly tiring. If she got in a fight with me, it was all or nothing. And there was no guarantee she’d win.

She jumped and picked up Painbreak again for the second time.

This time, I let up. She teleported almost unimpeded towards the PRT, barring the few bricks I sent whenever her hand strayed a little too close to a knife. She appeared on a roof just above the building when she suddenly turned to me, cradling her companion’s prone body in her arms.

I moved closer, curious at her reluctance. If she was getting cold feet now…

“Why’d you do this?” she suddenly said.

I stared at her. Did she really…? Cutter was exhausted and sweating. Her costume was ripped and blood seeped from small cuts and abrasions. Her entire body was surely aching and would soon be a canvas of blue and black. Her knees trembled with the effort of supporting Painbreak but she remained steadfast as she waited for my answer.

We broke the bathroom door. He was trying to drown himself. – CH

I laughed. It was a cruel sound, soft and high-pitched. I could see Cutter shift nervously as I raked my eyes up and down her form. I cocked my head as I smiled. “My name’s Moira Wild. I run a shelter for parahumans.”

She looked confused for a brief moment before her eyes widened. “You – “

“Yeah. Me,” I set myself down for the first time that night. I walked to her slowly, gravel crunching underfoot as my disks, bricks, and sand circled me menacingly. I was standing fifty meters away when they stopped orbiting me. Slowly, threateningly, they lined up to face her. And then, they broke the sound barrier with a resounding crack and flew towards her. To her, it must’ve looked like they teleported.

I was close enough to see the dark stain form on her pants as a single disk, spinning fast enough to produce a thin whine, stopped right in her face. The rest veered off course to return to me.

I caught her eye from beneath her mask and smiled pleasantly – almost affably, “Don’t ever hurt a
child again, yeah?”

…

Cutter and Painbreak turned themselves in. They refused to say what happened – although I did catch the PRT officers giving me looks from time to time – and was sent to the Birdcage. There was no trouble in their transport and they were admitted without trouble. I allowed myself to turn off my hunting mode and return to the shelter.

The night I came back, Cramer ventured downstairs. He found me easily and grabbed me by the shoulders, looking wild and sleepless. I shooed everyone out as I carefully sat him down to the couch.

“Was it you?” he whispered. “Did you do that?”

My hand found his and I squeezed it comfortingly. I leaned until my forehead touched his. Softly, I said, “Yes. It was.”

“Why?” There were tears in his eyes now, and his voice trembled. Cramer looked like he was a few touches away from a complete breakdown.

I reached up to wipe away a single tear from his neon cheek. “Because when I opened this shelter, I made it a place for safety. For security and for belonging,” I stroked his hair, long forgotten protective instincts rising up in me, “You’re one of my people, Jon.”

He was crying now, tipping over to sob into my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and rocked from side to side, my hand rubbing his back as he shook violently. “You’re precious to me,” I murmured into his bright hair. “So, so precious.”

Strangely enough, that only made him cry harder.
The ceremony was process that took entirely too long, in my opinion. After introducing himself, Parker was suddenly bombarded with a veritable sea of reporters all determined to be the first to get the scoop on the newest Ward. They asked him his age, his school, his type of girl… I mean, honestly. I get that PR is a big thing for the Protectorate but their heroes were less super-powered soldiers and more super-powered celebrities.

Though, watching Parker stumble through it while the PR manager gave him the stink eye was frankly hilarious.

I meandered away from the mess towards where Carly and the others would be. On the way, I saw several heads turn as they recognized me. Since the villains stopped bothering me four years ago, the whole excitement over my actions had gone down but… some people had longer memories than others.

Arsenal stepped in my path before I could reach my destination. His red and black costume was mostly the same even now, but he’d ditched the cloak sometime in 2006. Good riddance too, I thought as my eyes raked over his muscled legs. He was pretty fit and my age; too bad he was a Protectorate cape through and through. No chance of a relationship there. Plus, I was pretty sure I intimidated him.

“I didn’t know you had an interest in the Wards,” he said lightly, circling with soft, wide strides. A corner of his lips quirked up. “What brings you here?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t really understand why you insist on being obtuse,” I muttered to him, feeling the area for listening devices. None existed but nothing was beyond Tinker-tech. “Thought I’d check out the newest hero,” I said more loudly. “They are all responsible for our fair city, after all.”

“And what is your judgment?” He fell into step with me as I moved along.

“Good fellow. Bound to be dead useful, since he’s a Tinker. Also, very independent and strong-willed,” I rounded to face him, a knowing smirk on my face, “His folks probably trust him a lot. Enough to make his own choices.”

The cape was silent for a moment. “… not every time I talk to you is a recruiting effort, you know.”

I snorted, tossing my hair back over my shoulder. “Pull the other door, yeah?”

Arsenal grumbled under his breath at this. The Protectorate’s attempts to recruit, coerce, or force me into their side of things had become a running joke now. Nearly five years have gone and I was still a successful fairly well-known rogue. They’d assigned different capes to make the offer to me every few months.

I heard that they just picked straws to draw the unlucky bastard. Baldur had been the last one.

I swallowed the bubble of laughter that rose at the memories. It took him nearly a month to get me to let him into the shelter’s grounds – it took him an hour to flee from the kids I set loose on him. Ass he may be, but he was still a hero with a personal logo and merchandise. They’d loved him.

After that, it was just him increasing patrol around the area in hopes of running into me. No way
was he venturing into that hell again.

Arsenal, on the other hand… he was meh. Made no actual effort in his recruitment, since he realized that nothing short of god stepping down to earth to command me would make me join. And even then it was iffy.

“So, Torpedo.” Arsenal sounded thoughtful.

I whirled around to give him a hard jab on his armored chest. “No. I had to deal with Jetstream on the way here, and she wasn’t even assigned to me. Don’t even bother, Arsenal, because I swear I will—“

He held up his hands in a display of surprise and hurt. “Hey now, Wild, don’t be like that. Torpedo seems like a good kid, that’s all.” I searched him narrowly, but found no duplicity in his statement. Instead, I walked away. Arsenal tried to follow me, only to find the smaller armor panels of his suit was holding him back.

“What the – really? Wild, come on!”

I grinned at him as I skipped away. “Sorry, got things to do. Watch Torpedo for me, yeah?”

Arsenal struggled harder. I let go and snickered when he nearly fell on his face

…

Carly was good at radiating disapproval without doing anything. She continued her passive-aggressive assault as I flitted around the room, a whole regiment of plates and cutlery floated behind me as I rushed about. I set them down all around the place as I manipulated the kitchen knives into chopping the carrots.

“I distinctly remember,” she started balefully, “Telling you to set up things the night before. Is his gift even ready?”

I raised a finger at her. Opened my mouth. Thought for a brief moment. Then I grabbed a handful of napkins and shoved it into her scaly arms. “Set that,” I commanded before escaping the room.

“Moira!”

…

The party was, much too my satisfaction, a rousing success. To ensure maximum surprise, Carly had hypnotized Parker before he’d even stepped foot inside the house. Then we all got together to yell out “Surprise!””. Well, some of us did. The children all looked up to Parker in a way that always made him cough uncomfortably and Anyim had lost all control of himself in his hero worship. Thankfully, all the food was saved before the boy-turned-wave of water could wet it.

The only downside of the evening was the lack of women in bikinis bursting out of the cake. My idea had been shot down before it could even have a chance to grow. And we wouldn’t have even wasted any cake – Iago was a deft hand at illusions. Bikini babes popping out of bakery would’ve been a trifle for him. But nooo, the possibility of soiling Parker’s innocence had Carly taking up her metaphorical arms with wild determination.

I snorted where I stood at the front of the room, conducting a delicate orchestra of preventing spills and passing around dishes. I could clean the house within moments with my ability and had too many unforgettable forays into Parker’s room to ever believe his so-called purity. It took him
nearly a year to wise up and start locking his door. A year that I spent barging into his room brandishing cleaning products, hastily backing out, and scrubbing my eyes out while he yelled indignantly in the background.

I shuddered and a gravy boat dipped. He’s moving out now, thank god. Never again will I see… that.

I looked around the massive dining hall. Over the years, the shelter had grown exponentially. I first started out with just Carly and Parker… now, there were five children, three teenagers, and seven adults living here, discounting myself and Parker, who was moving out soon. There were more people, of course, that came in and out according to their situations, but these guys were my regulars, my permanent houseguests.

My five kids were still quite young. Cora was the youngest at six and Roger was the oldest at ten. All of them showed parahuman abilities that could make them potential Wards. I suspected that the only reason they were still in my custody was because they were too young to be heroes and close enough to PRT headquarters that they could keep an eye on them.

In the next five years, I’d probably lose at least three. Xiaoli was a definite, as was Roger. Renee was another possibility, but her teleportation was dodgy at best. But Anyim’s developing hydrokinesis might make him a target, especially in areas where Leviathan struck. Cora had some sort of issue with heroes so she might be safe, or go rogue like me.

My teenagers, on the other hand, were less likely to be press-ganged. Cramer and Terry had yet to be approached by anyone which was most likely due to how underwhelming their powers were. I knew the former was genuinely weak, but the latter… I had a hunch that his ability was much more than just giving shocks to people by touching them. Wade had difficulties with authority figures and it took me single-handedly dismantling a drug operation to make him respect me to any degree. They were safe.

And the adults? No chance. They all had some sort of problem or another that prevented them from donning a mask and going out to fight the good fight. Hestia was a pacifist, Iago had PTSD from his army days, and so on. The only one who might be considering the cape scene was Jorge. I’d caught him sneaking out at night a few times and coming back sweaty and bright-eyed, like he’d just fought someone.

I sighed as I twitched away the dish of butter from an errant elbow. It weaved through the air towards me and I snatched it up just as a knife flew through the air. It slowed dramatically before it could hit the bean dip and I directed an admonishing stare at Roger. He gave an impish grin before growing a small leaf from an apple just as Anyim put it to his mouth. The boy yelped and his hand lost shape.

I sighed as I saved the apple and several dishes.

Children.

…

I stepped out of the kitchen and gathered a series of bricks to form stairs for me. Nikolas and Asha could handle clean-up and the children were all piled in the sitting room with Parker, bloated with ice cream and candied apples.

I was a good way up when I stopped to admire the moon, sitting on a large circle of bricks and my feet hanging down. It was always slightly windy up here and I shivered without my parka. The
bricks under me slowly rotated, moving me until I was facing the direction Brockton Bay roughly would be situated.

It was 2008 now. Annette Hebert would die soon, or was already dead. And then, Taylor would be bullied. Viciously and cruelly until she was shoved into a locker to ferment for some hours and trigger to become Skitter.

She could be saved. I could swoop in and rescue her from an experience that would permanently alter her entire character. She didn’t have to make the wrong choices for the right reasons anymore.

I sighed as my eyes dropped from where Brockton Bay was.

And then I’d kill Khepri. The entity that would save the world from Scion. As much as I cared for Taylor, as much as I wanted to preserve her innocence for as long as possible, stepping in the series of events that would take place some years from now was too risky. I was no Contessa or Tattletale, my powers weren’t meant for high-stakes fate-of-the-world speed chess. She needed to be bullied so she could trigger. Then she needed to fight for her life against Lung and Leviathan and Coil and the Slaughterhouse… just so when the time comes, she’d be ready.

I had no right to step in and potentially fuck up the fate of the world. If I did, then the timeline could be changed irreversibly. Perhaps Cauldron could salvage the situation by pumping me for everything I knew… and then what? Would more people be saved? Would more people die? Would Scion die?

As long as I didn’t know the answer, I couldn’t mess around with things. I wasn’t going to be the stone that leaked the boat.

But…

I could almost remember Taylor’s thoughts. Her anger and misery at being denied justice. Her helplessness and suicidal tendencies that led her to the Undersiders. I knew her better than she knew herself, really, and I was going to leave her to that sad empty life.

“I’m sorry, Taylor,” I murmured to the wind. “But you have to save the world.”
I woke up to the feel of something electronic entering my range, which was extended to a lazy hundred meters around the grounds. I turned in my bed, the sheets rustling as I mumbled something incoherently. I was in the pleasant in-between state of sleep and wakefulness, still floating on the edges of a dream involving the beaches of Fiji and pina coladas. The object got closer and I frowned as I drew the sheets over my head.

Just this once… come on…

I cracked open an eye as a weight settled in the sill of the open window. The intruder barely had chance to step towards me before a disk was at their throat. They froze, swallowing against the cool metal as it menacingly dug into the soft skin and cartilage.

“Calm your tits,” I growled drowsily as I kicked away my blankets. Goosebumps rose where the morning air passed and I glared balefully at the intruder with a yawn. “You know, I don’t exactly get nights off. I really am not in the mood for shit from anyone. Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

More metal disks came to float besides them, pressed against vital areas around their body. They could still try to kill me, but I’d make sure to get a final shot in before I stepped off the mortal coil. The intruder stared at me. He or she was wearing a maroon suit with a domino mask that covered their cheekbones better than it hid their identity. Their hair was curly and long enough to just cover their ears. Although the suit was form-fitting, their body was androgynous enough that I couldn’t tell if it was a formless woman or thin man.

Admittedly, I probably didn’t look very threatening. I was in my nightwear – sleeping shorts and camisole, and my hair was a frightful mess. My state of sleepiness made opening my eyes difficult, so I was forced to peer at them like I was near-sighted. Also, I kept yawning when I talked.

“So, tell me why the fuck you’re attacking me at…” I glanced at the clock at my bedside, “Fucking five in the morning. The sun hasn’t even risen yet, you bastard.”

A pregnant silence hung in the air before the intruder slowly straightened from their crouch. They coughed uncomfortably, “Well, this is embarrassing.”

Well, that was certainly a male voice.

I gave him a bland look, “It’s about to get a lot worse if you don’t start talking real fast.”

The intruder shrugged, “You’ve collected quite a number of enemies over the years. I’m just a hired knife, here to stab you in your sleep.” He paused. “You are Moira Wild, yes?”

“You tried to kill me without even verifying who I was?” I asked flatly. “You stupid or something? Beyond that, did you really not take into account the fact that I could just kill you back? Because you’ve done nothing but just stand there like an idiot.”

“Hey now,” he protested, “No need to be impolite. Besides, I’ve already killed you.”

My eyes widened just as I dived from the bed. A disk shot from the cloud surrounding the cape to smash through a projection before it could slam a knife into my skull. Judging from the ominous hissing emanating from it, it was Tinker-tech. The knife fell onto my bed and the parts its blade touched melted into slag.
The disks around him slammed his hands and knees with their flat sides. Immediately, the delicate metacarpals were crushed and his kneecaps gave a popping sound as they were pushed out of alignment. The cape shrieked loudly at the pain and fell on his side onto my carpet. The lone disk I freed from the herd spun around me whirring like a buzz saw, protecting my back from any unexpected attackers.

I advanced on the cape writhing on my floor and pushed him onto his back with a foot. I pressed the same foot on one of his hands, staring at him coldly as he screamed. I could feel the people in the shelter stirring at the noise and Carly was certainly going to storm my door. I manipulated the locking mechanism on the door to click it shut. The door was a heavy metal within wood type – Hestia would take at least a few moments to drag it off its frames. Her hesitation about property damage would stretch those moments into minutes.

 Enough time to deal with this amateur.

“So, you were saying?” I said over his pained weeping, “Because you’re not going anywhere in this state. Furthermore, try anything else and I’ll send staples down your mouth and into your internal organs. You’ll bleed out within minutes.”

I didn’t really like spilling blood – it was messy and classless, not when you had a veritable inventory of different methods of killing someone. Why cut an artery and deal with a meter spray of blood when I could just inject air into their veins? Or suffocate them? Hell, I didn’t even have to kill anyone. Kneecapping was

He whimpered, trying to tug out his pinned hand out from underneath my foot. For his presumption, I added more force to coax a keening cry from him. “Your voice is fine, judging from your wailing,” I observed, “Fine enough that you could tell me who you are and who sent you.”

“Headhunter,” he gritted out, tears streaming out from under his tiny mask, “I w-was sent to – to recruit y-you for – for Management!”

“Recruit me? For what? The army of the dead?” I snarked, but released his hand. I bent down and threaded my hand into his curly hair, dragging him up by it to stare into his eyes. “Listen to me, Headhunter,” I said firmly, “I don’t really care for the middleman. I’m not the type to shoot the messenger. So I’ll let you go just this once, yeah?”

He nodded frantically, whimpering from the pain. “But m-my knees –“

I eyed him. “You got a doctor?”

Headhunter bleated an affirmative. I nodded. “Right-ho. Then we’ll go to this fellow of yours.”

I dropped him to the floor and rushed over to my closet to pull on my ‘costume’. The motorcycle pants went over my shorts and I pulled on a t-shirt before zipping up the parka to my chin. Bricks streamed in through the window to form a platform and I impatiently tugged Headhunter’s limp body onto it.

I was just clambering out the window with Headhunter aside me laid out on bricks when the door slammed open. Or rather, it fell straight off its hinges to crash onto the floor. I waved merrily towards Carly and Hestia just as they barged in, followed closely by Jorge. I could hear the others clamoring in the background, but Carly’s enraged shout rang out louder than anything else they said.

“MOIRA!”
I glided along according to Headhunter’s directions, swerving around buildings and over alleyways with an array of disks orbiting me as protection from attacks. He’d finally stopped whimpering, thank god. I wasn’t sure how much more whining I could take before I blew up. Capes were supposed to be tolerant of pain, not breaking down in tears every time they got a hurt. My mood wasn’t particularly stable, especially since I was still sleepy, and I wasn’t feeling kindly.

“Tell me about this Management,” I said as I avoided Jetstream with a hasty dive behind a billboard. “And your whole objective. I think I want to meet him to talk about his… recruitment efforts.” My glare made Headhunter wince.

“He… admires you,” Headhunter said slowly, “Says what you’re doing is real smart because you’ve got this private team of parahumans all loyal to you—“

Anything else he might’ve said was interrupted by my rude bark of laughter. We dipped down suddenly as my concentration wavered and the formerly steady platform threatened to break apart. “What the fuck? That’s utterly absurd. How delusional do you have to be to believe that?!?”

“They literally tore down your door to save you,” Headhunter pointed out. “And you already claimed territory for yourself. That’s why villains don’t go near there anymore.”

I waved him off. “I opened a shelter. That means safety. Having villains crawling around doesn’t exactly constitute ‘safety’.” We settled down in a deserted parking lot in the bad part of town. I looked around, noting the signs adorning the walls. The days of mundane-run gangs were over; now, parahumans dominated the scene. We were standing in Reaper turf currently and their signature skull and scythe signs were painted all over the buildings.

Headhunter caught me looking around and shrugged from his floating platform. “What can I say? The Reapers got healers.”

I hummed noncommittally. “So, this doctor…”

“Luce’s good,” he assured. “Go on, knock on the door and say ‘Management’s looking down’.”

I restrained a derisive snort at the name as I rapped on the door sharply. A slit for eyes slid open with a squeal of metal after five raps.

“What?” it demanded suspiciously.

“What?” it demanded suspiciously.

“Management’s looking down,” I parroted.

The slit was slammed shut and the door opened after an impressive series of unlocking sounds. A skinny guy greeted us, skinny and pale enough that I could blue veins under the surface. He glowered at us from behind an expensive looking pair of glasses before he turned back and yelled, “Oi! Headhunter’s back with some broad!”

I twitched at being referred to as such, but followed after him with Headhunter following on his platform. I looked around the room, noting the peeling wallpaper, the creaking floors, and the dying plants dotting the floors.

“Luce’s good ‘my lily-white ass. I gave Headhunter an unimpressed look. I wouldn’t be surprised if I contracted an STD just by breathing.

“Jesus, man, what the hell happened to you?” It was the skinny guy again. He was helping
Headhunter get down from his make-shift stretcher. I let the bricks collapse as soon as his weight was removed to orbit me instead. The disks discretely slid back into their respective pockets on my outfit.

Headhunter jerked his head in my direction. “Wild happened to me. Management wanted to talk to her and… well, you get the idea.”

Skinny guy’s head whipped around to stare at me. He looked so astonished that I felt a scowl tug my cheeks downward. What? Was I supposed to be a statuesque Amazon instead? Not expecting a five foot Asian, were you? This explains your fucking attitude, then.

I let the bricks scrape against each other until he got the message. Skinny guy quickly turned and dragged Headhunter away deeper into the building. I followed after him casually, bricks trailing after me like little ducklings. Occasionally, I let them brush against the wall or skinny guy to see him cringe.

I smirked as I marched after them. I should add some heels to this outfit. Ones that clack real loud when I walk.

We walked a little ways more before skinny guy dragged Headhunter through a doorway. Inside, I saw a figure slouched over a desk. When we approached, the figure groaned and slowly rose to face us.

I stared.

If I thought skinny guy was thin, then this man was nearly a rail. The only thing that prevented him from being waif-like was the wiry muscle that corded over his arms and presumably his legs. His slender build only led further attention to the bones that jutted out, the sharp angled chin covered in a week’s worth of stubble, and his gaunt, watery blue eyes. His hair caught the light as he slumped over to us, revealing it to be a pale blonde.

“You’re fuckin’ back again, I see,” he commented dryly, “Piss off someone with your stupid trick again?”

Headhunter winced as he sneaked a glance at me, “You could say that,” he said with a one shoulder shrug. “Now, come on Luce, work that magic of yours, please?”

The thin man didn’t seem to notice me as he stumbled his way Headhunter’s bedside. A single bony hand stretched out to grip Headhunter on the exposed skin of his face. The doctor’s eyes went unfocussed as he muttered something under his breath, fingers twitching as he saw something that none of us could comprehend.

The moment passed when he released Headhunter’s face. Luce shuffled away to a doorway, rifling through their contents as he continued rambling to himself. I could feel the small jars and objects in the room being shifted as he searched for the things he needed. Finally, he stepped away and out to us once again.

In his arms was a jumble of things. Small pincers, several jars, a spindly set of long sticks with joints that angled this way and that, and a hammer. Luce dumped them all into skinny guy’s arms with a muttered, “Here, princess,” before turning to face Headhunter.

“Alright,” he said with a roll of his shoulders, “Y’ remember procedure, hm? Princess –“ he nodded to skinny guy, “ –will hold your stupid ass down while I get t’ work. Capiche?”

Headhunter offered a wan smile, “Actually, I was hoping you’d use anesthetic this around –“
Luce hooked a foot around a trolley and sent it over to skinny guy to drop his items. Then the pale man rolled up his sleeves and dropped Headhunter into a chair with several straps on it. Before he could protest, the straps were belted around his chest, head, waist, thighs, and biceps. Then he picked up Headhunter’s hand to hold it steady for Luce to look over. I shuffled a little ways off to sit down on a rickety chair, curious despite myself. I’d met my fair share of back-alley doctors in my time but I’d never seen a parahuman one. Was he like Panacea or Bonesaw?

“’Kay, Headhunter,” the doctor said as he snagged a jar from the trolley, “You’re in luck. See, I developed this liquid tha’ pretty much melts bone without damagin’ the surrounding flesh. It’ll get rid all th’ shards in your hands quickie quick without any chances of somethin’ bein’ left behind.”

A bubble of hysterical laughter burst from Headhunter’s mouth. “Why do I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me?!”

Luce kicked over a small stool and sat himself. He squinted as he tipped the jar down onto Headhunter’s hand, letting the blue liquid slosh over it. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Yeah, see, the problem’s that I haven’t quite figured out how t’ make sure it don’t spread to your other bones.”

Both men ignored me in favor of the shrieking man they were treating. My eyes were wide.

Guess it’s Bonesaw.
Ten minutes passed before Headhunter’s screaming petered out into frantic breathing. I waited patiently in the background, observing as the good doctor did his thing. By now, I was convinced he was no biokinetic or regenerator. All his procedures were done with tools, like a tinker. He fixed up Headhunter in the same way one might go about repairing a robot. Replacing broken bits, updating obsolete parts, and tuning the rest. It was morbidly fascinating to oversee.

“Hey, Wild?” I perked up at the sound of Headhunter’s voice, “M-Mind a bit of talking while Doc finishes up? I need a spot of distraction, especially since he’s gonna start… digging through my kn- kneecaps.”

I made no reply, but the cape took it as an affirmative.

“Jesus, you know you d-deserve every bit of r-rep you got, right? You’re fucking brutal.”

I snorted. “I recall you trying to kill me. I just retaliated.”

Headhunter chuckled – or rather, he tried. His voice went high at the end when a scalpel was stabbed into the soft underside of his knee. “F-Fuck! Doc, come on, man!”

“Shut up,” the blonde said. “You tried tha’ trick on her, didn’t you?”

My bricks rose around me in wary circle. “Trick?”

Headhunter shrugged weakly. “You really think I’d tell you ‘I already killed you’ just seconds before my projection stabs you? Some capes can be hella fast. Nah, if I wanted to murderize somebody, there’d be no warning. It was a joke, that’s all.”

“A joke,” my voice was a flat drawl, a sound so contemptuously unimpressed that Headhunter had to suppress a wince, “Nobody appreciates my humor,” he groaned. “All I get is broken bones in exchange for first-class comedy.”

I stared at him incredulously. This idiot… doesn’t he realize that I literally might’ve killed him and called it self-defense? How is he still alive?

I stood up. “Next time you pull shit like that,” I warned, “someone will kill you. Don’t die for the sake of shits and giggles. Now, hurry up. I still have to talk to Management.”

The cape wiggled his hands at me. After the inner bones were melted away, Luce had replaced the inner working with small bio-metal supports that’d encourage bone growth along them. After the metacarpals were fully replaced, the metal would also dissolve into marrow and nutrients. My head whenever I tried to puzzle that out with my high-school biology knowledge. Taylor was right… fucking Tinkers.

“Another ten minutes,” he said cheerfully, grin only slipping when he caught sight of his shattered kneecaps, “Then I’ll be with you.”

I sighed and turned away to look around the office-like settings. I felt around the entirety of the space, feeling through all the knick-knacks Doc Luce kept in his lair. There was more Tinker-tech with purposes I couldn’t quite discern. There was a bathroom down the hall, filled with dirty equipment that felt coated with some sort of gelatinous liquid. To rooms away were a set of bedrooms. The insides of these rooms were minimal, Spartan in its design and feel. No personal
trinkets there.

I sighed as I glanced at the ceiling. Aside from counting the mildew spots, there appeared to be very little I could do as I waited.

...

It was a mind-numbing half hour later when Headhunter bounded up to me with bandaged knees. I hadn’t bothered to watch the operation this time, but I could tell that all the damage I’d inflicted was totally gone. He moved freely, without any signs of pain when he walked or picked something up.

I was definitely going to look at Doc Luce more closely. A biotinker who doesn’t horribly mutilate you was something I’d never expected to run into. Maybe I could convince him to become one of my people.

“Say,” Headhunter said, “Could you do that brick flying thing again? Management’s base is a little ways off Reaper turf.”

The bricks around me fell down to form a flat foundation. Disks slid out from their pockets to orbit me as I also stepped onto the platform. I could fly with the disks but I wasn’t going to reveal the full extent of my abilities to him. People knew I could fly, but not how. I was content to let them draw their own conclusions.

Slowly, we rose as I watched for any heroes in the area. Jetstream usually was near the center of the city, where she could utilize her speed to be first on the scene for any crimes. Energize prowled the streets randomly and Reprisal was typically stationed near the outskirts. But, the Wards were the ones I was keeping an eye out for. They liked to skate the edges of gang territory, eager for fights in a combination of teen confidence and stupidity. Washington D.C. wasn’t like Brockton Bay; it was secure enough that they didn’t understand the horrors of constant battle. Death was an abstract concept to them, something that happened to other people.

I caught sight of grey boots just in time to drop below the skyline. A teenaged boy materialized out of a smoky cloud from the feet up, a baton-like sniper rifle in his hands. Nox. He was the type of parahuman with an array of small powers that arranged into a larger whole. From what I’d seen, he would be hell for me to fight. Turned parts of his body into a smoky cloud that was mildly sedative and hallucinogenic, could move quickly within the cloud, and used his gun to either melee or shoot groggy opponents while avoiding their attacks. A snort of that gas would literally cut my combat efficiency in half. And investing in a gas mask might appear a mite confrontational.

Changer, Mover, maybe Trump or Shaker.

“What’s your power, exactly?” I asked Headhunter in a whisper, eyeing Nox as he scanned the city below him.

“Projection,” he muttered back. “Hard-light, can be sent forward about ten meters with anything a human could hold. I can alter its visibility and size.”

Ten meters was too close. Nox’s range if he sacrificed an arm for the gas could extend to a whole city block. I wasn’t quite sure what happened to him when he needed his body whole again, but it wasn’t true regeneration. Or what happened if the gas was taken away, somehow.

I didn’t want to find out, either, because trying to could be lethal. Nox was sixteen-ish, like Parker. I wasn’t going to have the blood of a minor on my hands.
I sighed. “Hold on tight. I’m going to evade until we leave Reaper turf. Then, we stick to the streets.”

Headhunter frowned. “What do you mean hold tigh –“

I muffled the sound of his scream with my hands as we shot upwards. We were nothing more than a blur to the naked eye and continued to move until we punched through a low-lying cloud. My hair was immediately wet as I slowly drifted with the cloud, using it to obscure our presence.

“You – you…” Headhunter appeared to be in a state of shock. He looked around to see the height we were at and turned green. “Please don’t drop me,” he whispered as he covered his eyes.

The cold wind nipped my fingers as I glanced at him. “Vertigo?”

He grunted, hunching on himself. “I – I can handle roofs and stuff. When you’re in the city, there’s no real danger. But up here… it’s empty.”

He became silent after that. Descent was just as rapid as the upward climb and even I felt an unpleasant twinge in my gut. Headhunter simply staggered off and vomited into a dumpster.

“Management’s right here,” he muttered weakly, gesturing at a warehouse. “Just go in.”

“What about you?” I asked when it appeared he was choosing to hang back.

He gestured at himself. “Look at me. I can’t exactly say hi to the boss like this. Just go in. He won’t harm you.” True enough, he looked far less put together since he did in the morning. His maroon suit had clear blood stains on it that were hardening in brown crust, and was ripped around the arms and legs. His curly hair was matted and tangled after our flight, and he was sweating profusely.

“…right,” I said. Management won’t harm me. Lie better, will you?

“Alright,” he said with a wave, “My own space’s near here. I’m gonna go in and sleep for the rest of the day. I think I deserve, especially after getting mauled by you.”

He jogged away. I watched him until he disappeared around a corner. Slowly, my eyes slid to the warehouse’s doors.

With a pop, I rolled my neck and shoulders. The bricks and disks all fell around me in a tight formation and I gathered up a cloud of gravel and sand from the street. They streamed into my outfit, filling unused pockets, sleeves, and my parka’s hood. More filtered into my hair as I walked up to the front.

Time to go see Management.

The doors opened for me the moment I reached them. I paused, eyes narrowed as I searched the area for any hidden cameras. I couldn’t sense any, so it was either Tinker-tech or a parahuman sensor type.

Neither option was particularly reassuring.

I stepped through into a brightly lit, storage container filled warehouse. Directly in front of me was a man surrounded by what might’ve been several parahumans. He was short, well-dressed in a white suit… and had an elaborate mask… that mimicked a stern, grim expression…
My brain fizzled.

“Good evening, Ms. Wild,” Accord said.
Broadcast.
-an entity shudders within its host-
Boredom.
-little is interesting-
Impotent.
-the host is softer, slower, no longer nourishing their bond-
Come.
-was the broadcast received?-
Closer.
-the host needs help-
Connection.
-needs to escape the cage-
Conflict?
-the host will be brought out of dormancy-
Location?
-must pushed to its limits-
Found.
-will help, will assist, will work together again-
Agreement.
…

I stood there, the protection around me dipping with my wavering focus, barely breathing as I took in the sight of him. He was different from what I’d imagined when reading the story – I remembered him being short, but he was taller than me by a few centimeters. His hair was in a coif, black mixed with a few streaks of grey that made him distinguished, rather than haggard. His suit was tailored, his waist was trim, and he stood with quiet confidence – I could see why Citrine was attracted to him.

But I was no fool. His shard-induced OCD was lethal, and his Ambassadors could probably overpower me. If I was lucky, I’d take at least two out. Maybe even everyone.

But I wasn’t here for a suicidal fight.

“Hello yourself,” I said coolly, eyeing the three sharply dressed parahumans beside him, “I wasn’t
I was going to be outnumbered, Management. Don’t trust easy, do you?”

He made no extra movements in his reply. It made him strangely robotic. “My Ambassadors accompany me everywhere,” he said stiffly, “It is their duty.”

I hummed as I slowly stepped closer to them. I didn’t know who these guys were. One was a particularly tall fellow in a three-piece suit with long coattails. His mask was made to look as if it were carved out of marble, a brilliant white with green veins crawling up the side. The other two were both women in gorgeous evening gowns. It was somewhat silly to feel a twinge of envy when my eyes skimmed over their delicate, gleaming masks with precious jewels on their foreheads, but it was there. The shorter woman had a theme of royal purple and black dotted with onyxes. The other woman was a lithe thing covered in iridescent, billowing fabric. At her throat glimmered a fat pearl in rainbow hues.

I looked away to fix eyes with Accord – or was it Management? I wasn’t sure what name he currently using. Playing it safe was the better choice for now.

“I suppose,” I drawled, wondering if it was rude to check the possible exits in the area. “So, why am I here? Your man wasn’t exactly… proper in his retrieval. He escaped death by a thin margin. So not only am I skeptical about your proposal, but I am also doubting your competence.”

Baiting him was not a good idea, but I needed to establish certain facts before the ball got rolling. This was my city, and my turf. Accord was an outsider, by all accounts. I wouldn’t let him bully me and it was valid concern, anyway. Headhunter had been exceptionally stupid.

“Headhunter,” Accord said, “was a mistake. He will be punished accordingly, Ms. Wild. Furthermore, you are correct. My aim here isn’t to recruit you as an Ambassador.”

Oops. Headhunter wasn’t one of mine, but… he might be useful in the future. It didn’t hurt to have people in your debt. “Don’t bother,” I said, “because Headhunter messed with me. He is mine to deal with. But for now, let us speak about the purpose of this meeting. Why did you call me?”

Accord remained silent for a bit as he appraised me. Finally he said, “I require your talents for a job.”

I blinked. Wow, while I didn’t know what to expect from this, that was certainly left field. “You do realize I am not, and have never been, for hire?” I asked slowly. “Why me, when there are a virtual legion of parahuman mercenaries who’d do anything for enough money?”

“Don’t lie to me, Ms. Wild,” he said softly, the contours of his mask becoming sterner, “You were once a mercenary. While you may have strayed from that path, you still are one in spirit.”

“I have a shel –“

“You have a paper trail that any Thinker could tear apart given the chance.”

I froze. My documents were good enough for the federal bureau, but not for parahumans. Tattletale wouldn’t even have to look at it to know it was faker than a porn star’s tits. Accord was very much the same in that regard, I thought darkly.

“I… see,” I said after a lengthy pause. “But the PRT would also –“

“The PRT have a surprising amount of holes in their security,” Accord said. “There are several groups that prefer you in action.”
When I looked at him in askance, he shook his head. Not Accord? Then who?

“That is a matter I’ll have to look into,” I said reluctantly, “But we haven’t addressed the issue at hand. Why me?”

This time his mask – and his face, presumably – smoothened out into an aloof geniality. “In my career, I have met many parahumans. None are quite like you, Ms. Wild. Did you know that your establishment is the first of its kind?”

I never really thought of it like that. But it wasn’t an answer I could accept. Why was he evading the question? “So I am the first person to open a shelter for parahumans,” I argued, “but that doesn’t explain why you came down here all the way from Boston.”

Shit.

I hadn’t meant to say that. I hated tipping my hand. Now he knows what I know. And that might encourage him to dig deeper into my history, to try and solve the riddle before him… somehow, I had a feeling my secrets wouldn’t stay hidden for long if Accord devoted his full attention to it. How long would it take him to figure out that Moira Wild hadn’t even existed until seven years back?

I glanced at his face. He looked almost… smug?

“As I thought,” he said affably, “You’re holding out on the greater world, aren’t you? You must be, considering you single-handedly lowered crime in this city.”

“Oh, I protested, “That’s an exaggeration. A really big one. I have a small slice of it, that’s all. A very small, tiny slice called Wild’s Home for Parahumans.”

He waved his hand as if swatting a fly. “You opened your shelter five years ago. A year passed when a villain – or rather, two villains – blatantly assaulted one of your people. Three days later, they turn themselves without a fight,” he held up his fingers out for me to see. “A month passes. Another teenager fall into your lap, one that is addicted to drugs. Three days later, the entire operation is shut down with every single member given to the authorities. Two months pass. You take in a woman who’s in a forceful partnership with a villain. Again, three days pass. The villain is turned in, he’s a policeman. A day later, he gives the names of every corrupt officer who let him get away with his crimes. The Protectorate attempts to recruit you, you refuse. A month later—“

I held up a hand. “Alright, thank you.” I said firmly while my head spun. My god, he was really invested. “So we establish that I’m good at hunting down villains. I am sure you could do much the same.”

“I could,” he said, without a hint of pride in his voice, “But I have other matters to attend to. This is something you can do.”

I sighed. When I thought about it, I really did miss doing jobs. Fighting, ripping for survival. Coming out on top on a blaze of glory with a trail of bodies at my back. Opening the shelter and purging the local villains had been fun… but not fun.

There was no conflict. There wasn’t any drive to succeed at all costs.

I wasn’t being pushed anymore.

I tilted my head and crossed my arms. “Fine. What’s the job?”
Accord didn’t show any overt signs of satisfaction. However, he still gave off a vibe similar to a cat that got the canary. “I have a rival,” he said, voice oily smooth, “in one of the more violent cities. I want you to end him.”

I blinked. “His name?”

“Coil.”

Fucking –!

…

Conflict?

Located.

Target?

Selected.

-the shard shuddered as its host came into synchronicity with it. The problem was solved. The host was stronger already, the power flowed freely.

The hunt was on.
Six and a half years ago...

Valere glanced around the corner to peek at the man again. It was Tracker, a favorite of his father’s. The man was fairly plain and non-descript, but that was no indicator of ability. Of the fourteen children that had tried to run away, he’d come back with thirteen – and only because the seventh committed suicide before he could be dragged back home.

The boy flexed his hand. If I could just touch him… But that wouldn’t be possible. Tracker had done his research and was covered in cloth from head to toe. His muscled, tall frame only emphasized the physical advantage he had. Getting in grappling range was just asking to be caught.

The boy glanced around the empty street. It was dark and club music reverberated through. He could even see the people standing outside in a line and the wildly glowing lights from the interior. They didn’t appear to notice him, or Tracker’s covered figure.

Valere cursed. Useless!

He glanced at the parahuman again. He was closer now, head swinging side to side as he searched for his location. Judging from the way he was wandering inevitably closer, he found the trail.

His heart pounding, Valere sprang out from behind his spot aside the dumpster in a sprint. His shoes slapped on the ground as he darted into the line of people outside the club, sticking his hand against the bouncer’s exposed forearm to make him lurch away. He heard a few cries behind him, but ignored it in favor of rushing into the crush of bodies. Tracker was moving towards him steadily, people looking away from him as his power was exerted in force.

Valere twisted around a throng of dancers, mind scrolling through his rapidly dwindling list of options. In his haste, he tripped and slid into a table, painfully clipping it with his hip. The table wobbled dangerously, upsetting the myriad glasses on top of it. The woman seated cried out as her current drink was spilt onto her lap.

“What the fuck? You little brat!”

The young boy stumbled away as the woman rose from her seat shakily. She was shorter than him and clearly tipsy, but the way the glasses on the table rose around her marked her as dangerous. To make it worse, he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder.

“Sorry miss,” Tracker said through his mask. “We’ll be leaving you in peace, now.”

The swayed on her feet, the glasses still hovering around her. “Who’re you?” she asked suspiciously. “His dad or somethin’?”

“His guardian,” he said. “Sorry for _”

“No!” Valere burst. “He – He’s a pedo! He’s been chasing me all over and –“ Please pay attention, Valere thought frantically, please don’t get turned around by his power.

The boy gagged. The man’s hand had now wrapped around his neck to squeeze the nerves on the sides. Before he could be dragged away, the woman spoke again.

“What the –? You’re a pedo? A fuckin’ child molester?”
“No, no ma’am,” the man said, backing away with Valere, “You’re mistaken, he’s –“

But the man didn’t get another word out. Valere screamed when a glass suddenly shot out, striking the hand on his shoulder precisely. Strangely enough, the now shattered glass failed to touch him. But that wasn’t important as he renewed his struggles.

Tracker also seemed frightened. He stumbled away, releasing Valre in the process, “You – you – Shatterbird!”

The few clubbers near him heard him. They glanced around to see the woman surrounded by floating glasses and reacted appropriately. Their screams drew the attention of the others and soon there was a stampede for the doors. The woman looked unbothered.

“What?” she slurred, “I ain’t a fuckin’ psycho.” She reeled forward, pointing a finger at the man, “But I will cut a bitch.” She waved her arm wildly.

The glasses around her rocketed forward with a sharp crack, shattering from the sheer speed as they circled the man in a wild cloud. Some went wildly off course to gouge into the walls, but the main body tore into the man’s body. The fabric covering his outfit was shredded immediately and the few armor panels beneath shattered. The man staggered back, clutching his face. It hadn’t been armored, just covered by a cloth mask.

She pitched on her feet as she strode towards him, planting a delicate foot on his knee. “Give me a reason to – to not horribly mur – murm – murder you,” she growled, “because sick fucks like you’re the scum o’ the earth.”

Tracker was twitching and whimpering from pain. Valere couldn’t see him very well from this angle, but there was blood on the floor that looked almost black in the low-light. Slowly, he crept away, eyes wide as he shimmied along the floor. He bit back a gasp when his hand crunched stray glass around the floor. There was broken glass everywhere, except in a tight circle around the woman.

“Hey, not gonna say nothin’?” She was still talking, and the ominous creak of her shoes on Tracker’s knee foretold what would happen next. “No? Well, then. We’ll just have to loosen your mouth!”

Her foot rose and landed on his knee. But the angle was wrong, and the woman stumbled as she staggered right. Tracker took the opportunity to gather himself and make his escape. He scrambled up and began to run, trailing clear spots of blood wherever he went. The woman right herself and jerked another arm in his direction.

Glass floated up around her for the second time and streamed out to follow behind the fleeing man. He screamed as they drew around him in a thick cloud, boxing him on the street.

“We ain’t done, ya little cunt,” she snarled as she slowly walked out of the club, relying on the railing to steady her, “So take your damn beatin’ ‘cause –“

Anything else she might’ve said was cut off when a man landed in front of her and threw a right hook at her shoulder. The woman lost balance immediately and flailed wildly, glass now targeting him instead. Tracker started to run, his power working to throw all notice away from him.

The hero stepped forward again and socked her jaw. Valere watched with wide eyes as every shot the woman tried missed or dropped out of the air. At this rate, she’ll get caught.

He could run right now, and avoid the fight. But then again… she had chased Tracker off
completely. He owed her that much.

The boy dashed out and tackled the hero by the side. There was a tiny patch of skin where the glass had ripped open and Valere slapped his open palm on it. Immediately, the hero collapsed and began to vomit uncontrollably.

Wrinkling his nose at what appeared to be half-digested chicken, Valere ran to the woman. She was lying on the ground, blinking up at the sky blearily.

“Hey, get up,” he urged, glancing around to see if anyone was coming. “Come on! More could come at any moment!”

“What?” she peered at him. “Oh. You’re the little brat. You wanna go ‘way?”

“Yes, yes,” he said, tugging at her impatiently. “Away. Now.”

She shrugged. “Mmkay.”

She held up a hand, hand splayed wide. Valere stared at her. “What are you—“

Bricks shot out from the side of a building. Shuddering, the gathered up around her and the woman pulled him closer with an arm around his waist. “Hold tight,” she mumbled before grabbing a cloud of bricks bodily with her other arm.

They took off, Valere’s distant scream only getting cut off when they dipped suddenly from the break in her focus.

…

It was a good three miles away when they stopped. Valere’s legs shook like a newborn foal’s as he fell to his knees. Along the way, they’d ran into a fire escape, two buildings, and almost fell out of the sky when the woman started to vomit the alcohol she’d consumed.

She was looking shaky when they landed. Right now, however, she was simply lying on her side, staring at the moon dully. Her breathing was slow, rhythmic. Valere edged closer before nudging her with his foot.

“Hey,” he said. “thanks for the help.”

She stirred. “Yeah… you’re a kid. Can’t ever let… a kid… get hurt…”

“What’s your name?” he asked softly, touched by her sentiment.

“Moira. Moira Wild.”

“I’m Valere,” he said in turn, “Valere Vasil.”

But she hadn’t heard him, because by then she was already sleeping deeply. Valere stared at her numbly, before picking himself up. Tracker wouldn’t be the last of the people looking for him. The woman was much too heavy for him to drag, and besides, she seemed to be capable of taking care of herself.

Valere looked to the horizon. A few faint rays of sunlight peeked out and he sighed. “Maybe we’ll meet again, Moira Wild.”

…
Alright, perhaps running into her nearly three years later was a bit ridiculous. Moira looked the same as ever, albeit far better put together – her long hair was pulled back in a braid, her face was bright, and she smiled charmingly at him.


She doesn’t remember me, Valere thought. Perhaps it was for the best. Moira had proven capable of protecting him when he’d been a ten year old on the run. She had a reputation now, and perhaps Heartbreaker’s men would be more careful from now on.

He smiled just as charmingly and stretched out his hand, “Terry,” he said.
I walked back to the shelter in a daze. My steps were slow, plodding things a world apart from my
usual ground-eating pace. The sun was already high up in the sky and several people were already
going about their business. It was eight, maybe even nine. Right now, however, my concept of time
was lost.

head like moths around a light bulb. Him, of all the people. I had to kill him.

Well, maybe not kill, per se. That wasn’t what Accord had requested. He wanted to me to rid of
him. But in a way, both things were virtually identical. In Coil’s case, I probably would have to end
his life to prevent a strike against me.

I could see no way out of this.

I turned a corner and shielded my eyes against the early morning glare. That’s a lie, I admonished
myself. I had my ways of wriggling out of things I didn’t want to do. But in this case… could I
really carry the weight of fifteen other people? What would happen to my people if I disappeared?
The Protectorate would surely target them. The people I worked so hard to shelter against the cruel
realities of the cape world would be sucked in within moments. I couldn’t do that. I was too
invested in their futures now.

Furthermore, there was the case of my documentation. What Accord said was true – a proper
Thinker would find my papers faulty. If I suddenly vanished, they would look into me closer than
before. And then not even the tentative protection of my unknown benefactors could save me. And
if Cauldron went and got involved… I shuddered. The manhunt for me would be over within
minutes, if even that. Fucking Contessa.

I kicked a pebble out of my way and looked both ways before crossing the street. There weren’t
any proper cross-walks, but fuck it. The closest one was around the block, and I didn’t want to
circumvent the entire road just to get to the other side.

The old couple on the other side gave me stink eyes, but I simply brushed past them. It seemed that
I had no choice but to target Coil. I would do it indirectly, somehow. Through Tattletale, maybe? I
wasn’t even sure if she was in his employ right now. Accord had given me a time limit for it too,
damn him. By the year’s end, he’d said. It was nearing the end of September now.

I’d have until the end of December to work out a plan of attack. For someone of Taylor’s caliber, it
might seem like the easiest thing in the world. But for me… I was just terrified.

What changes might happen if he died? Would the ABB or the E88 become more powerful? How
should I remove his moles in the Protectorate? Were the Travelers in his employ yet? And what
about the future? The Undersiders, Dinah, Taylor… what was I to do?

I could act in Coil’s place, I thought briefly, Keep the Undersiders in action with the Travelers. But
I couldn’t do what he did to Dinah. I never could. She – no one – deserved the way he ruined her
fledgling life. And without Dinah as a catalyst, how could I harden Taylor? How was I to make her
crawl and claw to victory?

I honestly didn’t know.

This wasn’t just a game anymore. The world was a lot bigger than Brockton Bay, and everything I
did since I came here could have unforeseen side-effects. The fifteen people in my shelter… without me, what would their life have been like? And why did Accord come south to meet me? As far as I knew, he tolerated Coil’s existence. What had my existence done to change the timeline of this world?

These questions… they piled up in my head with worrying speed. They were things I couldn’t answer.

I sighed deeply. Tilted my head up to catch a ray of sun. Let the city sounds filter through my ears. Felt all the things I could affect in my current range. All these little actions were like a relaxant to me, curiously akin to a power nap.

I couldn’t worry about all that now. I would drive myself mad trying to figure out where the waves began and how to revert it back to the original, if that was even remotely possible. I wasn’t Contessa. I didn’t have the power to make the odds in my favor.

All I could do was the usual – jump into the thick of things and hope for the best.

I exhaled and opened my eyes.

Yeah. There’s always a way.

…

The first thing that greeted me when I walked in the front door was a thrown towel to the face. My head moved with the impact and I felt a trickle of water wet my parka.

“‘I suppose,’” I said as I removed the towel and pinched it between my fingers, “‘I deserved that to some extent.’”

“‘Some extent? Some extent?!’”

Carly’s scaled face was usually quite stoic, but now she was nigh incandescent with her fury. I stood in the front door as she spat and snarled at me, upbraiding me with all the vitriol her sharp tongue could afford her. It was frighteningly similar to my mother from my past life.

Behind Carly, I could see several other people standing awkwardly at the entrance to the kitchen. Hestia was looking disapproving, Iago concerned, and Petra angry. I couldn’t see her husband or Jorge anywhere, however.

I felt a twinge of guilt. They must be looking for me.

“… so tell us, Moira, just why you had some cape screaming loud enough to wake up the entire shelter in your room!”

I glanced at her. She was tapping her foot impatiently, and her arms were crossed confrontationally. I was sure it was only courtesy and respect for our friendship that she hadn’t simply mind-whammied me the instant I came in.

“His name is Headhunter,” I said slowly. “He was sent to find me. A cape wanted to meet me and he was sent as the gopher.”

“The screaming?” Carly probed testily.

“He may have… ah, tried to assassinate me as a joke.”
Ah, yes. Carly’s bitchface was magnificent as ever. I circled around her and away from the kitchen as I shuffled towards the stairs. No one was fooled, unfortunately, and I saw Petra slide into a tackling stance.

Welp. She was no speed demon, but her ability to launch herself bodily at high speeds accomplished the same thing. I could always construct a brick wall or something, but I was no fan of digging the hole deeper for myself.

I inched away, watching the Dutch woman as she followed my movements with her eyes.

“Another thing,” I said, eyeing the bangle on Carly’s wrist. “He just wanted to talk to me, that’s all.”

“About what?”

I put my foot on the stairs. I considered it. I could pull on Carly’s bangle and drag her into Petra’s path. They would collide, I would make my escape, and be gone upstate before anyone knew what happened. But then again… why bother making more trouble?

I sighed in mock exasperation and began to walk towards the sitting room. “Come on, you lot,” I said over my shoulder, “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

I felt movement in the objects they carried on their person. Carly walked forward. Petra’s earrings shifted as she relaxed. All around the shelter, I could feel various things being moved around as my people went about their business. Toothbrushes, combs, jewelry… they all shifted and moved in sync to their person.

Feeling that every morning was fascinating. Sensing the familiar movements of their daily routine, knowing just which accessory they liked the most, how they brushed their teeth, and even how they squeezed out their toothpaste. It made things personal on a level I didn’t know could exist.

The thought of ever risking that… it scared me. I was in too deep. I cared too much.

And that was why I began to construct a beautifully detailed lie rather than just running. It made things more complicated, but that was love, I guess.

“I’m moving,” I declared. “To open a new shelter.”
No one said anything for a moment. They stared, floored by the idea. No one knew what to say. What could they say, anyway? Tell me not to go? Tell me it was a bad idea? I don’t think anyone here was quite that selfish.

Before the silence could stretch on any longer, Petra piped up from the armchair closest to the staircase and front door. Still wary of my potential escape, then.

 “… you’re not going alone,” she said. “You’ve got rep and people know you by face. Going alone’s a death wish.”

I considered the idea. That was a viable one. Of course, I was going to leave the most powerful here so they can continue to protect the shelter but taking a few along as support was a good idea. However… I turned to my first – and closest – friend.

“Carly, you’re not coming with me,” I said resolutely. She blinked, face going slack, before tightening with burgeoning irritation. She straightened to stare down at me with her solid black eyes. I stared back.

“What?” she demanded, bristling with indignation. “Of course I’m coming with you! Someone needs to keep you out of trouble.”

“And someone needs to watch over the shelter,” I replied without missing a beat. “You’ve been here the longest, you know how to do the managing. Hell, you do the managing more than I ever did. I need you here more than I need you with me.” I crossed my arms. “Look, Carly, your power… we can’t use it where I’m going. How do you think people are going to react if I bring along a Master everywhere I go?”

“I wasn’t aware you cared about the trust of the people,” she hissed, too angry to be hurt at the barb. “Who’re you taking, then?”

My eyes flicked over Hestia and Iago. She was a Brute. He was a trained soldier who could’ve been in the PRT if he hadn’t been discharged. Both were faster, stronger, and more able than Carly. Her power – as terrifying as it was – required time and direct eye contact. Even the common thug could kill her. As much as I wanted to take her with me, I had too many enemies to let her leave home base, where the Protectorate headquarters were literally a few blocks away and she was always surrounded by allies from the shelter. I knew from the moment I took a step into Brockton Bay, I’d make enemies – ones who would have no compunction killing off someone if they got in their way.

It was too dangerous to let her come.


Without me went unsaid. It stung, to say the least. Carly had been the first real friend I made after coming here. She was the one who got me registered into the federal system, helped me learn the ins and outs of my ability, and broke me out of prison more than once. There was a certain camaraderie you get after breaking the law multiple times, you know?

“For what it’s worth,” I said to her retreating back, “I’m sorry.”
Her pace faltered, but she said nothing. Regaining her stride, she swiftly disappeared upstairs. A silence was left in her wake, something that no one wanted to break.

I bit the inside of my cheek. Better to rip off the band-aid…

“Hestia, Iago,” I said calling their attention before the atmosphere got too oppressing, “You two are the ones I want to bring with me. If you want to say no, it’s fine. I won’t force you. But if you do choose to come with me, then we’re leaving in three days.”

Iago nodded without hesitation. Hestia vacillated for a brief moment before also agreeing. I watched as they both stood up to leave for their rooms. Packing, presumably. Asking this right after Carly stormed off felt awkward but I had to do this before I started making excuses for myself.

Their departure left only me and Petra in the sitting room. I remained seated on the couch, watching Petra and daring her to say something. She pursed her lips. “The kids are going to be up soon. I’m starting breakfast.” Her face was unreadable as she said, “Moira. Please, be careful. Everyone here cares about you.”

With that, she swept into the kitchen.

Further away, I could hear the front door swing open. Nikolas and Jorge were back, talking quietly amongst themselves as they removed their jackets and hung them up. They jerked in surprise at seeing me in the house, but the former simply shook his head in fond exasperation before leaving for his wife. Jorge hovered at the entrance, looking uncertain as he scratched the back of his head. Before he could waver any longer, I cut in.

“Spit it out already.”

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Shrugged. “Nah, nevermind.” He gave me another look, just as unreadable as Petra’s before trudging away to his room.

I crossed my arms and tilted my head back to stare at the ceiling. In the space of one morning, I just mauled a parahuman, visited a back-alley gang doctor, chatted with a crime lord, decided to move to the one city I said I’d avoid, and alienated nearly all my adult friends. Now, I’m not sure whether the future is still the same and I have to kill a different crime lord within three months while establishing a new shelter while also fighting off the villains of the city.

I rolled onto my side and settled my head on the armrest with sigh. It could be worse. At least I avoided Cauldron and Ziz.

…

When I woke up from my impromptu nap, breakfast was in full swing. I could hear the rattle of dishes emanating from the kitchen, along with the loud screams of young children. When I walked in, no one looked twice at me – except for little Xiaoli. Her power probably sensed the ugly aura around all the adults and the way it centered on me.

The first day went by without a hitch. The second… not so much.

The news of my departure went through the shelter like wildfire. People who’d stayed with me previously came by asking about it. Everyone – even the little kids – was giving me looks that ranged from confusion to worry as I went about my personal business. I ignored it all as I tramped throughout the shelter, arranging our suitcases and travel method.
I could fly us all the way to Brockton Bay, but the simple matter of suitcases and other personal effects made that harder. There was once a time that I survived with little more than anything I could fit into a large backpack. Hell, I even managed to eke out a living in the woods for a week while on the run from several angry Russians with nothing more than what I could fit into an Altoids tin.

Now… I sighed as I stared at Hestia’s suitcases. She was a notorious thrift shopper and had a closet full of vintage, chic clothing that she simply couldn’t leave behind. All of this would easily go over a hundred kilograms.

Ah. I wish I had teleporter.

My own suitcase was far more modest. It was a black, boxy thing covered in stamps from places I never went to and filled with the bare necessities. The majority of my clothing I left here. Who knows, maybe I’d have to come back in a hurry. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t do my shopping at Brockton Bay.

We had another day left before departure. Carly was still sulking but she would come around. I was honestly rather eager to leave. The tension that’s been building up since my announcement left me on edge – I cared for them all, but deep, emotional goodbyes simply were not my style. I fled to my room after the third time one of the kids burst into tears.

I left the suitcases where they were in the entrance. Let them be visible, force people to confront the idea of my going away. It was better to get used to the idea sooner than later when they wouldn’t have the chance to say their final farewell.

I patrolled the grounds of the shelter absently while flexing my range wider than normal. I let it blanket the entirety of the area, letting the presence of all the small objects enter my mind and began to adjust them. Coins floated out their hiding spots to places people could get them. Missing toys went back to their proper spots. Little by little, the shelter straightened itself out. I did this for the same reason people smoked cigarettes and bit their nails – it relaxed me.

A shout made me drop a troop of spoons I was taking out of the dishwasher. They fell in a cascade of sound as I jerked around, already feeling for a weapon to use. I relaxed immediately upon seeing Parker young, but handsome, face. He was panting as if he had ran here all the way from school and his hair was rumpled.

“You – Carly said – why?!” His face was white and his clothes were disheveled. I stared at him before starting to walk back to the shelter. He followed after me, still panting after his sprint.

“Why what?” I asked as I returned my attention to the spoons.

“Carly said you’re leaving,” he said heatedly. “Why? Why are you going?”

I put the spoons in their respective cabinets just as we entered the shelter. I immediately went upstairs to my room, wincing at the thump of Parker’s dropped schoolbag. It was only after I had sat on my bed that I said anything.

“Come,” I called softly to him. “Sit with me.”

He looked rebellious, but did so anyway. He dropped on the bed roughly, and it sagged under the weight of his body.

“I opened the shelter five years ago,” I started. “And some people have told me that apparently, it’s the first of its kind. Ever. That means that there is basically thousands of parahumans out there who
don’t have the help they want or need. That’s not fair or right. I intend to change that. That’s why I’m going.”

He still looked sullen. “Let me come with you, then.”

I twisted and reached up to hold his cheek in my hand. It was cold and wind-bitten. Little moron clearly wasn’t wearing proper clothing for the weather, I mused fondly. Probably got a test from Carly and just ran here without his jacket. “You and I both know that’s not going to happen. You have school, the Wards, and will be living at their headquarters. Unless you’re hiding mad teleportation skills, it’s not possible, Parker.”

He was faced away from me, stubbornly ignoring the hand on his cheek. His fist was clenched and his voice shook faintly as he spoke. “So you’re just... leaving? Just... why can’t you... is it because I’m a Ward?” he asked softly, sounding terribly vulnerable. “Are they forcing you to go or something?”

I chuckled bitterly at that. “Are you kidding me? When have the Protectorate ever gotten me to do something I didn’t want? They got nothing to do with this. It’s all my decision.”

I saw a muscle in his jaw jump. Slowly, he looked at me in the eye. To my concern, his brown eyes gleamed with unshed tears. “Please... please don’t go,” he whispered. He grabbed the hand on his cheek and shifted closer as he squeezed it in his larger fist. “I don’t want you to go, mom.”

I cracked a strained, lopsided grin despite how difficult it was. Parker never called me ‘mom’ unless he was genuinely upset about something. “Don’t be like that,” I said, wiping away the tears before they could roll down his dusky cheek. “It’s not like I’m leaving forever. And I’ll call, like, everyday.”

He bit his lip. “What if you get hurt?”

“Me? Hurt? Please, the people will be too busy running away screaming to fight me,” I laughed. I couldn’t handle Parker the same way I’d handle Cramer. He didn’t need the gentle, supportive affection. Parker had grown beyond that and now needed stability and a purpose. The thought of me – a solid pillar in his life – leaving frightened him. But he couldn’t depend on me like that, or it may become his downfall.

Still, I suppose, it was the same for every child when they left their parents. It certainly had been for me, even if the lust for adventure had been too great to resist. I had loved my mother and father but in the end, wide-eyed wonder of the world had won out.

“Look,” I said, pulling my hand out of his grip to lock gazes with him, “I said to not worry, alright? I believe in you. I believe that you can handle everything life throws in your way, whether it’s your shitty brother or the fucking Endbringers. Afford me the same faith, yeah?”

He inhaled shakily, the air rattling through his lungs noisily as he calmed himself. Silence fell as he looked at me, seemingly trying to memorize my face. Slowly, he reached out to embrace me. I wrapped my arms around him, marveling at his size. You used to be a skinny brat who used to reach only my hips. Since when did you get this tall?

But I guess even the biggest of men missed their mothers. I didn’t know who Parker’s biological parents were, and neither did he. I suspected Cable might know, but he was probably on transit to the Birdcage by now. I didn’t think Parker wanted to know, anyway.

“I love you, mom,” he mumbled into my shoulder.
I only smiled wider and squeezed tighter. I don’t think I wanted to know, either.

... Everyone stood at the front of the shelter as they watched me prepare to leave. Carly had offered to drive us to the train station. I took it as the peace offering it was.

I couldn’t see any heroes – or feel them. But they would show up eventually.

The children were teary as they sobbed out their goodbyes, and Roger even grew some vines that stubbornly rooted me in place. His crying turned into a full-on tantrum when I cut the vines off and he was given to Nikolas to be taken care of. I could still hear the shatter of pots as they cracked from the wild growth of their floral inhabitants.

Anyim and the others were equally miserable in their farewell. The African boy had lost shape when it was his turn to hug me and apologized profusely at having soaked my front afterwards. The teens were more reserved, but I could the luminescent tears in Cramer’s eyes. Wade had point-blank refused to say anything, too busy hunched in a tight ball of angry wretchedness to accept my departure.

Just before we got in the car, Parker came running up the drive. I’d allowed him to stay home just this once due to the occasion and he’d disappeared early in the morning to his lab at Ward headquarters. In his right arm, he was holding a silvery briefcase.

“I – I made these for you,” he gasped, holding out the case. “I wanted to give them to you on your birthday… but, yeah.”

I opened the case carefully, juggling in my arms as I peeked at its contents. Inside were needle-like projectiles about a finger long and thick as a nail. They were painted a grey matte and tapered into a wicked point that promised many, deadly things. I felt them in my range immediately, feeling how strong yet light-weight they were and how it had... liquid inside?

“Tranq-needles,” Parker said. “A full injection could knock out a dozen elephants in one go and you’d only need a drop to put a normal person into a coma. They can also double as small blades. There’s more of the tranquilizers in a second compartment in the case. If you need more, just ask.”

I lifted them up into the air carefully, and manipulating a few delicate swoops out of them before putting them back in. I gently closed the briefcase before gathering Parker into my arms to give him a bone-crushing hug. He wheezed at the force and reciprocated with an equally strong embrace. We stood there, soaking each other’s warmth and smell in for the last time.

Letting go was painful, empty even. In fact, it ached to leave in general. It felt like a gut punch to see them all so unhappy at my leaving while desperately hiding it from me. Hestia was clearly sobbing when we got into the car and Iago’s mouth was pressed into a thin line, his throat working to swallow the lump lodged in it. It was only after the car started moving that a few tears fell down his cheek too.

Everyone was sad. Aching, miserably gloomy. I couldn’t see Carly up in the front, but her hands clenched the steering wheel like a lifeline.

It all served to accentuate my deep disgust at the frisson of thrill that went up my spine at seeing the scenery whip by. I had remained stationary for too long… and being on the move again was making me giddy. Thankfully, the guilt roiling in my gut grounded me.

I felt my knee jump as I tapped my feet. I guess that, in the end, my wander-lust was a central part
of who I was. If it made me a terrible person… then so be it.

…

Location.

Target.

Purpose.

Hunting.

… Joy?

Incorrect.

Disagreement.

Hunger.

... and the host grew stronger…

...

*Teeny-tiny omake*

I crossed my arms and tilted my head back to stare at the ceiling. In the space of one morning, I just mauled a parahuman, visited a back-alley gang doctor, chatted with a crime lord, decided to move to the one city I said I’d avoid, and alienated nearly all my adult friends. Now, I’m not sure whether the future is still the same and I have to kill a different crime lord within three months while establishing a new shelter while also fighting off the villains of the city.

I rolled onto my side and settled my head on the armrest with sigh. It could be worse. At least I avoided Cauldron and Ziz.

Sixty-four miles above south-east Asia, the Simurgh wrinkled its nose, reach up with its hands, and sneezed.
There were several nondescript vans parked outside the train station when we got there. To my displeasure, I also found Director Rodriguez sitting in a café sipping at a coffee while surrounded by several suited PRT officers. There was no one else in the café. Or in the train station, for that matter.

“I’d ask how you did all this, but then again, I actually don’t want to know,” I quipped as I slid into the seat before him. Hestia and Iago hovered at a different table, looking uncomfortable under the glassy gazes of the officers around them. I made a show of languishing, leaning back in my chair indolently and crossing my legs with a crooked grin.

“I suppose you didn’t go to the trouble of getting me a drink, too, Director.” I waved to the waitress huddled behind the bar and she darted out to take my order.

Rodriguez sneered politely, dark eyes wary as he looked over me. “You’ve been… restless, these last few days, Wild.”

I shrugged with one shoulder. “What can I say? I’m a busy little bee.” I turned to the waitress with a hooded grin, “I’d like an Earl Grey, please. Bring lots of sugar.”

He leaned forward, placing his left forearm on the table. His suit’s neat crease was lost as he locked eyes with me, lips pressed so hard that they were bloodless. “I don’t know what you’re doing. Personally? I don’t care all that much. But the higher-ups want you watched. We can’t legally hold you unless you do something illegal, but you still better step lightly, Wild, especially if you’re doing what I think you are.”

“And what am I doing?” I inquired challengingly.

“Making enemies,” he stated bluntly. “Annoying the Protectorate. Recruiting capes into your private army,” his eyes flicked down to my teacup, “Putting too much sugar in your tea.”

I took an extra loud sip just to be contrary before smacking my lips in mock satisfaction. “All I’m getting from this conversation is that the Protectorate is throwing a tantrum because I’m not doing what they want. And they’re pissed off because they can’t make me do shit, either. Am I right in this?”

Rodriguez’s face was pinched as he finished off his coffee. “Pretty much, yeah,” he grunted begrudgingly. “Just… just get out of D.C. and subsequently out of my hands. Wherever you’re going, you’ll be the regional director’s problem, not mine.”

I laughed. It wasn’t a humorous sound, just an acknowledgment of the amount of trouble I’d been for Rodriguez when he’d been a newbie director. Then I gulped down the last of the overly-sweetened, still hot tea. It scalded my tongue as it went down and pooled warmly in my belly.

I offered a hand over the table.

“Watch over my people,” I said to him. “Fight with them when they need help.”

The Hispanic man regarded my hand coolly, until he took it in darker one. His grip was firm and he shook it once as he nodded. “Go be someone else’s problem, Wild.”

I slapped a couple bills on the table next to the cup and sauntered out of the café with Hestia and
Iago at my heels. I could feel the eyes boring into my back, but I ignored it as I strode forward to where the train waited in shroud of steam. There was a bite of frost in the late September air and I breathed it in deeply.

Well, then. Brockton Bay, here I come.

…

Arrival was about as exciting as a meatloaf dinner. I don’t know what I had expected, but reading Worm had steeled me for S-class villains, wrecked streets, and gangs running amok. Instead, I stepped into what might’ve been a nice suburban neighborhood. Of course, there were some gang signs here and there, but they existed in D.C. too. But maybe I was just in the nice part of town.

My head swiveled around as I took in the sight. Brockton Bay had wide streets and a beautiful view of the distant ocean. Today was also sunny, which served to accentuate the fantastic scenery. I aimed myself in the direction of the Docks and began to walk down the street briskly. No one glanced twice at me or my companions, which was to be expected. I couldn’t be that well-known outside of D.C., anyway.

The lot I had purchased was smack dab in the middle of the Docks. I wasn’t sure when exactly Lung showed his face here in the bay – I think it was after Marquis got incarcerated… and that was the extent of my knowledge. Hopefully, I got to the area before he could. Taking down Lung when the entire Protectorate couldn’t would just lead to more attention on me. For the next three months, that was one of the things I least wanted.

I kept an eye out as we got closer and closer to the lot. To my relief, I didn’t see any ABB signs or Asians in the trademark green and red colors. There were a few who might’ve been gang, but they were none I recognized. Finally, things were going my way.

I heaved up my suitcase up to the apartment we’d be staying at until the shelter was finished. It was a dilapidated thing with exposed brick and peeling paint, but I’d stayed at worse places. The place I’d chosen was a four-room with two bathrooms and several closets. It came with ready furniture – although judging by the apartment’s exterior, I’d be better off with buying my own stuff and then moving them out when the shelter was done – and all we needed to do was unpack our belongings.

We shuffled in and I got our keys. To my growing irritation, the elevator was down. Iago offered to take all our bags but I waved him off. Instead, I picked up the suitcases by their small components – the tiny metal screw, hinges, and other little things – and floated them up in front of us. Blatant use of my power was one of the freedoms I enjoyed as an outed rogue.

The flat looked… useable. The couch was sagged, the walls were grey enough to be any minimalist’s wet dream, and the kitchen was cracked, but we could live in it with a measure of comfort.

But I was definitely changing the switching the sheets. They smelled… odd.

Hestia immediately went to the room closest to the largest bedroom. Iago slunk away into the smallest one and I got the master. I stepped into it uncertainly, noting the airiness of the bedroom. I was sure that the two had chosen their bedrooms because it suited their personal tastes, but the fact that I had gotten the master bedroom made me suspicious. The Protectorate kind of – sort of – maybe so believed that I was building a private army of parahumans under my command, which was ridiculous. But the way my people sometimes just deferred to my unspoken authority… well, it lent some credence to that idea.
Still, I wasn’t going to pitch a fit over something so petty. Maybe I was just reading too deep into it.

I threw open the closet and gagged at the dust that flew over my face. Trying to control dust was always a little challenging for me, for some reason. Maybe it was because of how little a proper weight it had.

I concentrated on the dust and formed it onto a tight, conical shape before directing it out the window. I did this all over the room, banishing all the dust I could get before I was satisfied. I should do this in the other rooms as well, I mused. But that would be later.

I stripped the bed down to the mattress and lied down with a sigh. I used my power to twist open the window and pull it open. Cool, salty air blasted in to fill the room and a few gulls cried out. I never thought the Docks could be so pleasant.

If I could ignore the smell of the mattress then… yes, this was quite comfortable. I shifted on the bed until I found the right position and settled down for a nap.

Who knew Brockton Bay could be so peaceful?

And then Murphy chose that exact moment to don its steel-toed boots to kick me in the face. A loud explosion rocked the room and knocked plaster loose as I tumbled from the bed with a shout. I scrambled up and clawed my way to the window to peer out.

Oh. Okay. I deserved that.

There was Lung in full glory, burning like the massive, scaled jackass he was.
I stared mutely out the window, utterly flabbergasted by the sheer stupidity of the current situation. Lung was stout around the legs and middle, and wreaths of intense flame spiraled out from his mouth, nostrils, and around his limbs. His scales were a gunmetal grey with a green tint in the light and he seemed to be growing in size every few moments.

He went crashing through the Docks like a runaway freight train, barreling through walls and buildings alike. I could see trail of the local capes chasing him, some flying while others relied on other modes of transport, all trying to shoot him down before he could wreak more damage. But I wasn’t in the frame of mind to register who they were. All I could see was one thing.

Lung was headed right where my shelter was to be founded.

I was dressed in casual, civilian wear. My top was a thin, cotton long-sleeve and my pants were simple blue jeans. My hair was loose, as I had taken it out of it customary braid when I went to sleep. My clothes were flammable, I was still groggy, and my hair kept whipping into my eyes in the light wind.

But…

I didn’t give a flying fuck.

My range shot out to gather my discs and gravel from the street. I also took out to the tranq-needles Parker had given me before we left. They might turn out to be necessary.

My current outfit had none of the numerous pockets that I could slide my discs in so they could lift me up in a facsimile of flight. I did the next best thing. I jumped out the window just as several discs shot out underneath my feet to form a board of sorts. I flailed in the air a little but before regaining balance.

This was incredibly dangerous. This could even be called idiocy on level with Headhunter.

But… fury coursed through my belly as I leaned forward and sliced through the air on the disc-board. I heard a shout behind me as I left. I twisted around for the briefest moment to catch sight of Iago at my door.

I turned away. There was wind in my hair, salt on my tongue, and heat on my face as I sped towards Lung’s lumbering form and that was what was important at the moment. I shot past a flier who backed away with a cry at my passing but I ignored it as I sent my remaining discs to slam into Lung’s side at sonic speed. Although they were tiny compared to him, he fell off his course like he’d been slammed with a wrecking ball. Serves you right, bastard.

They whistled shrilly as they circled around and dove into him again, driving him to the ground. I should be more careful, a part of my brain thought distantly, the discs will wear out at that sort of speed against that sort of armor.

But… but I didn’t care. Lung roared as a disc hurtled into his knee with a crack! and shattered on impact. He stumbled as he fell on his side and I dove in for the kill with a cloud of gravel at my side. They dove into his eyes and mouth as he shrieked gouts of white hot flame into the sky, whipping his head side to side.

The gravel dug into his still vulnerable eyes and popped the delicate sacs so they oozed out their
jelly-like whites. The gravel ripped apart the delicate tissue of his esophagus, some melting from
the fire passing through to coat the inside of his mouth. Soon, Lung found himself unable to close
his mouth from the sheer amount of melted gravel that layered up. His regeneration couldn’t keep
up with the speed of the gravel as it moved through his body, perforating internal organs and
wriggling out of his body to be trapped under his scales irritably. Lung’s flames sputtered as he
started to throw up blood made dirty with the dust I’d taken off the roadside.

Blinded and in agony, he tried to stagger onto his knees. Immediately, I sent discs into them at
sonic speed. They shattered like glass at the rough use, but it also fractured his knees. With his
regeneration busy with his damaged organs, his knees were slow-going at best.

Lung toppled with a mighty groan as I watched from where I stood on my disc-board. The tranq-
needles hovered at my sides as I watched him unblinkingingly. I wasn’t going to make the mistake
Armsmaster and Taylor made in their tussle with Lung.

I sent a single tranq-needle to thread between the cracks in his armor and injected only a little bit
in, just enough to hamper his regeneration.

Slowly, scales receded into Lung’s skin as he began to reform. What was left behind was a ghastly
sight. What might’ve been a tall, sturdily built Asian man was instead a bloody half-corpse. Blood
oozed from his mouth and eyes and there were clear holes all over his body. In my cold zeal, it
appeared that I had accidentally torn open a hole in his gut. I could see a ropy length of intestine
flop out with a gush of blood, and the intestine itself looked as if it had been chewed on by an
animal.

I glanced at the lot for the shelter. It was untouched.

Slowly, I relaxed. For the entirety of the fight, I had stayed out of range from Lung’s fire. My
attack had been one of brutal, immediate lethality that he hadn’t expected. That was the only reason
I came out the victor.

The disc-board lowered me to the ground as I trained my eyes on Lung warily. To an outsider, my
defeat of him might’ve been seen as a one-sided curbstomp. But that wasn’t true. Lung could heal,
could escalate to the situation. I… couldn’t. And that’s why I always had to hit hard as possible.
Even if it meant inhumane violence.

I called all my discs to me. Several were utterly shattered into tiny fragments but they could serve
in a pinch. The whole ones circled me in a tense orbit while the fragments simply floated in place
in a cloud around me. The tranq-needles were positioned around my head in a wide crown-like
formation where they could be shot off in any trajectory I wished.

“Who… who are you?”

Slowly, I turned to face the voice. It was a woman dressed in a white bodysuit and she wore a
delicate tiara in her ash blonde hair. She stood – no, hovered a little way from me. Between me and
her was a hard-light shield and her hands seemed to glow almost threateningly.

Who – Lady Photon. There were more capes around her, people who were beginning to look
familiar now that I had shaken off the cold fury that had taken over me just before.

Velocity, Assault, Battery… well. It appears my plan to not be noticed was gone. No, not just gone.
More like dragged screaming into its grave, pissed upon, and desecrated in the worst way possible.
I stood there awkwardly in my civilian wear, wondering how I could put away my weapons
without looking like I was going to attack them.

From the way they traded glances, it appeared that they’d heard of me.

But before anything else could be said, a delicate purr of a Tinker-tech motorcycle pulled up next to us. The man on it got off and took out his halberd – the halberd – and pointed it at me. “Are you here to fight us?”

“Um, no?” I carefully lowered the discs and tranq-needles in a display of submission. The fragment cloud receded in size until it was just a small ball at my side.

Well, guess it’s time to sort out this fuck-up.

…

Emily Piggot’s face was an impressive shade of puce as she clutched the phone to her ear, looking as if she could breathe fire at any moment.

“You did not tell me,” she hissed into the speaker, “that she would be this disruptive!”

“Hey, be happy I even gave you warning,” Director Rodriguez replied on the other end. “But I didn’t think that she’d go and fuck up Lung first thing.”

“She didn’t just ‘fuck up’ Lung,” Piggot said, “She mauled him. The only reason he’s alive is because he’s got his regeneration. We even needed to pull Panacea out to repair his organs because she. Shredded. Them. To pieces.”

Rodriguez almost sounded sympathetic. “What caused her to go berserk like that, anyway?”

“Lung was headed to where she wanted to build her shelter. Apparently, Wild didn’t like that.”

“Oh. That explains it. Wild’s a loose cannon at the best of times, but once you mess with her ‘pack’…”

“Pack?” Piggot asked.

“Yeah, that’s what we call her folks over here. Wild’s like a beast with a territory – normally, she’s all docile like, even playful, but if anyone threatens her pack and turf… well, D.C. lost over three-fourths its villain population since she got here for a reason. She can seem harmless and then you get to see the results of one of her rampages. We have villains turning themselves in because they’re scared of pissing her off.”

“And you said all attempts to recruit her failed?”

“Yeah. She just digs in her heel harder and harder each time. And most of the capes here don’t want to push their luck with her.”

Piggot sighed. It’s like life just wanted to add to the clusterfuck that was Brockton Bay every time it looked like the heroes might get on top. Fucking parahumans.

“Look, Emily,” Rodriguez’s voice was partly understanding and partly gleeful and it made Piggot want to punch him all the more for it, “Wild may seem dangerous – but she really isn’t if you know how to play her. She collects parahumans like stamps and sometimes you’ll find a diamond in the coal box like we did with her son - which she let us take without a fight. As an added bonus, she’ll
take out all the villains in the area without you risking your own people. Wild’s like a primed missile – you gotta point it in the right direction.”

Piggot pulled a face. “Fine. But I hope I don’t regret letting her stay. If I do, I’m going to make sure you regret letting her leave.”

Rodriguez didn’t reply. He disconnected and Piggot set the phone down with a hard clack on her desk. She then leaned forward and rubbed her forehead.

Lung was still being watched – and not because he was at risk of escape. Panacea had to purge his entire body of the filth Wild had put in and then rebuild his internal organs from scratch because the originals were too infected and torn from their places to even bother with. There were holes all over his body, his veins, his fucking bones even, and they were all filthy with dust and other contaminants from the street. Then there was his esophagus – Lung had to breathe through an artificial tube for several hours because his windpipe was also crushed. The only thing they didn’t have to heal was his eyes.

Piggot picked up the file on her desk. It contained a picture of Wild and she studied the woman’s face. She wasn’t remarkably in any way – Asiatic features, long hair, on the short side.

But somehow, a shudder passed through Piggot’s spine when her eyes passed over Wild’s dark ones.

Moira Wild. What a fitting name for a beast.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in as Torpedo (verified cape)
You are viewing:
· Threads you have replied to
· AND threads that have new replies
· OR PM conversations with new replies
· Thread OP is displayed
· Thirteen posts per page
· Last ten messages in PM history
· Threads and PMs are ordered chronologically
*You have no infractions.

◊Topic: Moira Wild
In: Boards > News > Capes > N. America > Brockton Bay

>Night_Shade
Posted 27 Sep 2008:
Alright, so more news on the east coast’s most terrifying badass lady rogue.
1) She moved on from Washington D.C. about a week ago
2) Reappeared in Brockton Bay two days ago (on the hunt)
3) Planning on opening new shelter (?)
4) And just KO’d Lung (footage here from camera phone)

(Showing page 49 of 132)

>MaxiumPOWER
Replied on 27 Sep 2008:
That was BRUTAL
Lol what he do to piss her off so much???

>Hot.Laddie
Replied on 27 Sep 2008:
Classic Wild move.
Fast takedown and no mercy.
But what are those little pointy things next to her head?

>Blackfire
Replied on 27 Sep 2008:
@Hot.Laddie Probably new toys of hers
But the real question is: Just how many BB villains are running away from the city now?

>GooMan
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
Why’d she decide to leave D.C.??? We want her back!

>Ladyluck
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
Are none of us going to discuss the fact that she literally just oneshotted Lung like a boss?

>Merpie (cape wife)
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
@Ladyluck Meh. I always thought Lung was over-rated. The villains in DC shit themselves when they hear her name.

>Ladyluck
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
@Merpie Lolwut? ‘Meh. I always thought Lung was over-rated’??? He fucking drove LEVIATHAN off one-on-one Some chick who can make things float in the air should be no match for him

>Merpie (cape wife)
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
@Ladyluck are you kidding me? Wild can do some nasty shit when she gets pissed Seriously we have a thread dedicated to the things she inflicted on some villains right here And Lung gets stronger the longer he fights. Wild just didn’t give him the chance to actually fight. She sucker-punched him like a little bitch She is amazing waifu don't you know.

*User has received an infraction for inflammatory language.

>Ladyluck
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
@Merpie shut the fuck up bitch

*User has received an infraction for inflammatory language.

>Aspire
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
@Ladyluck and @Merpie You two to need to stop before the mods descend on us for real AGAIN

>GooMan
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
Agreed
We don’t need another thread ban

>Hollyhock
Replied 27 Sep 2008:
Moving on from the fight
Any word from the BB capes about Wild?
Vista (verified cape)
Replied 28 Sep 2008:
Still not decided. Personally, she seems cool enough. Her shelter idea is a good one imo.

(End of page)

Parker continued to scroll through the thread, reading through the posts, theories, and flame wars all centered on his mom. He’d watched the video nearly ten times before accepting what he’d seen. Fucking hell.

Resisting the urge to brag about the tranq-needles had been hard. While he was sure the Director knew about it, no one mentioned it. Parker was the only Tinker in the Washington D.C. area for miles and they wanted to keep him on board for as long as possible – especially when he always had other avenues to use his powers. Plus, antagonizing someone as intimidating as Moira Wild was just stupid.

There was a knock on his door just as he shut down his computer. It was Janus, a fellow Ward.

“Hey, Parker,” he said, “Dinner’s ready. And no, you’re not allowed to eat in here.”

The Indian boy sighed good-naturedly as he followed after his teammate. It was only a few days into his cape career, and he already had a reputation as a workaholic. He couldn’t help it – making, building, creating things was too fascinating. Testing the absolute limitations of his power was almost addicting. Who knew projectiles could have so many different uses?

“So,” Janus said as they walked down the corridor to the mess hall, “Your mom.”

He rolled his eyes. It seemed that every cape he ever met only wanted to discuss Moira. “Not this again,” he groaned, “You people already pumped me of everything I know.”

The other boy shrugged. “What can I say? I mean, she just fucking bullied Lung.”

Parker snorted. “What? Nah, he –“

Before he could say anything else, however, an arm snaked out to grip his shoulder tightly. Parker jerked to a stop and barely stopped the second groan. “No, Synch,” he bit out before the girl could say anything.

Synch gave him an exaggerated pout. “Come ooon, just one autograph –“

Parker threw his hands up. “No!” he cried.

Synch’s pout grew worse. Then she flounced away with a prim ‘hmph!’. Janus grinned at Parker’s irritated expression.

“That girl…” he growled. “Is way too hung up on my mom. It’s creepy.”

Janus nodded sagely. “It’s hard having a lesbian teammate with a crush on your badass mom,” then he patted Parker’s shoulder mockingly, “Hey, at least you don’t have to listen when the guys talk about hot cape ladies.”

Before Parker could move away, he leaned in and whispered into his ear, “She’s a MILF, by the way.”

He was still laughing when Parker tackled him to the floor.
I strolled down the street with a tray of coffees in my hand. The sun was slowly descending down the sky and the ocean view was simply fantastic. A pleasant breeze played with my few loose hairs as I approached the lot with a brisk pace.

There were already construction workers milling about the place like ants, talking to one another as they stripped down the massive warehouse that stood there down to its skeleton. I could see Hestia and Iago sitting together yet apart at the same time. Ah, good. They were clearly widening their range of sight or some such.

While I didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to launch an attack on us in broad daylight, I wasn’t willing to risk the workers and the site. Too much money was sunk into that particular endeavor, money that we couldn’t afford to lose.

After all, the shelter’s finances were a careful balancing act that we all contributed to. Maintaining it wasn’t about making money – it was about saving it.

I had started it out with the money I’d saved up during year one as a parahuman – a year spent stumbling around blind drunk, in denial, and other sorts of self-destructive behavior – and the money Carly and I made hitting up villains after teaming up. It had been fun; I’d hold them down, she’d hypnotize them into forgetting us, I’d pack up all the cash, and we’d off within minutes. But in the end, not even that was an infinite source. So we began to look for ways to lower expenses.

For example, our main power source was a missile-turned-generator that Parker had built when he’d been twelve. Despite the dubious safety protocols, Parker reassured us that it was perfectly safe, and I was inclined to believe him after nearly five years of working order. It worked to provide us with electricity, heat, and so on. We couldn’t replace the plumbing like that, but Parker just changed the system to reduce waste. It wasn’t his specialty and would never compare to his other work, but it was a head above what mundane systems could do.

Our final greatest money saving method was Roger’s botanopathic abilities. He could alter floral biology as freely as Panacea could – something that should scare me a lot more than it did. His domain was an underground garden we kept in the basement filled with vegetables, fruit trees, and berry bushes. Honestly, for a ten year old, he was frighteningly powerful. I had a feeling he would be a force to be feared by the time he reached his majority.

There were more ways that we acquired money, but they were limited at best. Selling Parker’s Tinker-tech was dodgy at best and downright dangerous at worst, and villains could never be fully relied on as proper cash-cows, regardless of the amount of shady banking one did. So we skimped, cut corners, and saved coupons with obsessive focus.

Hence why I was reluctant to let the site be damaged in any way. A lot of money had gone into buying the property and hiring these men. No way was I going to allow danger to it.

I handed Hestia and Iago their drinks before settling beside them. My range fully covered the lot in a generous four-hundred meter wide circle and I could sense nothing amiss. The two had reported a day without mishaps beyond the foreman needing more insulation for the southern wall.

So far, so good.

I pulled my phone out of my jacket to scroll through the texts. Nothing new had happened except
for Parker getting on the news for a clever use of ice-missiles that literally froze a villain in their tracks before any property damage could occur. Beyond a couple visits from the Protectorate, Carly had said there was little to report. It’s nice to know that the world can operate without you, I thought contently. I don’t need to hover all the time.

“Moira,” Hestia said unexpectedly from my side. I jumped slightly at that before turning my head to look at her in askance.

Her face was contemplative, clearly unfocussed as she stared out the horizon. “This old woman,” she said, “Approached me while I was at the grocery store. She… she said she was a parahuman. And that she wanted to join the shelter.”

“Alright,” I replied between sips of my latte. “And?”

“Well… see, she’s – she’s got no control over her power. She can’t help what she does.”

I stared at her cautiously. I studied Hestia’s face for any sign of her being Mastered. She looked lucid but that no indicator. From the corner of my eye, I could see Iago doing the same thing.

“No?” I said slowly. “What’s her power?”

“Aging,” the woman blurted, “She has this… aura that ages people. She said that she’s actually just twenty-five years old, but looks eighty because of her power. Her power passes on the aging onto other people and makes her younger.”

Well. That was interesting. Had some worrying implications, too.

“And you think she never used this on anyone?” Iago demanded before I could say anything. Hestia looked surprised before her face grew pinched.

“She can’t control it –“

“- is what she says. People say many things. You say that she looks old? You say that her power makes her younger in exchange for making other people older? Who says that she has not used it on anyone already? You are being naïve – “

“People revert once they leave the field!” Hestia snapped defensively. “And the aging process is gradual!” Her face was pink, however. She had not considered this.

The Latino man’s expression was flat and his tone was chilling. “So you were fool enough to let her get close to you.”

Hestia stood up abruptly. It wasn’t threatening, but Iago also sprang to his feet. They stared into each other’s eyes with perturbing intensity, fists clenched at their sides.

“You are the most awfully condescending man I had the displeasure to meet!” the Greek woman declared hotly.

I put my drink down and got between them before they could argue any further. Placing a hand on Hestia’s shoulder and the other on Iago’s chest, I pushed them apart as best as I was able. With both being greater than me in raw strength, this was mostly futile.

“First off,” I said, “Calm down.”

Neither backed down and I sighed.
Gravel streamed up my legs and my arms as I tried a more forceful tone. “Sit. Down. Now.”

Iago turned his glare on me. “I am not a dog,” he gritted.

“Then act like the adult you are,” I retorted. However, Hestia shrugged off my hand roughly and stormed away before I could say anything to her. Iago and I watched her leave for the apartment silently before I spoke up.

“Just… what happened?” I asked. “I don’t recall you two being this antagonistic before.”

Iago’s face was undecipherable. “Neither do I,” he said cryptically before also shrugging away my hand. “I will remain here to watch over the site. You go do what you want.”

His tone was polite enough, but I could hear the dismissal in it. I bristled at being spoken to in such a manner, but had no wish for further conflict. I would leave it for now and wait until things settled down. Then I’ll hold a friendly spar in which I would hold them upside down until they told me what was going on.

Or, I’d ask Carly. That could work.

I grunted before turning to leave the lot. As I walked, I pulled my phone out again.

What’s up with H and I? When did they get all growly at each other? –M

The reply came within a few seconds later.

Are you stupid –CH

I scowled at Carly’s answering text. Well, then. I had other resources too.

It took me a minute to swallow my pride before sending the same text to Parker.

His reply came just as I was about to tuck the phone away into my pocket. I quickly scrolled it open, my curiosity growing –

C told me not to say. You’re on your own! –P

The corner of my lip twitched. My eyes narrowed. Oh, it’s on.

I started to text my people.

Figure it out yourself. –Petra

The missus says it’s a secret. –Nikolas

Wow, you blind. –Jorge

I put my phone away. Useless, ungrateful bastards, the whole of them. I quashed the intense curiosity that welled up in me, demanding that I know now. Carly said it was just because I was too nosy for my own good. But I wasn’t.

Really. I wasn’t. Secrets were secret for a reason and…

Dammit, I wanted to know!

...
I spent a good hour wandering around the city before deciding to take to the skies. I had yet to locate where Coil’s base was – did he even have one at this point? All I remembered was that it was in a park somewhere, or something like that. I was no Worm buff and my memory was hazy at best.

I floated a few meters above the bank as I scanned the city. In the years I spent at D.C. I had taken the time to familiarize myself with the layout of the buildings, the patrol routes of the heroes, and where the gangs stationed themselves. Brockton Bay was utterly foreign to me beyond the tiny bit of Docks I had taken for myself. It was time to rectify that problem before it tripped me up later down the line.

Brockton Bay was cooler than D.C. in the evenings, and I shivered lightly under my parka. It was time to invest in more heavy clothing, then. For now, just zipping it up to my chin would have been enough.

Slowly, I rose into the sky with my eyes riveted on to the skyline. My range was still extended to four-hundred meters and I gently lengthened it into five-hundred. Nothing was amiss. I rotated in place as I scanned the city. I could feel nothing that could damage me nearby. That was be good enough.

I shrunk my range back into a tight twenty-five meter bubble around myself. I hadn’t taken the time to take some spare bricks from the site earlier and I didn’t want to steal any from the buildings, so my discs would serve as my main flight source. To compensate, I had a cloud of gravel arranged around me, along with the shattered disc fragments left over from my earlier fight with Lung. The tranq-needles were tucked into the inner folds of my parka, ready to be whipped out if necessary.

I performed a gentle loop-de-loop in the air before gliding down to follow the main roads. I went north to the Docks, before circling back to cycle around the downtown. Everywhere I went, I took note of the spots where I could hide, conduct ambushes from, or use to confuse my enemies. Thanks to Brockton Bay’s rather mish-mash architecture, I found plenty.

I floated back to the Docks for the third time around. The moon was high in the sky, and the lot was empty of its workers. It drifted to the apartment where we were staying at. Iago was shaving and Hestia was fussing with some nail polish in her room. I fell back to soar over Captain’s Hill. It was mostly forested and quite green compared to the rest of the city.

I dived sharply when I sensed a few kids walking by the jingling of change in their pockets. They soon disappeared and I rose into the sky again. One more fly around and I’d head back.

I started to glide towards the shopping district, where I had spent some enjoyable hours buying a new wardrobe specifically for Brockton Bay. I was just about to coast away into the downtown when I decided to extend my range.

That was what saved my life.

I had no time to try and sense who it was that shot me. All I could comprehend was the silenced click of the sniper rifle as it fired, the way the trigger moved and activated the hammer that shot a single, deadly bullet into the air at incredible speeds –!

I jerked away and put up a half-assed shield of disc fragments hastily.

It wasn’t enough.
The bullet punched through both the shield and my right shoulder in one go. I plummeted almost immediately, surrounded by a cloud of utterly useless gravel and metal discs.

Pain! Painpainpain!

Try as I might, there was no way for me to think properly and channel my power. All I could understand was the burning pain in my shoulder as I dropped like a stone. The ground approached me rapidly as I twisted uselessly, strangled screams torn out my mouth by the sheer speed of my descent.

Pain… shoulder! Too much! Can’t focus, can’t think, hurtshurtshurts…!

I closed my eyes tightly as I realized my impending doom. Fear and pain clouded my thoughts as I rocketed down to earth.

I am going to die.
I wish I could say I went down to meet my death with eyes wide open. But that would be a lie. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth to await the sickening impact that would turn me into little more than a grease stain on the cement. I don’t want to die. Not like this.

I fell.
And fell.
And fell.

I wasn’t sure how long a time passed until I mustered the courage to open my eyes a crack. Immediately, I squeezed them shut again. Everything around me was normal – the air rushed, my clothes flapped, my stomach still flipped over and around – but the ground…

It was moving away from me. It was almost surreal to see it move back like I was zooming out of a video. Just seeing it in action made my eyes cross.

Spatial warps, the still thinking part of my mind offered, that’s Vista’s power, isn’t it?

I twisted to turn my back on the warping.

Although Vista’s attempt to keep me from being splattered on the ground was appreciated, I wasn’t exactly sure how she was going to catch me. Her power couldn’t affect kinetic energy. Then I caught sight of a shape flying towards me. It was in a rust-and silver bodysuit which meant Aegis. He swooped in but stopped short, clearly reluctant to grab hold of my hand. Considering the speed that I was falling at, I was more than a little grateful. Saved from death by falling – only to die from whiplash. Hell no. I wasn’t going to be the Gwen Stacy in this scenario.

I tried to focus past the pain. It still ached horribly but I pushed it aside with herculean effort. Tight bubble. Nothing inside but me. Fine control of my clothing. I have buttons, zippers, laces, and gravel on me. They can lift me. They can stop me. They can slow me.

But it was easier said than done. I felt gravel scrape painfully against my skin when my control slipped, and my entire body jerked awkwardly whenever I overshot it. But slowly, I was losing the acceleration I had built up. I had to do this quickly – who knew how much further Vista could warp space? Physics certainly didn’t.

Some time passed before I realized the second problem. Aegis’ reluctance to grab me wasn’t the only thing holding him back. With Vista increasing the distance between me and the ground, it was also putting space between me and him. At this rate, he would never catch up. I’d have to pull him closer to myself.

Good thing he’s durable, I thought as I wrenched my arm out in his direction. He was roughly fifty meters away from me and I struggled to find anything I could affect on him. Visor, helmet solders, straps, canisters… belt!

His belt wasn’t a consistent length of steel and Teflon that wound around his waist. It was a long wire with a loop of segmented Tinker-tech alloy that could snap into separate parts for both flexibility and easy removal. There were also several compartments attached to it, all of which containing what I assumed were Tinker-tech tools. I grabbed a hold of the whole thing – tools,
segments, wires, and all – and pulled hard.

Aegis yelped in surprise as he was yanked forward roughly by his waist. He nearly bowled me over when I forgot to let go, but righted himself in time to wrap strong arms around my chest. I could feel his flight come into play as he saved me. At first we slowed. Then we came to a dead stop.

Vista removed the warp and I averted my eyes as it snapped back into place.

With the excitement of my fall over, the pain in my shoulder reintroduced itself to me. My head spun as Aegis descended to the ground as gently as he could. Despite his careful grip, the full-body hug he had me in pressed against my wounded shoulder agonizingly and I was sweating by the time we touched ground. There was also the sound of falling gravel and metal as they found the ground. I ignored it.

My knees wobbled threateningly when I tried to step away. Thankfully, Aegis was there to support me before I could collapse entirely. I leaned on him heavily as I tried to regain my breath and calm my heart’s frantic beating.

There was the light sound of footsteps. “Hey, you alright?” The voice was high and melodious. Girl. Young. Hasn’t hit puberty yet.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I breathed hard and fast, shaking under my clothes as I stared at a point in the ground. I felt myself get lifted up bodily into a bridal carry. It jostled my shoulder and black spots danced in my eyes. My breath hitched as a low whine of pain escaped.

“Shit, she’s going into shock,” it was Aegis this time. “Come on, Vista. Hospital.”

I didn’t hear any confirmation from the girl but we started moving. Aegis took a few more steps before we were suddenly inside a brightly lit lobby. Immediately, a swarm of nurses flocked over us as I blinked dazedly.

“Blood loss and shock,” Aegis belted out as he placed me on a stretcher, “Injury seems to be on the shoulder. Appears to be a bullet wound, though there is no exit.”

There were more words but they slid over me like water on a duck’s back. I stared at the ceiling uncomprehendingly as a curious numbness spread over my shoulder and down my fingertips. Slowly, I fell into unconsciousness.

…

Waking up was a process. The first thing I registered was light. I blinked rapidly, temporarily blinded by the sudden luminosity. Then came sound.

Hospital equipment beeped, whirred, and hummed as I awoke fully. There was the faint smell of disinfect in the air and the hospital bed sheets were a brightly-patterned, crisp nest of warmth. I felt utterly relaxed and peaceful, even with the detestable sensation of my unwashed tongue lying thickly in my mouth. My range rested just within the perimeters of the room and it pulsed periodically with my breathing.

Exhale. Grow. Inhale. Shrink. Exhale. Grow. Inhale. Shrink. Each time the size of the perimeter grew by a few centimeters I could feel the equipment in the room. I could sense the light bulbs, the dust gathered in the corners, and the delicate surgery equipment arranged on the tray to the side. Several of them were covered in blood. A lot of them were sharp.
I strengthened my grip on them.

I sensed the person before they opened the door. Their ID tapped on their chest loosely – female – and their long robe’s laces shifted as they walked in – strangling possible. I didn’t bother looking at them. Scalpels began to rise from the tray and drifted high into the ceiling and thus out of sight. Whoever it was, I could kill them with a surgical slice of their throat if needed.

A cool hand touched my bare arm. A scalpel turned in the air ponderously, its sharpened blade glinting mesmerizingly.

“Hi,” said the brown-haired girl who came into my field of vision with a smile. Despite the strained, false nature of the expression, the spattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose gave her a sweet air. I smiled back.

The scalpels retreated but I could still feel the laces in her robe.

“My name’s –“

“I know who you are,” I said flatly. “It’s nice to meet you, Panacea.”

She looked unsurprised. Her smile slowly fell away as she focused on my shoulder. Her fingers flickered over and up my shoulders to press against the bared skin. “You got shot here,” she said curtly. “It’s removed now and healed up. Your collarbone was broken and there were some bones that were looking a little weak – I fixed them but you should drink more milk.”

Panacea concentrated further. “You need more protein in your diet. Also, there appears to be something on your knee? It doesn’t appear damaged but your body behaves as if it was. Old injury?”

I grunted. Older than you’d believe.

Although her tone was friendly, there was nothing but a cold, removed feeling throughout her diagnosis. She was, what, thirteen now? Fourteen? And she was already burning herself out. At this rate, I could see why her breakdown was so horrifically tragic in the series.

I grabbed her hand before she could trail it down to examine the rest of me. Her eyes flicked up to mine in confusion. I pasted on a scowl. “What’re you doing?”

Panacea looked puzzled. “Healing you?”

“I get that,” I replied, “But why? As painful as the injury was, I don’t think a non-fatal bullet wound could warrant your attention. Why’re you doing this?”

“Because it’s my duty –“

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I interrupted. “‘Duty’? That’s not why. Try again,”

Her expression was pinned, frustrated. She was backing away, looking like a cornered animal.

“I –I don’t – you can’t – you were hurt and –“

She looks like Parker did. When his brother tried to take him away.

It had been nearly five years ago – several months after I’d taken Parker under my wing when he’d still been Partha Saradhi. Cable finally caught up with his little brother and injured Carly trying to get to him. I’d succeeded in driving him off before he could accomplish his goal only to find
Parker gone.
He had ran away into the sewers. And had reacted the same way when I found him.

“Why did you run away?”

“I – it was my fault and Carly got hurt and –“

“But why did you run away?”


I eased up. “I’m not angry. I just want to know why a no-name like me would get the first-class treatment.”

She fidgeted and played with the hem of her robe. “You fought Lung, right? And took him down?”

I shrugged. “Yeah?”

“My aunt was there – Lady Photon – and she was pretty impressed. All of New Wave was. They wanted to meet you. Talk to you.”

Oh. How could I have forgotten? Panacea’s desperate desire to be loved by her adopted family had been the driving reason behind her constant shifts at the hospital. And healing me to grease the wheels… I could see why she had been the one to fix me up. Too bad Brandish wouldn’t ever love her.

I reached out and put my hand on her head. Panacea flinched at the contact and froze when I started to ruffle her hair. I ignored it in favor of mussing up the frizzy locks. “Thanks anyway,” I said softly. “You did a good job. I just need one more thing.”


“You said New Wave wanted to talk to me, right?” she nodded. “Then I want one favor in exchange. I’ll go and meet them or whatever, and you will go and show me around the city.”

She looked… confused. “I have hospital shifts –“

“- and they will can survive one night without miracles,” I asserted. “That’s my terms and I’m willing to negotiate further. You go and tell New Wave, alright?”

She still looked cautious but offered me a hesitant nod. “Yeah, I’ll go and do that. You can check out now,” she said with a vague wave. “Everything’s fine.”

Then she darted out.

I returned my gaze to the ceiling when I heard the door close. Slowly, the scalpels rose in the air and got into a circular formation. They whirled in a tight circle before I made them shoot out and reform into three separate circles. I played with the blades without a single twitch out of me.

Then I turned my influence off. They stopped and started to fall. I activated it and caught them before they could touch the floor.

I should have stopped the bullet.

The scalpels began to rise again.
I could have stopped the bullet.

This time they lined up in rows, blades all faced in the same direction.

Why didn’t I?

They began to spin rapidly.

I was careless.

They went faster and faster as I approached the sound barrier.

I was stupid.

I stopped before I could break them. Slowly, the scalpels drifted into a waltz right over my bed.

That won’t happen again.

The scalpels vibrated. And with an artistic flourish, I put them back down on the tray before I could break them.

I swear it.

...

It was an hour and nap later that I walked out to the lobby. The only clothes I had apart from the hospital scrubs were the clothes I had worn prior to getting shot. They were stiff with blood and I rubbed the massive hole in the shoulder of my parka. I guess it’s time for a change, anyway.

Hestia rose up from where she was sitting in the waiting room to rush over to me, Iago hot on her heels.

“What happened to you?” she asked in a loud whisper, face pale as she took in the bloody state of my clothes. “Who did this to you?”

“I was stupid,” I said. “Went patrolling on my own. There was a sniper and I wasn’t paying enough attention to my surroundings. Got shot but Panacea healed me right up.”

A muffled squeak escaped Hestia. “You – you –“

I smiled reassuringly at her. “It’s alright. I’m can handle it myse – “

My head snapped to the side and I stumbled back, more from surprise than pain. I gently palmed my stinging cheek.

“You – fucking idiot! Who the hell do you think you are?” Hestia raged, eyes sparking with her emotion. “We didn’t come with you just to watch in the background while you go and get in fights all the time. It happened with Lung and it happened last night! Why won’t you fucking trust us to fight with you?!”

I stared at her. “I – it was – it was only two fights!”

“And how many will it be next time?” she demanded back. “Why do you insist on always doing everything alone? How far are you going to push yourself?”

I blinked at her uncomprehendingly. While it was true that I was a bit of a lone wolf when I went
'hunting’, so to speak, I never left without back-up when I needed it. I’d been too angry to think properly when I’d fought Lung. And how was I to know that I would get shot while on patrol?

But that’s why you brought them, my mind supplied. So that your back would always be covered. If the Wards hadn’t saved you, you’d be dead. Something you could’ve avoided if you took someone along.

I looked at them. Hestia was breathing heavily and Iago stood stiffly at her side, looking anywhere but at me. His jaw was set, however, and a muscle jumped in his neck.

But it’s more than that. You’re making them feel useless. Superfluous. Like they never were needed in the first place. That’s not what a leader does.

I still felt a slight surge of anger. I bit the inside of my cheek as I exhaled noisily. “I… I’m sorry. Thank you for pulling my head out of the clouds before I got myself killed. I was being reckless. I’m sorry.”

The words came out through gritted teeth and I felt the burn of shame lace the vowels. But they came out and that was what counted, considering my absolute hatred of being in the wrong. Hestia looked somewhat mollified, although her stance was still aggressive. Iago slid into place behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“We should leave,” he said tightly. “I’ve maintained an illusion around us but people are getting uneasy. We ought to leave before any heroes are called in.”

I looked around. No one seemed to be alarmed, but I could see couple glances in our direction. As useful as Iago’s hallucinations were, they had a habit of slipping and making mistakes that people could perceive in minute glances. While it was a good way to unnerve one’s enemies, it also made the perfect illusion impossible. I nodded in acquiescence.

“Let’s go, then. How did –“

“Rented a car,” Iago grunted. “They called us in the morning about you. Came as fast as we could.”

I shifted guiltily. Maybe I’m too used to being alone.

We piled into the car – it was cherry-red four-wheel drive with rather nice leather seats that should’ve been out of our pay range. My eyebrows shot up until Iago explained.

“Hestia was worried,” he said with a faint amount of amusement. “And they were eager to please.”

Hestia slapped his arm lightly. “Shut up,” she grumbled. “It was your fault; you were being all tall, dark, and looming there too.”

I glanced between the two of them. Their dynamic changed completely since yesterday. What the fuck?

Sometimes people just confused me. Especially these two.

I closed my eyes as I leaned back on the leather seat. I could still feel the traces of Panacea’s treatment lingering in my system, and intended to get the full enjoyment from it.

Then I’d find the little fuck that shot me down and make him sing.
The sniper rifle was a comfortable weight in his hands. He shifted on the rooftop silently as he scanned the skies for the chink bitch who’d taken out Lung. Her name had been Wild. Moira Wild.

There!

He found her gliding on the wind horizontally, a dark speck against the navy night sky. There were some things surrounding her; but they were small and thus inconsequential. Victor looked into his scope and tagged her.

“How are you so sure that a single bullet could stop her?” Victor questioned Stormtiger contemptuously. “She stopped Lung.”

“Look, Victor,” the burly man said as he leaned in closer, “I know this bitch, alright? Fought her more than once in the ring. She’s got a weakness.”

“You mean she used to participate in those underground parahuman fighting rings?” It was Othala. She was beside Victor—as usual – and her plain face was sparked with interest.

Stormtiger grunted in affirmation. “Me and Cricket used to be in ‘em back in the day. Wild showed up suddenly one year and participated for some months. Fucking raked in the cash ‘cause she was an instant hit. Chink’s fucking vicious when she wants to be.”

“I see,” Victor said. “But that weakness? How did you find it?”

“Man, it was great!” he suddenly crowed, nudging the skinny, mute woman beside him proudly. “Bitch went up against Cricket. Didn’t know about the nausea thing. See, the thing is that if you keep her off balance, she can’t fight as well. Can’t control her shit like usual. She tried to shove shit down Cricket’s throat but missed. Started throwing up half-way through. It was fucking hilarious.”

“Why can’t Cricket do it, then?”

“You fucking kidding me? You know she’s got other shit to do. Be proud you got this job.”

Victor’s expression was still unconvinced, as was Othala’s.

Stormtiger’s grin became wider. “Don’t you get it? You distract her and she’s a goner. Can’t fight worth shit. So if you shoot her in the air,” he pantomimed a gun with one hand, “– bam! She falls like a rock and dies. Nothing flashy. Going out with – not a bang – but a whimper.” His white teeth flashed hungrily.

“So put down that bitch like the dog she is.”

He lined up the shot. Followed her for the barest of moments before squeezing the trigger. He felt the bullet leave the chamber just as he saw her move.

Wild jerked onto her side awkwardly and a tiny black shape formed in the path of the bullet. But it didn’t deter the shot and Victor’s breath hitched in triumph when he heard her scream. He was just beginning to watch her plummet when his wife tugged on his arm gently.


He cursed. As much as he wanted to watch the bitch die, he didn’t want to quite get the fact that
the E88 had been involved in her death known quite yet. Not until the moment was right, like they did with New Wave.

They got up together. Othala grabbed his hand and he felt a surge of super-strength come from her. Quickly, he picked her and started to silently free-run out of the way with the gun in her hands for maximum stealth. Behind them, they could still hear Wild’s panicked screams echo as she tumbled.

The husband and wife smiled at each other.

The mission might’ve not gone to plan as they’d hoped, but the bitch was going back off now. Right?

…

Amy was just finishing up on her last patient when she saw someone get rushed into the ER. Despite her weary apathy, she wandered closer with curiosity.

“Who’s that?” she asked one of the nurses.

The man shrugged. “Don’t know. The Wards came in with her. She’d been shot, apparently.”

“Oh? Where’re the Wards now?”

“Still in the lobby.”

Amy nodded noncommittally before walking out to the lobby. Aegis and Vista stood together, the former muttering into a radio while the latter waited for him patiently. Both looked utterly out of place in their bright costumes in the somber hospital. The girl of the pair glanced up just as Aegis finished up talking into his radio.

“… she’s in surgery, I think. Understood.”

Amy approached them slowly. “Uh, hey.”

“Hey,” the echoed back awkwardly. Although they were both teenaged – well, two at least were – they’d never gotten much chance to talk to one another. Amy winced at the weak greeting. Vicky’s so much better at this.

“Um, I heard you brought in somebody?”

Vista nodded sharply. “Mm, yeah. We got to her just in time before she fell. She’d been shot out of the sky while flying.”

“Flying?” Amy asked sharply. There were several fliers in Brockton Bay, but the woman appeared to be none of them. “Who – ?”


Actually… yes, Amy had. She had been mentioned more than once in the Dallon household as another parahuman cape willing to divulge their identity to the masses. There’d been a few joking considerations about recruiting her, but they’d never been serious.

Until she stomped into the city and wrecked Lung her first day here. Then it got a lot more serious.
“Yeah, bits,” Amy said, remembering to address the Wards before it got too uncomfortable. She held up a hand in farewell. “Thanks. Bye.”

Aegis gave her a curt nod and Vista gave a short, friendly wave. Both left the lobby the same time she did. Amy immediately set course for the emergency room, her white robes flapping around her feet as she did so.

She stepped into the room just as they begun the surgery. One of the nurses whirled around, “Get out!”

“I can heal her,” Amy said adamantly. “That’s what I do, isn’t it? Let me do my job.”

The nurses shifted nervously as did the surgeon. Sweat dripped on his forehead as he gently moved the scalpel in the woman’s – Wild’s – shoulder. “Panacea, maybe we could have this conversation after - ?”

“No,” Amy interrupted him with ceremony. “I’ll do it. Just get out.”

They were all looking nervous now. The surgeon carefully moved away from Wild’s shoulder with the bloody scalpel in his gloved hand. “Please, Panacea, you – “

Guess it’s time to pull out the big guns.

Amy drew herself up. “Well then. I suppose if this hospital will not allow me to practice my powers to my full potential, I shall have to seek out another that can.”

“No!” the surgeon cried. He dropped the scalpel on the tray and retreated from Wild’s body. “We’ll go then. Just – just don’t leave, okay? We’re sorry.”

He and the gaggle of nurses quietly moved out of the room, although Amy could still see them trying to peek. A quelling glare had it slam shut and she turned her attention to the woman before her.

Wild was fairly small – barely a full five feet tall. Her face was distorted with pain and she was sweating lightly. Amy leaned in closer, determined to see what kind of woman Moira Wild was.

The faint traces of make-up on her face were composed mostly of concealer, powder and lipstick. A few strands of hair poked out from the hair mask to reveal an inky black color that set off her pale face nicely. She was kind of pretty, but wholly unremarkable. Certainly not as beautiful as Vicky or as striking as Alexandria.

She was just… there.

It was strange. You’d think someone so infamous would look prettier. Or more unique. Or just stand out in general.

Amy shook herself. I’m not here to judge her face. Focus.

She laid a small hand on the exposed skin of Wild’s uninjured shoulder and the workings of her body immediately came into her mind. She could see the injury clearly, along with the bullet lodged in her flesh. Remove that, then heal.

First, she numbed the chest area. Wild’s face immediately smoothened as the lances of agony
ceased. Then she set the tissues and muscles around the bullet into gently pumping out the metal. In a few moments, a small gleaming bit poked out. Amy reached out and tugged it out from the relaxed flesh.

It gleamed wetly under the light, still covered with some blood clots and flesh fragments. Amy stared at it – fascinated – before putting it down on the tray. I can look at that later.

She put her hand on Wild again. Without the bullet getting in the way, she could now fully influence the body. She melted down the damaged tissue and minor bone fragments before resetting them. Whenever there was a deficiency of biological material, she simply diverted fat from all over her body.

It took a few minutes and Wild came out healed but rather gaunt at the end of procedure. Amy pressed a button on a wall to call a nurse.

“Have someone bring me the bacteria cultures I use for basic material,” she said.

Ten minutes later, the nurse from the lobby came in lugging a large jar of brown liquid. “H-Hey,” he said as hefted the jar onto a spare tray. “So that’s you were asking about her, huh? Well, good luck.”

He patted her shoulder encouragingly before leaving. The door closed behind him with a soft click.

Amy unscrewed the jar and dipped a finger inside. She swirled the liquid, testing out the contents before nodding to herself. It will do.

She found the ladle the nurse had also brought in for her and scooped up the liquid to pour on Wild’s body. It immediately melted into her skin as she reworked the system. After her fat stores were replenished, Amy turned her attention elsewhere on her body. She restored the bones, muscles, and skin with a few more scoops of the liquid before stopping.

Wild was as healthy as she ever would be, now. All the tension building up in her body was dispelled, her bones were strengthened, and her skin had a healthy glow to it. If someone had said she’d been the victim of a gunshot just a few minutes prior, no one would’ve believed it.

Amy stepped away from her work, feeling a mild sense of satisfaction despite her growing distance from her patients. Wild wouldn’t wake up any time soon so she could leave until her shift in the morning.

The nurses came back in after Amy left. They flocked around Wild, clucking at the miraculous recovery as they set up the monitoring equipment. While Panacea’s record was spotless, they weren’t going to get in trouble for negligence. Not when they had gained so much prestige.

The monitors whirred around Wild as she continued to sleep.

…

Iago sat on his bed, leaning against the headboard, with the lights dimmed. He could hear Hestia banging around in the kitchen as she cleaned up.

Dinner that night had been awkward, especially without Moira’s oblivious presence to set up a wall between them. She’d disappeared on one of her jaunts, as usual, and left them behind again. Iago would’ve been more annoyed if he thought that she did on purpose. But Moira wasn’t a spiteful character – she just was a lone wolf to the bone.
It might’ve been for the better. Iago didn’t feel like putting up with Moira’s favored method of travel. Too much height and speed for his tastes.

There was a quiet crash from the kitchen and the sound of glass shattering. Hestia began to curse angrily in Greek.

The curses got more and more volatile before she suddenly burst into a wave of loud tears. She quieted down immediately, aware of the acoustics of the flat, but it was too late. Iago swung up from the bed and strode out into the hall.

“Are you alright?”

“Y-yes, I am! Go away!” Hestia’s voice warbled as she tried to clean up the shattered glass.

Iago ignored her order and approached the kitchen entrance. His footsteps were light as he appeared. “I will help you.”

Hestia’s face was covered by her dark, curly hair and she determinedly looking down when Iago crouched next to her. Despite her less than careful handling of the broken glass, her fingers were undamaged.

“Hestia,” Iago said slowly, eyes in the glass he collected in his hand, “I – I am sorry. I should not have lashed out at you so. It was wrong of me.”

The woman said nothing. Iago could see nothing of her face and the way she clutched the glass tightly could’ve meant anything.

“Hestia?”

“Shut up!” the woman suddenly burst. The glass in her hand crunched as she clenched her fist angrily. Her eyes were bright with tears and her face was pink. “You’re doing the same thing he did! You bastard!”

She screamed again and hurled the glass into the wall. Iago flinched at the loud sound. Hestia saw it and moved away, guilt and anger twisting her beautiful face into strange shapes. She stumbled out of the kitchen, still crying.

“He always d-did that. Called me stupid. Thought I was stupid. Made me feel stupid and make me do those h-horrible things to m-make up f-for my mistakes!” she cried into her hands, “Th-then he’d apologize. Always say ‘I’m sorry, I was wrong’ and then come cr-crawling back u-up like the snake h-he was!”

-the blood won’t come out – it stays and stays and stays – my hands are ugly and bloody – I am a killer –

“I can’t say I’m perfect,” he said softly. “I am messed up. My time as a soldier has broken me. I
will say and do things I regret more than once. I still do, to be honest. But –“he went to Hestia’s side, “– I do love you.”

He gathered her up in his arms and buried his face in her hair. “You are also messed up. Your husband has also broken you. You are not perfect, nor will you ever be,” he breathed in her smell, “And I love you all the more for it. For you, I want to be a better man.”

Hestia crying slowly abated. She took in a rattling breath before laughing softly, shaking all over. “We are so messed up.”

Iago smiled. “Yes, caro. We are. Why not do it together?”

She hummed as her arms wrapped around his chest. “You got blood on my shirt again, didn’t you?”

He looked at his palm, where the blood was smeared across it. He then showed it to her. “Sorry. Sometimes I forget that you can clean it off.”

She huffed a laugh and laid her head against his shoulder.

They stayed like that, faintly illuminated by the harsh kitchen lights as they sat together in each other’s embrace. Hestia fell asleep first, exhausted by her emotional outburst, and Iago followed soon after, breathing in the scent of her lemon soap to protect against the memories. Neither was exactly mentally stable, and they both had enough emotional baggage to make any therapist cry. But together, the problems seemed a little less scary.

Their moment lasted until the precise moment Hestia’s phone trilled from where it sat in her pocket to inform them that Moira was in the hospital.

They glanced at each other.

“Truce?” Hestia said nervously, worry already firing up her nerves.

Iago smiled faintly and kissed her forehead. “More than that, caro.” Then his expression became more somber. “Let’s go and see what Moira got up to this time.”
The first thing I did when I got in the flat was discard my outer clothes. I ripped the parka and motorcycle pants off roughly before kicking them into a corner with a disdainful grunt. I could throw them away later. Or burn them. That might be the better idea. Who knows what crazy shit parahumans could do with a blood sample?

I then stumbled into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. My power locked it for me as I stripped naked while running a bath for myself. Hot, scalding water gushed out and I stepped into it without a thought. My feet tingled painfully as they immediately reddened from heat.

Settling into the tub with my knees drawn up to my chest, I burrowed my face into them and closed my eyes. Slowly, I relaxed in the steam growing around me.

Spot check time. Bathroom door locked. All corners of the room clear. No hiding spots available. Only other residents on the floor Hestia and Iago. Hestia in her room, removing her bra. Iago in the kitchen, opening the refrigerator and moving around contents. Both safe.

Range extended. Full five hundred meter bubble. No more foolishness this time around.


Relax and think.

Who is the prey? Currently unknown.

Who dares hunt me? ABB. E88. The Merchants. Uber and Leet. Villains in the area. All must be removed.

I tallied through all the snipers who might have the skill to shoot me down. Miss Militia. Victor. Coil’s mercenaries. They were the only ones I could think of. I didn’t think the former was possible, but the latter two certainly were. But I wasn’t sure.

Well. Then I’d just have to kill all of them.

Got to be thorough, you know.

…

Strength.

Happiness.

Eagerness.

Anticipation.

Hunger.

…

It was nearly five hours later that I came out of the bathroom, feeling utterly refreshed. I heated the dish of food left out for me and sat down at the kitchen table in my bathrobe. I couldn’t find the parka or pants anywhere – Hestia or Iago had thrown it away in my place. I ought to thank them
I would also have to find myself a new outfit soon. Something better than my old one, certainly. I still didn’t know how to neutralize my weakness, but I could defend against people trying to take advantage of it better. The meager shield I made before I got shot hadn’t been enough. Tinker-tech would be much appreciated but I didn’t know who I could go to – the tranq-needles were pushing it already and Parker’s specialty was too noticeable for me to use without any suspicions being cast on him.

There was currently Kid Win, Arm master, and possibly Dragon available in the area. All three could probably rig something for me. But they wouldn’t be willing to unless… Arm master was quite attached to Dragon. More than he even knew, in fact.

I smiled.

Ah. Of course. Sentimentality.

I had an idea that may be both stupid and brilliant. Just the way I liked it.

I finished my dinner, ideas running through my head as fast as I could think. I had some shopping to do tomorrow and people to meet.

…

Iago was left at the construction site while I dragged Hestia away with me for the day. We stopped at the nearest Army Salvation store where I bought a canvas parka and cargo pants for a cheap price. Then we went to a tailor shop I had found online the night before.

I grinned at Mr Spokes. He smiled back nervously as I held up the clothes in one hand and a large bag in the other. It had taken a little elbow grease getting the armor panels within one night, but the contacts I had lived up to their reputation.

“My order is simple,” I said sweetly. “I want you to sew these panels onto these clothes in the areas I marked out. Shouldn’t take you more than two days, yeah?”

He looked uncertain but took the clothes and bag. “I suppose, Ms Wild. How will you be paying?”

“Up front,” I said amiably and handed him a wad of bills. It was more than enough to encourage fast work and zipped lips. The tailor took the money in his slightly shaking hands and nodded to me.

“O-of course. It’ll be done by Thursday.”

I smiled at him again, revealing more teeth than strictly necessary. “I expect it to be so.”

I ignored Hestia’s rolled eyes as I whirled around and marched out. Scaring mundane people is too fun for me to stop. And I still have more to do.

“You didn’t really have to have the bricks floating around you,” Hestia said disapprovingly when we stepped outside, although the amusement in her voice gave her away.

I simply laughed.

…

The Protectorate base was actually quite nice. Hestia followed behind me while I walked besides
the tour guide, whistling lowly whenever I saw something shiny. It looked all very hi-tech and futuristic. Gotta look good for the tourists.

I perked up when I saw the gift shop. We went inside and Hestia resisted a heavy sigh as I snatched up a Miss Militia hoodie. A few seconds of thought had me also grab a pair of pants that mimicked Battery’s suit design and figurines of every Brockton Bay hero there was. I cackled as I waited in line.

“Is this necessary?” Hestia asked me wearily.

“Of course!” I said brightly, brandishing a Velocity model at her enthusiastically. “It’s all strategic, you see. I’m confusing them.”

She looked doubtful but said nothing as we continued the tour.

It was nearly a full hour later that we actually got to meet the heroes. Not all of them were present, unfortunately, but I could see Arsmaster and Miss Militia standing together. I was temporarily obscured by the tourists in front of me – time I used to mourn the fact that I hadn’t had the time to slip on my newly bought fan clothing. Their faces would’ve been priceless.

A few minutes passed before they caught sight of me. I watched Arsmaster’s beard twitch as he held back his urge to whip out his halberd and Miss Militia’s eyes tracked me for every step I took. I held my hand out to them, smiling toothily.

“Hey,” I said smoothly. “Sorry about the Lung thing a while back. I also wanted to commend your Wards. They are very competent for such young capes.”

“Indeed,” Miss Militia said lightly as she took my hand in hers. Her grip was tight, but not patronizingly so. “We heard about your… accident.”

“Did you?” I said with my grin still in place. “Good, good. Though I did not come here just to sight see – I have some very important matters to discuss with you lot,” I leaned in closer, ignoring the way her body stiffened, “Private matters, yeah?”

She made no reaction but her expression was fixed. It was gone a moment later and she smiled at me. “After the tour is done, then.”

I continued to smile at her. “Of course.”

I turned on my heel and rejoined the tour group, ignoring the stares centered on the center of my shoulders.

Maybe I still have time to change, after all.

…

It was approaching the afternoon when the tour finished. We were led out to the boats but I waved Hestia onward, handing her my shopping.

“Look,” I said to her gently, “They’re going to be more inclined to trust me if I’m alone, okay? And they’re heroes, they won’t just attack me. Stop worrying. I’ll tell you everything when I get back.”

Hestia looked only slightly mollified. There was still a twist of displeasure in her eyes as she took my bags and got in the boat. “I don’t understand why you have to be wearing that, however. It’s
I glanced down at my current outfit consisting of an Armsmaster t-shirt, Miss Militia hoodie, Battery pants, Velocity boots, and Assault bracelet. I hadn’t found anything good for Dauntless, so he’d have to wait for his turn. “I told you. Strategy.”

She snorted. “You look like a cape groupie. A desperate one.”

I waggled my eyebrows at her. “Maybe I am one. You don’t know me.”

She laughed briefly before waving me away. “Go, then. Show them the might of Moira Wild, cape groupie and master tactician.”

I grinned and waved to her one last time before turning to face the Protectorate building. My grin became an indifferent mask. Time to establish my persona.

I strolled into the Protectorate building, ready to confuse the shit out of Brockton Bay’s capes.
They were waiting for me in the lobby. I resisted a grin as the heroes all stopped to stare at me, floored by the eclectic nature of my dress. They recovered quickly and Battery and Assault flanked me while Miss Militia hung at the back with her green shotgun in hand. Armsgmaster took the lead and briskly escorted our small party throughout the base.

“So,” I heard from the right, “What’s with the outfit?”

I turned to see Assault looking at me speculatively. He was a good deal taller than me; so tall that I had to tilt my neck to look him in the eye. I examined him briefly. I remembered him to be a joker of sorts, but sobered up after his wife died.

“Research purposes,” I said gravely after some thought. Then I lowered my voice and said, “I am a strategic person,” in a conspiratorial stage whisper that everyone heard.

He stared at me through his mask. Then, slowly, he backed up a step. “Right. Of course. You do that.”

We continued walking. No one said anything to me after that, which I counted as a win.

It was a few moments later that we stopped in front of a wide, oaken door. Armsgmaster opened it with a quiet click and revealed a large conference room with several padded chairs all around. I could see Velocity and Dauntless already seated. Director Emily Piggot sat at the front of the table, utterly expressionless as she watched us.

I stared at her. Although many people didn’t like her, I never found the woman all that distasteful. She was also not as fat as some stories described her to be. She was… meaty and solid. Built like a wrestler. Her face was hard and set, not soft and pudgy. Her bob cut and navy jacket only further emphasized the severity of her form.

I could see why she could be intimidating.

“Ms Wild,” she said slowly as we filed in, “You’ve been causing quite the disturbance since your arrival here in Brockton Bay.”

I was left without a seat by the time everyone else sat down. I glanced around and saw no chair left out for visitors. Mentally, I commended Piggot for her power-play. Despite her lowered position, the action singled me out and was likely intended to make me feel self-conscious and vulnerable – like a child standing before their school principal about to be berated.

My face was smooth. A ghost of a smile danced on my lips as I locked eyes with the blonde, rotund woman before me. Let’s turn the tables, shall we?

I did not request a chair, or make any further efforts to locate one. I stood, relaxed and placid, as I stared down Piggot intently. In my past life, I’d been in the debate club. The feeling of being alone on the stage was not unfamiliar to me. And this woman would not cow me.

“My apologies if I caused any inconvenience,” I said easily with my hands splayed out in the open, “I still had some lag from the trip over here and Lung’s sudden appearance caused a little distress. I got upset, that’s all.” Good, highlight that loose cannon quality that had infuriated Rodriguez so much. I’m not on your side Piggot, but we can certainly work together.
“However, that’s not why I came here to talk to you,” I said before she could get a word in. I put both hands on the table, palm-down, and leaned forward, “I wanted to inform you of something that I will be doing very soon.”

Piggot looked at me, unimpressed by my theatrics. I could see the capes at the table tilt their head in my direction, curious as to what I would say next.

I let my apathetic mask drop to smile thinly. “I’m going to get rid of the Empire Eighty-Eight in three days. I wanted to let you know so you and your operations don’t get in my way.”

The heroes stared. I stared. Piggot stared.

And then Piggot laughed.

Her laugh was deep, throaty, and mocking. She didn’t toss her head up or shake in place – just sat there and laughed. I waited until she was done, never taking my eyes off her face. My expression was still in place – a thin half-smile that did not reach my eyes.

“You are one woman,” she said after she calmed. “One. Are you delusional?”

I cocked my head. I’m… not going to answer that. “You have to cater to the masses. Make sure your capes,” I swept my eyes over the table, “Are always PG. I have no such restriction. I can play as mean as I want to.” She glanced to the side and I sensed Armsmaster move his head in the slightest of nods.

I looked to Piggot again. She was deadly serious now and her eyes were narrowed. “Brockton Bay’s got a delicate balance as it is – I don’t need a wild card like you running rampant.”

The corner of my mouth twitched at the unintended pun but I pressed on. “Lung’s out of the game,” I replied. “And the ABB’s fracturing. All the other villains are going to be pushing for their territory, so I don –”

“What?” Piggot cut me off. “What are you talking about? Lung’s still in the city.”

I froze and my mask slipped. What?

My mouth gaped as I tried to form words and failed. It took me precious seconds struggling to regain my cool. “He’s back?” I asked slowly. “How is he back? He was fucking half dead when you got your hands on him! How the fuck does someone like that escape?!”

“We had to heal him before we could take him on the PRT transit for the Birdcage,” Piggot said tightly. “Oni Lee broke him out during transfer.”

I leaned back from the table and closed my eyes. So much for fucking PRT competence. Should’ve hunted Lee down before he pulled this shit.

Alright,” I said softly. “Okay. Alright,” My mind worked as I considered all the angles of this new information. Lung, E88. They weren’t allies and there’s always a way. “Then how about a deal?”

Piggot looked uninterested but I bulldozed on. “I still want to eliminate the Empire, along with the ABB. I’ll handle both if you protect the two I brought with me.”

“You’re saying you can handle both gangs at once?” Armsmaster cut in, “Impossible.”

I looked at him coldly. My upper lip curled as I sneered, “Impossible? Impossible is nothing but a
dare. Give me a week. A full week and they’ll be gone. I took down Lung once, I can do it again. You won’t lose anything agreeing to this.”

The Protectorate looked disbelieving. Piggot looked at me contemplatively. “One week,” she said after a moment. “One week. We will take in your… companions for one week while you do your business.”

I tilted my head and grinned at her. “That’s all I ask,” I said to her. “Thank you.”

With that, I whirled around and left the room, forcing the heroes to scramble after me so they could escort me out. I kept my eyes on the horizon, feeling a surge of heady confidence shoot through my chest. I couldn’t keep the grin off my face despite my efforts.

But before that, another visit to the gift shop. There had been foam weapon replicas in the back and I really wanted one of my own.

…

Piggot was still in the conference room when the heroes filed back in. Wild was now off the grounds, probably on a boat to the mainland. She felt a migraine begin to pound the sides of her head as she glared a hole into the polished wood table.

“Not that I’m questioning your judgment, Director,” Velocity said as he came in. “But why’d you clear her?”

Piggot didn’t answer him, still glowering at the table.

“I’ve also been wondering, especially when she’s so… off. Did you see what she was wearing?”

“She said it for ‘research purposes’ but god knows what the hell that is…”

“… heard about what happened in Washington…”

“Moira Wild appeared seven years ago,” Piggot said, cutting through the chatter like a hot knife through butter, “And opened her shelter five years ago. Washington D.C. had several villains at this time, the most prominent being Judge Libra, Reactor, the Reapers, and the Cartel. Over the years, numerous small-time villains have been shut down after clashing with Wild. Judge Libra is paralyzed from the waist down, Reactor can only process fluids, and the Reapers’ numbers have been cut in half. The Cartel no longer exists. All this – after Wild came into play.”

‘Wild may seem dangerous – but she really isn’t if you know how to play her’

“There have been multiple attempts to recruit her. All have been rebuffed. Any tries to leverage her into compliance have failed, most likely due sabotage. Wild has proved to be a thorn in our side – and many have worried that she may be another Crane.”

‘She collects parahumans like stamps and sometimes you’ll find a diamond in the coal box like we did with her son – who she let us take without a fight.’

“Crane? Who’s that?” Dauntless asked.

“Another parahuman who collected other parahumans. She used to raise young children to become her private soldiers. More than one Ward or Protectorate hero came from her… school. But Wild proved to be different when her adopted son, Parker Wild, entered the D.C. Ward roster.”
Piggot didn’t look at any of them. Her gaze was firmly on the table in front of her. No one interrupted her as she spoke.

“I allowed Wild to do what she wanted because of her track record. D.C. villain scene has been reduced to a shadow of its former self and honestly?” She finally looked up, “Brockton Bay needs that. We lose nothing allowing her to take on Lung and the Empire. If she wants to do something as suicidal as taking on two villain gangs at once, then we’d best hope she manages to take down at least a few of them.”

Wild’s like a primed missile – you gotta point it in the right direction.”

Everyone stayed silent as they contemplated that. In the end, Battery broke the pregnant silence. “What happens if she fails? I mean, she already got wounded by a gun.” It was a reasonable concern. What kind of hero were you when the most common mook in the street could kill you?

Piggot shrugged. “Then she dies.”

The moon was high in the sky as I sat on my brick platform. Discs orbited me as I closed my eyes, range extended out to probe the buildings below me. The wind was light and my new outfit felt wonderfully secure with newly added armor panels. I felt ready. I was ready.

It had taken me two nights of sleepless searching to locate the ABB and E88 hide-outs. Right now, both were in large warehouses but on different ends of the city. I had been extra careful in my search so as to avoid any itchy sniper fingers, ducking behind buildings and around fire escapes at random moments. I hadn’t felt any guns in my range yet, but you could never be too careful. There would be no convenient Ward rescues for me this time.

Hestia and Iago probably were spitting mad at me right now. That was fine. As long as they were safe, I could deal with hurt feelings.

The first location for tonight would be the ABB. I got up from my sitting position to crouch on top of the platform with my arms spread out. I delicately balanced on my toes as I leaned forward to the edge. The cold wind whistled through my hair but I remained warm. The tips of my fingers prickled with the chill as I moved my arms back with a rustle of canvas. Inhale. Exhale. Control… control… control…

I waited for the moment. My heart began to beat faster. I had done this move a hundred times before and I still felt the same rush each time. I licked my lips in anticipation and launched myself forward almost soundlessly. At the same time, the bricks fell apart and dropped with me.

I fell through the air. But this time, there was no panic.

This type of falling was different, as different as day and night. There was no terrified flailing and screaming as I tumbled helplessly, watching the scenery slip by like water through my fingers. I took my time falling, my figure lined up straight as I rocketed downwards. The adrenaline coursing through my veins manifested as a bright burst of laughter that I had to swallow down.

Falling like this… the feeling was akin to getting high. I felt as if I took a half-step out of my body with each passing second of descent and was watching it in the lieu of a memory. My perception was different and every joint in my body was jelly. I wanted to laugh and scream and cry and do a million other things at once.

But now was not the time for joy-riding. I slowed dramatically as I neared the city skyline, pulling
myself into an upright position as my bricks fell in formation around me. I mimicked a standing position as I floated in the air, my entire body obscured by a thick cloud of bricks and whirling discs. From this high up, I could see the warehouse Lung was at.

I drifted over and landed gently on the roof. Thankfully, the rubber soles of my boots and the thin gloves on my hands muffled the noise of my touchdown. Lung and several of his men were down there, he watching while they unloaded what seemed to be guns. I felt around the insides of the weapons, finding the pins and small parts immediately. I grabbed on to them tightly.

One… Two… Three!

The guns burst apart with a shriek of metal as I wrenched on the parts. The gang members screamed as they were hit but I concentrated the majority of the flying metal on Lung. The larger components fell on the ground uselessly. He bellowed, scales already ripping out his skin and fire licking up his body.

Good. Get angry.

I repeated my previous move on the other guns, ripping the apart carelessly and throwing the bits I could control at Lung. The mundane people were all gone by the time I finished on the last gun in the entire load.

I crouched, ready for takeoff. Bricks shot into the warehouse to slam into Lung, doing little but enrage him further. I wasn’t going to target his vulnerabilities just yet – he still had a purpose.

“Where are you?!” he snarled as his fire grew hotter and higher. I sense his swaying from side to side as he searched for me. “Come out!”

I waited. More bricks hit him, encouraging his growth. I waited until I saw his face become malformed, twisting and engorging into a snout that split four ways before making my move.

I pulled myself up with the panels. The remaining few bricks around me tapped the roof once, twice, three times – as if someone was walking across them.

I just narrowly avoided the jet of flame when a humanoid dragon burst through moments later. I lifted higher, my discs orbiting me wildly as I watched Lung. His landing was poor but he still managed to cling to the little bit of roof remaining.

“You!” he snarled in his accented English. “You!” He was growing in size, now looking nearly ten meters tall and a tail was beginning to grow from his spine.

I grinned at him viciously, the shadows of my face highlighted by the glare of his fire. “Yeah, me!” I yelled back. “Did you miss me after I fucking curb-stomped your pansy ass?!”

Lung didn’t reply. Instead, he roared furiously before leaping for me. I dodged him and weaved back in the air. Why didn’t I think of the panels sooner? They’re giving me some serious airborne flexibility.

“Try harder!” I yelled at him. Then immediately darted out of the way when a long tongue of fire shot out in my direction. It still caught the edges of my boot, but did little more than flicker around it before going out.

“Let’s play a game!” I called out to him as I weaved in front of him. “You’re the cat and I’ll be the mouse!”
I threw a disc at his face as gravel spiraled up and into my clothes. It began to spin just as it reached him and he howled as it sliced a thin line from his forehead to his chin. The wound started to heal immediately but he looked mad.

I wandered closer and laughed.

Of course, that would also be the moment Lung chose to throw himself right at me.

…

Pleasure.

Excitement.

Conflict!

…

*Teeny-tiny omake*

But before that, another visit to the gift shop. There had been foam weapon replicas in the back and I really wanted one of my own.

I could feel eyes on my back as I snatched up Dauntless’ Arclance. I waved it through the air as I made exaggerated lightsaber sounds. Then I saw the halberd. It was not The Halberd, but it was close enough. I took it in my other hand and whipped both in the air.

“I am doing research,” I hissed to Assault, moving much too far into his personal space as I pirouetted through the shop. The zipper of my hoodie hit his face and he yelped. I made sure to hit him two more times with each foam replica before performing an entrechat into a sunglasses stand.

Strategy, I thought smugly when I caught sight of Armsmaster’s horrified visage.
Iago glared at the hero that stood much too close to Hestia than was necessary. Dauntless didn’t appear to notice but Miss Militia did. A faint smirk flitted across her face when she saw the Portuguese American’s displeased expression. Well, well, love is in the air, huh?

Before Dauntless could get any closer, Iago stepped in between the two. He snaked an arm around the Greek woman’s waist with a challenging glare over her head at the cape hero, daring him to do anything.

Armsmaster, however, was oblivious to all this. His careful avoidance of all social and romantic endeavors made him a slow study in the behaviors of his fellow humans and he displayed his ignorance fully when he assumed that Iago was becoming mutinous. “Trouble?” he said, coming closer as his hand meandered its way to the halberd on his back.

Dauntless stared at Iago silently before conceding. “None, sir.”

Armsmaster hmm’ed suspiciously but wandered away nonetheless. This time, Dauntless stood with more than a foot’s worth of space between him and the two rogues. He wasn’t an asshole, after all.

Hestia disregarded the male posturing going on around her to cast wary eyes around the PRT base. It was quite different in appearance to the Protectorate base floating in the bay. It was less chrome and steel and more brick and cement. Functionality over appearance, clearly. Suited officers darted around her as the two heroes escorted her through the headquarters. She could see the Director standing next to several armed officers, waiting for them draw closer.

Emily Piggot’s face was unreadable as she scanned their appearances. “Moira Wild proposed a deal,” she said flatly. “We protect you, while she fulfils her end. Did she tell you this?”

“Yes, she did,” Iago said. Hestia said nothing but her thoughts ran rampant. Oh, she said a lot more than that.

“Yes, she did,” Iago said. Hestia said nothing but her thoughts ran rampant. Oh, she said a lot more than that.

“Very well, then. Come this way, Jensen will show you your quarters.”

Hestia and Iago both looked at the man in front of them. He had dark skin and was well-muscled. Iago’s eyes rested particularly on the gun in his hands. He did not recognize the brand. Whatever it was, it looked powerful. Perhaps even enough to pierce Hestia’s skin.

They have to be careful, then.

The capes left as the PRT soldiers surrounded the two parahumans instead, taking the Director with them. Hestia grabbed Iago’s hand as they started to walk within the center of the formation. Unseen, her hand beat out a rhythm on his wrist.

Start.

Iago’s power spread out in a flash. To anyone else, it just felt like a slight tingle of cold air on their skin. But true to form, the soldiers reacted instantly. Guns raised, they immediately gained combat stances as they searched out for the source of the disturbance. Hestia recoiled into Iago’s side, eyes wide as she feigned fear and he put a heavy arm around shoulders.

“What is it?” Iago asked, his power giving his voice a frantic edge to it. “Are we under attack?”
Jensen swept over the tense base a second time before relaxing minutely. “Perhaps,” he said in a soft, rolling tone. “We should move, anyway.”

The two parahumans nodded before hurrying to keep up with the rapid pace of the soldiers. They were nearly at the entrance to where the ‘guests’ of the PRT were kept at when a low alarm blared through the entire area. Everyone looked up for a brief moment before exploding into action. In the corner of his eye, Iago caught sight of the man they had come for before they were shoved through.

So, you are Thomas Calvert.

He caught Hestia’s eye as they were ushered along. She squeezed his hand in confirmation. I saw him too.

“What is going on?” Iago asked loudly. “What was that noise?”

“Alarm,” Jensen supplied tightly in front of them. “Villain rampage through the city. That’s all you need to know.”

Hestia opened her mouth to argue on the point but a warning squeeze from Iago halted her. She looked at him sharply for it but complied. They walked briskly down the corridor before being pushed into a room roughly. The guards glanced nervously around the room before departing, shutting the room with an ominous clang.

Hestia waited a few moments before Iago nodded. She quickly sat at his side and leaned close to whisper, “Did it work?”

“Yes,” he breathed back. “They won’t come in.”

Hestia sighed in relief. Iago had assured both her and Moira that his hallucinatory ability could unnerve even the trained soldier but they had been uncertain up to this point. He had pulled through though, at any rate, and they could plot in unmolested.

“Alright,” she said. “But the cameras…?”

“On it.” Iago turned his attention to the camera inserted in the wall and frowned. His power had a strange interaction with things and the environment had a tendency to warp when under influence for long. When he tried to make things disappear, the object in question could become blurry or bent out of shape and so on. Hestia watched as the camera vanished before her eyes and then reappeared. This process ended up with the camera’s inner workings reshaped in ways that would make most people’s eyes cross.

“Done,” he said. “But be quiet. I don’t think I got everything.”

“Well. So, first thing?”

“Remember what Moira said,” Iago muttered back. “Timeline separation. So, this is the plan…”

Iago was just starting up lunch when Moira came in. He’d spent a boring day at the site rereading an old novel before heading back in when Hestia came back without their leader. Moira’s face was glowing and she was bouncing on her feet when she came into the kitchen.

He raised a brow at her outfit. “Really? I thought you were classier than that.”

The woman didn’t look deterred by his tone. “Strategy,” she chirped before going to smell the
Moira gave a considerate hum. Both ignored Hestia’s offended ‘hey!’.

Moira sauntered out of the kitchen with the bottle in her hand and wineglass floating behind her like an obedient puppy. She plopped down next to Hestia on the couch and propped her feet up on the table. With a deft twist, the cork flew out of the bottleneck and settled onto the table. Moira’s eyes were on the latest news as the bottle lifted ponderously and tipped to release its contents into the glass. She stopped when it was half-full and pulled it close enough to grab it out of the air.

She swirled the pale liquid in the glass thoughtfully for a moment before chugging it down with a practiced swig. Only on the last draw did she slow down to swish the wine in her mouth to get the full range of taste and swallowed.

The liquor went down easily, leaving behind a pleasant trail of warmth down her throat to pool in her belly. She smacked her lips appreciatively before pouring another and repeated the same process of chug, slow, taste, and swallow. Only then did the woman stopped there and set the bottle down with a content sigh.

Hestia eyed the bottle. “Getting drunk this early, are we?”

It took Moira a few seconds to answer. She jabbed a finger in her direction to sleepily say, “What? No. It’s for relaxing, that’s all. My alcohol-drenched days are over and I don’t want a repeat.”

To prove her point, she poured another, but this time it was only a quarter-full. Then she recorked it before sending it away into the kitchen. To her credit, it only bumped into a wall once before Iago grabbed and tucked it away into its cubby in the fridge.

Ten minutes passed before Iago came into the sitting room with several plates in his hands. He dropped them off at their respective persons before settling on Hestia’s other side. Moira stirred as her plate floated into her hands along with her fork. Her wineglass remained in the air dutifully, only coming into her hands when she took a sip.

“So,” she said, her eyes on the television, “I’ve got a job for you two. There’s this guy, yeah? He’s kind of an asshole and will probably try to kill me in the near future.”

Neither parahumans reacted. People trying to kill Moira wasn’t much of a surprise. She had enemies, after all. The surprise came when they almost succeeded.

“Was he responsible for the sniper?” Iago asked.
“Maybe,” Moira grunted. “Not sure but unlikely. Still, he’s a threat. So I want you two to…

disappear him.”

“That doesn’t sound shady at all,” Hestia interjected dryly. “How are we supposed to do that?”

Moira chewed on a bell pepper as she thought. “He’s got the power to split timelines and oversee
what happens in each one. He doesn’t like one; he ends it. Very useful in manipulating events in his
favor. But you can pigeon-hold him by focusing his attention on something else. That’s my role –
his attention’s going to be on me. Meanwhile you two – “

“ – stab him while he’s not looking,” Hestia finished for her. “Alright. But what is the plan for all
that?”

Both looked at Moira for her great idea. Her eyes were still on the television as she smiled. It
wasn’t a nice smile. It was the sort of expression you might see when a drug lord orders someone’s
death or when a shark scents blood in the water. It was the sort of smile that made Hestia wonder
just what sort of life the other woman had led prior to the shelter. It was the sort of smile that
reminded Iago of blood money and broken bodies.

“His name is Thomas Calvert. He also calls himself Coil. He’s a PRT agent that moonlights as a
supervillain. He is your target.”

“… it’s time to move,” Iago said, eyes on the clock. His phone had been taken away at security, but
he had a burner stuffed into his sock. No text had come from Moira, so Calvert was on base rather
than on the field to deal with the results of the villain’s rampage. That was their due to move. They
still weren’t sure what Moira was doing, though he had a hunch that the rampage was her fault.
Judging by Hestia’a darkening expression, she though the same.

He got up and pressed his ears to the door. Now would be the moment. A quick image of a running
shadow jumped into existence along the corridor and drew the soldiers away. Then an auditory
‘buzz’ deafened their ears to crunch of metal as Hestia wrenched the door off its hinges.

They glanced around the corridor. The soldiers were gone. Good.

Both stepped out and began to search for Calvert. Anyone who saw them simply registered them as
two shadowy beings, one large and the other small. But that mattered little when they were also
being driven partially mad by nightmarish images and whispers in their ears. This onslaught only
stopped when they were out of sight but that precious little to stop panic.

Hestia barreled through a door and punched out the man behind it.

“… so cause as much fucking panic as possible. Give him no leeway. But only if I say he’s not on
the field.”

Iago and Hestia stared at her. “That sounds like it could get us arrested,” Hestia finally said.

Moira’s unpleasant smile grew more dangerous. “Trust me, no one will ever suspect you if it goes
to plan.”
Lung’s claws just barely raked the front of my parka as I jerked back. It still scorched long lines of black down my chest and I felt the flash of intense heat cause sweat to run down my face. He landed on a roof heavily, scattering debris around him with the force of his beating wings. I spiraled around him in a dizzying pattern, determined to not allow him a clear shot.

“Come on!” I hollered at his ear. “Follow me!”

I barely dodged another swipe before shooting away into the distance. The cat-and-mouse game had gone on for nearly a full hour now and I was tired from all the dodging I had done, not to mention more than a little sick. Plus, Lung had sprouted wings half an hour prior, depriving me of my safe haven. Thankfully, he was far more ungainly in the air thanks to his aerodynamically challenged bulk.

I weaved to his front. With Coil out of the picture, I could focus on my secondary target of the night. The E88 awaited!

I drifted in front of him. “Come on, you flying lu – “

I had been prepared for a flying dragon. What I had not been prepared for was a fast flying dragon.

Lung suddenly leapt off the building he had been on and rammed into me, instantly setting my clothes on fire while attempting to snap his kitchen-knife teeth on my waist and sever me in half. I gave a futile kick to his face before sending gravel around his jaw to force it open. Despite my efforts, a fang tore into the tender flesh of my hip and I gave a short scream. It didn’t dig in deeply, but it dragged down a line of fire before mercifully halting at my upper thigh when my speed overtook his.

I pressed a hand to the already cauterized wound as I juked around him and to where the E88 warehouse would be. The flash-fire was gone but I smelt singed cloth and burnt hair. The outfit I’d put together for this occasion was going to have to be thrown away after all this. What a waste. This had gone on for long enough. He was getting smarter and I was starting to feel the hurt keenly.

Lung followed me with another mighty flap. I sent five discs around him to follow a good twenty-five meters away. We made good time and I could already see the neo-Nazis gathered below panic as we dived over them in a storm of fire and shrieking metal. A shield of discs formed around me in case of bullets.

Another dive and I shot high into the clouds again. Lung was just nearing my feet when I dropped like a stone, zooming past him to the ground. My eyes watered with the speed but I didn’t blink. The warehouse was approaching rapidly and… there!

There were five simultaneous thunder-cracks as the discs broke the sound barrier and slammed down on Lung just as he passed over the E88 warehouse. He was shoved down without mercy and the roof crumpled under his weight like paper. There were screams as an enraged, flaming dragon fell into the midst of a white supremacist meeting.

I slowed to stop. The mundanes in the area were already gone, having high-tailed it the minute they saw Lung’s great mass. I gathered my discs as I perched on a different warehouse a little ways
off. I wanted join the fight, of course, but I needed a moment of respite to gather myself. I’ve had too many close encounter as of late.

I hissed when I tried to put weight on my right leg. A pulse of agony shot up and I settled for hovering in the air as I bent to check it.

The flesh around the wound was burnt. Not just burnt, even, but cooked. I grimaced at the sight of blackened meat before probing the other areas. The burns beyond the cooked area were shiny and a platoon of blisters was already forming. The cut itself wasn’t as bad. It was about half a centimeter deep at most and did not bleed. It would hold until I could seek medical help.

I turned back to the ongoing fight. I could hear the roars, screams, and shouts as the E88 and Lung duked it out. From what was audible, it was a one-sided battle. Lung was already powered up and they had been taken by surprise. I wouldn’t be surprised if a good few were already dead.

Just as I prepared to fly in to join the fight, I felt something punch my back, exactly where an armor panel was. I staggered forward and heard a muttered curse just as I whipped around.

It took only a glimpse of the demon mask before it broke down into ash for me growl, “Oni Lee.”

Gravel fell out of my clothes and pooled onto the ground as I looked around. They spread out to cover a nearly one hundred meter radius as I gently drifted higher and higher. I couldn’t see Oni Lee, but he was probably biding his time. Waiting for me to slip up.

The second strike came at my side. The gravel found him instantly but this time, rather than a killing blow aimed at vital region, Oni Lee struck at the wound Lung had inflicted just earlier. The clone fell apart as a violent stream of gravel tore into him but I was already sinking. I uttered a low whine as the agony coursed its jagged path through me, blinking past the tears welled up in my eyes to look around my surroundings. Oni Lee was gone again. In the moment of my distraction, I had lost him as he fled.

I increased the grain count. I could counter Oni Lee easily, but I was weakened right now. My attention was divided between the pain in my hip and the environment. Without Taylor’s multi-tasking skills, I couldn’t effectively block it out and focus on the task at hand. I breathed heavily, cold sweat rolling down my cheek and running clear lines through the heavy soot on my face.

I waited for a second appearance from the villain. Come on, you sadistic fuck. Why so shy?

There was a rustle behind me.

I whirled around and sent three discs at the sound. They ripped into Oni Lee at a speed just below sound and he burst into a cloud of ash. More sounds came from all directions and my discs went crazy as they slammed into multiple Oni Lee clones.

Where the fuck is he?!

I stopped trying to hit the clones. That tactic was clearly not going to work, as he kept teleporting before I could pin him. My discs surrounded me in a tight circle and spun menacingly, their low whines offering a small comfort. If I couldn’t actively hunt him down, then I’d wait for him to come to me. I could still hear the fight between the E88 and Lung going on in the distance that was punctuated by the odd scream.
A clone’s arm was shredded in the disc spiral when it tried to knife me in the side. Then he was gone.

I waited.

Where are you?

There was a short burst of silence following a particularly piercing scream. I stood stock still, hovering in the air. I could leave Oni Lee behind if I wanted to, but I had no intention letting him get an opportunity to finish me off for good. This ended here and now.

I felt him appear and the gravel responded accordingly. It spiked through his thigh and the man gurgled before collapsing into ash again. I waited. More clones appeared in rapid succession, all brandishing some weapon of some sort. The gravel and my discs decimated them but he kept on coming.

Soon, I was surrounded by a veritable crowd of assassins. I was so focused on killing them all that I neglected the defense at my back. A weak point that Oni Lee was about to capitalize on when something large body-slammed him away. I lurched and looked back.

A teenage girl, blonde and sweet-faced, hovered directly behind me. I saw Oni Lee some distance away, looking to be in considerable pain judging from the femur poking out his leg. Thank god for flying bricks.

Glory Girl watched him intently, obviously waiting for him to get up before she attacked again. I had no such compunctions. Gravel descended on him in a swarm, pulling into his delicate orifices as I choked him. He gave a final rasp before falling unconscious and I pulled away. Killing was still a no-no and especially so when near someone as impressionable as the girl beside me.

I turned my attention to Glory Girl. Even now, I could see signs of the beauty she would grow into. Despite being… thirteen? she had the beginnings of curves and a chest that was a far cry from what I had when I’d been her age. Thankfully, her outfit was far less revealing. Can’t be flashing milky thighs and shapely calves at villains this young, after all.

I offered her a tight smile. “Thanks. You broke that stalemate before it could devolve any further. Kudos, yeah?”

The girl blinked before smiling back, oddly hesitant now that the threat was gone. “Uh, yeah, sure. Any time,” she cast her eyes down, “You’re… you’re Moira Wild, aren’t you?”

I cocked my head. “Yes. You’ve heard of me?”

“Yeah!” she said, suddenly excited. “I mean, who hasn’t?”

Inwardly, I deflated. Okay, maybe I wasn’t the most discreet of people but really? Who hasn’t? Was I that glaringly conspicuous?

Before I could sulk any further, a load roar from the E88 warehouse reminded e of my original mission before Oni Lee showed up. I gave a token effort to brush the filth off me before giving up with a sigh. I rose into the air and was about to speed into the midst of the fight when I saw Glory Girl move to follow after me.
“Woah, woah,” I said, turning to her. “What’re you doing, exactly?”

She suddenly looked uncertain. “Helping?”

“No,” Hell no! Fuck if I was going to drag a girl still in puberty to fight criminals with me! I wasn’t Batman! “You are going to…” I looked around and saw Oni Lee’s crumpled form. “… you are going to hand him over to the PRT.”

Glory Girl still looked recalcitrant. “I just helped you out! I can do the same now! I – I’m not a kid!”

Another roar from the warehouse made me wince. I really couldn’t put off going there any longer or the situation might spiral out of control. I moved closer to Glory Girl and put my hands on her shoulders. She jerked, surprised by my move, but I remained steady.

“Listen to me,” I said lowly. “And listen very fucking well.” I pointed to the warehouse. “You see that? That has several of the most powerful parahumans in the city – Kaiser, Hookwolf, the fucking embodiment of rage, and so forth –duking it out. It’s going to be bloody and messy in there, you realize that? And unless you are prepared to kill,” I squeezed her shoulder, “You are not going in there.”

She opened her mouth.

“Unless your next words are ‘I’m ready to punch someone, break their bones, spill their blood, and kill them dead’, shut it.”

Her mouth snapped shut. Her eyes shined suspiciously in the light, however, and I sighed.

“Look,” I said in a gentle tone. “I get that you’re a hero. You want to stop villains and fight crime. But this?” I gestured to the warehouse and the screams emanating from within emphasized my point, “That’s not crime. That’s a literal killing house, where you’re on your own from the start. Be smarter than me and avoid it as long as you can.”

Glory Girl looked down. Slowly, reluctantly, she started to fly to where Oni Lee lay and picked him up like he was a rag doll. I sneaked a tranq-needle over and pricked his arm before she could fly away. Precautions and all that. I watched her depart for a brief moment before turning my attention to the warehouse.

I hadn’t been exaggerating when I called it a killing house. It was likely going to really fucking messy. Ah, well. When you play with your food –

The warehouse blew up, throwing walls that had jagged steel jutting out everywhere into the distance.

I sighed when I saw two buxom, badly burnt women roll out, each wrestling to hold down Lung’s thrashing limbs. There was a bright streak darting through the air, shooting hard light at choice moments. More people came out, all bloody and panting.

– you still got to eat it.
I flew low, using the darkness of the night to mask my approach. No one on either side seemed to realize my presence, being far too busy fighting for their lives. I glanced through the E88 cape line-up as I circled them. I couldn’t see Rune, Night, or Alabaster in the fray. The latter was probably not dead, but the former two was less certain. I didn’t even know if Rune had joined this early in the game.

Whatever. It didn’t matter who was in and who was not. I knew enough to dismantle them.

A large cage of steels bars jagged around and through Lung, attempting to hold him down long enough for either of the gigantic twins to slice his head off. It held him down for only a few seconds, however, before he broke out. He turned his flame on Menja, sending a white-hot burst that made her stagger back and shield her face.

Hookwolf took advantage of his momentary distraction to barrel into him with a cacophony of clanging steel. I didn’t know how he intended to melee Lung when his fire seemed hot enough to melt most metals. I drifted higher to where Purity was. Her light was too bright for me to make out her form, but she seemed to be tired out from the rapid movement of earlier. She no longer was shooting her light anymore. Whether it was from exhaustion or fear of hitting her comrades, I did not know.

I drew my discs together. Enough surveillance. It was time to fight.

I flew up high, high enough that I could no longer feel Lung’s intense heat. I hung there for a moment, letting the cool air blow across my filthy and sweating brow, before I started to drop. I accelerated the closer I got to the ground, to the point that my bones creaked when I turned away in a sharp angle.

My eyes watered but I was no longer relying on them. Sand and gravel was filtered all around the battleground, thick enough for me to get a good sense of everyone’s position. Someone would eventually notice, but I was planning on finishing this fast enough that they would not be able to formulate a counter-attack.

I targeted the vulnerable ones first. Stormtiger’s nude chest was a definite aid as I pricked his bare bicep with a tranq-needle. His air-claws blew prematurely as he groaned and fell to the ground. I ignored the crunch of bone upon his landing.

Next.

I swerved to find Cricket. She clearly heard me coming, but could not move away fast enough before I jabbed her with the same needle I’d used on Stormtiger. Well, jab may be a bit weak for the action. The needle’s sharpened point punched through her layers and nearly stabbed her stomach through as I tranquillized her. Bitch. I remember you, I snarled mentally. The mortification of that day cost me my rep and my money.

With those two out of action, I turned to locate Fog. He was in his gaseous form and I wasn’t quite sure how the tranquilizers would interact with him in that state. I briefly considered trying to make wind tunnel of sorts with the bricks, but that seemed improbable at best. It would be best if I ignored him for the moment.

Kaiser was covered in his armor, but it still had small areas I could penetrate. I thickened the grain
count around him, allowing him a second of realization before I slammed it into the interior of his suit. The shining metal was destroyed instantly as I sandpapered through the joints and padding, not bothering to be safe about the method. Kaiser screamed as the gravel scoured his entire body.

His entire body.

I took advantage of the open mouth to stuff a tranq-needle in. It pricked the inside of his cheek and the man struggled briefly before toppling in with a crash of metal.

I spiraled away from him – next up would be Victor and Othala. They were on the move constantly, staying far away from where the rage dragon snapped at Fenja and Menja, both of whom were looking worse for wear. I didn’t know if had been the ones that had shot me down but I was going enjoy putting them down all the sa –

I yelped when a burst of hard light clipped my side, sending me careening off trajectory. Considering the speed I was going at, landing was less than optimal. I bounced off the ground a total of three times before rolling to a stop. The slice on my side immediately fired up and I gasped when I tried to get up. I couldn’t breathe. I could not breathe.

My eyes bulged as I coughed, each spasm sending bolts of black pain across my vision. The fall had broken a rib. Maybe more than one. I couldn’t tell. I continued to flail there on the ground, gasping for air that would not come.

Despite the holes in my sight, I still could see the white hard light hurtling my way. I tried to crawl away but stopped when I started to cough, sending blood-flecked spittle out my mouth as I tried not to fall on my front. There was no way I could use my powers to pull myself out of this. Hopefully, the blast would not crush me. Then again, Purity could knock down skyscrapers with her blasts and I did just brutally put down the father of her baby.

I braced myself.

The blast did not come. Instead, there was a loud crashing sound directly above me and flash of bright light. There was someone hovering above me – a woman, perhaps – with her hands spread in front of her. She had done something to Purity’s blast and the two attacks had cancelled out.

She didn’t stop to speak to me, immediately flying after the bright speck in the sky. I watched her go. Huh. New Wave was pulling my ass out of the fire quite a lot lately. First Panacea, then Glory Girl, and now Lady Photon.

My chest still hurt and I kept coughing at random periods, sending up globs of blood that I had to spit out regularly. I remained curled up on the ground, wishing I could push the pain away long enough to regain my focus again. As it was, it was slow going. Whenever I recovered enough to pick the gravel in the area, a wave of pain brought by a coughing fit had me drop it immediately.

I distantly heard footsteps behind me. The person came closer and carefully gathered me in their arms. I whimpered when they tightened their hold around my chest as they tried to arrange me into a secure hold.

I didn’t recognize the man who was holding me. He wasn’t hostile, at least. Good enough.

I briefly considered trying to prick myself with a tranq-needle to numb the pain but pushed the thought away. No, better to be even vaguely cognizant and in pain than snoring away for days.
The man began to walk and I cast my eyes around. There was a bright spot of light in the distance – Lung?

*Lung.* Even if the E88 was out of the picture, I couldn’t let him rampage any further. I still had to put him down before he destroyed Brockton Bay entirely. I batted the man’s chest weakly. “Put me down,” I rasped, ignoring the rattle that accompanied my words and the shortness of breath as I spoke. Something was wrong with my lungs, then.

The man ignored me. I batted him again. He ignored me again.

*Fuck.* New Wave was good but they couldn’t fight Lung. All their attacks were focused on beating the exterior, on a strict ‘hit it till it drops ’ principle. That was exactly the way *not* to fight Lung.

I tried to speak up. “L-Lung… gotta f-fight him… you – New Wa-Wave c-can’t,” the man finally glanced down at me. There was a small smile on his face.

“It’s alright,” he assured. “You’ve done your part. We can take it from here.”

*No, it’s not!* I wanted to yell at him. Lung… I had been the one to provoke him. I had been the one responsible for the fires in the Docks, for the dead PRT agents unfortunate enough to be with Coil, and for the current level destruction around. I had to fight him. It was my job. My responsibility.

My fault.

I watched in frustration as we moved out of the battleground and thus away from Lung. I couldn’t convince the man to drop me off and I couldn’t force him to. Just as I considered biting him, however, my window of opportunity came up.

Victor and Othala landed in front of us. Victor looked frantic. Othala on the other hand, looked injured. Badly so. I felt the man tense as he sized them up, waiting for any sign of hostility.

“Help… us,” Victor gasped.

The man sneered. It was funny actually, when you remembered that the E88 had killed Fleur and now one of them was begging her friend to help him save his wife. But the man wasn’t moving to engage them, despite his obvious distaste. I’d have to interfere.

“Hey!” I choked out, surprising both Victor and the man. “You f-fucking sho-shot me, didn’t y-you?”

Victor looked surprised but his face quickly whitened even past the pallor of exhaustion when he seemed to recognize my face. He let go of Othala gently and burst forward with surprising speed, brandishing a dagger in his hand. The man cursed as he was forced to let go off me to engage the neo-Nazi in combat.

I landed heavily, gagging on a burst of pain. I forced it down as I turned away from the fight and started to crawl to where Lung was still burning brightly. I dragged myself with one arm while my other supported my chest. Spots danced across my eyes and I my hearing was foggy – though that might be due to the thunderclaps above from colliding blasts of hard light caused by Lady Photon and Purity’s aerial duel.
I continued to heave myself forward. I couldn’t see Fenja and Menja around anymore. Maybe they succumbed to their wounds. Maybe they fled. I didn’t care.

*Lung. Gotta stop Lung.* The E88 was shattered and my greatest priority as of now was stopping the monster I’d woken up. Spots of blood stained my sooty chin as I got closer to the dragon-shaped bonfire. He was snapping at the air, sometimes releasing concussive jets of flame at odd intervals.

As I got closer, I saw Lung in his full glory. His draconic form was now elongated and far more sinuous down the middle than before. Wreaths of fire that had more blue than yellow erupted around his limbs and sent waves of heat worse than any summer day throughout the area. He stood at an impressive twenty or so meters tall, shining a deep gun-metal grey through the flicker of the burning scenery. His tail lashed powerfully and his claws were as large as a butcher’s knife.

I pulled myself up, partly physically and partly mentally. I tugged on my full arsenal. The needles fell into their bristling crown formation around my head, almost akin to a bastardized halo. Discs began to spin like buzzsaws and a truly enormous cloud of gravel and sand grew around me.

I coughed once, twice. Blood flecked onto my palm but I just rubbed it off onto my burnt, filthy parka. I straightened the best I could.

Lung swatted the air and I heard a scream. I watched as a man came into form in the sky and hurtle downwards with a sickening impact. Fog.

Lung snorted as he glanced contemptuously at the fallen figure. I concentrated and sent a single brick into his face. It collided and shattered into red dust without moving the man’s serpentine head an inch.

Slowly, his head swiveled to look at me. I met his gaze head-on grimly.

“You still have—haven’t caught m-me,” I said, spitting the words out despite the crackle in my chest. My knees shook with effort as I stared him down the best I could.

Lung said nothing. He didn’t have to.

His great hand – paw? – crushed me to the ground flat and I wheezed. Pain twisted my face as he pressed harder and leaned closer. I cracked my eyes wide open and met his gaze. His eyes were yellow and still very human.

“Caugh’ oo,” he said. His lengthened mouth stretched unnaturally as he forced the words out. I stared at the great teeth that coated his cavernous jaw. The inside of his mouth was still pink and gummy, not armored like the rest of him. Slowly, a bright flare of light started to burn in his throat. He wanted to incinerate me alive, then, and enjoy it.

“D—Did… you?” I gasped. I could no longer feel my legs. Hell, I was pretty sure he pulverized most of my lower body.

Sweat broke out on my face as I yanked on the last dregs of my focus. A single tranq-needle, the only full one I had, darted out. It shot through the air, threaded the maze of his teeth, jabbed the soft tissue of his wind pipe, and released a little less than half its contents.

Lung gagged. But the fire growing in his throat did not waver.
My abdomen squelched as he pressed too hard. My eyes remained open throughout the ordeal as the dragon-man swayed, fighting the drugs in his system.

“I think I caught you,” was what I tried to say next, but found that I couldn’t. It appeared that Lung had quite effectively crushed my ribcage. The fire in his throat sputtered before dying out. His eye rolled in its socket before finding me again.

“Nex’ ime,” Lung growled gravely before collapsing.

Only then did I close my eyes and smile past my bloody teeth.
I woke up in the General Hospital with a bad taste in my mouth. I attempted to sit up, but paused when I felt something tug on my arm. I turned my head stiffly to see an IV drip sticking out of my left arm. I sighed and leaned back.

There was a moment as I recalled the events prior to my hospitalization. After Lung had utterly crushed my lower body, he’d collapsed just a few inches shy of the rest of me. I managed to stay conscious long enough to see him begin to reform back into a vaguely human shape before succumbing to the darkness. The rest had been nothing but flashes – being picked up, flying, yelling, bright lights – until I slipped into an uncomfortable slumber.

Now I was in the hospital and not on the brink of death. I could no longer feel the deep rattle in my chest, nor was I coughing up blood. However…

I breathed in deeply and tried to wiggle my toes. There was a heart-stopping moment of unresponsiveness before they slowly began to creak to the orders of my brain. I wriggled them eagerly before tensing my calves and thighs. There was a lingering pain, strangely enough, but it was worth it in exchange for operational limbs.

I wanted to whoop. I was alive! I was not crippled! I had just gone toe to toe with the major villains in Brockton Bay and possibly won! This definitely called for a fantastic nap.

Unfortunately, someone chose to come in at that moment. My power swept over them – ID card, belt buckle, laces – and I relaxed. If I had any theistic leanings, I might’ve worshipped at her feet. Panacea deserved more than she got, she truly did.

Panacea looked surprised before a tired, wary smile crept onto her face. “Funny,” she said with a hint of adolescent snark before sobering up. “I heard you fought Lung and the Empire. I – I thought you were dead. You looked dead.”

“Did I?” I inquired, fascinated despite the morbidity of the topic. “Do you have pictures I could see?”

Panacea gave me a look that said she questioned my sanity but she called for a nurse anyway. A few minutes later, one scurried in with a packet in his hands. He quickly handed them to Panacea before scurrying out just as hastily as he’d come in.

She pulled out a few polaroids. “Here. These are the ones they snapped when you came in.”

I carefully took them from her and squinted at the pictures. My brow knitted at what I saw.

Most of my body was covered in a thick layer of soot, but the damage was still clear for all to see. My legs were just… gone. They looked to be little more than crushed meat attached to the rest of me by the thinnest of muscle fiber and skin shreds. There was a river of blood pouring out my mouth and face was shining with burns. My clothes were nearly melted onto my skin and I could see a few ribs poking out.

I shifted. I had been close to death. Too close to death. I couldn’t always depend on a Panacea
being around to save me. I probably would have died from the trauma if it hadn’t been for New Wave’s interference.

I didn’t bother looking at the rest of the pictures. One was enough to put me off for the rest of the day.

I instead looked at Panacea. She seemed… ragged. Her eyes had bags I only saw on college students, her hair was greasy, and her hands shook where she put them on her lap. Her face was gaunt and even the fullness of her white robes could not hide the way they limply hung off her body. How long has she been working?

“Hey,” I said as I handed the pictures back to her, “How long have you been on shift?”

She looked surprised before answering, “I don’t… since last night. You’re my last patient for the day.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. “Oh. Right. Thanks for the save.”

Panacea didn’t seem to appreciate my gratitude. “I still haven’t finished. I only had time to pull you out of the red before going somewhere else. Lung’s rampage put a lot of the residential districts on fire. Apparently, he’d killed the PRT team sent to mitigate the fire in the Docks.”

I closed my eyes briefly at that. That PRT team had been Coil’s. Shit

“I still have to finish up on you,” she said with her going for my side. “You’re going to have some lingering pain but I can – “

I grabbed her hand before she could place it on my bare shoulder. It wouldn’t stop her, but it did serve as deterrence. “Wait, first… could you get me a mirror?”

She stared at me. “Are you sure?” she asked, looking concerned. “Your face isn’t scarred or anything.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said firmly. “Please.”

She shrugged before reaching over and snagging a handheld circular mirror from a wall-counter. Silently, she handed it to me. I took it from her with a small smile and gazed at my reflection.

Oh my.

My hair was gone. Well, I mentally revised, not all gone. But it used to be long enough to brush my waist. Now, it barely reached my chin. I ran my fingers through the wild, wavy strands, unsure of how to feel. I wasn’t very vain about my appearance, per se, but my head felt oddly light and cold. I had gotten used to a long braid that swung with my movements and having such a drastic cosmetic change felt… strange.

I ripped my eyes away from the mirror. To keep my attention away from the haircut, I began to examine my body. My chest was no longer caved in and I took a few greedy inhalations of air to enjoy the feeling of lungs expand without trouble. Collapsed lungs were no joke.

I continued down my body. I quickly found the cut on my side, the one Lung had left behind. Panacea healed it cleanly and it was no longer a gaping gash of cooked flesh anymore, just a thin white line that went from my lowest rib to my hipbone. I traced it idly. Almost caught me there, the bastard.
My legs were much the same. There were patches of paler skin here and there, all signs of the patchwork healing Panacea had done before rushing away to other people. They didn’t hurt when I poked them, so I guessed that the changes were mostly only skin-deep.

“It’s fine,” I said to Panacea. “You don’t need to do more. I’m fine like this.”

She looked confused. “But… the scars, they won’t –“

“I’m not petty enough to complain about scars,” I asserted, “You saved my life. For that, I can handle being a little banged up.”

She looked uncertain. “If you say so.”

She turned to leave. Just before she could step out, I called her back. “Hey! Remember what we talked about last time? Do you want to fly with me?”

Panacea looked over her shoulder. “Sure. I guess so. My shift ends in a few minutes. We can go then.”

I smiled broadly. Although her reply had been less than eager, it was good enough.

Panacea left. But before the door could close, it swung open again and my smile slipped briefly when I saw the second person to come in. Piggot face was more severe than usual and her customary frown had an unhappy lean to it.

“Well,” she intoned soberly as she stepped into my room with an honor guard consisting of Battery and Armsmaster, “Has anyone ever told you how troublesome you could be?”

I suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable in my flimsy hospital gown. That’s what she’s aiming for, I berated myself. Don’t give her leverage for anything.

I straightened and arranged the sheets around me in a more comfortable position. I gave Piggot a crooked smile as she sat down heavily on the chair Panacea had been on previously. I could feel the buttons and clasps on her suit. I could feel the small components of Armsmaster’s suit and halberd. There were enough scalpels in the hospital that I could stab Battery before she charged up.

I wasn’t weak.

When Piggot met my eyes, I was no longer groggy and in a playful mood. My gaze was intense as I met her head-on.

“Awkward, isn’t it,” I said lightly before she could speak, “For me to finish what you couldn’t even start? But you aren’t here to discuss that regardless of the PR nightmares soon to come. I did my part in our deal.”

Battery tensed. Armsmaster’s jaw tightened. And Piggot’s lips twitched downward just the littlest bit. My smirk grew. The pace of the conversation was now set, I had made the first move, and now it was their turn to counter.

“We’d like,” Piggot began, “to offer you a place within the Protectorate.”

“I remember proving recalcitrant some years ago,” I said shrewdly, eyes narrowed as I tried to puzzle out her motives. “What’s going on, Pi –“

I was cut off by a sudden scream from outside. The two capes both whirled around in a combat
stance as the building seemed to pulse. The crying got louder.

“He’s not dead! He can’t be dead! He’s not dead!”
Interlude VI

The fire roared as it reached the residential districts. Most of the houses in the area were old and entirely made of wood, making them easy bonfires in the making. Thick smoke clogged the streets as people ran to and fro in the flames, panicking.

It had been night when the fires started. Most people had been asleep when they’d been rudely woken up by the greedy licks of flame and thus weren’t prepared at all. More than one house collapsed in on itself before the residents could escape, forcing them to negotiate through burning timber and broken floors.

Taylor’s eyes watered as she coughed, hot smoke scalding her delicate throat as she tried to navigate her way through the house. She woke up when someone from the street had started screaming and had been trying to get out ever since. The roof had fallen in some time ago, obliterating the front door and living room. Her window was too high up for her to try jumping out so her only hope was the kitchen. However, she had to get her dad first.

“Dad!” the little girl cried as she crawled along the floor to avoid the cloying smoke above, recalling the fire safety rules she’d learned in school. “Dad, where are you?!”

She couldn’t hear him. His room was down the hall but when the roof fell in, it had collapsed a portion of hallway on the way down. There was a narrow sliver of wood along the wall but it was too narrow for her to clamber on. Her only way through would be the long support beam precariously hanging in the middle.

She inched her way forward, knuckles white as she hugged the wooden beam tightly. Dad usually kept his door open a few inches in the night but now it was closed. Sweat streamed down her face as she finally crept across. Her limbs shook as she dragged herself to the door and rapped on it.

“Dad! Get out! Dad, help me!”

There was no response. Taylor swallowed a sob when she tried to twist the doorknob only to burn her hand. She ripped her t-shirt sleeve and wrapped around the heated metal. It twisted easily, but the door remained stubbornly shut.

Taylor tried to muscle it open but it still did not budge. Finally, she tried to throw herself bodily against the thing. This time it moved but only a few inches at the most. Something heavy had gotten in the way.

The girl sucked in a breath as she wiped the sweat and tried to open it again. It was getting hard to see and breathe in the heat but she had to get her Dad. With Mom gone, he was the only family member she had left. He couldn’t die!

She slammed it, ignoring the ache in her shoulder. “D-Dad!” she sobbed as she tried to widen just the slightest bit more. “D-Dad, please! Where are you?!”

She threw herself at the door and it finally scraped open wide enough for her to get through. Taylor squeezed through the miniscule gap with effort, grunting as she tried to get her skinny frame through the hole. She fell into a coughing fit when she accidentally breathed in smoke and black spots hovered through her vision as she collapsed.
It took precious moments for her to locate her dad in the burning mess of their house. He was on
the floor, unmoving. A large support beam had fallen across his back and he bleeding from a large
gash on his head. Taylor scrambled to him.

She grabbed his hand and tugged on it. “D-Dad! The house’s on fire!”

“T-Taylor…” he rasped weakly, “What’re you d-doing here…? Get out…”

“No, I’m not leaving you,” the girl cried and scrambled to lift the beam on his back. Unfortunately,
it was far too heavy and her arms strained to budge even the slightest bit. Danny coughed harder in
the smoke, “Taylor, you have to get out!”

Hands shaking, the girl tried to lift the beam and failed again. She fell down and crept to Danny’s
side. “D-Daddy,” she whimpered. The fire was now licking at the edges of the beam and it was so hard to breathe. Her eyes fluttered as she fought to remain conscious.

“Taylor,” Danny coughed, cupping her face with his free hand, “I love you. I-I will always love…
you. But you n-need to get out, now!”

Another section of the roof collapsed. Taylor cried out when the hot sparks of the fire leapt onto
her face and huddled closer to Danny, who was bleeding sluggishly. He tried to push her away but
his waning strength failed to move her.

Moments passed. Taylor’s breathing slowed as she started to succumb to the choking smoke.
Danny had stopped moving long ago. There seemed to voices but she could not hear them.

“…Found one… little girl… alive…!”

Strong arms wrapped around her middle and she knew no more.

...

Taylor woke in a cold sweat. Her eyes darted from side to side as she searched for the smoke and
fire, heart beating like a drum. All she saw were brightly painted walls and medical equipment. She
twisted the sheets nervously. “Dad?”

No one answered.

“Dad? Dad, where are you?”

She obviously was in the hospital, but where was her father? Someone must’ve saved her so they
also should’ve gotten her dad too, right? But where did he go? Taylor sniffled as she looked around
the brightly colored children’s room. Maybe he was in another room, one for adults. He’d been
really hurt too, so she couldn’t expect him to be at her side.

Taylor looked around. She felt fine – which was kind of weird since her throat hurt really bad after
breathing in the smoke, but it wasn’t important.

She slipped off her bed, padding on her bare feet on the cold tiles as she poked her head out the
door. There was a long hallway full of people in scrubs, all running frantically because of
something. Taylor waited for one such person to pass her door before quietly walking out. She
didn’t know where the adult area was, but hospitals usually had signs. She could find her dad that way.

She found the main stairwell and peered at the plastic-encased signs. There were some words she didn’t know, but she had a feeling that her dad would be in the heavily injured section. The beam had been heavy and there’d been a lot of blood.

She looked around the hall before moving down the stairs. The children’s section had been on the third floor and the first floor was a short two flights down. Taylor skipped her last few steps down before peeking out into the first floor’s hallway. There were a lot more people here and she wondered how she was going to move past them. They probably wouldn’t be happy about her walking around, even if she just wanted to see her dad.

She slipped through and tried to duck behind a row of gurneys. Before she could hide, however, she promptly bumped into someone. The pretty, red-haired woman blinked down at the little girl in surprise before grabbing her by the shoulder before she could run away. Her face was pinched but she still managed to adopt a kindly air, smiling widely as she crouched down to Taylor’s eye-level.

“Hey now, kiddo, what’re you doing here?”

“I’m looking for my dad,” Taylor said softly, looking down at her bare feet nervously. “Our house was on fire.”

The nurse’s face took on a sympathetic cast. She hefted up Taylor into her arms and said, “Well, then let’s see about finding him, shall we? Then we’ll go back and put you in your room.”


“So, what’s your name?” the nurse asked. “Mine’s Betty.”

“Taylor,” the little girl muttered.

“You know your dad’s name?”

The little girl frowned. She knew their last name but still forgot dad’s first name. What had Mr Barnes called him when they visited his house, again? Before she could remember, a nurse ran up to the pair.

“Hey,” he said breathlessly, “You’re going to reception right? Tell ‘em to call the morgue. Danny Hebert in room 104 just died.”

Taylor froze. “What?” she said softly. Danny Hebert…room 104… just died…

“No,” she said loudly, struggling to get of the nurse’s arms. “No! He can’t! H-He can’t, you’re lying!”

The nurse holding her gave the man a withering look before attempting to console Taylor. “Shh, what’s wrong?” she crooned, “Don’t cry. You’re a big girl, aren’t you?”

But she did not hear her. Taylor mouth opened and closed as she cried, so overcome that no sound came out. Her eyes bulged as she thrashed, tears beginning to fall.
“He’s not – you’re – he – n-no – he’s not – dead –“

A great entity floated closer –

“D-Daddy – but we –“

It circled once, twice, three times before – agreement?

“He can’t! Not when M-Mom is –“

It settled slowly – agreement.

Taylor finally regained her voice. She screeched shrilly, prompting the nurse to drop her in surprise. “He’s not dead! He can’t be dead! He’s not dead!”

She began to scream and everything started to warp.
Both Battery and Armsmaster moved out of the room and into the hallway, cautiously surveying the area. Piggot remained in her seat but I could see her hand on the gun in her jacket. She stiffened each time the building pulsed, setting her jaw as she slowly got up.

I glanced at my IV. Yanking it out – unlike what the movies would like to tell you – was a stupid idea. It’s connected to your vein and pulling it would lead to bleeding out. And a blood loss headache and the ensuing fatigue is not fun to deal with. Instead, I settled for sweeping up all the weapons in the area. Scalpels and medical scissors danced in the air as I drew them close to my bed with their pointed ends facing the open doorway. I arranged them into a protective formation, ready to drive them straight into the body of whatever villain that appeared.

The seconds passed. The wailing from the hall was gradually getting less and less coherent, now little more than drawn out howls. Piggot edged towards the door.

“Situation?” she asked Battery from where she remained.

“Armsmaster’s advancing,” the woman muttered back. “Target not visible. The hall’s… changed.”

My ears perked at that. Shaker? I don’t really remember any capes like that except for Labyrinth but she’s probably still in the asylum… and it can’t be Grue. The Undersiders haven’t formed yet, from what I recall.

I got off my bed and pulled the IV along with me. Its plastic wheels clattered on the cold tiles as I padded closer, the trail of sharp tools hovering behind me obediently. I stepped around Piggot and peered down the hallway.

Battery was right. It was changed. The entire hallway’s proportions were out of scale, similar to what might happen if Vista went crazy. The lights flickered randomly but I could see Armsmaster up ahead, slowly walking forward with his halberd at the ready. The source of the pulsations was not visible but its location was clear in the way all the waves seemed to come from on point.

I glanced around. It seemed that the nurses had already cleared the hall for whatever fight that might happen, but I saw a few poke their heads out, curious as to what was going on. I ignored them in favor of something far more worrying.

Down the hall, there was something moving. It was low and along the ground, seemingly dragging itself on the floor. As I watched, it slowly rose up and staggered drunkenly, bumping into walls and gurneys. I couldn’t see it very clearly in the weak light, but it seemed humanoid to me.

I nudged Battery. “Turn around. Possible secondary target.”

To her credit, she did exactly as I said. Wasting no energy, she whipped around to face the figure coming at us. Her suit continued to glow as she watched it.

It was about twenty meters away and showing no signs of hostility before she spoke up. “Can you hear me? Who are you?” Her tone was cool and level, maintaining an impressive line of professionalism despite the unusual circumstance.
The figure made no sound. It staggered closer. I squinted at it, trying to make out its depths. It was fairly tall and dressed in a pale green hospital gown – one identical to the one I was currently wearing.

“This is a possible combat area,” Battery continued, voice echoing down the hall. “I repeat, do you understand me?”

It moved closer. Battery’s stance was now entirely hostile and the glow of her suit was almost painful to look at directly. I averted my eyes and trained them on the figure moving towards us. Piggot’s attention was now divided between the source of the pulsations and the dark figure, but her gun did not waver from it position.

A light flickered on just as the figure passed under it and I gasped.

The figure looked dead. I could see the dried blood coating his face as he lurched forward and his body was covered in glossy burns. A good deal of his hair was gone and his legs seemed to have been crushed by something incredibly heavy. Despite his horrific injuries, however, he still moved forward with a single-minded determination. Even more astoundingly, his body seemed to be healing. Blackened skin paled and the blood was dissipating even as we watched.

“Where… is she…?” he rasped as he moved closer. “Is… she s-safe…?”

There was a clang behind us. I watched with wide eyes as an enormous halberd flew past us and impacted with the opposite wall. What the – ?

“Get away, get away! Liar, you’re all liars!”

There was another pulse. But it was not harmless like the others. We were thrown down by the concussive, earth-shaking force as it passed over us, warping the walls further as it continued down the hall. The figure paused at the scream, head twitching as if he were searching for a scent in the air. He took a step.

“T-Taylor…?” it croaked.

I frantically righted my IV before clawing my way up with the door frame. I stared at the figure before looking in the same direction he was. The source of the pulses was visible and it was a girl. A girl with dark, frizzy hair and a bright pink hospital gown that sagged off her gangly frame. A girl whose image made my body seize and mouth dry. Oh god… not her.

“He’s not dead!” she raged, “You saved him! He’s not dead!”

“Taylor…!” the figure almost fell forward in his haste. His face was now entirely healed, showing a receding hairline, weary eyes, and a long face. “I’m here… don’t cry…”

Without meaning to, I blurted, “Danny Hebert?”

The fires… Coil’s team was supposed to stop the fires… but he died and it spread to the residential area. Taylor lived south of the Docks. Of course her home was in the line of fire.

The figure twitched involuntarily but did not stop his slow march. But it was the cue I needed. Holding my IV with one hand, I started to move towards the screaming girl. Every pulse from her sent me to my knees but I made do by leaning heavily on the wall. I could see Armsmaster flat on
the floor and unable to rise, in spite of his straining.

Danny tottered the last few steps towards his daughter before falling in front of her. “Taylor!”

Taylor’s eyes were wide as she took in the sight of her father, hale and whole. Her screams stopped abruptly and the pulses coming from her weakened exponentially. She stared at him breathlessly.

“You’re… not dead. You’re not dead!” She dived into his spread arms, looking elated past the curtain of tears.

“You’re alive! I knew it! You’re alive!”

The man smiled down at her. “I heard you calling and just had to come back, kiddo. What happened here?” he asked, gesturing at the wrecked hospital corridor. Taylor shrugged sheepishly and just hugged him tighter. By now the pulses had stopped entirely and I could see a wave of change rapidly come down the hall. The light’s all switched in into full working order and the spatial warps disappeared, resetting their proportions with a snap. The wave rushed over with me like a breeze before sinking back into Taylor’s body.

“I’m… not sure. I just got so mad because they said you were dead and – Dad? What’s wrong with your face?”

The man seemed to be puzzled by her question. He tilted his head as he said, “What do you mean?”

I finally got close enough to see what she was talking about. Danny’s previously just healed form was now breaking apart, the undamaged skin and flesh falling apart into bloody globules of biological matter. Taylor gaped as her father suddenly fell apart in her hands, collapsing as his burns returned.

“Daddy? No, no, no…!”

“It’s alright,” the man dying man gasped, hand cupping her face and leaving behind bloody smears. “I’m gonna be alright, nothing’s wrong…” his hand’s skin flaked off and a blackened husk caressed her cheek. “Daddy… loves you…”

I watched in horror as his hair fell apart into fine ash and his spine suddenly concaved on itself. He still tried to hug Taylor, but his arms were husks that no longer cooperated with the rest of him.

“Tay-Taylor…”

He crumpled without ceremony, back to the burnt and filthy corpse I’d seen first stagger down the hall. Taylor stared at the dead body in her hands, eyes wide and hands shaking. A thin keen escaped her throat as held onto the front of his gown tightly.

“N-No – Dad, you’re not…”

I edged closer and sat down heavily next to her. Taylor still was not processing the sight before her. I looked at his face briefly before turn away my eyes uncomfortably. The still recognizable face of Danny Hebert was twisted in the last moments of his death into a rictus of terrible agony, a sight enhanced by the vile burns trailing around his face and open skin. Taylor’s hands began to shake violently, as did her entire body.
“No, no, you can’t… not when Mom’s… I-I – “

Before our eyes, we watched in numb silence as Danny’s body healed and fell apart in turns, doing this so many times that a mountain of unused and dissolved flesh gathered around us. Taylor’s hands cupped her father’s tortured face as she tried to muster up the power that had healed before. Whatever it was that fueled her ability, it was no longer working. Perhaps it was the realization that her father was truly gone that sapped the iron conviction of before. Each time interval between heal-and-fall-apart got shorter until Taylor no longer could fix him.

I looked at her. Slowly, I opened my arms. The girl simply fell into my chest limply, wilting like a marionette with its strings cut. I ignored the blood that seeped around us and the cool fleshy substance that had dropped off from the man when he’d become solvent in favor of simply embracing the traumatized child.

*I did this,* I thought distantly. *I had been the one to bait Lung, after all. This is my fault.*

I looked down at the girl in my arms.

*I believed that you had to suffer. That you had to be broken to become the hero we’d need. I-I thought it was for the best.*

*But now… I don’t want it. I don’t want anything to hurt you ever again.*

I hugged her tighter.

*I’m sorry.*
I sighed as I parted from Taylor reluctantly. After the debacle with her dead father and the warping hallway, she’d passed out from the shock and fatigue. As it was, she was back in bed. But this time, rather than the brightly painted children’s ward, she lay sleeping in the personal hospital of the Protectorate. Taylor was dwarfed by the gargantuan bed – it had been built to suit most types of parahumans – and appeared sickly in the light with her dark eye shadows and lank hair.

She remained in her fitful slumber as I slowly approached the heroes waiting for me. Few citizens had left the disaster site of Coil’s death and fewer were still alive. The fire had spread from there to the south and gotten into the residential area before reinforcements could arrive. More than one home was utterly wrecked by the roaring flames and several people had died. One of which was Danny Hebert.

I felt bowed by my guilt. I had been the one to light the match. How could I blame it for burning? My fight with Lung could’ve been cleaner, could’ve cost less, could’ve not killed the father of the one girl I desperately wanted to see alive by the end of all this!

I breathed in through my nose.


I kept my gaze level as I stopped in front of Dauntless. My hands shook lightly but he was courteous enough to ignore it. Still, he could not keep his eyes form being partly sympathetic and partly wary.

“The Director will see you now,” he intoned in a surprisingly deep voice before letting me in the council room. It was the same situation as before – when I’d first declared my intent to take on the villains of Brockton Bay. The heroes were arranged around Piggot as she stared me down. I simply hovered there for a moment, standing lonely and open like a tree in an open field about to be struck by lightning, before venturing further in.

“We have much to discuss, Wild,” Piggot said, eyes tracking me as I looked around the open room. I did not reply. I was too drained for anymore theatrics at this point. In the last few hours, I had collapsed my lung, gotten stepped on by a dragon, survived certain death thanks to a fourteen year old girl, and accidentally murdered the father of a twelve year old girl and triggered her mental breakdown.

I trudged slowly to the corner of the room and grabbed a chair from a stack. With a painfully loud squeal of metal, I wrenched it up and started to drag it towards the great table in the middle. Everyone was dead silent as I ambled my way closer with the chair in hand, dragging it across the floor and surely leaving behind scratch marks with each groan of wood.

A final squeak-and-groan later, my chair was in place. Conscious of everyone’s eyes on me, I seated myself with a faint grunt.

“My apologies,” I said after settling down in the most comfortable position I could get in the rather nice leather cushions, “But I am too tired to bother standing. Do continue, Director.”

Piggot’s face was pinched as she glared at me hotly. A beat later, she continued. “As I said before,
there is much to discuss. A good portion of the Docks is on fire, five PRT agents are dead, and
general property damage is to be in the millions – perhaps even billions. What do you say to that?"

"Take my spoils and pay the damages off," I retorted tiredly. "I took down the whole of the Empire
and Lung, shouldn’t that be enough?"

"You took down Kaiser, Fenja, Menja, Fog, Cricket, Stormtiger, Hookwolf, and Oni Lee. New
Wave takes credit for Victor, Othala, and Alabaster. Night is dead. Krieg and Purity are
unaccounted for. Lung was not at the scene,” Armsmaster belted out without stop, sounding as if
he memorized the entirety of the list before the meeting.

I narrowed my eyes at the last four names. “Wait, what? Wasn’t Lady Photon fighting Purity? And
I tranquilized Lung – no way he’s getting up from that.”

"Purity fled the battle when it was clear the Empire lost. Lady Photon chose to remain and fly you
to the hospital for treatment. She and Manpower stated that they had seen someone slip away but
were too busy in their own fights to intervene.”

I rubbed my eyes, suddenly too exhausted to muster up even a small amount of anger at this. I
wasn’t going to even bother asking where the fuck the Protectorate was in all this. This was now
the second time Lung escaped after I took him down personally. His persistence could be
considered admirable if he weren’t such a thorn in my side. I didn’t want flaming rage dragons in
my daily life but it seemed that luck was not on my side.

"Very well,” I said after a moment. “How much can my spoils pay for, then?”

I could see Armsmaster doing the math in his head. He took the barest of seconds to think before
replying, “About eighty percent of damages with insurance. Perhaps eighty-five if the Empire’s
subsidizations are seized.”

“How much… exactly… is the remaining fifteen percent?” I asked hesitantly.

Armsmaster told me the amount. I paled. Nope. Nope, not going there.

“Is there any chance th Protectorate might be willing to foot the bill?” I asked, less than hopeful.
True to form, Piggot leaned forward.

“In exchange for you joining the Protectorate, yes. It’ll be on our tab,” she said smoothly, not even
slightly ashamed. I had to commend her for that. The woman clearly knew what she was doing. Set
a gigantic debt on me – one that I could not possibly pay back – and offer me a way out.

It might’ve worked, if I wasn’t sure about what to do next. As it was, I was not going to take the
bait just yet. Let her sweat it for a while as I figured out my next few steps. I gave her a lax, one-
shouldered shrug in response, “Give me a fortnight to pay it off.”

As expected, Piggot’s mouth pursed into a thin line as she regarded me. This was not the outcome
she desired, clearly. I could see why. If news got out about just who took down the majority of
villains, then a PR shitstorm was to be expected – something she could’ve put a favorable spin on
if I had joined the Protectorate right after. She could still try to strong-arm me into joining, but the
hassle I would put up would buy enough time for me to wriggle out of my debt and she knew it.

But I wasn’t in the mood for playing games. I also wanted something from this meeting and I
would get my say.

“What are you planning to do with the girl?” I asked bluntly as the heroes ruminated on their side. Miss Militia glanced at me.

“What girl?” she said sharply.

“Taylor Hebert,” Battery answered. “Victim of the fire, she triggered in the hospital. Currently being watched.”

“What do you want with her?” Piggot demanded. She was growing impatient, irritated with my dismissal of her ‘offer’.

“She’s a newly triggered parahuman who has no one,” I shot back. “And who here has a shelter meant for that type of people?”

“Her father left no will stating what would be done with her in the case of his death,” Piggot said back. “As such, she is a ward of the state. She would most likely be evaluated for mental health and then given to a foster family.”

Now was the moment. Let’s see if you like my bait, Director.

“I’ll take her,” I asserted, slapping the table for emphasis, “Whether she’s my ward or my adopted child – I’ll take her.”

“We can’t just give children away,” Miss Militia immediately protested. “There are protocols to be followed in the case of parahuman children and – “

“I offer myself in exchange,” I continued loudly, cutting the woman’s sentence off, “I refuse to be limited by the bureaucracy of your organization and neither will I become a full-time member. However, I will offer my service as a consultant of sorts and on-call hero when needed. And I’ll jump through every hoop to stop the PR mess before it happens.”

There was instant silence upon my proposal. Everyone’s eyes were on Piggot as she considered my terms, turning over the pros and cons in her head, searching for even the slightest advantage over me. Finally…

“Why do you want the girl so bad?” Velocity asked from his seat. He sounded suspicious, even slightly worried.

I took my time replying. “I… Lung’s rampage was the cause of the fires in the Docks and the subsequent burning of the residential areas. I had been the one to initially provoke him. I had not expected the fallout to be so disastrous nor did I expect civilian casualties. I – indirectly as it may be – am the one to orphan this girl. It’s my duty to make it up to her.”

I could see Piggot looking at Armsmaster in the corner of her eye. He nodded back – a movement so slight that I might’ve not known if I hadn’t been tracking the movement of his suit – and she… well, she didn’t relax. But she looked slightly more genial. Did I pass a test or something?

“We need time to discuss matters,” Piggot declared, “such as the aftermath of the rampage, your debt, and your… proposal,” she finished lightly. “See yourself out. Dauntless, will you?”
Just like that, I was dismissed.

I was already out the door before Dauntless could move to flank me.

...

I was a long way away from the PRT headquarters before I stopped. I took a detour to a street vendor to purchase two chili dogs before meandering down the street. I passed one alleyway nearly three times before finally going down it and into a small park.

She was already waiting for me on a bench, a faint frown on her vulpine face. Her bottle-green eyes found mine in an instant as soon as I came out of the alley.

“You knew,” she accused me. She didn’t specify as to what; we both knew what the other knew.

“As did you,” I said with a simple nod in her direction. I gave her one chili dog before biting into my own with a delighted moan. It had been years since I’d eaten proper street food. It was still as good as I remembered it.

Lisa gave me a shrewd look before nearly inhaling hers. She was done by the time I was only three-quarters finished and I raised a brow at that. Surely she…?

“I’ve been living on the street for a week now,” she said. “Got away from Coil a while ago but then he… went silent… you killed him.” It wasn’t a question. It was not a revelation. It was simple fact.

I nodded. Lisa looked stunned before snapping back into her role. It wasn’t as smooth as it would be when she meets Taylor, but it was good.

“So,” she chirped with false cheer though I could see her mind churning with the information her power was feeding her, “Having money problems, hm?”

I huffed a laugh. “Wow, it’s like you have powers or something.”

Lisa lasted only a moment before breaking out into peals of laughter. I joined her soon and we both held our stomachs as we snorted and giggled together. I could still feel the weight of the guilt on my shoulders, but somehow, sitting on a park bench with the biggest smart-ass on Earth Bet and laughing until we cried, I felt just the slightest bit lighter.

...

I have several matters to address. First of all, while I appreciate the discussion going on about Taylor and her as-of-yet unknown abilities, she is not and never will be anyone's expy. While I'm known to base a character off another, I refuse to do that with her. I believe her character deserves more than that. This does not mean stop discussion, however. That I enjoy very much, especially when you tear your hair out trying to figure out my next move.

Furthermore, why do people think Taylor would know Moira accidentally caused Danny's death? I mean, she's a victim of the fires that Lung caused. It was night and most civilians would not think 'this lady provoked Lung!'. They would think 'oh no cape fight between rogue and villain'. Most of her fury would be directed at Lung until she realizes the full extent of the villain extermination plan later on.
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*You have one infraction

◊ Topic: Moira Wild
In: Boards > News > Capes > N. America > Brockton Bay

>Night_Shade
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
More news on Brockton Bay: Majority of E88 APPREHENDED (footage here) and Lung nowhere to be found. New Wave’s on the scene, as is the Protectorate. There is no sign of our cape-stomping badass, however.

Possible theories are that she is:

a) Dead (as if)

b) MIA

c) Back in D.C. (confirm?)

d) In hiding (HELL NO)

e) A villain (no way)

f) Hospitalized (she’s too cool for that)

The facts are as shown:

1) Arrival in Brockton on the 26th of September → Lung fight
2) Was seen in the PRT base on the 9th of October → recruitment, threats, information, partnership???

3) MASSIVE fight between the E88 and Lung on the 15th of October → Wild takes credit for nearly the whole of E88’s cape roster and uses the money to pay off the damage

4) Was seen in the PRT base a second time on the 16th of October

5) Was also seen wandering BB city area for reasons unknown several times

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> Mugrat
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
She’s def not back in DC or I would’ve known. My house is pretty close to the original shelter. Any BB locals here?

> BlackBlackBlack
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
You’re looking at one. My flat was pretty close to the fires so I got a firsthand look at Lung. I saw someone also flying around him, but the cape was moving too fast for me to really get a look. Dressed in dark costume, can fly, manipulated objects around him/her. Sounds pretty close to Wild’s modus operandi?

> GimmeMyGun (verified PRT Agent)
Posted Oct 16 2008:
Not much I can say but I do know the higher ups are planning a press release pretty soon. Maybe it’s about Wild?

> Rebelteen
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
Forget the PRT; look closely at the footage. Lung didn’t touch Wild even once. Man he was chasing her all over the place – talk about UST lol

> Merpie (cape wife)
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
@Rebelteen Duh. She’s Wild. Reputed to be one of the most effective rogues in action. Of course she’s totally kick-ass. And no, Lung can’t have her because she’s my waifu forever

> Hot.Laddie
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
R u srs rn? Wild just kicked the E88 into orbit and ur making shitty jokes about her?

* User has received an infraction for inflammatory language.

> Merpie (cape wife)
Posted 16 Oct 2008:
@Hot.Laddie Calm your tits bruh. Can’t blame a lady for looking at such a fine specimen. BTW, anyone talk to one of her people about her?

> Rebelteen
That would be me. I go to school with her adopted son Parker. He’s pretty chill. Asked for an autograph but he seemed pretty annoyed by it all. Guess he doesn’t like the attention his mom always gets. (I may have also implied Lung is into his mom. Oops.)

@Rebelteen That’s to be expected, of course. Can’t blame you for trying tho. Tho Lung doesn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell with her. She is too much of a woman for him. Wonder if she is single and looking for someone

I like how quickly this thread moves away from Wild’s fights and into Wild’s sex life We must know moooooore

URGENT NEWS: Apparently Wild is in deep debt due to the damages from the fight. Donate to help her pay it off! Donate button here.

what the fuck? Why does wild have to pay for shit she saved a bunch of people. This doesn’t make sense.

ikr. Wild did so much more than the Protectorate ever did, why does she have to pay for the damages? It’s pretty obvious that they have some grudge over her showing them up.

Well, she’s just a rogue, right? Not associated with the Protectorate or anything? I don’t think they should be paying for something that’s her fault.

@Cannedcream Well, she’s just a rogue, right? Not associated with the Protectorate or anything? I don’t think they should be paying for something that’s her fault. The battle was not her fault! Wild pretty much fought them one her own with some NW help. Note that no Protectorate cape took part. They’re in the wrong and they know it. That’s why she’s saddled with this debt – for sticking out of the herd of the other rogues that have already been neutered by the Protect-o-nothings. She’s a great waifu and you can’t bring her down.

Don’t be oblivious to things. Wild’s a complete loose cannon and everyone knows it. She’s demonstrated severe unreliability in the past – the Protectorate shouldn’t have to pay for her
mistakes. Nearly half of north BB burnt down thanks to her and several civilians died. She was clearly baiting Lung in the footage and he reacted to her.
You don’t blame the gun for killing people, you blame the person pulling the trigger.

>Merpie (cape wife)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
You don’t blame the gun for killing people, you blame the person pulling the trigger.
Are you fucking with me? Are you seriously on the side of fucking Lung?! He’s not the helpless woobie you make him out to be and Wild is simply trying to be a good hero. Her methods may have been a bit sloppy but they worked a load better than anything any local hero did. It’s only been two days but you can already breathe easier in the city.

*User received an infraction for inflammatory language.

>Cannedcream
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
I want you to look at every documented tape of Wild in a fight now. Look at the things she does. She may have turned in a few villains to the PRT but the majority of them just disappear after Wild pays them a visit.
She’s been disappearing them for a while now, and BB just the next stop on her list.

*User has received an infraction for incitement.

>FreeMason (Moderator)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
@Merpie @Cannedcream I’m choosing to be lenient and let you two off with just infractions. This thread isn’t for debates about Moira Wild’s morality nor is it for petty conflict. Calm down before I start handing out bans.

>Graceling
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
Damn @Merpie you’re pretty passionate about Wild’s gig. Isn’t the fifth fight you got in about her?

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>YeahShesMyMom (verified cape child)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
Sometimes I can’t believe that my mom is literally a whole thread on PHO

>Graceling
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
@YeahShesMyMom you do realize that pretending to be a cape’s family member is a ticket to a ban right?

>Graceling
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
@YeahShesMyMom nvm you somehow got verified in the three minutes it took me to make that post
so, hows the old lady?

>BlackBlackBlack
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
so, hows the old lady?
Ugh, can we not do that? Wild’s like twenty or smthg. Def not old.

>Merpie (cape wife)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
Wild’s Asian, no one knows how old she is – except for some certain exceptions. She could be forty for all we know. She’s always a sexy goddess to me tho

*User has received an infraction for poor behavior.

>Night_Shade
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
@Merpie At first it was funny but now it’s getting both sad and pathetic. Her freaking SON is RIGHT THERE and you’re still talking about how hot you think she is. Get a life.

*User has received an infraction for incitement.

FreeMason (Moderator)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
Although Night_Shade’s tone was less than exemplary, she is also right. Please refrain from further possessive behavior with people.

>Merpie (cape wife)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
You can’t stop me! I will love my waifu Moira Wild any way I want to because she is my sexy goddess of love and beauty! Hahahaha! And I will [REDACTED]

*User has been banned for two days.

>Hot.Laddie
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
It’s kinda messed up but now I wanna kno what he said. Anyone c be4 it got redacted???

>FreeMason (Moderator)
Posted 17 Oct 2008:
Trust me. You don’t want to.

(End of page)

Lisa grumbled as she clicked out of the PHO boards. Jeez, what a waste of time. Her powers helped her quickly sift through the unneeded junk but it was amazing what these people could come up with. Honestly, some were insisting that Lung was desperately in love with Wild and wanted her to be his dragon bride or whatever. Really? How could they forget her making complete mincemeat of him in their first encounter?

It didn’t help that she was slowly getting a migraine too. She only had her power for a few months but was still finding new aspects to it every day. Most of it was incredibly useful. Some of it was less so.

Especially the ‘I know what everyone is into in the bed’ bits. Lisa knew more about her mom and dad than she ever wanted to know and it was very, very nauseating to think about. Thankfully, in
her brief talk with Moira didn’t reveal anything too…incriminating.

liked her partners bigger than her/liked to laugh/healthy sexual appetite/has not had relationship for many years/interested in both genders/…

The girl rubbed her eyes tiredly. Browsing on PHO was shown to be a waste of time that she could’ve spent more wisely. For example, sleeping. After Moira eliminated Coil from the game, she’d basically handed complete control of the entire thing to Lisa. Now the thirteen year old girl had a whole villain lair, an army of mercenaries, and more money than she knew what to do with.

Swiss bank accounts/investments in stock market/possible illegal dealings/gang sabotage likely/…

It was frightening. It was also thrilling. Wild still popped in from time to time to watch over her activities but she usually preferred to stay as the impartial observer. Sometimes, she offered her guidance on some matters but typically relented when Lisa started mouthing off. Of course then she’d feel guilty about the entire matter and try to appease Moira.

It wasn’t that Moira was a fantastically good guilt tripper. She just had… presence. Something that made you sit up and listen to her when she spoke. Something that made a primal part of Lisa’s monkey hind brain want to roll over and show submission. It was easily suppressed, but the urge to obey, to listen, to shrink away remained.

power/not active/passive presence ability/unknown range/she doesn’t know about it/…

Lisa sighed as she clutched her pounding head. As interesting as Moira was, her migraine was beginning to get worse.

The girl sighed before dragging herself off the computer table and into the small cot she set up in Coil’s former office. Although the man had good taste in interior design, he was shit as finding comfortable furniture. The last time she slept on the couch, her back had thirteen separate kinks in it.

The girl rolled onto her bed, trying to find a way to stop her migraine and go to sleep.

Wild cares too much/intense guilt/selfish in the way she will only fight for the ones she cares about/enjoys flight/finds Armsmaster attractive/does not care for personality/wants him to save someone/admires few people/…


deeply enjoys tinkering/competitive/likes the glory/intrigued by another tinker/gets gratification from well-designed tech/…

Oh, that’s even worse!
It was nearly midnight that I chose to leave. I slid my window open as I scanned my room for anything forgotten, letting my power sweep through the rooms to feel through the contents of each one. Finding nothing, I shouldered my rucksack and picked my way out into the cool night. I hadn’t found the time to replace my parka with the armor panels so I was downgraded back to a simple jacket with pockets.

I carefully balanced on my sill, refusing to even glance down, as I examined the side of the building. There was a decorative lip that jutted out on the side about the same width as my palm that I’d noticed the day we moved in. I dropped down onto it with faint *thud*, using my discs to compensate for any imbalances. From there, I closed my window and locked it before calling up a brick platform.

The building material rasped as they configured into a flat square for me perch on. I quickly formed a raised seat with more bricks and sat down on it. As I did so, I also formed up a wall to shield against oncoming air. I settled down in a comfortable position with my legs tucked in and my arms in my lap before zooming out into the night towards Boston.

With my mission for Accord finished, it was only appropriate that I go and inform him. Taking the man’s obsessive personality into consideration, I wasn’t sure how he’d react if I simply let him find out by his own efforts. Certainly nothing good. Boston wasn’t too far from Brockton Bay anyway – less than an hour’s drive, really. I could go there on nothing but my own power.

My appointment with him was set up for six a.m. but I would arrive in the city just before one. A five hour safety net should be enough for any unwarranted trouble.

Iago and Hestia both knew of my departure. After their part in assisting me with Coil, I’d saddled them with administrative duties. Namely, the profiling of the various parahumans that came to us. I had a specific array of people I’d accept into my shelters – which got even narrower when it came to long-term stays – and *someone* had to do the culling of the numbers. It had been Carly the first time around. Now Hestia got the dubious honors, with Iago her unwilling assistant and coffee-boy.

Hestia had been pleased with the easy, familiar task. Iago looked like I’d told him to cut his balls off. Nonetheless, I was sure the Greek woman could rein him in while I was gone.

I watched as the city lights lower in numbers as I flew above at a steady pace. My hair was flat against my skull and my cheeks stung with the chill of the mid-October air. Avoiding the various fowl wildlife required some effort but I managed fairly well. My greatest problem was staying on course but a GPS and the highways made it all better.

I wrapped my jacket around myself tighter and took a few bricks from the wall to make something to lean on. In spite of my reclining position, I did not sleep. Instead, I ran systematic sweeps over the area around me in a steady, easy-to-keep two hundred meter radius. Never say I could not learn from my enemies.

…

The first sign of Boston were the lights. They came into view like hundred of earthbound stars, twinkling coyly as I sped closer. I halted on the very outskirts of the city and discreetly landed on
the side of a highway. My range was now extended to a four hundred meters, barely pushing the
limits of my range before I started losing basic control. I felt no capes enter it as I lighted down in a
clump of bushes but I kept my guard up all the same.

I left the bricks behind in the shrubbery as I started to stroll into the city by the roadside. Cars
passed by me in short intervals, illuminating my path with their high-intensity headlights. The
kinder ones paused to offer me a ride – which I declined as graciously as I could. It might be silly,
but I wanted no one to have interacted overly much with me in my foray into foreign turf. Less
chance of collateral that way.

The hotel room I’d gotten was ready for me by the time I got there. By then, it was nearly two a.m.
and the clerk gave me a suspicious look at my windblown appearance.

“Not very windy outside,” he remarked as he handed me my keycard.

“Drag races out of town,” I shrugged, the lie rolling off my tongue without effort. “You can hit
some wild speeds out there, yeah?”

The guy gave me sage nod, as if he knew what I was talking about. I ignored his attempt to slip me
his number and swiped the keycard out of his lax grip before striding off to where the elevators
were. There was a brief wait before it dinged upon arrival.

I stepped in the boxy car and endured the slight gut-dropping sensation of the ride upwards. Room
809 was at the end of the west corridor and was revealed to be a bare, if serviceable, room
equipped with a bed, closet, and a loveseat. I dropped off my travel clothes on the small couch and
made a beeline for the bathroom.

Once inside, I examined my reflection in the massive mirror.

Instead of the mop of half-burnt hair I sported for the better part of a day, Hestia had been kind
each to hack it into a trendy cut with the kitchen scissors. I ran my fingers through the fly-away
strands thoughtfully, before turning my attention elsewhere. I had a full make-up kit ready, as well
as clothes to change into for my meeting with Accord. Once I finished that, I could fly back over to
Brockton Bay to deal with the PRT.

With that in mind, I stepped under the hard spray of shower water. It was hot enough to sting and I
relished the heat as the last of the chilly outside air was chased from my bones. I squeezed out a
generous dollop of shampoo onto my palm before rubbing it into my hair for a soapy lather.
Showering was an automatic process for me, and my mind immediately wandered away into other
territory.

Taylor. Taylor Hebert, the girl whose father I just killed a few days ago.

The girl was a constant weight on my mind, always hovering at the back of it and waiting for my
attention to drift over into its corner. She still hadn’t woken up from her coma-like state, which
worried me immensely, despite the doctors assuring me that this sort of behavior was normal for
particularly traumatizing triggers. I had begged Iago and Hestia to watch over her for the brief time
I was gone. Hopefully, I would be there when she woke.

I moved onto to scrubbing my shoulders. I fully accepted Danny’s death as my fault. But I didn’t
want Taylor to know it. It would drive her away from me, I knew it, and I couldn’t bear the
thought. I was the only one in this world who knew what she would – could – become. With my
interference, her fate might already have shifted. And then, who would remember Skitter? Who would remember Weaver and Khepri?

Who would remember the girl who suffered the weight of the world upon her?

For as long as she would let me, I wanted to take care of her. But when the moment of truth came… she was free to make her own choice from there.

I blinked the sudden tears from my eyes as I took in a deep breath. I let it out slowly and then soaped up my calf. For a short moment, my fingers skittered over the scar on my hip. I traced the mottled area with one finger before moving on. I couldn’t help it – it was my biggest scar yet.

I wrenched my thoughts away from Taylor. Instead… Lisa. She was an easier topic, if only by the barest of margins.

She was thirteen now, I believe, and woefully under-prepared for the task I’d hefted upon her. In a different world, she would’ve been a sixteen year old warlord well-versed in the manipulation of others. But here and now, she was still a young girl unsure of herself, no matter how she might protest to the contrary. She was not ready for the burden of Coil’s network. Somehow, I’d have to take it before she snapped under its weight.

All in due time, I thought as I rinsed the conditioner from my hair. If I spent time worrying on the what-ifs and I-should-haves of this world, then I’d drive myself around the bend. It was better to simply concern myself with my immediate problems and go from there. Right now, I had to deal with Accord.

I snagged my towel off the rack and began to dry my wet hair. Goosebumps instantly swept down my entire frame as I left the enclosed space of the shower cabinet and into the greater bathroom, steam wrapping around my legs as I did so. I wrapped the damp towel around myself and finger-combed my short hair.

I toed on the slippers laid out for me before venturing out into the bedroom. From within my rucksack, I pulled out a neatly folded black turtleneck and black pants. Both were snug and form-fitting and a black peacoat finished the look. Carly always said I wore too many dark colors that made me look overly pale and washed out – but why bother? Bright colors just made me a more vivid target.

I glanced at my clock. It was five. Nearly time.

I slipped my wallet and phone into my pocket before leaving the room. Accord actually legally owned a building in Boston and his secretary handled his appointments. Walking over there would take me thirty minutes, give or take any distractions. I could arrive with time to spare and just wait for the seconds to tick by. Better early than late when it came to a man like him.

Boston’s early goers were already buzzing in the streets when I stepped out. Joggers, bikers, and skaters circled past me as they went on a tight circuit around a park. Some sleepless university students stumbled past me, blearily sipping hot cups of coffee as they tried to navigate their way downtown. It wasn’t obvious, but Boston had a definite air of difference compared to Brockton Bay. It felt… safer. Softer. I certainly had a feeling that rampaging dragons and skinheads shanking people in alleyways were not common occurrences here.

I glanced at my watch. I still had another twenty or so minutes to kill. Enough time for breakfast,
perhaps. I swerved away from the street that would take me to Accord’s base and instead approached a street vendor selling falafel.

I sat on a bench and bit into the food. The falafel was spicy and hot, making my lips sting even as I ate. I blew on the steaming end in hopes of cooling it down and glanced towards where the base was.

The building that served as Accord’s base was a beautifully designed structure constructed from glass and steel. It was not as breathtakingly tall as the skyscrapers around it, but easily had them beat in sheer magnificence. I covered my eyes to protect against the early morning glare as I examined it.

_This thing would be out of place in Brockton Bay_, I thought. Even the Medhall building wasn’t quite this sophisticated.

I finished the falafel. After tossing the paper wrap into rubbish bin nearby, I stuck my hands into my pockets and headed to the doors leading inward.

As soon as I was inside, I looked around. I didn’t know what purpose this building served other than a base for Accord, but it didn’t seem to be public by any means. The receptionist immediately saw me coming and straightened up. She was plain-faced but well put together. She saw my approach and smiled unnervingly, teeth gleaming white and eyes absolutely earnest.

“How may I help you?” she asked, tone perfectly modulated.

“I have an appointment with Management,” I said. Then added, “At six.”

“You are Moira Wild?”

I nodded. The woman tapped at her keyboard before heading to something at her desk. I saw her mouth move, though I did not hear what she said. Probably telling Accord of my arrival, I assumed. She seemed to listen to his reply before coming back, smile still perfectly in place.

“You may use the southern elevator to go to the tenth floor. His office is at the end of the hall. Please wait until it is 5:55 a.m. before you go up.”

Her eyes flicked to the clock hanging behind her. I followed her gaze. Somehow, I had no doubt that this one clock was the most correct clock to have ever existed. It was 5:54 a.m. Fantastic. My fingers rapped the wooden surface of her desk as I impatiently waited for the minute to pass.

As soon as the minute turned, I swept away in a flurry of black. The heels of my boots clicked on the marble floor in a steady rhythm as I jammed my finger into the elevator. It opened upon arrival.

The ride was smooth and soundless – Accord was no fan of elevator music, it seemed. I stepped out onto the tenth floor after the brief ride and looked around. There was no other door except for the one that led to Accord’s office. I hesitated for only the shortest of moments before striding to the door and knocked twice.

“Come in.”

I opened the door slowly, wary despite myself. Accord’s office was of minimalist design but elegant at the same time. He was seated behind his desk and was staring straight at me when I
came in. I resisted the urge to back out.

“I assume you are here about the mission I gave you,” he said simply as I sat in the chair laid out in front of his desk. He stopped his staring and was now writing something out on a notepad in a neat, almost printed script.

“Yes,” I replied, “Coil’s dead. And I need a favor.”
Accord stopped writing. Slowly, he put his pen down and folded his fingers over it. The contours of his mask followed the movement of his face as he looked at me directly for the second time. “I heard of your exploits concerning the Empire Eighty-Eight and Lung,” he said slowly, “But I was not aware you had also taken Coil out. Was it within the chaos?”


Accord’s gaze was unwavering, seeming to bore into me. “I see. What of his operations?”

“I’m handling it,” I answered, refusing to back down. I didn’t know the purpose of this staring contest – or if it had purpose at all – but I wasn’t going to lose. Accord was not dominant over me, no matter how much he unsettled me. “You don’t need to worry about it much.”

A side of his lip twitched up. “I rather hope so. Otherwise, I might have to… retaliate, in turn.”

Ugh. His threat was barely there but you’d have to blind, deaf, and stupid to miss it. No matter. I was aiming at a far larger endgame than the local crime boss. Let him play his mind games – if he reached too far, then would I start baring my teeth.

“Now that we are both on the same page,” I said, “I’d like to discuss the favor I’m here for. Are you open to the suggestion?”

“Perhaps,” Accord said lightly, finally breaking away his gaze to jot another note down. “What is it?”

“I want payment,” I said bluntly, not bothering with further embellishments to my request, “for Coil’s death. Also, I heard you have some… undesirables in the area?” The silence after my question was heavy, only interrupted by the sound of pen on paper. I waited patiently for Accord to speak.

“Do you think,” Accord said, “that I am a fool?”

My fingers twitched in place and I immediately felt the presence of every small object in the room. Pins on his mask, cufflinks, stationary, …, however, my slight alarm was not missed. Accord looked tranquil but I saw the glimmer of jewels in the corner of my eye. Slowly, I relaxed and let go of the objects.

“I meant no offense,” I said, resisting the urge to keep a constant sweep over the area. “I assume the lady behind me is one of your Ambassadors?”

“She is irrelevant,” Accord dismissed. His tone was now colder than before, utterly passionless to the point of being robotic, “Do you think we can be allies, Ms Wild?”

A muscle in my jaw jumped as another person joined the woman behind me. I couldn’t see him or her, but the hair on the back of my neck was rising. “I had hoped,” I said softly, “We could set up a mutually beneficial partnership between us. I take the troublesome parahumans off your hands. You give me missions to complete in exchange for various favors. We both benefit.”
“That doesn’t answer my question,” he said in return. “Can we be allies?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. *Can we? He’s a villain. But who am I to judge? How many people have I killed or tortured? How many laws have I broken?*

“… perhaps,” I said finally, cautiously, “Normally, I am against such relations with active villains. But you’re not the typical villain, are you? Regardless of what the PRT might say, Boston did not become the city it is today because of *them*. It was your efforts in weeding out the scum that cleared up the waters.”

My flattery might’ve been obvious, but Accord preened nonetheless. That’s right; wasn’t one of his greatest annoyances the fact that no one appreciated his ideas or something? I remember something about how he solved world hunger but the proposal never got accepted.

“While it is apparent that you have clearer sight than most,” Accord said, temporarily mollified, “I still have my doubts about you. I will need time to consider the matter further. But let us discuss your secondary request. Coil’s payment?”

I nodded. “Killing Coil required some sacrifice on my part. Compensation would be ideal.”

“Compensation… I assume this would be financial. I have heard of the impressive debt you have. Why did they saddle you with such an extravagant sum, anyway?”

“Most of the property damage was Lung’s rampage,” I grimaced at the reminder of Danny’s death, “And I was directly responsible for the rampage. I had hoped for the fight to be cleaner but it was not so. While my spoils from the Empire can pay for a good portion, I still have a left over that I can barely afford.”

“Unfortunate,” he shrugged. “How much is the debt?”

I held my hand out for the notepad. He slid it over with an elegant pen that I was sure cost more than most of my wardrobe. I wrote the remainder of my debt down and slid it back to him. I watched as Accord’s brow slowly rose as he examined the number. “Well,” he murmured.

“Exactly,” I replied wryly, “why I need this. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I assume you have a bank account?”

I wrote it on the notepad. “Here.”

He didn’t glance at my account number. “The payment for your transaction will be given to you shortly. But you still have another mission to fulfill before I can give you the money. Consider it a test of faith.”

I chewed on my lower lip. “… go on.”

“A new villain entered Boston a short while ago – three weeks ago, to be precise. He originated from Brockton Bay, I believe, but was driven out by the Empire. The Empire *you* stamped out. You will take him out. Kill him, recruit him… I don’t care how you do it. But do it before the day ends.”

*Before the day ends… I’m not sure whether to be insulted or flattered. “His name?”*
“Blasto.”

...

It was seven a.m. when I exited Accord’s base. I squinted against the sun’s glare as I looked around. Not a lot of people in sight so… my discs pulled me up into the sky. Wind beat my face as I flew high enough to hover directly over the tallest skyscraper in the city. I knew very little about Boston. Hell, I didn’t know who was the Director here, much less the hero capes.

Accord was also unwilling to tell me anything. Said it was another part of the test. *Bastard.*

As it was, I was effectively flying blind. Assuming that Blasto wasn’t a total idiot, he’d be careful being so new in the neighborhood. I’d have to either pull strings with the Protectorate or find him manually.

I waited.

It took a while but a young woman came to a landing on the skyscraper below. She was dressed in a costume that was airy and light, mimicking the look of a cloud. *Aerokinetic?*

I gently drifted closer to her. Upon seeing me come closer, she adopted a clumsy combat pose. “Who are you?” she yelled over the wind.

I stopped a few meters from her. Her eyes widened at seeing my unmasked face, “Wait, aren’t you –“

“Moira Wild, yes, yes,” I waved her off. “You’re a Protectorate hero, yeah?”

To her credit, she was off-balance for only the slightest moment. “Yes, I’m Nimbus,” she said. “I… um – why’re you here, exactly?”


“Uh… yes?”

I landed on the roof of the skyscraper with a faint *thump.* Slowly, I started to walk towards her. I was shorter than her – like I was shorter than nearly everyone else I knew – but she was transfixed, frozen in place as I moved closer. I stepped into her personal space and smiled thinly.

“Why don’t you be a dear and tell me how to find him.”

“I – I can’t… protocols are in a-and I –“

I put a hand on her arm. “Don’t worry,” I said to her. “Do you think that anyone would be upset you told someone about a villain? I mean, it’s not like it’s classified, right?”

Nimbus stepped back. “…you said Blasto?”

I hummed. This time, I did not try to get close to her. Instead, I circled her softly. Put her off balance. Made her feel alone and trapped. Doing something like this with someone experienced as
Miss Militia or Battery might’ve resulted in a defensive, guarded cape. But Nimbus was inexperienced and younger than me. Vulnerable to blatant psychological manipulation.

“It’s personal,” I said to her. “It probably won’t be even violent. But I need to find Blasto soon.”

“I—I… Blasto’s a tinker cape,” she stammered. “You really should speak to the D-Director about this…”

“It’s not an issue, re—“ I froze. A shadow fell across me and something jabbed into my back, something distinctly solid.

“Good job, Nimbus,” the cape behind me said. His voice was far more confident than the girl’s. *Experienced. Older. Unknown power.*

“So, Moira Wild,” he continued. “What brings you here to good old Boston?”

I pursed my lips. Slowly, I turned as the baton scraped along my peacoat. “She was supposed to stall me,” I surmised. “Your power requires time to work, which is why you needed a minute’s wait time. Boston’s doesn’t have many Movers, does it?”

I heard a muffled gasp behind me. But I ignored Nimbus. The cape before me was a hulking man covered in a white bony, layered shell with a full, green body-suit as his costume. His face was unmasked but more bony protrusions hid his identity effectively. The baton he’d held at me was not the separate weapon I thought it was, but another protrusion from his forearm. But the most arresting part of him was the great span of wings coming from his back. They were uneven and poorly-made. Smaller wings sprouted from the two main wings, akin to the Simurgh’s design.

“Changer?” I inquired. “With some Brute and Mover sub-classifications, yes?”

“Maybe,” he rasped. “You can call me Carapace. But don’t circumvent the subject. What were you asking Nimbus?”

*She’s got a mic on her,* I thought. *Be more subtle about trying to trick me into making mistakes.* “A villain” I said loudly, “Blasto. He’s a biotinker who came here recently. I was hoping you’d point me in his direction.”

“Why do you want him?” he asked lowly.

“Personal reasons,” I shot back, abandoning my intimidation tactic for something more straightforward. “It won’t affect your operations, so don’t worry about that. I’m not leaving until I have his location.”

“Protectorate and rogue collaborations have to follow certain protocols,” Carapace said. “Of course, on the spot collabs are within parameters, but we can’t just hand out the information of every villain in the area.”

I sighed noisily. Oh goody. Bureaucracy *again.* I didn’t have the time to deal with the Protectorate digging its heel in – not when I also had to concoct a plan of attack against Blasto. Hopefully, he would not be established enough to fight me effectively. Fuck it, I’ll make Accord deal with the fall-out. I turned from the two heroes and ignored their surprised protests as I jumped off the roof with a running start.
“Never mind!” I called over my shoulder.

I tumbled down in a freefall, barely breathing as the wind stole the air from my lungs. Carapace probably could not catch up to me, but Nimbus was less predictable. I twisted my body and circled around the tower before ducking sharply below the city skyline. My power swept out into a four hundred meter circle centered just below me and I began to fly through the city.

It was past seven now. I still had to find Blasto. And do it before the day ended and before the Protectorate tripped me up further. Carapace was probably going off to report to the Director right now, who would organize something. While pinging Piggot.

I pressed forward. *One problem at a time.*

…

It was nighttime when I landed in lower Boston behind a dumpster and took my peacoat off. I bunched it up into a ball before stuffing it into a trashcan. It was a shoddy appearance change but it was better than nothing. Plus, the night was warm.

Blasto was hiding out in an apartment, one where he had set up a pretty sizeable lab in the bathroom. The insides were pretty rudimentary for Tinker work, however, and he wasn’t even close to setting up a proper cloning chamber. The most he could do was play around with plant cells.

I hovered outside his apartment, peering in. I couldn’t see him inside, so perhaps he was out in the city doing something. I wasn’t going to enter – who knew what traps he might’ve set up?

Instead, I loitered around the base. My turtleneck was now a cropped top and my shoulders were bared. I could do little about my pants other than pull them low but a hefty splash of alcohol on my clothes covered up any flaws. Blasto was about a block away before I sprung my trap.

I stumbled out the alley, mumbling nonsense under my breath. Immediately, I lurched into him. The man jerked and his hands automatically went to my shoulders.

“Hey,” I purred up to him blearily, “What’s a cutie like you doing alone?” My hand slid up to his side, “Bet’chu I can warm you up *nice* and proper.”

Blasto made a disgusted noise as he tried to move away from me. I only caught ‘thought… Boston better… than… Bay’. It was enough to get the gist of the idea and I cackled in my head. My hand wrapped around his wrist and pulled him down to my eye level, “Now, now,” I said into his ear, “Play nice.”

He finally caught sight of my full face. Blasto went pale and jerked back, “You – !”

I gave him no time to fight before I pricked him with a tranq-needle.

…

*Tying up Blasto with his own shower curtain might’ve been a bit crude,* I thought as I jogged to Accord’s base. After knocking him out with a tranq-needle, he’d collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. I didn’t want to wreck his work in the bathroom, so he was currently propped up against his bedpost.
I didn’t bother with Accord’s receptionist. I flew up to the tenth floor and rapped on his window. There was a moment of waiting before someone opened it. It was the tall man in the suit – the one who I first saw when Accord approached me. His nose wrinkled when he smelt the heavy alcohol staining my clothes.

“Hey,” I said to him cheerfully. “Mind if I come in?”

There was a pause before he opened the window wider. I gave him a flirtatious smile just for kicks before floating in. Accord was still seated in his desk, though he was frowning at me.

“You could’ve just used the elevator,” he said disapprovingly, clinically examining my state of undress.

I shrugged at him as I landed gently. “Too much trouble. This way, I can get the reports done easier. Blasto’s handled, so the transaction ought to go smoothly, yeah?”

“Of course,” he said. “Will you divulge your methods in… handling him?” I noted the distasteful way he glanced at my body.

“Give me some credit,” I said as I watched him begin the transaction. “This? For Blasto? Please, he’d have to be on level with Eidolon for me to resort to sex. It was a trap for him – he wouldn’t be on his guard against prostitutes, not if he’s a true Bay boy.”

Accord looked unconvinced. “You should have the total sum in your account now,” he said. “I will contact you if there are anymore missions for you to do. Dispose of Blasto how you see fit.”

“Another thing – the Protectorate?”

“They might contact your city’s Director. But there will be little evidence for them to show. After all, why would you be prosecuted for simply visiting a nearby city?”

I smiled. If only you weren’t crazy…

“Good doing business with you,” I tilted my head before getting back into the air. Accord and his man watched me until I exited out the window and flew into the night. I offered a short wave before shooting towards Blasto’s apartment.

…

Hestia was waiting for me on the Docks with the rental car. I shoved Blasto in the trunk before settling in the back seat.

“Iago?”

“Waiting at the flat,” she said as she got out of her parallel park. “So, tell me – why did I get a text telling me to show up ten at night with the car? And why you just dumped someone in the back?”

“His name’s Blasto. The guy in Boston wanted me to take him with me for the shelter. He’s a villain. And he... uh, wants to change.”

Hestia was silent. But her tight grip on the steering wheel was a clear sign of her mood shift. “You
can be a terrible liar, sometimes.”

“I know,” I admitted without shame. “But trust me, Blasto’s fine. I know what I want to do with him and he’ll cooperate.”

Hestia hummed.

We drove on.

“Carly called earlier,” she said finally. “Something about Child Services. And we have the profiles here.” She handed me a large manila folder filled with paper.

Ugh. CPS. How many times do I have to deflect your people? I groaned mentally as I flicked through the folders idly, running my eyes over the names. There weren’t any I recognized, so that was that.

“Oh yeah,” Hestia piped up again. “There was another girl – we didn’t profile her. Said she wanted to meet you.”

“Yeah? Name?”

“Sophia Hess.”
Hestia and Iago were in the living room, keeping watch on Blasto, when I crept out my window again. Rather than fly anywhere, however, I simply stayed in the air. The bricks were in their customary platform formation and kept me suspended in the cool night air. I breathed in deeply and looked over night-time Brockton Bay.

Brockton Bay wasn’t a city that never slept – the danger of gangs and parahuman fights at night was too great for nocturnal wanderers. The only people who did keep to the streets at night were the prostitutes and the one who could handle themselves. The lights twinkled below me sleepily as I contemplated the events of the past few weeks.

It was nearly November now. And what had I accomplished? What things have I done to fix this world before it collapsed in on itself. Very little. Too little. The Empire’s chump change compared to the fucking Endbringers. And there’s still the Golden Fool. I’ve been sitting on my ass for the last seven years, trying to not change anything in the hopes of everything going according to canon. I’ve held back from so much. So many people I could’ve saved… but I didn’t.

I bit my lip.

I just undid nearly a decade of non-effort in less time than a month. I destroyed the Empire. I beat Lung twice. I killed Danny. Enough is enough. Slowly, the platform under me parted. I remained balancing on a single brick until it, too, drifted out from beneath me. The wind shrieked in my ear as I started to fall.

I waited until I reached the skyline, feeling oddly at peace. How much have I let go in my fear? How many opportunities passed in front of me?

I seemed to fall in slow motion before I picked myself up. I dipped my fingers into the chilly water in the bay before deciding on a trajectory. I tilted against a headwind and headed for Captain’s Hill.

The Dallon and Pelham households were fairly close to each other, standing only a few blocks away from one another. I landed right outside the Dallon’s white-picket fence and observed the exterior of their home. It was fairly nice, akin to what you might see in a housing magazine of sorts. I floated over the fence and up to the door in short order, making no sound. I hesitated before knocking. The door opened sharply on the third knock and I jerked back at seeing the angry face of the woman before me.

Carol Dallon glared at me unseeingly for a few moments before seeming to realize who I was. Her face slackened and she pasted a sheepish smile on her face. “Oh. Hi.”

I gave her a weak smile in return. “Hey. I heard you wanted to meet me about something?”

Carol’s face was still tight as she digested what I said. Her face cleared up soon enough, but she was reluctant as she ushered me inside. “Yes. Of course, come in. Please, make yourself at home.”

I did as she said. I slipped my shoes off before heading deeper inside. They’ve been fighting before I came. I could feel it in the air – the tense atmosphere, Carol’s angry expression – and coming into the living room only confirmed it further. I saw Mark seated on the couch, looking lost and forlorn, and Glory Gi – no, she’s in a civilian setting – Victoria was standing. Pana –Amy stood a little further away, but her stance was similar to Mark’s – begging to not be seen, to not be noticed.

They all looked up at me as I entered. I remained tall, refusing to be cowed by the weight of their
gazes. Carol followed in after me, clutching a cup in her hand.

“Please,” she said, “Sit down. Coffee or juice?” Her question was uncomfortably loud in the silent room, the hospitable platitude out of place in the stuffy air.

“Juice,” I said as I settled onto an armchair adjacent to the couch Mark was on, “Orange, if you have it.”

Carol shuffled out of the room. I waited until heard the clatter of ceramic in the kitchen before looking up at Victoria.

“Calm down,” I said firmly. “I can feel your aura from here.”

And I could. But it didn’t feel like emotion as it had been described in the stories – it was like an itch, centered somewhere on the small of my back. Odd.

The girl looked surprised for a moment before her expression clamped down stubbornly. “Don’t tell me what to do,” she growled. “You’re not even my mom.”

“Maybe not,” I said softly, “But I am sure your mother has taught you a lot about dealing with other people. She must’ve forgotten one crucial lesson – “ I put my gaze on hers squarely, “Don’t piss off people who can bite harder than you.”

Victoria held my eyes for a second before looking away. She still was obstinate but wasn’t openly defying me anymore. I watched her slowly sit down next to Mark before finding Amy. Her eyes were riveted to the exchange between me and her adoptive sister, but the girl quickly realized where I was looking when she glanced at me. Her face flushed in embarrassment.

“You too,” I said to her, “You’re important to this discussion. Sit down.”

Amy looked hesitant but nonetheless, she obeyed. I pretended to not notice the way she squeezed herself in between Mark and Victoria. Baby steps.

Carol finally came out and handed me a tall glass of orange juice. I took it from her graciously with a thin smile, “Thank you, Ms Dallon.”

“Call me Carol,” she said back before turning to the couch. I watched her stare at Amy and Victoria in confusion. Her eyes flicked towards me before she resigned herself to the chair opposite me.

Good. Let’s see how much you like being isolated.

I took a long draw from my glass before setting it down on the coffee table. Slowly, I laced my fingers and crossed my legs. My eyes took in the face of everyone. Each one of them – even Victoria – avoided looking at each other too long. How did this family even last this long?

“So. What did you want to speak to me about?”

It was Carol who spoke up, “I think this should be a New Wave team meeting instead...”

I barely looked at her. “Then call them all.”

…

The Pelhams arrived within five minutes. They were still in casual wear – hell, it looked like they just threw their clothes on and flew out right in the middle of dinner. Sarah was the clear leader and
she strode into the living room naturally.

“You said you wanted to meet?” she asked rhetorically as she took her place next to her sitting sister. I offered their family a perfunctory greeting before falling silent.

They shuffled around for a little longer before finding their places. Sarah and her husband were next to Carol while their two teenaged kids hovered near the couch.

I spoke as soon they settled down. “Someone told me that you were interested in my activities.”

“Well, yes,” Sarah said, “Do you know what New Wave’s mission is?”

“To have unmasked heroes,” I said, thinking back to what I remembered from the story before New Wav dissolved. “Full accountability and all that.”

“Exactly,” Carol cut in. “And that’s why we are so interested in you. You are one of the very few unmasked rogues. The level of success you reached with your shelter is quite infamous, especially when you never bothered to conceal your efforts against villains.”

“I see,” I said coolly. Nothing they said was new to me. In fact, it sounded like they were buttering me up for something. “You’ve done your research, then. But what is the purpose of this meeting?”

“We were hoping you’d join us,” Sarah’s husband said softly from her side. I didn’t know his name – or maybe I just forgot it. He wasn’t important anyways. “To show that being an unmasked hero is a viable tactic. That you don’t have to hide behind flashy costumes and PR to be a successful crime fighter.”

And here we come to the crux of the matter. “I can’t join you,” I said immediately. “Not possible. I’m sorry.”

Immediately, Carol stiffened but showed no other sign of her tension. “We understand that,” she said diplomatically, “But we were hoping for a partnership between your people and our team. To become a coalition of unmasked heroes working together.”

“I will also not require any of my people to become heroes. If they don’t want to join the cape scene, they won’t.”

“But – “

“That was the original purpose of my shelter and nothing will change that. The shelter is a place for parahumans to be simply human – not heroes or villains.”

Carol looked as if she swallowed a lemon. Even Sarah seemed put off. And my back was itching.

“You have something to say, Victoria?” I said, not looking away from Carol and Sarah.

“Yes, yes, I do, in fact,” she said loudly from where she was on the couch. The itch got stronger and everyone seemed to recoil. Victoria stood up again, towering over me. “Who the hell do you think you are? Coming in to our home, saying nothing but empty shit… who do you think you are?! Her pretty face was angry, the golden hair fluffing up around her like a sun’s corona. Her name was boastful for someone so young, but I could see why no one ever contested it. She did look glorious, for a brief moment, in her outrage.

But she was still a little girl and she was causing problems. I had to shut her down before she riled everyone up beyond reason.
I waited for her to stop patiently.

“I thought you were a hero,” she spat, the vitriol in her tone growing stronger, “You seemed so strong! I thought you were going to change everything when you came to Brockton Bay, not… not… ”

She trailed off as I stood up. No one stopped me as I made my way over to her. I kept my eyes on hers squarely, daring her to say anything more. “You thought I was a hero?” I asked delicately. How touching. I would be flattered at any other time.

Victoria nodded mutely.

I stopped short of her. Victoria was pretty tall for her age – I was only eye level with her jaw line. But she was hunched enough that I could look into her eyes without trouble. “Victoria Dallon,” I said to her, “I opened a shelter. Do you know what that entails?”

“Yeah, but –“

“Jonathon Cramer,” I cut her off loudly, “Is a year older than you. A Case 53. No family, weak power, no chance of civilian employment. Xiaoli Fang is six years old. Parents abandoned her at my doorstep. She’s a Thinker, can look at a person and sense their intentions, whether they’re lying, what they might do… you could even call her a precog in some ways. I rate her as a Thinker 6 and her power keeps growing. Do you think no one would take advantage of that?”

Victoria avoided my eyes, still looking mutinous. However, she was just pouting now. There was no sign of the previous hard anger lingering on her face. The itch started to lessen.

“Those are just two people,” I continued. “And they have neither your family nor your power to protect themselves. What chance do they have out there? Who will protect them? Who will take them in and let them live as people? Certainly not anyone that would recruit them.

“And that’s why,” I said, “I opened my shelter. To give them a home. To give them someone who would protect them. Nothing can change that goal, not even the opportunity to have more capes against the villains.”

“… I looked up to you. You were my hero,” she finally said after a short pause in a small voice. I heard a sharp intake of breath behind me. Ouch, that must’ve hurt, right, Carol?

I brushed a blonde lock of hair off her shoulder, “You don’t need to,” I replied soothingly. “I believe you can be a fantastic hero, with nothing but your own efforts. You are a hero too, Victoria, and you just have to believe in that.”

She was now actively avoiding even the chance of looking at my face. She hung her head as she nodded. “Okay,” she croaked. “Thanks. I-I need to go,” she muttered to the rest of her family.

Victoria flew out. I watched her leave before turning to look at the rest of New Wave. With Victoria gone, they looked far less tense. Although the twin glares of Amy and Carol signaled their displeasure.

“That was unnecessary,” Carol said as I returned to the armchair. “I could’ve handled that. You didn’t need to –“

“Victoria has an emotion aura,” I said bluntly. “If you upbraided her, then she probably would’ve just gotten more upset. It was better for her to leave so we would not be affected.”
Carol had no reply to that. She still looked mighty irritated as she stared me down. Amy was about to say something, but a glance at Carol’s offended expression made her fall silent.

“Alright,” Sarah coughed uncomfortably from the sidelines, “Shall we continue, then?”

“Of course,” I said, staring back at Carol. “I have no objections to a coalition. In fact, I want it. I would be happy to offer my hand in anything New Wave needs. If anyone wants to join, it is up to them. Agreed?”

Sarah nodded. “That’s reasonable. The particulars can be set up later on. But the main thing is that it will be a coalition of unmasked heroes. No secret identities to hide behind.”

I clapped my hands together. “Then it is agreed. My shelter and New Wave will join. We will operate as unmasked heroes and other parahumans are free to join. Sound good?”

Sarah nodded. “Sounds great. We can set up details such as a rapid response team for threats and home protection. Of course, we’ll need a theme and name but –“

I cut her off with a raised hand. “That’s good and all,” I said. “I am glad that you have so many ideas for the active capes. But we also need a space for non-active parahumans. Counseling, second homes, civilian power usage, maybe even an orphanage.”

Sarah appeared thoughtful, but Carol spoke up before her sister could. “And whose defraying the costs for that?” she pointed out. “New Wave is a joint project between our families and unless your shelter has some sort of sponsor, this may be an issue.”

“Donations,” I said simply. And if those donations happen to come from anonymous third-parties… well, at least it goes to good use.

“Donations?” Sarah’s husband said. “I don’t think that’ll be sufficient for the idea you have in mind, Ms Wild.”

“Please, call me Moira,” I said to him. “And don’t worry. I imagine this idea will rapidly become self-sufficient soon enough.”

“How so?”

“Well,” I made a wide gesture, “Consider the different types of powers in existence. If someone had,” I wracked my head for ideas, “textile kinesis, then they could pretty much manufacture quality clothing at phenomenal rates – perhaps faster than a clothing company. Or a bug user. He or she could operate a one-man pest removal service.”

Both sisters looked doubtful at my suggestions. I knew they didn’t sound very impressive, but it was better than risking your life fighting psychopaths in the streets.

“Look,” I said placatingly before anyone could speak, “Just an idea, alright? Not everyone wants to become a hero. And sometimes, parahumans are desperate enough to go down the villain route. A third option like this could mean saving a life.”

“… very well,” Carol said first, much to my surprise. Her face was now devoid of the previous anger, now concentrated as she analyzed the ins and outs of my proposal. “It makes sense when you think about it. But we need to figure out some things first – what will happen to New Wave in the coalition?”

“You can operate as your own team,” I shrugged, “But you’ll be associated with the coalition, I
“Perhaps,” Sarah’s husband said. I really need to learn his name. It wasn’t fair of me to think of him as an attachment to someone else. Even if he was going to die sometime in the future. “But it defeats the purpose of the coalition. Instead, we could rename ourselves and have it become your shelter,” he nodded at me, “and hero team fighting against villains,” he addressed his family.

Again, to my surprise, Mark finally chose to speak at this point. He’d stayed silent the entire discussion, so I wasn’t sure as to why he chose this exact moment to pipe in. “If New Wave was the change we meant to bring to the cape world,” he murmured, “then this organization should be something greater. Grander.” With that, he fell silent.

I blinked. “Thank you, Mark,” I said quite honestly. Really, the friendly reception I was getting here was fantastic. If only everything else could be so easy.

“Very well, then,” Sarah said with a small clap of her hands. “I do think it’s all decided. We still need to decide on a name, along with announcing ourselves to the world at large. And you,” she pointed at me, “need a costume.”

“What.”

“It’s true!” Crystal piped up. She and brother had both been quite bored by the more technical aspects of the earlier discussion, but now seemed to be a little more into the current topic. “A good one. You can’t just go around calling yourself a hero without a proper name or theme.”

I… what?

“But I’m not ~“

“That is, of course,” Sarah nodded to herself, “you intend on joining the hero team. Are you?”

“Well, yes, but I ~“

“Then you need a costume. Don’t worry,” she waved my protests away, “We have a costumer on call. He’s no Glenn Chambers, but he can whip up something good for you.”

Sarah walked out the room with that, already calling up her friend. I sat there. They just…they just double-teamed me. And I still don’t need a costume.

I heard the faintest of chortles come from Carol but when I looked at her, she appeared perfectly in place. In return, I pulled the small link in her bra strap. Judging from her sudden stiffening, she felt it.

Only I get to be the smug bastard, I thought.

I peeked at Crystal’s fervent expression as she chatted with her mom, both glancing at me every so often. Feeling oddly nude under their eyes, I quickly waved out a good-bye to them all. Leaving Amy for last, I shook hands with Carol – whose grip told me she knew what I did – and waved to Mark before tapping the girl’s shoulder.

“Remember the thing we talked about?” I said to her. She looked confused before nodding.

“I can pick you up tomorrow after your shift.”
Amy gave me a hesitant nod. “Alright,” she muttered.

…

With my mostly successful meeting with New Wave, I headed back to the flat to deal with Blasto. The new shelter was nearly done now, and opening would be in a few days. I dived around it before flying through my open window. It was close to nine pm when I came in. That’s it with New Wave. But there’s still Sophia, Taylor, and Lisa to consider.

But the former was the one that giving me the most trouble. Why did she want to meet me? What kind of person was she? Could I ever talk to her without putting Taylor at risk? I didn’t like Sophia in the story – but wasn’t it unfair to judge her younger self for the monster her older self was?

I pushed the thought out of my mind for now. Enough. I still had yet to even see Sophia, much less talk to her. I felt around the flat. No trouble here, it seemed. Satisfied, yanked my jacket off before ambling into the living room. Hestia was idly watching the TV with Iago sitting next to her. At their feet was an irate looking Blasto, gagged and tied together with an impressive amount of duct tape and his shower curtain.

“Hello, minions,” I said to the pair in greeting before sitting in front of Blasto and gently removing his gag. Hestia turned the TV off in response and shifted on the couch, clearly ready to attack Blasto if he got rowdy.

“Bitch,” he said as soon as he could speak. “What the hell? I didn’t do anything to you.”

“No, you didn’t,” I agreed amiably.

“Then why am I here?” he demanded. “Plus, that apartment was rental. How the hell am I going to explain my lab?”

“Not to worry. It’s all handled.” Hopefully. Accord was no slouch in those matters. “And you won’t be returning to Boston anytime soon. In fact, not ever, if you value your neck.”

“What?”

“See, there’s this guy called Accord. We had a deal going on and… well, you were the payment. I take you out, Accord fulfills his end. Capiche?”

Blasto’s irritable face was now considerably paler. “If you were going to kill me,” he interjected, “then I’d be dead in that alley. Why am I here?”

“Well, you see,” I said, “I’d like to employ you. Biotinkers are pretty rare, yeah?”

“Right,” he said, sounding doubtful. “I can see that. What do I get?”

I smiled at his audacity. It took guts to demand equal exchange when you’re tied up and outnumbered. “Well, first, a lab. A decent one. I saw the pathetic set-up you had in your flat. It limited you, didn’t it?”

Blasto shrugged. “I would’ve made it work.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “Probably, even. But why bother? Here, you can have the best of both worlds. In fact, why are you a villain, anyway? The Protectorate would kill to have more Tinkers, regardless of specialty.”
“Armsmaster’s a dick,” Blasto said bluntly. “I tried going to them once. Didn’t work out so I decided to do my own thing. All I want is to experiment in peace – no bureaucratic red tape bullshit. The PRT wasn’t exactly down with the stuff I wanted to try.”

Considering you were insane enough to clone the Simurgh, I can see why, I thought. But on the outside, I simply grinned at him. “Not here, you won’t be,” I said. “What can you do anyway?”

“Creation of life is my specialty,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I can replicate powers, if given the tools and time.”

I nodded. “I can work with that. You get a lab and a chance to work in peace. Good?”

“Can you get grass?” he asked after a pause. I paused in untangling him from the ripped shower curtain.

“Why did you never try making your own?” I yanked more tape from him and winced when I realized it had been on bare skin. Blasto made a sound as the sticky material was ripped off along with a considerable amount of arm hair.

“Never had the time,” he squeaked. “Can you, anyway?”

“Yes.”

Blasto flexed his hand before offering it to me. “Rey Andino,” he said. “Good to meet you.”

I took it. “Moira Wild. These are my associates, Hestia and Iago. Say hi.”

Hestia was friendly enough to offer him a sweet smile. She was also pretty enough to warrant Blasto’s attention. He opened his mouth to say something, but snapped it shut when Iago narrowed his eyes and put a muscled arm around the Greek woman’s waist. I caught Hestia’ eye and we rolled our eyes together.

“That’s fine and dandy,” I said, “But now we should –“

Anything I was going to say was cut off by my phone’s insistent ringing. I pulled it out my pocket and glanced at the caller ID. Stange. Why’re the PRT calling? The press release is for tomorrow.

“Hello?” I said as I put it up to my ear.

“Is this Moira Wild?” the person on the other end inquired.

“Yes, it is.”

“Come to the PRT base now. The girl’s awake.”

My eyes widened. Taylor…!

“Of course,” I said into the receiver before swiping out of the call menu. I stuffed the device into my pocket and rushed to my bedroom. Even as I was pulling my jacket on, I belted out order, “It’s the PRT,” I told Hestia and Iago, “He tries anything funny, stop him.”

To Blasto, I gave him a hard stare. “You’re a smart man, I hope,” I said. “And maybe you know what happened to those who’ve crossed me. And I can go faster than you can run. Okay?”

“Good!” I chirped. With that, I whirled around and started to run towards the living room window even as I pulled it open with my power. Behind me, I heard the snatches of conversation.

“…is she always like that?”

“Trust me, she only gets serious after committing mortal injury.”
Interlude VIII

*Four days ago…*

Sophia walked alone with her schoolbag hoisted on her, circling around the city in long routes that lengthened the time it took her to get home. *I’m just enjoying the scenery*, the girl thought to herself determinedly, *and I need the exercise, anyway.*

The fact that Steven, her stepfather was going to be home tonight didn’t factor in, not at all.

The Boardwalk had a nice view, but not nice enough for her to want to walk its length for the third time. She turned to the right sharply and briskly walked along the alleyway. It wasn’t quite safe for a black girl to be skirting this far down south – even if the Empire was broken – but Sophia didn’t care. A predator didn’t notice the prey around it unless it was hungry, and Sophia was very much so a predator.

She walked on.

The first signs came when the people around her started to look distinctly unfriendly. They didn’t do or even say anything, but Sophia could feel the holes being burnt into her back. *I could still turn around,* Sophia thought as she passed a sneering group of skinheads, *Could head back north. To home. To him.*

There was no question about it. Sophia pressed on, wresting her thoughts away from the topic of her stepfather. He was, for the time being, utterly irrelevant. Instead, Sophia found herself mourning her choice of venue for her strolls. North was where Wild was. There, she could’ve caught a glimpse of the woman, maybe even snag a chance to talk to her. Why had she done this?

Her eye caught the gaze of another group of whites. They were fairly young and one of them was staring squarely at her. The teen was taller than her by a wide margin and had blonde hair that was shaved on the sides. He sneered at the same time she did. His friends seemed to notice, and they began to whisper to one another, glancing her all the while.

Sophia sneered one last time before sliding into an alley separate from the street. It was getting dark now, and all the streetlights were on to cast their illumination upon the dark roads below. Sophia slowed her pace, the sole of her boots crunching the gravel loudly, as she meandered her way through. Home was still at least two kilometers away and she was in no particular hurry right now.

It could wait.

“Are you lost?”

Sophia closed her eyes and halted. Despite the sudden jitters in her knees, the girl found herself oddly calm as she turned to find the blonde teenager and a coterie of his friends. Most of them were male, she noted.

“Not really, no,” she replied dully.

“Then why’s a nigger like you on Empire turf, huh?” Another boy cut in, this one far uglier than the first. He had a brutish face and a clear 88 tattooed on his collarbone.

“The Empire’s dead,” Sophia retorted. She could feel the edges of her power come in, wisps of
black nipping her fingertips as she shifted her center of balance to something more preferable. Spoiling for a fight like this… not a good idea, really. But who the fuck cares about some roughed up Nazis, anyway? She could become incorporeal before any of these losers could come close.

“Shut the fuck up. What’s a nigger bitch like you know?”

“That Moira Wild kicked Kaiser out of town,” the girl said and relished the darkened expressions, “Whipped him like the –“

“She’s just a chink bitch!” the ugly boy snapped before rushing at her. His compatriots hung back, clearly waiting for him to get his blow in. But before he could step any closer, before Sophia could even activate her power, someone dropped into their midst with the sound of whirring buzzsaws. The person didn’t fall to the ground entirely, choosing to float a full head above everyone in the alley, and was dressed in a thick parka and dark jeans. She was faced away from Sophia but the girl still felt her heart leap into her throat.

The woman’s presence seemed to make the air heavier. Sophia watched with wide eyes as the teens all got a good look at her face and paled as one group. To her glee, she saw the way the brutish boy almost seemed to shrink on himself. Wild said nothing for a long while, seemingly content with terrifying them with the sheer weight of her company, before speaking up. Her voice was low but the dead silence did nothing to hinder her words.

“‘Chink bitch’,” her tone was wry, almost sarcastic, and lowered herself from her high position. The assorted boys flinched back as she planted her feet, though Wild didn’t advance on them. She cocked her hip and snorted. “Classy as ever. I don’t suppose telling you renounce your misguided ways would work here?”

No one said anything. Wild wasn’t deterred and just continued her train of thought.

“With the Empire gone,” she said contemplatively, “The whole ‘white supremacist gang’ schtick won’t exactly fly here, right? I mean, the capes were what held the BBPD back from cracking down on your heads. But now your parahuman enforcers are enroute to the Birdcage. Which means you sorry bastards have no buffer between you and law enforcement.”

Slowly, she took a step forward. Everyone tensed as she got closer, looking wild-eyed. The woman just seemed to relish the rising fear.

“Of course, there’s a lot of people the Empire’s pissed off while still extant. Some of them, I imagine,” she grinned, “might love to get their hands on the closest idiot for a deserved beating. Am I making sense to you?”

There was no answer to her question. Wild let the seconds pass before emitting a moue of disappointment. “No takers?” she simpered exaggeratedly before smiling again. “Well, then. Now that we established the basics, why don’t you young men –“

“Fuck you!” someone cut her off. Sophia watched in sudden panic as a boy from the back whipped a gun out of his jacket and pointed it at Wild. “Shut it or I’ll shoot!”

Wild gazed at him in the same manner a teacher might at her most simple student. With a sigh, she continued as though he had never interrupted. “You really should turn yourself in.”

The boy turned red and pulled the trigger. “I said, shut up!”

But nothing happened. The gun clicked a few times as he squeezed the trigger but no bullet came out. The boy looked confused before flushing deeply. Then he remembered who he was facing and
gained a new pallor. Sophia watched the gun in his hands shake violently as he desperately tried to make it work.

Wild tutted. “None of that,” she said and the gun in the boy’s hand flew up. It hovered in the air briefly before twisting apart in a number of small components, all warped by their rough removal. The gun parts danced overhead hypnotically before jerking to a stop. They slowly rotated in the air until they faced the boy, moving slowly in the same manner a guillotine might rise. He had no chance as they suddenly shot forward, pelting vulnerable parts of his body with enough force to bruise. He squealed as they struck him, blindly throwing up his arms in order to keep his face from harm.

His friends were not simply watching in all this. Several had already scattered, disappearing into dark alleys as they scrambled away. Others brought out their guns and found them equally useless as the first boy’s.

It was all futile, however. Wild stood silently as they all dropped like flies, a thin needle-like weapon threading around. No matter what they did – fight or flight – it was nothing in the face of the silent woman. And when they all fell down in a heap, Wild didn’t bother with any show. She simply called her weapon back into the depths of her jacket before turning to face Sophia, her small smile still present.

“You should go home,” she said simply. “Can you do it?”

Sophia nodded, feeling numb. Wild nodded approvingly and patted her back. “Good girl,” she said. Any other person, and it might’ve sounded condescending. But on Wild, it fit. The woman turned without another word and flew upwards, the rapidly blackening sky swallowing her up without a whisper.

Sophia watched her go. Then her eyes swept down to see the unconscious teenagers in the alley. Despite their initial bravado, they’d scattered like rats in the light the moment Wild showed a hint of her fangs.

I... I want to be that.

...

Present day...

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in as Night_Shade

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND threads that have new replies
- OR PM conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed
- Twenty posts per page
- Last ten messages in PM history
- Threads and PMs are ordered chronologically

*You have four infractions

◊ Topic: Moira Wild
(You have a 1 new PM from Slimer)

>Slimer
Posted 1 Nov 2008:
Check it out – Wild seen near the New Wave residence! Also, she pays a second visit to the PRT base. What for, methinks?

(end of page)

Below the message was a long line of blurry photos, possibly snapped using a phone camera. Although they were hard to properly decipher, one could make out the blurry form of a person hanging in mid-air. The location changed several times but the quality of the images never did.

Sophia bit her lip as she glared at the latest batch of photos. Slimer hadn’t the opportunity to snap a proper photo of her fighting someone, unfortunately, but there was no mistaking the person depicted. Wild – even in photographs – had a distinctive air to her that drew the eye.

Why did you come to Brockton Bay? Sophia wondered as she scrolled through the list of pictures. She had seen some posts about the woman coming to the bay a few times, but her meeting with the woman that fateful day was what had driven the point home for her.

Sophia scrutinized the pictures one last time before clicking out of the page. The whole picture thing could be considered creepy from an outsider’s perspective, but only if they didn’t know why she did it in the first place. Wild… she was her guide. She was someone who seemed untouchable in the best way – not like the Triumvirate, who were just cold – but untouchable in the sense of being indomitable. Wild was the nail that stuck up, the thorn in the side of both the heroes and the villains, and neither side could do fuck-all about her even if they wanted to.

Sophia respected that. No, it was more than that. She wanted to be that kind of person. To be the predator that other hunters steered clear of. Wild had done some brutal shit over the years – she may not have that impressive a kill count, but her rate of permanent crippling was unbelievable – and no one ever had the guts to stop her.

Sophia shuddered at the thought. If she was like that… then no one could ever touch her again.

The girl did a few more searches in the thread before logging off her account. Then she slid off her chair to do a stretch in the middle of her room, enjoying the feeling of her muscles as they went with the movement. The movement was automatic, made so rote by training that Sophia was she could do it in her sleep if she wanted, and her mind began to wander.

The announcement of the new shelter being ready for opening had her excited – so much that she went over there after school in hopes of seeing her hero. Instead, all she got was some couple doing interviews.

Swallowing her disappointment had been hard, but the woman – Hessie or something – had promised that she could meet Wild sooner or later. But then it all went silent. No more news about Wild getting into a fight with some villain of the week. It was understandable, since she’d single-handedly chased the majority of the villains in Brockton Bay but still. Wild hadn’t even bothered with a public showing. The PRT agent that liked to lurk on the Moira thread on PHO insisted that there was a press release scheduled for a statement about the recent events in the bay, but Sophia doubted it. What else was there to say? The heroes fucking failed. Wild kicked ass. The villains pissed their pants. Nothing new.
Sophia pulled out of a lunge and began to stretch her hamstrings with a grunt. Wild was probably busy, anyway. So it was likely that she couldn’t make time to meet with some little kid she saw once in a dark alleyway.

But if *Sophia* showed some initiative… well, she had to be impressed by it, right? And she didn’t have track practice tomorrow, anyway, so it was fine for her to leave school earlier than she normally did. Walking to where the shelter was would be easy.

Yes. It was a good plan. Sophia swallowed her smile as she straightened, feeling a small thrill in her stomach that not even Steven’s presence in the other room could muffle.

…
‘Lay Your Weary Head to Rest’ 5.5

It took me only five minutes to get to the base. I rushed in with a burst of cold wind behind me and stomped up to the alarmed receptionist.

“Where is she?” I demanded. “You told me she was awake. Take me to her!”

The woman pushed her glasses up in a flustered manner. “I-I,” she stammered, “The D-Director is waiting for you,” she gestured helplessly at a corner in the room. I immediately turned and found Piggot, surrounded by a couple armed PRT agents. Disregarding the receptionist, I flew across the room within seconds.

“Taylor,” I said tightly. “I want to see her. Now.”

“You’ll have to wait for that,” Piggot drawled. “First, you need to sign this.” She brandished a thick ream of paper at me. I snatched it from her and scanned the page.

“’For guardianship of Taylor Ann Hebert,’ I muttered under my breathe, ‘I, Moira Wild, consent to a full partnership with the PRT and the Protectorate’. What? No, I said I would serve as a PRT consultant!”

“We decided it would be better for you to do this, instead,” Piggot smirked. “Although you won’t become a full member, you will automatically be associated with us.”

No, no, no…! I already had a full partner in New Wave. Fuck you!

“You need me for PR,” I responded. “You think they’ll forget how much you failed, Piggot? How much the Protectorate failed? I can cripple you.” I made an obvious glance down to her legs and enjoyed the way her expression became thunderous.

“Maybe so,” she said darkly. “But you won’t be getting the Hebert girl. And you want her badly, don’t you?”

I resisted the urge to strike her. Clenching my fists, I turned away. “You’re making a mistake,” I said. “The press release is tomorrow. Don’t do this, not now.” Maybe it was because of desperation, maybe it was because Taylor was awake – a faint string of pleading bled into my voice. I hated myself for it as Piggot’s smirk widened an inch.

No. No, not when I’m so close to her.

“Why?” I finally said after calming myself. “I thought we could work together. Why do this, Piggot?”

The woman looked at me, the final dredges of her smugness draining away. She turned sharply with her guards. “Come.”

I bristled at being addressed to like a dog, but trotted after her anyway. We came to an unmarked door that revealed a bare room – a table, some desks, a single drawer, and that was it. Piggot
stepped inside and gestured me in. Her guards moved to follow but she brushed them off. “No need,” she said curtly. “Standing outside is sufficient.”

“But Director –” one tried, before being quelled by a venomous glare. The two shuffled to the two sides of the door and allowed the door to be shut. The sound clanged strangely in the Spartan room, sending my hearing off-balance. Piggot looked unbothered as she sat down heavily in a chair.

I made to follow.

“Well,” I said after locating my own seat, “You just lost what little trust I had in you.”

“Don’t play coy,” Piggot snorted indelicately. Her mouth was a hard, grim slash as she trained gimlet eye on me, “I heard about Boston. Specifically, what happened in Boston. Where is Blasto, Wild?”

I feigned an unknowing expression, but Piggot looked unimpressed. She leaned forward, “The PRT allowed you in existence because you kept your head down most of the time,” she hissed, “And played king of the hill with only the villains. But now you’re toeing the line between what’s allowed and what’s not. You’ve been getting more aggressive since you came to Brockton Bay. Offing every other villain in the city, poaching parahumans, and now you want this girl…” she trailed off before sharpening, “Don’t think we aren’t aware of what you’re doing.”

“And what is it?” I snapped. “Enlighten me as to what my terrible plan is, Director.”

“You’re building up strength,” she said simply. “Don’t play the fool with me. It became clear the moment you came in the city’s bounds.”

I laughed, the sound shrill and disbelieving. “Really?! I proved to Rodriguez that I had no ulterior motives and I can do the same here, Director.”

“You didn’t actively ask for parahumans in D.C.,” Piggot pointed out. I was stumped for only the barest of moments.

“I remember saying that I had personal business with Blasto,” I sneered, “And I want to do what’s right with the Hebert girl.”

“Don’t try,” the blonde woman shut me down. She looked almost bored as she stood up from her seat. “Give it up, Wild,” she said to me as she sauntered towards the door. “You’ve lost.”


I remained seated for a beat before sitting up violently and upending my chair. The two officers beside Piggot looked alarmed as I stormed past, but I didn’t see their raised guns or worried frowns. All I could see was her small, satisfied grin as she took pride in her victory over me. We’d fought and she’d beaten me down with nothing but a few words and stack of paper.

Well. She may have drawn first blood. Hell, she may have won the battle. But now, I knew my weaknesses and I wasn’t going to leave that opening for her any longer.

Piggot had to be eliminated.
The flat was silent when I blew in with all the force of a gale. Iago caught sight of thunderous expression before quickly scurrying into the kitchen and grabbing the bottle I saved for when things got too stressful, eyes cast downwards as he held it out. I took it from him with a toothy smile before vanishing into my room. As I passed through the living room, I saw Blasto open his mouth to say something. Before he could, I trained my eyes on him.

“Yes?” I said lightly. “Do you need something, Blasto?”

I felt Hestia shake her head frantically by the rapid jingle of her earrings. But when I turned, she was seated and still. I looked back at my original target. The former villain seemed to flounder before saying, “You, uh… got somethin’ on your… lip.”

I smiled at him, aware of the trace amounts of blood on my teeth from biting my lip earlier. Blasto seemed to whiten as I drew closer to him. He was frozen stiff, lean shoulders slightly hunched inwards as I patted his back. “Don’t mention it,” I said quietly into his ear. “Really.”

With that, I turned and plodded into my room. There was little else I wanted to do with my night other than get drunk. Then I’d get to work tomorrow. Ridding Brockton Bay of its villains was the barely the beginning of what I set out to do.

With that, I took my first sip of wine.

…

It was a new day when I woke up on my floor with an empty bottle next to me. I got up groggily before stumbling into a cold shower that woke me up faster than any hangover remedy. No one else was out and about when I ventured out, but that was fine by me. I grabbed an apple and painkillers before getting dressed to go out.

The time had come. I had been considering this for several days now, but kept putting it off each time. But now was the time. I had a feeling that such calm waters would not be normal for me very soon.

My brisk pace took me downtown in short order. I circled some buildings a few times in a row to throw any trackers off before disappearing into the lowers floors of a different building. I passed several men, all of whom avoiding looking at me directly as I swept past them. I bypassed several more similar checkpoints before finding Lisa.

She was seated in her office – an old one of Coil’s before he set up his actual lair – looking bedraggled. The moment she saw me, her nose wrinkled.

“Ugh,” she complained. “Have you been drinking again?”

“Only last night,” I replied. “And the situation warranted it.”

Lisa gave me a narrow-eyed look, but seemed to agree nonetheless. Instead, she focused on her screen. “The stocks are going good,” she said, “But someone’s pushing it. I’ll have to handle them.”
“I could always – “

“No,” Lisa said sharply. She looked regretful immediately after. “… not that I don’t appreciate the offer, Moira. But this is my job, so let me do it.”

I didn’t point out the fact that it was only thanks to me she got this far in the first place. Lisa still seemed to catch my unspoken thought and grew marginally annoyed. “Look,” she said after a moment. “You never come without some sort of purpose. Tell me.”

I examined her irritated face. The girl had a small scar on the underside of her jaw, I noted, a tiny one that looked more like an accident than an injury. She was still lean after poor nutrition but she was filling out rapidly after being set on a proper diet for a girl her age and size. Her eyes were piercing as she stared at me, probably unwrapping layer after layer of my characters with each passing second.

Lisa had the potential to be a powerful proponent. Her power had potentials that her parents barely scratched the surface of before she ran away. But with what I was going to say… I honestly didn’t know how she was going to react. I might make my greatest ally here… or my greatest opponent.

Lisa sighed when I stayed silent for too long. “Moira... seriously. I have a lot to do. You have something big to say, clearly, but I can’t see what it is. So speak up or – “

“Lawyers,” I blurted unthinkingly. “How good are your lawyers?”

“My... lawyers?” she said after a pause. “Better than anything you can get publically – or legally. But that’s not what you’re here for.”

I pursed my lips before checking the room with my power discreetly. Lisa saw through my mask, of course, but she couldn’t see the reason for it. After seeing nothing, I drew closer to her. I looked into her green eyes as I prepared my impromptu confession.

“I have a story,” I said to her lowly. “About a woman named Moira Wild. She used to be a fairly normal one – if you discount a life as a mercenary – and she had many hobbies. One of them was reading. There was a story in particular that she liked.”

I took a deep breath as I prepared to spill my deepest secret. “The story was called ‘Worm’. It was about a girl named Taylor Hebert, a girl who could control insects. She was a girl who wanted to be a hero, but became a villain instead.”

As I spoke further, Lisa’s eyes only got wider. But I was barely into the beginning of my narration before she stopped me suddenly. She held her head tightly as I paused. It was only after her breathing got erratic that I started to rub her back comfortably.

“Th-that’s enough for now,” she said through her panting. “T-tell me later. I-I can’t think right now. Please. Just l-leave.”

Despite my itching to bundle her up and take care of her, I backed off. Lisa needed time to regain her trust in adults before I could start throwing my weight around. For now, it was better to just let her be.

“I’ll come back in two days,” I said before I left. “And I’ll continue from there.”
Lisa’s only reply was a whimper of pain.

...

My talk with Lisa largely unsuccessful, I headed for greener pastures instead. I waited outside the General Hospital for only ten minutes before Victoria alighted next to me, looking suspicious but mildly friendly at the same time. She wasn’t in costume, just jeans and a white t-shirt. It didn’t stop the occasional glances at us, but it was better than her being in full regalia.

“Someone you’re visiting?” she said casually as we stood before the great building.

“In a way,” I replied. “I needed to talk with your sister.”

“What?” the blonde teenager asked just as Amy came out dressed in casual jeans and sweater. She glanced between us, looking curious. I noted the dark under-eye bags and the greasiness of her hair. With each passing day, Amy seemed to look more and more tired.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Victoria demanded as soon her sister came into range. To my surprise, Amy didn’t immediately spill.

“It’s not that important, Vicky. Besides, Mom knows about it so don’t worry. Just… just stay back and watch, alright?” She walked up to me quickly before Victoria could muster up a rejoinder.

I didn’t remember seeing her talk to Carol about the flying, but perhaps it was just done when I wasn’t there. It wasn’t like I saw New Wave all that often. I led Panacea further outside with Glory Girl watching in the background, looking both baffled and curious despite herself. I formed a staircase of brick in front of her and said, “Get on.”

She gave me a dubious look before taking shaky step. Despite her doubts, the brick remained solid as the ground beneath her feet. I formed my own set of stairs and walked up to a brick platform that was forming in mid-air. Amy took a little longer to reach the platform and clutched my jacket when she got on the platform. Even when she got her footing, her hand remained entangled with my clothes. We started to drift upwards.

“So,” I said to her as we went higher, “You have anything to say to me?”

Amy seemed to think about it. She drew closer as she said, “What did you do to my sister when you came to our house?”

“What needed to be done,” I replied. “Your sister has an aura, yeah?”

Amy nodded.

“That aura makes it hard to talk to her,” I stated. “You can’t even get upset at her properly because of it. She’ll just project anger or fear or whatever to make you back down. This makes disciplining her harder than most teenagers.”

“I know that,” Amy muttered. “But not me. I have immunity to it.”

Oh, if you only knew. My heart ached as I glanced at her assured expression. She was just hitting puberty now. But soon, she’d realize that her feelings for her sister were more than familial affection. And then the fecal matter would hit the rotary engine.
We flew high enough that we could see over the majority of the buildings in Brockton Bay with ease. I saw a blonde flash in the corner of my eye but ignored it in favor of Amy.

“Why’re we doing this?” she asked when we came to a halt.

“Why not?” I replied unthinkingly as I looked around the city. “Look around you. Isn’t it nice?”

Amy looked down. “Uh… yeah? I mean, I guess so.”

Her answer was less than moralizing, but I remained cheerful. “You comfortable with this height?”

The girl looked down. “Vicky and I flew higher than this before.”

“Then we’ll have to keep going up,” I said to her. Amy looked doubtful, but didn’t give a voice to her hesitation.

I took her hand off my jacket and into my own before continuing higher. We were approaching level with some small mountains when Amy stopped us. “Okay! That’s enough. I – I can’t really breathe right now.”

I lowered us. “Now?”

“Better. Thanks.”

“Alright. Come on. Hold my hand.” Amy slipped her hand into my own and held on tightly. I glanced down at the city below us. The bay seemed tiny from here. The lights were simply pinpricks of bright color. “Close your eyes.”

She did.

I took the bricks away from under our feet. Amy frowned at the rasping sound coming from beneath us. “Hey, what are you – “

“You can scream,” I said to her just before we fell.

Amy managed a short yelp before she started to fall. Her speed was slower than an actual freefall, but it was more realistic than anything Victoria could offer to her. I followed her down as we tumbled down to earth. Despite my joyous excitement, I kept a close eye on the girl. The discs I slipped into her clothes mid-way pulled her up just as we approached the skyline.

With Amy beside me, we swooped over a building before flying hard to the bay. Amy was no longer screaming, but her eyes were wide as we went down. Bay water flecked her face as we skimmed the bare surface like gulls. I did another swoop around the harbor before pulling up into the sky again. The bricks that had been following us the entire time made a platform that we dropped down on.


“I-I,” she stuttered, “Is… is this what flying feels like to y-you?”

“Mhmm.”
“It was… it was incredible,” she gasped. “Just… oh god. I-I – can we do that again?”

“Of course,” I said to her. “Anytime you want. I do it as both fun and stress relief. The falling… it just takes away everything from you, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Amy murmured. “It really, really does. Not even flying with Vicky did that.”

“Because she’s the one flying,” I pointed out. “In this? This is all you, by yourself. The wind, the water, and the sky… it’s you whose feeling it all.”

“It is,” she agreed. Her expression dropped. “I need to go home soon, though.”

“We can always do it tomorrow,” I said.

“I have another shift at the hospital,” she said, now sounding upset. “Lots of people need me, you know.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “You have duties. I get that. But your shift always ends, right?”

Amy looked confused. Then her face cleared. “Really?” she asked.

“Anytime you want it,” I said. “I’ll come over to the hospital after your shifts ends.” I ruffled her hair and the girl’s previous hesitation finally melted away. She giggled as I mussed her hair.

“Thanks.” And sinker.

In the end, Amy’s beatific expression was all worth Victoria’s reaction. Though the constant itch in my back that lasted until she left was quite irritating. Still, Victoria had done her part in assisting me. With her help, I knew where Carol’s law firm was.

I drifted higher up and pointed myself towards Captain’s Hill.

...

Seneca & Associates was stationed in a fairly nice office building. I headed straight in, past the awkward looks at my civilian wear in the business atmosphere, to where Carol’s office lay. Victoria said her mother usually did paperwork in the evenings before heading home, so she should still be behind her chair. I could easily snag her for a quick discussion.

I found her room at the end of a long corridor. I marched up to it and opened it without ceremony. “Carol Dallon,” I said loudly, “How good of a lawyer are you?”

The woman barely looked up at me. Instead, the man who’d been standing right next to her jerked up in surprise, several expressions flitting across his face as he caught sight of my face. Finally, he seemed to settle on perplexed bafflement. With his bright red hair, it made him look especially comical.

“Moira Wild?” he said in a dazed voice.

Carol finally looked up. “Unfortunately,” she said stiffly before shaking a stack of papers at him, “Come on,” she said, sounding slightly impatient, “The rest is up to you.”
I stepped aside politely as the man moved past me. But before he stepped out fully, he half-turned to address Carol, “You are coming to the meeting, yes?”

“Without a doubt,” Carol responded. “See you later, Alan.”

My eyes widened. Holy shit. Everything clicked into place and I shrunk against the wall as Emma Barnes’ father slipped past me. I watched him go, considering. What sort of uses did he have, I wondered, in my campaign for Taylor? I pushed the thought away and turned to Carol. She looked back at me with a raised brow.

“He’s married,” she said before I could speak. I laughed dryly.

“Please,” I said as I ambled in, “Give me some credit.”

With that, the mood was set. Carol put her pen down and looked at me fully for the first time.

“Well, then, Moira,” she said smoothly, “Let us talk.”
“So you’re saying that the Director went against her deal with you?” Carol looked disturbed, a wrinkle knitting the skin between her eyebrows. She pulled out a legal pad and began to jot down notes after another. I watched her pen fly across the paper, feeling the previous night’s anger stew in my gut as I tried to put my thoughts into some order. So far, it was going rather poorly. It was only thanks to my periodic breathing exercises that I wasn’t causing every small object in the room to spontaneously start vibrating with the force of my impotent fury.

“Yes,” I said tightly. “We worked it out. I assist her, and she gives me guardianship of the girl. I hadn’t expected her to spin it around into this.” I made a wide gesture with my hand that was both vague and on-point. Carol hummed as she tapped her pen against her cheek.

“… you know this won’t hold up in actual court,” she said after a while. “I mean, the PRT has only marginal oversight over parahuman children. At most, they can detain them if they’re seen to be mentally unstable. Otherwise, these matters usually go to the parahuman branch of Child Services.”

“Child Services,” I spat, “Is over-worked, under-staffed, and apathetic. I’ve already proven myself capable of rearing powerful children. Piggot isn’t doing this because she’s concerned – she’s doing this because I embarrassed her in public by doing what she couldn’t.”

“Perhaps,” Carol conceded after a moment of silence. “But for now, the Director’s reason for this isn’t important. You have your press release this afternoon, I assume you’re going to do something there?”

“I was thinking about it,” I admitted after a short pause. “Why?”

“Don’t,” Carol said directly. She put her pen down. “All you’re going to do is cause an inflammatory war between you – and New Wave subsequently – and the PRT. You’re not a child. Going the direct route by metaphorically pushing them in a ditch is going to cause you nothing but trouble in the long run.”

I bit my lip, causing the scabbed over remains of last night’s wound to sting painfully. My eyes watered as I used the small pain to clear my mind of the clustering emotions. Unbeknownst to Carol, the small pins holding up her certifications on the wall behind her were vibrating violently.

_Inhale. Exhale._

“Then what do you suggest?” I inquired slowly after the pins stilled and my anger was bottled up.

Carol laced her fingers. “Don’t do anything overt,” she advised. “Make the Director think you’re playing her game. Make sure the public knows who was responsible for the riddance of the Empire – while still admitting your faults. Make it clear that you are working to pay for the damages. And finish up with an endorsement for the shelter.”

“But then, the girl – “

“Never mind her,” Carol cut me off. Then her tone softened. “Why are you so desperate to take her in, Moira? It honestly doesn’t look all that good.”
I paused as I mulled over my answer. Finally, after gathering my thoughts into a semblance of order, I spoke. “Her name’s Taylor,” I admitted reluctantly. “And her dad’s name is Danny. He… he died in the fire. Lung’s fire.”

“So?” Carol asked. “What about it?”

“I was the one responsible for the fire,” I acquiesced miserably. “I baited Lung into following me so I could use him in the fight against the Empire. I just… I just hadn’t expected it to be so damaging.”

Carol didn’t respond. Her eyes looked far away as she considered the matter. “You want to take her in… because you took her father away?” she said softly. I nodded.

The woman stood up from her seat. I watched her walk over to a window and stare out into the Brockton Bay skyline, turned away so I could not see her face. I nevertheless felt the minute vibrations of her jacket’s buttons. But when she spoke, her voice was steady as ever.

“New Wave will help you,” she asserted. “And the girl, too. We have a legal team on stand-by for matters like this – you can call on their services anytime. Just don’t make a mess of the press release and you should be fine. Alright?”

I smiled, grateful for her help. “Thank you,” I said with surprising warmth. Carol wasn’t all that bad – unless Amy was involved, of course – and she had truly extended a hand to me when I needed it. I got up to leave. However, before I did, I turned. I still had a question wandering my head after this.

“Say… why are you helping me out against Piggot, anyway?”

Carol didn’t turn. “You aren’t the only one she’s burned in her ‘deals’,,” the woman said bitterly. “Why do you think we formed our own private team?”

I processed her answer. “Oh.”

With that, I left.

…

I returned to the flat and bypassed Blasto as he came out of the bathroom covered in pink gunk. He squeaked as I burst past him, almost fumbling his hold on several beakers, but managed to recover before he could drop them. Iago caught sight of me when he opened his door and wisely retreated back inside. I didn’t see Hestia anywhere.

I dropped my rumpled jacket and jeans for something different. My usual image wouldn’t work here. I needed something that left an impression.

I examined my outfit. The tailored, unending blackness of the pantsuit stripped away any sense of softness I might’ve had. Every curve and supple line was replaced by sharp angles and planes, every sense of femininity went beyond simple emphasis and into borderline aggression. My make-up was minimal – nothing but a simple slash of red in place of my lips.

I slipped discs into every crevice that offered space. My tranq-needles, refilled after a message to
Parker, went into their halo formation around my head, pointed ends gleaming as they bristled with every pulse of building anticipation. Opening the window, I pulled up gravel from around the street. They streamed into the legs of my suit and into my hair, making it ripple as if it were moving on its own. The gravel here was getting a reddish tint, making the swarming cloud look rusty in the light.

Fully armed, I opened my window and called up a few discs to serve as my platform. No clumsy bricks for me, not this time.

…

*Meanwhile…*

“How are you feeling?”

Taylor refused to look up at the doctor’s words. She focused her gaze on her sheet, twisting it this way and that. The fabric was smooth to her fingers, smoother than even the sheets she and dad used to have.

*Used to.*

Her grip tightened. “A bit not good,” she said when the pause became unbearable. Twist. Twist. The sheet grew steadily more wrinkled in her hands.

“You miss your dad, huh?” asked the doctor in a sympathetic tone. “It’s alright to miss your family, you know.”

Taylor didn’t reply to him. The doctor had been visiting since yesterday, always inquiring about her health. Sometimes, he asked about her dad, but her reaction always made him back off. He only mentioned a different family once, but stopped when he realized his pen was losing shape.

Today’s session was the same as the day before. He asked a couple arbitrary questions about her feelings, inquired as to whether she wanted anything, before he finally left. Throughout this, Taylor just kept her head down and played with the bed sheet.

The doctor sighed. “Do you want to do anything today?” he asked haplessly.

Twist. Twist. Twist.


Taylor glanced at the black screen fastened to the opposite wall. Slowly, she nodded. Background noise wouldn’t make much difference. In fact, if she showed some willingness, maybe he might go away a little sooner.

The doctor perked up. Almost dropping the remote in his indecent haste, he quickly switched the television on. The first thing that played was the local Brockton Bay news channel.

“… coming to you live, reports about the PRT press release is…”

“Aha. Sorry. Let’s look for something more interesting, shall we?” Before he could switch channels,
however, Taylor stopped him.

“Wait,” she said, eyes riveted to the screen. “Who’s that?”

The doctor looked up with a frown. “Oh. That’s… um, that’s Moira Wild.”

Taylor stared at the woman’s face. She was pale – almost bloodless – and seemed to have palpable air about her even beyond the confines of the screen. Compared to the bright costumes of the heroes around her, she cut a swathe in her absolute black. Wherever she stood, the woman – Moira Wild – seemed to catch the eye.

Twist. Twist. Twist.

*She was the one at the hospital. The one who hugged me.*

“Does she live here?” Taylor asked in a low voice, still staring. The doctor glanced at her.

“No. She came to Brockton Bay a few weeks ago at most.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Taylor muttered finally. She leaned against her bed and closed her eyes. “Um… sorry. I’m kind of tired. Could you leave?”

“Actually, I –” a peculiar look passed over the man’s face. Then he smiled. “Of course. Do you want the TV on?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright.” He handed her the remote before gathering up all his stuff. With a small, friendly wave, he stepped out into a brightly lit hallway and left Taylor to her thoughts.

*People all around… all of them liars… so loud… who was screaming?*

*A man – a hero – dressed in blue, rushes at her… he has something in his hand… then he doesn’t have it anymore… stop, Taylor thought, stop, don’t hurt me… and he fell…*

*There are more people but the girl doesn’t care anymore… liars, liars, liars… she sees someone coming… who is…?*

*Then a voice, a loud voice, cuts through the screams… “Danny Hebert!” it gasps… she sees the woman who said it… small, black-haired, dressed in a green gown… but she no longer matters because her father comes and all is right once more.*

Until it isn’t.

Taylor turned around in her bed and cast her eyes at the TV again. The camera was focused on the woman’s face. She didn’t look as tired as that day in the hospital, but her face and small figure was unmistakable. Taylor examined her, using her as a buffer against the memories.

*You were there, at the hospital. You were the one to say his name.*

*Moira Wild… how did you know my dad?*
Interlude IX

Unknown time…

Lala was just a nickname – something to give label to the otherwise nameless, unknown girl.

Her oldest memory was waking up under a tree, sitting up and looking out at a valley illuminated by twinkling lights that seemed to stretch out into forever. It looked so beautiful – so fantastical that it could not possibly have been a bad thing. Slowly, she had started to amble towards it, occasionally tripping in the dark as she did so.

She walked to the lights, and found they were buildings. And the valley was a city. Big metal boxes with windows rolled by noisily, smelling like tar and grease. There were people on the streets, and they all pointed and stared as she stumbled past them. She didn’t realize it at first, but she was naked and spotted all over by mismatched patches of cloth. They tried to speak with her, but she couldn’t understand them. She tried to talk too but her mouth was all wrong. Like there was something connected to her lips, something that stretched uncomfortably and tugged on the skin whenever she moved her mouth.

The people around her also wore cloth. All of which were in a dizzying array of patterns and styles and colors. But the cloth covering her body did not hang off like theirs did. It was a part of her.

What am I?

She could not remember what ought to have been there, what she had looked like. But she knew this was not it. Had she been pretty? What had her home looked like? What had happened to her? Questions came in a torrent, making her head spin as she tried to figure out the strange, foreign world out.

She wandered for hours. Then someone handed her a coat. It was man, a man with kindly eyes and grey hair. He tried to speak to her, but the girl could only stare at him dumbly, wondering what was wrong with her. Then came the screaming. Strange men, all dressed in black gear, poured out of a van that had skidded to a stop next to her and wielded a weapon that released a bang. The old man fell and the men gathered around her. One stepped forward and stuck a bag over her head.

The men took her to a building, a big one. All filled with pallets of boxes. They tied her to a chair and took the bag off, revealing a strange man before her. He wore a black and green bodysuit. It covered all of him to the point that she wondered if he was a monster like her. He did not speak for a long time, just sat and stared at her. Then he touched her with the only part of him that was not covered – the tips of his fingers.

And then he said the first words she understood since she had woken under the tree.

“You can heal, can’t you?”

She had no money, no connections, no possessions, and no skills. But she had one thing he wanted – her power, weak though it was. The man – he called himself Perception – told her so. He said it while glaring, as if she was to blame.
He named her Lala, and called her that in a way that made her shiver.

She could heal, and the healing could extend to others, but she had to be hurt first. Perception broke her legs with sledgehammers, cut off the small fingers of both her hands and all the toes of her left foot with pruning shears. He peeled the skin off her arms and wrenched her fingernails out. He had her right arm amputated. She had fingers and toes made of canvas for two days while they grew back. Her legs took a week, her arm took three.

He told her that, toweling off his hands until the sink was permanently stained red and she could not scream any more.

Perception kept her until the day she killed him.

She escaped, ran off into the streets of San Diego and bounced around for a while in the turf wars, fell in with a gang called the Heap. They took her in, fed her up. Bucktooth was their leader, and he kept them in line by getting them addicted to his ‘special recipe’. When he thought Lala was broken in, he told her he wanted her turning tricks, said she would be able to charge more because she was different. A freak. About a year into this one of the other girls, Hershey, suggested they raid the boss’ box and escape with the money.

They escaped all right. It went off without a hitch.

Hershey was her friend and she’d reached out to her the day she joined. She never called her a freak, not even when it looked like Lala wasn’t listening. But when they reached her boyfriend’s car, she had turned and put one in Lala’s leg.

“She needs to distract him,” she had said, shrugging, before sliding into the car and laughing as they roared away into the night.

Hershey got away. Lala didn’t. And when the Heap caught up to her, it might have been better if Hershey just shot her in the head instead.

Bucktooth talked about selling her off. However, before he could, another villain broke into the safe house where the Heap was keeping Lala. Prowler looked like a cat-man with too many teeth, wild hair, and chitin on his arms. He’d sniffed Bucktooth’s ravaged body disdainfully before looting the place when he caught sight of Lala, huddled in the darkest corner available, not daring to breathe. He’d simply dropped all the cash and carried her out of the shithole without a glance back.

When Lala asked him why, he just cocked his and scratched one grey, pebbly arm.

“M’name’s Otis,” he said. Lala wasn’t sure if this was supposed to mean anything, but he didn’t act like it should, so she didn’t try.

…

They stayed together. She stayed clean. Somehow, she had thought things would get better.

Prowler had strange mood swings, violent fits that drove him into a crazed frenzy. It had gotten bad enough that he would make the news every week. Usually vandalism with no casualties, but he was frightening and he was never subtle about it.

Nevertheless, he never let it get bad around her, even if he had made the world’s most wicked
scratching post out of an oak tree one time. Then he realized she had seen and immediately stopped his furious mauling out the bark to slink away, looking downcast. He would stay like that for days on end, moping a little ways off, sneaking worried glances at her from time to time.

Lala never worried that he'd turn on her, and sometimes... sometimes he was so gentle that she couldn't imagine him hurting anyone. To her, he was Otis, not Prowler.

But it was bad for everyone else, and Prowler had a bounty. And with bounties came Tapio. Tapio was an up-and-coming cape with an impressive power, and ambition, and he made it his business to hunt them down.

A week before in Salt Lake City...

The scrape of brick on metal was deafening as the fire escape and the side of the building collapsed around her ears. Lala scrambled back, desperately seeking cover while trying to keep her footing. A long, ragged cut ran down the length of her arm but she was in no state of mind to try and heal it. The girl yelped when a portion of the roof tumbled down a scant meter from her.

“C’mere!”

Claws clamped over the back of her dress. Otis, ever faithful, hoisted her over his shoulder and made a running leap out of a collapsed window frame to a separate rooftop. Lala was careful to keep limp in the sudden acceleration, limbs flapping as they moved through the air. Otis was trying to be gentle but there was no time for hesitation and Lala winced as her body jerked painfully.

Once on the roof, Otis set her down as if she was made of china before turning to growl at the street below, “Where’s da bastar’?” he snarled gutturally through his fang-filled maw.

His tongue whipped out, tasting the air, and the armor on his forearms flickered with blue forcefields. His lips were parted in a broad snarl, revealing rows upon rows of needle-thin teeth that could’ve made sharks green with envy. Lala noted the sluggish bleeding in his arm with what appeared to be a pipe sticking out of it. Otis, all in all, looked heavily battered with spots of blood everywhere and one of his legs looked particularly damaged.

“Oi, fight me ya cowar’!” Otis howled, seemingly heedless of his injuries.

“Over here!” Tapio shouted back, appearing in a flurry of bright lights on a rooftop opposite theirs. He was dressed in a bodysuit with metal armor plates that gleamed cleanly in the morning light and a short cape was slung over his shoulder. His face was obscured by a mask that revealed on his eyes through a thin slit.

Lala whipped her pistol out and fired three times in rapid succession, but Tapio only laughed and disappeared again. Five bullets left, she thought.

“Bastar’.” Otis reiterated for effect, hacking up a globule of watery phlegm on the rooftop. His face relaxed from its agitated snarl, though he was still radiating anger.

Lala just hung her head, suddenly exhausted. Tapio was gone for now, giving her time to treat Otis before he went and died. She knelt down beside the cat-man and prodded the pipe. Immediately, he flinched.
“No need,” he said hastily but Lala ignored him. She pushed him until he conceded, handing her his injured arm. By the time Lala got to pulling the pipe out, Otis was actively squirming.

“Hold still!” Lala snapped. When he didn’t, she grabbed the puncture and kneaded it until he whimpered. She huffed, “Idiot.”

She wrapped Otis’ arm with the cloth and tied it off tightly enough to stop the bleeding before she drove an ice pick into her own bicep. She grabbed the tourniquet tied loosely above the stab, specifically prepared for this moment, in her teeth and yanked it tight. It only needed to stop the bleeding for a few seconds until her powers overtook the injury and the wound closed. Otis had a minor healing factor of his own – his injury would take even less time. A couple minutes at most.

Tapio reappeared some distance away and Lala snapped towards him. She drew more cloth from the bag slung over her shoulder and quickly formed a few rudimentary shapes from it. Slowly, they began to march towards Tapio, single-minded drive pushing them onerously onward.

“How are you doing?” she asked, and staggered under his weight when he faltered. “Get up!”

The connection to her cloth golems fell apart before Otis could regain his feet properly. Tapio was closing in on them.

…”

“That’s enough, you two!”

The bastard was grinning and levitating high above them, his shroud of light burning like a collection of stars – the very image of a brilliant and dashing hero. He wasn’t bleeding. He was hardly scuffed. PRT agents milled around in the street, cutting off that route of escape.

“This chase is at an end, my nemesis, and you have nowhere to go. Surrender and kneel!”

Otis shivered and glanced at Lala. Although his arm was better, his ankle was twisted wrong. There would be no running for him. But Lala… she could still escape.

“Kneel!” Tapio cried out again.

Otis shuddered, and dropped to his knees.

“Go, Lala. Ya can make i’,” He ground out, his tongue stumbling around in that mouth of razors.

“Like hell,” she rejoined, gripped by a kind of savage triumph in their defeat, a fierce antipathy rising in her chest. She wanted to scream streams of profanity and invective, to claw off Tapio’s ridiculous mask and make him pay for every injury Otis had suffered.

The both knelt, hands on their heads, as Tapio stared down at them and waited for the PRT agents to surround them. Prowler would be lucky to get anything less than the Birdcage. Lala was in a better boat herself – she had only resisted arrest. Tapio was the one responsible for the destruction of property, but they would probably be charged with that as well.

By the time the PRT agents had led them down the streets, Lala had given up all hope. She saw the vans lined up before them. And the man standing beside them, cheerfully ignoring the PRT agent trying to lead him away.

“Now, this is a real interestin’ situation, y’know?”
Tapio blinked. Lala stumbled.

The man who had spoken was wearing biker leathers, but the jacket was open and displayed what had to be the most offensively loud Hawaiian shirt she ever had the displeasure to see. It wasn’t simply ugly. It was a sin against nature, with its pineapple print and garish electric blue coloring. What made it even worse was the motorcycle helmet worn by the man – solid black except for the disturbingly wide-eyed, manic grin painted in reflective silver. It seemed to scream ‘cape’.

An Asian stood a little ways behind him, looking immensely bored. She checked her nails for a moment before looking over.

“You’re not that good at covering your trail, asswipe,” she sneered in a strong Boston accent. Her comment was directed at Tapio, who sputtered indignantly.

“Hey, you – !”

“Real interestin’,” Motorcycle Helmet repeated, cutting him off. The PRT agents fanned out while the foam sprayers came up, but Motorcycle Helmet and his partner didn’t move. Both faced Tapio squarely.

“Who are you?” Tapio’s demand came out a little squeaky – understandable, really, with that unsettling helmet. He recovered quickly and continued with more authority. “Unless you two are villains, I’m going to have to ask both of you to leave. This is a crime scene, and the villains in question have been apprehended. ”

“Tapio, Tapio, Tapio,” the man drawled, “This entire block’s a crime scene, and just so happens, we live here. And th’ name’s Smiley, just Smiley, ‘eva pleased to meet ya. And this fine lady,” he waved to his partner, “is Bakuda.”

The woman waved.

He pulled a wallet out from his back pocket, and removed a slip of paper. “My card,” he handed it to Tapio who, after some hesitation, moved to collect it.

“… this is a crayon smiley face. It’s been laminated.” The hero said after a disbelieving pause. Lala couldn’t hold back the snort at that.

“Yeah, but it’s red crayon. Real classy, red crayon,” Smiley replied cheerfully, putting away his wallet. Tapio looked a little stunned.

“Sir, we’re going to have to ask you to leave,” one of the suited PRT agents said. They weren’t pointing the sprayers at him anymore, but they were still deadly serious. Lala and Otis remained silent.

“O’ course. Just had some freelance heroin’ to do, if ya don’t mind.”

“Sir, we appreciate the offer, but the villains are contained-“

“I’m not talkin’ about the Raggedy Ann ‘n Wolfman,” Smiley said, jerking a thumb at Lala and Otis, “much as I can respect a smile like that. You missed another villain.”

The agent glanced at Scrapdoll and Prowler while Tapio perked up, “Another one?”

“Yup. Thinkin’ it might be a Master or somethin’.”
The PRT was on guard again, and the sprayers came up, but this time only about half of them were pointed at Smiley and his partner. Tapio took flight and scanned the street from shoulder height.

“You want to explain that?” The agent asked.

“Well, sure.” Smiley said cheerfully, and stepped aside for Bakuda, who was brandishing a recorder. “She’s got it.”

The PRT set up a perimeter and Tapio leaned in closer to hear. Lala couldn’t see what they were doing from where she was kneeling. She turned to look at Otis instead. He was drooping, his ears laid back. He looked beaten. They both were.

Bakuda pressed play.

“That’s enough, you two!”

“This chase is at an end, my nemesis, and you have nowhere to go. Surrender and kneel!”

The woman rewound it and pressed some more buttons. A single word came out.

“Kneel!”

“Ya see it?” Smiley asked proudly.

Both the PRT officer and Tapio shake their heads.

“That’s enough, you two!”

“This chase is at an end, my nemesis, and you have nowhere to go. Surrender and kneel!”

“Kneel!”

“How ‘bout now?” Smiley didn’t sound friendly any more. Bakuda also looked distinctly hostile, a hand edging towards the inside of her jacket.

The agent shook his head, but Tapio was starting look a little uneasy. His voice trembled as he stammered, “There isn’t anything on that video. It’s just me capturing –”

Smiley took the recorder from his partner. “Here, I’ll help you.”

He turned and stepped towards the two villains. Passing Lala, he crouched by Otis, who could only snarl at him weakly. He pressed play.

“Kneel!”

Otis flinched back, like he’d been struck.

“Surrender and Kneel! Surrender and Kneel! Surrender and Kneel!”

Otis shuddered and, to Lala’s horror, his eyes rolled back and he fainted.

“Stop! Stop it! What are you doing?” she screamed, trying to stand. “Bastard, get away from him! Stop it!”

Otis was all she had. What was the bastard doing to him?
“Easy, girl, easy. He’s fine.” Smiley said, patting her shoulder and standing to look at the assorted agents and Tapio.

“Now, we got some mighty heavy questions for ya. This man’s got a trigger phrase brainwashed into ‘im. Why’s some fine, upstanding hero got a brainwashed villain on call?” He glanced between the agents and Tapio. “That’s some ultra-level fucked up shit, ya know?”

Lala stared as the PRT agents shifted their sprayers to cover Tapio too. The hero’s face was getting progressively greener.

The agent spoke after a pause, “All right, everyone, calm down. Tapio, get your feet on the ground. We’ll take everyone back to HQ and get this sorted out with the Director.”

Bakuda suddenly laughed, “Fine by me,” she said smugly, “getting him under lock and key before he has a talk about this. That works. Yeah.”

Tapio’s eyes widened. He began to fly higher, drifting out over their heads.

“I’m making the call. Master and Stranger protocols are in effect. Tapio, land.” The leading agent barked. Tapio was going higher and higher, his eyes darting about. He dodged a spray of foam. Smiley started to laugh with his partner, and continued to do so even after another agent kicked the back of his knee and forced him to the floor. A different agent apprehended his partner in much the same manner.

“Land, Tapio!”

Tapio panicked at the order and rolled over, darting over the nearest van, and avoiding the spray of a foam nozzle. With a shower of brilliant light, he disappeared just before a spray of foam could strike him. Just like that, he was gone. And the PRT was scrambling and talking over their radios and Lala didn’t have a clue what just happened.

The man, Smiley, and the woman had stopped laughing, just chuckling as they watched the chaos unfold.

“What the hell?” Lala breathed.

…

They loaded up Smiley and his companion with them in the same van, both in restraining manacles. He howled with laughter the whole time and Lala was quickly brought to the conclusion that he was completely insane. Bakuda just looked bored again, occasionally examining her binds with an interested eye before leaning back with a huff.

“Hey!”

The lunatic’s helmet jerked in her direction. Smiley was back to sounding cheerful but the insane grin just made him sound demented.

“Hey, hey, hey!”

“Shut up already!” Lala shot back, at her nerve’s end thanks to his crazed antics.

“I didn’t catch yer names. To whom do I owe th’ pleasure?”

“Scrapdoll.” Lala replied after a moment, choosing to use her cape name instead. Not that she had
much of a secret identity to hide, being made of fabric and all. And then, because she might as well, “What did you do to Prowler?”

“Jeez, sorry about that.” And Smiley really did sound sorry, “He ought to be fine, best I know. Yeah, Bak?”

The woman jerked her head over with a gusty sigh and examined Otis briefly. She shrugged. “He should be fine. The command was supposed to incapacitate him, not kill.” Bakuda paused thoughtfully before kicking Smiley. “And don’t call me that.”

Lala opened her mouth, closed it, and the PRT agent ride-along barked at them to quiet down from the front. So, instead she looked over at Prowler, who sat limp and glassy-eyed, looking very lost.

The rest of the ride passed in silence.

At the Protectorate HQ building they were split up. The last Lala saw of Otis was him, shackled and straight-jacketed, being led down a separate hallway. She was stripped, showered, and given a jumpsuit with the word ‘villain’ displayed broadly across the shoulders by an unsmiling female agent. Then she was dumped into a featureless cell. Lala stared at the concrete wall, seated on the unforgiving cot, hoping that Otis was alright.

She didn’t know what to expect. A long wait or… something else. But she was only beginning to get bored when the intercom chirped and she was instructed to stand facing the door. A pair of uniformed PRT troopers was waiting for her. Instead of fully restraining her, she was simply handcuffed by that same humorless woman, and led down the hallway and opened a door to a small conference room.

“—of all genders and species, by all genders and species. All because I tried to overcome my inadequate grasp of the concept of ‘fun’. Yeah… not doing that one again.” Smiley concluded. “Still, I managed to get away, get my sense of humor back, and heal up in the end. So it’s all good.”

Smiley had discarded the leather jacket, now hung over the back of a chair, but still wore the eye-watering Hawaiian shirt and his helmet and gloves. He was leaning back in his chair till he was balancing it on just two legs. Bakuda was in another chair, seemingly asleep judging from her closed eyes. Across from them, Director Whelks sat staring at Smiley, a little slack-jawed. He was a short, balding man in his late thirties, broad shouldered and stocky with a nose that had been broken at some point in the past. He was, all in all, oddly akin to a bulldog in a suit.

“Er, yes. I see.” Whelks managed faintly.

Lala considered asking. For a moment. Just a moment. She immediately discarded the thought when she caught sight of Otis in a fourth chair. He was still shackled and muzzled, but had lost the straight-jacket somewhere.

Director Whelks shook himself and looked at her. “Have a seat, miss.”

Lala sat down next to Otis. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to verify his safety, but the setup felt… unreal. Too good to be true, in fact. She was still in shock and a part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

There was an expectant silence that the Director broke.
“Tapio has discarded his phone. We are trying to reach him at home and Galerius has attempted to
divine his intended actions, but it seems his intentions are… indecipherable, for the moment,”
Whelks sighed. “Which leaves us with you two.”

Lala’s eyes darted to Smiley. Just ‘you two’? The painted smile betrayed nothing and the other
woman was still napping.

The Director himself looked a bit sour. “Prowler – wanted for multiple counts of assault, and is
Burglary. Drug dealing. Prostitution.”

Lala looked at the floor. It wasn’t like that. Not in the way he said it. When she looked up, she
found Bakuda awake and staring at her. Her blue gaze was piercing but somehow… warm at the
same time. Smiley wasn’t even looking in her general direction.

He leaned forward, cocking his head, as he spoke to the Director. “And all of it’s cast ‘n doubt
now, amiright?”

The Director glanced at him and his scowl deepened. “Indeed. Which brings us here.”

He sighed and fell silent.

And then Lala cleared her throat. “What’s going on?” she asked in a shaky voice. “Why did… why
did Prowler do… that when you played that recording? I… I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Otis growled in agreement. “What ya really wan’? Ya don’ nee’ all this if ya want t’ throw us in th’
slammer. Ya want somethin’.”

Director Whelks patted two stacks of manila envelopes in front of him, a small smile on his square
face, “The PRT is willing to extend you both an offer, one-time only –“

Lala’s eyes narrowed, “A lawyer. I’m not – neither of us are signing anything or looking at
anything without a lawyer.”

Whelks nodded, “That is part of the stipulations. We are willing to waive Scrapdoll’s
misdemeanors, with two years probation, and mandatory Protectorate service. Prowler, as a felon,
will have a more strenuous sentence. Four years probation and mandatory counseling with
Protectorate service. At the end of your respective probationary periods your records will be sealed.
All this is conditional on your signing confidentiality agreements in regards to the events of this
afternoon.”

Lala found the implications immediately. She narrowed her eyes. “You mean Tapio’s involvement.
You want us to help cover that up?”

Whelks sighed.

“Ya wan’ us t’ cover for a goddamn hero settin’ us up!” Otis growled.

Smiley snorted, drawing everyone else’s attention.

Whelks gave Smiley a gimlet eye, “You’re straining my patience, ‘Smiley’. You understand your
own terms are also quite lenient? You went looking for trouble. Both of you did.” He gave
meaningful glance at Bakuda.
“Hey, hey.” Smiley protested, “Had to make an impression on mister Tapioca, had to keep him on the off-foot. Only way to do that was to turn over the rock he was hiding under.”

Whelks sighed, “You’re going to be more trouble than you’re worth.”

Smiley was silent for a moment, “Yeah, we went looking for trouble.” Smiley said, “But this wasn’t no Five Sisters Incident, y’know? No need for amputations – particularly of genitalia – though I could use an oil change at some point.”

He gave Bakuda a glance. She rolled her eyes and swatted the back of his helmet, eliciting a dull thud.

Lala turned her attention to the Director, who had gone very still. That sounded like something they weren’t supposed to hear...

“Indeed.” He said after a pause and laid out two slips of paper for both Lala and Otis. “I would like both of you to look these over. I will call the desk upstairs and have a public defender brought in for you. Don’t sing until he arrives.”

The Director got up and opened the door. A moment later it was just the four of them. Smiley glanced at Bakuda. “Did you –“

She flicked him. “Really? You think I’d forget after Macau?”

“Sorry,” he said, sounding utterly unapologetic. “Though, to be fair, it was your –“

“Don’t,” She cut him off and he hurriedly turned away to the pair sitting adjacent to him.

“So, how about you two join us?” he asked brightly.

“I don’t think that –“

“We have dental care, pensions, and equipment for members. Newcomers receive the complimentary soap package,” Bakuda droned and handed Lala a bar of molded soap. As Otis could not take his, she simply placed it on his head.

“I’m not sure I –“

“Come with us and you can make new friends, learn strange things, and see what the world has to offer!” Smiley threw his hands up and confetti sprayed out from his sleeves.

“We will make this offer until you join us,” Bakuda informed them drily as she picked off the neon strips of paper from her hair. She flicked a blue strand onto Lala with a wink. “It’s not too bad a gig, really. You can do some really insane shit.”

“Like breaking into an asylum for dangerous parahumans!” Smiley declared. “Or visiting the worst city on this coast!”

“With bombs!” Bakuda added and opened her jacket. Lala choked at the sight. Clusters of cylindrical explosives littered the lining of the jacket, gleaming balefully in the lighting as the woman showed them off proudly. They looked too hi-tech to be anything normal – it had to be Tinker-tech.

“How did you get that past the guards?” she asked after a beat. “They should have taken that the moment they detained you!”
“Watch,” Bakuda said smugly. The bombs in her jacket began to melt until they seeped into the interior of her t-shirt. “It pays off to be armed at all times. This one could probably destroy this entire city’s electrical system,” she said, pointing out a small black one tucked precariously into the corner.

Otis whimpered.

…

So, you might be wondering why Bakuda already triggered in this universe, right?

It goes like this:

Bakuda attended Cornell (having gotten in at 18). Her exemplary record, despite her single year of attendance, got her the coveted role of TA for a rather well-liked professor (or so she thought). Unfortunately, said professor was an undercover Cauldron villain that got busted, which brought her entire file under suspicion. Long story short – Bakuda got kicked out. And no other uni would accept her, regardless of what she did.

Trigger event occurs. Still a Tinker with bomb making (but the particulars of it is different).

However, she doesn’t get her chance to blow up any universities in this world. Smiley, the guy who busted her professor, tracks down Bakuda and convinces her to work with him. After some reluctance (and much bombing) she agrees. So begins their epic partnership.

(And yes, Smiley is quite important.)
Lisa clutched her head, groaning in pain despite the low light and silence of her office. After Moira’s visit, her head had been bothering her for the majority of the day. She still could remember the gist of what the woman had said – Taylor Hebert, the ABB, the Empire, Leviathan, Brockton Bay – but concentrating on the memories just made her migraine worse. It was better to think of it peripherally, like an errant thought of no importance.

The girl shook her head as she tried again.

Lisa swore as her headache spiked, whimpering and curling in on herself as lances of agony speared through her skull. It was nearly a minute later that her breathing slowed. Wiping cold sweat off her brow, Lisa tried again. This time, however, she chose a different subject matter. A safer one.

Lisa cut it off before her power could go haywire again. There, that was it. Faultline’s crew was her answer. Hours upon hours of turning over the information while trying to side-step the headaches had been torture, but one Lisa could not resist. She finally had her solution to the Wild conundrum.

Moira had been willing to offer information, of course, but anything she said resulted in brutal migraines that Lisa couldn’t afford. Thinking about information in relation to Moira gave her the mother of all headaches – but deducting on her own didn’t. It was strange. When Moira said the name ‘Taylor Hebert’, Lisa could barely think. But simply reading it off the town records just gave her the usual list of inferences she always got.

She never knew about this oddly specific, seemingly arbitrary rule about her power. Why did her ability only give her headaches when Moira was involved?

Lisa had been willing to listen to the ground rules about secrecy, caution, and possible dangers Moira laid out when she started talking. But now, she was curious. In fact, she was burning with the need to know.

So what else was there for Lisa to do other than start digging for information by herself? There was no harm talking to Faultline, anyway, it wasn’t as if the mercenary would attack her. Hell, she might even be willing for a profitable business relationship in the future – her services in exchange for the information Moira had offered.
So Lisa picked her up her phone and dialed the woman’s number.

…

Meanwhile…

Taylor stared at the TV set listlessly, the beating of her heart uncomfortably loud in the silence. The program had gone on much longer than Wild had been on stage but she had stopped paying attention after the woman’s abrupt departure. The fat woman on stage was red-faced, clearly angry about something.

So. Wild. Or more specifically, Lung and Wild. They were the two people responsible for her father’s death. Of course. Taylor should’ve seen it coming. Lung was the villain based near her house and Wild had been the one from the hospital. And she knew what she did.

She knew who she killed.

Flashes of her father’s lean, tired face went by and Taylor blinked, face suddenly hot and throat scratchy.

Twist. Twist.

Water welled in her eyes. They gathered until her eyes could no longer hold them and started to roll down her cheek, trailing out salty paths of liquid in their descent. Gently, soundlessly, they fell onto the sheets that Taylor worried in her small hands.

What do I do?

She wanted to hurt Wild. Hurt Lung. Make them pay for taking away her sole family member. After all, wasn’t that what they deserved?

But… was it all that true? Wild had admitted, on live television, that she fully accepted the losses of her fight with Lung. That what she did was harmful and that she wanted to reimburse the people who’d suffered directly from her recklessness. Lung, perhaps, deserved the full weight of her wrath. Wild, it seemed, did not.

Still, all the logic in the world could not stem the grief stewing Taylor’s gut. A lump formed in her throat as she bit her lip, itching with the fury that rippled under her skin.

Twist. Twist.

The room felt too small. Claustrophobic, even. Taylor couldn’t think in the oppressive clinical quality of her room with the constant beeping of the monitoring equipment and the visits from the too-sympathetic doctor. She had to leave.

…

Slipping out form her room was easy. All she had to do was clamber off her bed and toe on the felt slippers provided for her whenever she had to go pee. Taylor wrapped the coarse blanket around her before slowly padding out the room. A peek outside revealed an empty corridor, letting her breathe easy. Perhaps she could even get home at this rate. Even if it was burnt down.

She crept along the wall, jumping at every little noise and shrinking into the shadows whenever she thought she saw movement. Taylor was almost at the stairs when she heard the footsteps. The stride was long and the footfalls confident, as if the person knew exactly where they were going.
The girl frantically glanced around for a nook to hide before spotting a large potted plant. It was squeezed in between a set of chairs and a counter of sorts, providing natural shade that she could conceal herself in. After another glance at the direction of the footsteps, Taylor darted behind the plant. Pulling the blanket in tighter, she shut her eyes tightly, breathing as lightly as possible.

The person continued walking. They moved closer and closer to her spot until they were nearly upon her. Then they stopped.

“Taylor?” came the voice. It was the young doctor, the one who constantly visited her. “Taylor, it’s me, Dr Dayne. Please, come out from there.”

The girl huddled back further, eyes now wide open. She saw the white shoes he wore, as well as the neat creases of his hospital scrubs. How did he find her?

“Hey,” he said. “Come on, tell me what’s wrong.” His voice was pleasant to listen to and openly kind. But Taylor didn’t want him and his nice voice and gentle friendliness. She wanted to go home.

“… go away,” she said after a pause. “Leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that,” he said, managing to sound regretful. “It’s my job to take care of you, Taylor. And I can’t do that if I leave you alone.”

“I don’t want you,” she insisted. “I want my dad. I want to go home.” Her voice trembled on the last word and Taylor suddenly found herself holding back tears. She sniffled loudly as the doctor crouched down and peered into her hiding spot.

“Oh, Taylor,” the doctor sighed. “I know.” His handsome face was distinctly sad as he gazed at the young girl before him. He held a hand out. “Come with me, please? We can talk about this in your room.”

She sniffed again, shrinking back from his large hand. “Go away,” she tried again.

Dr Dayne paused before he sat down fully. He picked at his nail for a moment before looking at Taylor in the eye. “It’s your dad, right?” he asked. “The one you miss, I mean. Tell me, what happened to your mom?”

“She’s… dead,” Taylor said hesitantly, wincing at the painful memories the statement brought. “Car accident.”

“I see,” the doctor’s face was contemplative. “You know, I’m an orphan too. My mom died from leukemia when I was about fourteen and my dad… well, he never was the same after that. Kind of went loopy, to be honest. Clinical depression or something. Started to work more, got a bit distant sometimes… I couldn’t really blame him, I guess. People always said I looked a lot like my mom did.”

Taylor, in spite of her reluctance, found herself paying attention to his story. The doctor’s tone was self-deprecating and the slightest bit bitter. “What happened to him?” Taylor blurted.

“Died when I was sixteen,” Dr Dayne said simply. “He was walking home, in one of his depressive moods again so he wasn’t really paying much attention to his surroundings. We lived in a construction-heavy zone and there was an accident with one of the cranes. Dropped a ton of bricks on his head while he was walking. Died on impact.”

She was silent. The doctor looked immensely sad, his youthful features pulled down by the old grief remembered. Although his voice was steady when he spoke, his eyes seemed to gleam wetly.
“So, please, Taylor. I know how much it hurts to lose your family in a short amount of time. Hiding and running away from it won’t help the pain.”

Taylor flushed, suddenly feeling very silly in the face of Dr Dayne’s words. She still wanted to go home but what was she doing, hiding behind a plant of all things like some child? What… what would dad have said if he saw her? Slowly, she crawled out and stood up, hanging her head to hide her pink cheeks. She took Dr Dayne’s hand when he offered it and the pair started to slowly walk down the corridor. They walked in a stuffy silence that made Taylor fidget as she walked.

They were in sight of the door for her room when she froze.

There were two men in front of the door, armored and holding guns. They turned towards the pair, raising their weapons halfway as Taylor jerked back. Then a woman stepped out from behind them, dressed in the same color scrubs – dove grey – as Dr Dayne. She had blonde hair tucked into a severe bun and a long, equine face exacerbated by her tight scowl.

“Joseph,” she snapped as she came closer, “why is the girl out of her room?” Her eyes flicked towards Taylor disdainfully as she sneered at the doctor.

“Put her back in,” she commanded. “Before she goes mental again. We can’t risk her going off before we can –“

“Yates,” Dr Dayne bit out, face pale with a rush of anger. He avoided looking at Taylor as he spoke, “Shut up.”

But it was too late.

Taylor backed away, eyes wide. “What?”

Dr Dayne turned to her, hands held out before him. He crouched down and held her eyes, “Taylor, it’s alright. Don’t worry, okay? Dr Yates,” he jerked his head to the blonde woman, “was being very, very rude. She’s going to apologize now.”

“What? I don’t…” she trailed off when Dr Dayne looked at her over his shoulder. With a peculiar expression, she shrugged. “Um. Sorry for upsetting you.”

Taylor still looked recalcitrant. “What was she talking about? Before you can what?”

“You need to calm do – !” A strong wind came out of nowhere and buffeted him, pushing him back. An agent faltered, dropping on one knee as he tried to maintain balance. Taylor scrambled back even more, breathing hard as the wind around her grew stronger. “Stay back!”

“You lied to me!” Taylor shrieked, hurt by the betrayal despite herself. “What were you going to do? What was she talking about?!”
Dr. Dayne looked pained. “Taylor!” he shouted over the gale. “Stop this!”

“Tell me!” she screamed back and the gale rose to hurricane force, slamming the doctors and agents down like a fist of god. Taylor backed up until she was at the stairs again and turned to run. The wind died down as her desperation to get away turned to a surge of anger. Tears pricking her eyes, Taylor’s feet, now devoid of slippers, slapped the linoleum stairs as she ran down them.

Liars, they always lie!

Even Dr. Dayne and his kind face hid the true face of the liar he was. It seemed that no one ever wanted to tell her the truth. First it was the nurse from the hospital, then it was the young doctor. Who else was next?

Well, the nurse didn’t exactly lie... a small voice from the back of her mind piped up. Taylor entertained the thought briefly before slapping it down roughly. No. Now was not the time for mental arguments with herself. She had to just get out and away from the liars.

The anger rekindled and Taylor seized it, using it stoke her body to fever pitch. Anger was strong. Anger let her fight. Anger was fire.

Embers dripped down her skin as the girl burst out into a long hallway filled with various PRT workers. Men in armor and business suits alike all reacted instantaneously at her unexpected entrance – some dived for cover, others drew their guns and prepared to fire.

The embers gushed out until Taylor’s skin was nearly coated with the hot mess that melted containment foam before it could reach her. She flung her arm out and pillar of flames swept down the hall, forcing everyone to shrink back. With the troopers distracted, Taylor turned towards the lobby. The embers started to recede, though the flames around her didn’t. Festooned in hellfire, Taylor walked out into the lobby.

Now that her anger faded, a deeper darker emotion took its place. Misery and resentment at the people around her bubbled up in her as she glared at everything around, willing to simply go away.

Two, bare feet padded along the ground, leaving behind a trail of scorched tiles in their wake. The walls around her twisted strangely, no longer obeying the laws set down by mathematics and physics as they bent and reformed into impossible shapes. Wherever the girl’s gaze landed, fractures appeared on everything in the immediate area. The fissures spread with alarming speed over the entire object before crumbling into fine dust.

She slowly walked out of the PRT base, unconscious agents littering the floor behind her, and looked up into the sky, brushing wild hair out of her eyes as she did so. The hellfire that grew around her feet strengthened before suddenly roaring to life in massive bonfire that swept her up into the sky. Festooned in her cocoon of flame, periodic pulses radiated off her body, warping everything it passed over. Each pulse’s diameter grew until the girl was distorting an entire city block.

She saw the city hall nearly a kilometer away and remembered Wild’s pale visage broken only by a slash of red, a dark stain on the colorful entourage of heroes. And she remembered her words.

“... Although it was Lung’s fire that tore the residential districts apart, it was my failure in stopping him that allowed it to happen...”

With eyes like burning coals, the girl rotated in the air until she was facing her destination. Thin spider-web cracks crawled across her skin as Taylor screamed, punctuated by a pulse that sent
everything flying up before crashing down with earth-shaking force.

**Destruction**, her power seethed. **Destroy. Annihilate. Obliterate.**

She turned her heads towards the Docks. It was where her home used to be. It was where Lung was. It was where Wild would go.

*I want to hurt them. I want to hurt her.*

But… no.

Not when she was destroying everything around her. Not wrapped in hellfire, surrounded by shattered streets, and disintegrating everything she looked at. It was too dangerous. Too risky.

She wasn’t going to make the mistake Wild had made.

Taylor turned away from the Docks and flew out and away from the city, the damage that went on below her going unnoticed. Car alarms screamed below her to the tune of groaning earth as it was upturned, though she paid them no mind. In fact, so caught up she was in her hasty departure that she never saw the way the city reverted to normal when she moved away.

One last thought occurred to her as Taylor flew on.

*She never lied to me.*
I was right above the shelter when I heard the scream of car alarms from behind me. I twisted in the air and my eyes widened as I took in the great pillar of flame somewhere in downtown Brockton Bay. It moved around in quick, flicking motions, spreading its destruction everywhere it passed over. But before I could start flying towards it, it began to move away. Out from the city, in fact.

I hesitated. *Is it really my jurisdiction if my people aren't getting harmed?* I thought, watching as a blur sped over the rooftops – Velociy, maybe, or Battery. I hung in the air, watching the fire move away in a south-western direction. I expected to see a long trail of burnt out buildings behind it, but instead saw something else entirely.

The buildings, judging from what I could from here, appeared to be… warped. Not burnt or scorched like I’d expected, but more like something Vista might do on a bad day. I drifted closer, straining to divine more details. Warped streets, stationary spots of bonfires, and piles of dust. I blinked and watched as all the destruction faded away before my disbelieving gaze. Streets snapped into place. Dust coalesced into trashcans, streetlights, and cars. The bonfires went out without even a hint of ash to mark their existence.

*Non-permanence*… I realized, my thoughts moving like molasses. The world seemed to speed up and slow at the same time I turned my head to the distant, moving pillar. I felt like I’d been slapped. My mouth was dry as I started to drop out of the air in my dull shock, unable to comprehend the situation before me.

*…Taylor?*

I tilted sideways. *No.*

I dropped below the skyline. *No.*

I landed on the street, hard enough to jar my knees painfully, and sat down breathlessly. My hair flew around my face willy-nilly but I ignored it.

*I have to… I need to help her. Can’t leave her alone, not in that state.* I stood up on shaky knees and got into my takeoff position. Leaning forward, knees bent, balanced on the toes, arms at my sides, I prepared for a forceful jump that I could tug into a low flight position.

My leg gave out on the first attempt, leaving me to stumble moronically on the street. I nearly tripped over my feet, drawing people’s attention to myself more than the usual amount parahumans got (which, admittedly, was already too much for comfort). Face reddening, I crouched again and readied another jump.

This time, it was successful, and I heard the flurry of conversation go on below me as I flew over their heads with preternatural stiffness. I ignored it in favor of soaring upwards sharply to leave the buildings below me. I could still see Taylor, though her rate of movement was quite fast. It had been only a few minutes between me first seeing her and now, but she was already at the outskirts of the city.

I still had my phone in my pocket. Even as I scanned the city, I quickly texted out a message to Hestia and Iago’s phones.
South-west. Outside BB. Moving fire. Bring Pan. – M

With that out of the way, I narrowed in on her spot and plotted out the appropriate trajectory. Tilting forward, I pulled on the discs in my legs, back, and chest at the same time to propel myself forward while being careful to tuck my arms in close to my body. I still didn’t have quite enough discs to enable proper maneuverability, unfortunately. Stupid. Should’ve replaced the suit with the armor panels as soon as I had left the hospital. Was much better.

In the course of this, I didn’t lose sight of the heroes deployed after Taylor. The blur was already gone, but I could see a PRT transport van racing through the streets with a blue motorbike weaving beside it. That would be Miss Militia, Armsmaster, and Assault. Dauntless could fly so he probably was already halfway there.

They all had a bit of a head start on me. That was fine. None of them however, discounting Velocity, could break the sound barrier like I could. Mindful of my rate of acceleration, I gradually upped my speed until I just a mere blur to the naked eye, easily overtaking the heroes below me. I chewed up the distance and reached Taylor within scant moments.

I circled her twice as I slowed, sweat springing up on my entire body as the intense heat of her fire registered. Shielding my eyes, I lowered myself.

“Taylor!” I cried. There was no answer as the girl forged on determinedly, blazing like a miniature sun. I swooped around to her other side as a lick of flame burst hot sparks on my face, stinging painfully wherever they landed.

“Taylor, listen to me!” I tried again, desperation coloring my tone. I kept pace with her, even tried to flying in front of her, but it was like she was blind. She pressed on like an inexorable juggernaut of fire and reality breaking, allowing nothing to break her stride. I tried calling her a few more times, but gave after realizing the futility of it. Furthermore, I didn’t dare try and fly into the inferno that she draped in. I was probably getting a sunburn just from being this close to it – no need to tempt fate anymore than I usually did.

In this span of time, the heroes caught up. The transport bounced along, dodging warps in the street as it tailed Taylor and I could see Armsmaster lining up his halberd for whatever he was going to try. Small wires shot out and flew towards Taylor, but stopped short when they reached the flames. They were incinerated instantly and I saw Armsmaster bring his arm up to his mouth.

*Probably talking with one of them.*

Velocity was still running aside us, a washed out blur that I could almost make out. Battery had fallen back and was perched on the back of Armsmaster’s bike, probably waiting for the moment her power’s could become needed.

I swung my gaze over to the transport and felt a chill run up my spine. Miss Militia had poked her head out, with what appeared to be a massive rocket launcher hefted onto her shoulder. Despite the uneven motion of the van, she lined up a shot with unnatural ease and fired. I could already tell that the rocket was too large for me to try influencing and watched helplessly as it flew towards Taylor in gouts of white smoke.

Whatever I or the heroes had been expecting, it didn’t happen. The rocket exploded prematurely the moment it impacted the inferno, showering us with shrapnel that I diverted within seconds. It didn’t harm Taylor, but it did call her attention to us. She turned, revealing a soft, childish face that was still puffed with baby fat and her curly hair whipped around her head like a black halo.
She seemed to register the transport for the first time, as well as Armstrong beside it. Her eyes scanned it before I accidentally wandered into her field of vision. Immediately, her face twisted into a thunderous scowl.

"Wild," she snarled. The fire around her went out and the spatial warps snapped back in time with a pulse that she pulled into her body. Taylor remained in the air as she watched me, the anger on her sweet face looking foreign. The transport skidded to a halt and the heroes all got into combat ready positions.

"Stand down!" Armstron called but Taylor simply waved a hand at them. With a thump, they collapsed and, despite repeated struggles, could not get up. It was as if a great hand was holding them in place. Only Velocity escaped this fate but he could neither help his teammates nor reach our high altitude with anything he had on hand. I could only imagine his intense frustration as he slid to a stop, glaring up at us with one hand on a handheld foam sprayer liberated from the transport.

I hung there awkwardly as Taylor glowered at me poisonously.

"I –" I started, unable to take the silence anymore, but Taylor cut me off immediately.

"You," she hissed, "It was your fault. Lung. The fires. You killed my dad."

I stared at the girl, somehow unable to comprehend the sight before me. I'd seen Taylor before, in the hospital bed, looking pale and sickly. She had appeared vulnerable then, similar to what she might've been before Skitter.


But now… the child before me defied all expectations as I saw her clearly for the first time, unmarred by wreaths of flame and periodic reality-shattering pulses. She was still dressed in a thin hospital gown and her hair was tangled around her face. She was still pale and her eyes were gaunt and bruised. However, she seemed to burn with something greater inside her.

Perhaps it was the way she was glaring at me, baleful and truly furious beyond all explanation.

My mouth was dry. I couldn’t formulate a reply to her accusation. I simply hovered there, suddenly feeling hollow. Everything I did prior to this moment felt foolish now, like I’d somehow spoiled a beautiful painting by adding my own changes to it.

I hovered there like a fool, staring at Taylor helplessly while a hundred thoughts ran through my head.

I didn’t mean to.

I thought I was helping you.

Coil deserved it.

Danny wasn’t supposed to die.

I can protect you.

But in the end, I only said one thing. I hung my head and clenched my fists, shame heating my face as I forced the words out. No matter that it was the truth – it still took effort to verbalize it. Saying it as a speech had been easy. There had been no attachment, no feeling in it. I wanted to make a
performance out of it and that was what I got. But here and now… I couldn’t do that to Taylor. What I would say here was straight-out, not a single hint of my usual bullshit staining the words.

“I’m sorry,” I said, just loud enough to be heard. “I’m sorry. I thought I… never mind. I just… I just wanted to help. To protect people. Your father’s death was my fault. I’m sorry, Taylor.”

I couldn’t see her face but she sounded oddly flat as she spoke. “You said his name,” she said. “At the – the hospital. How did you know him?”

I was silent. Inside, I was panicking. Normally, lies rolled off my tongue with ease but right now, it felt like the first time I’d ever gone up on a stage. My gut felt hollow, my heart was racing, and my face was hot. I stumbled over my words.

“I – I knew him. Sometime back a few years. We were more acquaintances than anything else, though I did hear when he got married and had a kid. Had you.” I finally managed, praying that Taylor would not spot my hasty dissembling. She seemed to take the statement for what it was, however.

“You knew him. You knew him. And now… all you can do is ‘I’m sorry’?!” The last word was a screech and I looked up sharply to see Taylor furious expression. Her young face was positively apoplectic as she suddenly hurtled towards me like a blazing comet, flame springing up on her arms. I only had time to jerk upwards a little bit before she snagged me, hands clamping my arms in a vice grip. The same power that had toppled the Protectorate also did the same here and I wheezed as I was slammed down to earth, black spots dancing in my eyes. My skull cracked painfully and my vision swam as Taylor straddled me, still holding my arms.

“He burned,” she hissed, face paled in her rage. Her hands were trembling as she leaned in close. “He burned to death and now all you can do is say sorry. You – you - !”

Words failed her and I stared at her helplessly, unwilling to harm her. It was not only because she was Taylor – but because she, in the end, a young girl deep in her grief. Unable to do anything but rage against the source of her sorrow, the one who’d taken her last shred of family away in the most agonizing way possible. Just as I would never hurt a child, I had to atone for my stupid arrogance. If taking the brunt of her fury was it, then I’d gladly embrace the chance.

Her grip tightened and only then did I realize how her left hand seemed to be getting hotter. The temperature ramped up steadily until I was sweating. It passed the threshold of discomfort and was well into the realm of pain when Taylor gathered herself well enough to speak again.

“He burned,” she hissed, face paled in her rage. Her hands were trembling as she leaned in close. “He burned to death and now all you can do is say sorry. You – you - !”

Words failed her and I stared at her helplessly, unwilling to harm her. It was not only because she was Taylor – but because she, in the end, a young girl deep in her grief. Unable to do anything but rage against the source of her sorrow, the one who’d taken her last shred of family away in the most agonizing way possible. Just as I would never hurt a child, I had to atone for my stupid arrogance. If taking the brunt of her fury was it, then I’d gladly embrace the chance.

Her grip tightened and only then did I realize how her left hand seemed to be getting hotter. The temperature ramped up steadily until I was sweating. It passed the threshold of discomfort and was well into the realm of pain when Taylor gathered herself well enough to speak again.

“He burned,” she said softly, brokenly. Tears dripped from her eyes and fell onto my face as she started to sob. “He burned. And now you… you’ll burn too.”

With that, her hand seemed to ignite.

I arched my back and nearly dislodged her as I shrieked in shocked agony, the scent of scorched flesh drifting into my nose as I wrenched my head side to side, trying to remove the molten manacle that was her grip. I shut my eyes tight as I flailed, screaming, until my voice cracked off into a shrill whine that scraped my throat dry. All the while, her hand – her burning hand – steadily sank deeper into my arm as she incinerated it. By the time someone pulled Taylor off me, I was already passed out, the smell of my burnt flesh and bone lingering in the still air.

…

It was Armsmaster that finally wrestled the girl down and tranquilized her. Velocity hung in the
back, face pale as he watched Battery gather Wild in her arms like she was a delicate doll. His eyes skipped over the ruined remains of her arm, instead focusing on the small child still on the ground. For a moment, she looked so tiny and frail that he could scarcely believe she was a parahuman. Then he recalled her, burning and manipulating reality like it was her plaything, like she was some sort of child-god.

Velocity shuddered. There were parahumans, and there were parahumans. Just his luck that Brockton Bay got the crazy kid with the insane power-set that would’ve made Eidolon hesitate.

He glanced at Wild and grimaced as he quickly looked away.

The tiny, pale woman looked utterly broken in Battery’s strong arms. She hung lifelessly, the stump of her left arm tucked into her chest as she flopped. The smell of her being burned by the girl still hung in the air and Velocity didn’t envy their team leader for a moment. It had been Dauntless that pulled the Hebert girl off Wild, but it was Armsmaster who would have to take care of her.

Judging from his deep grimace, grimmer than usual, and controlled movements, Armsmaster was well aware of the danger he was in.

Velocity shivered again.

_Fucking Brockton Bay. Always gets the absolute loonies._

…

When I woke up, I saw nothing but frizzy brown hair. I scrunched my nose as it tickled my face, blowing the few strands away as I tried to sit up drowsily. The restraining hand on my chest halted my movement.

“Don’t,” Amy said warningly from where she was sitting. “I numbed out your whole body. Move and you’ll probably fall on your face.”

I complied easily. Taking a moment to work my jaw, I spoke past nerveless lips. “Wha’ habben’d?”

“We found you outside the city,” she said. “With the Protectorate, in fact. You were badly injured, you know. Blood loss, concussion, burns, you name it.”

“I shee,” I mumbled. I blinked as I tried to organize my thoughts past my tranquil haze and succeeded on a minor level. “Why’m I feelin’ sho fuck’d righ’ now?”

Amy hesitated at this juncture. I caught in spite of my state, so it was clearly something bad. I patiently waited for her, trying not to get distracted by the bright blobs of patterns on my bedsheet. I failed, clearly, when she said something I didn’t understand.

“Wha’?” I demanded. “Terr m’. Wha’ ish i’?”

“… It’s your arm,” she said with a sigh. She slumped back, looking somewhat defeated. “It’s so… I don’t even know. I just…”

I stared at her blearily, uncomprehending.

She sighed again. “You arm… I can’t heal it.”
My confusion must’ve been manifest on my face because Amy flicked a bit of hair off her face as she prodded me again, looking weary and a touch exasperated.

“I can heal things,” she said, “Most things, anyway. An injury like yours? Small potatoes. But it’s like – like something is overriding any attempts I try to mold a new arm. I tried growing an arm straight onto the shoulder, tried growing an arm separately, I even tried growing an arm from your chest and transferring it in place! But, no matter what I do, it’s not taking.”

I blinked. Amy looked irritated as she put her hand on my bare shoulder. “Just watch.”

Slowly, I watched as a nubbin of flesh sprout from my amputated limb, growing until my fingers were formed. It continued to thicken until I found an exact replica of my arm in place, free of old scarring and flakiness from poor skincare. I flexed it, marveling at the minor miracle she just performed. Then Amy took her hand off.

The change was subtle at first. I stared in growing horror as my skin seemed to redden into a shiny sunburn, before blackening like overcooked meat on a grill. The smell of overcooked pork wafted to my nose as I watched my arm smolder in place. Scorched bits of ashy skin and flesh drifted to the metal tray fastened to my bedside like macabre snowflakes. It continued until my arm was reduced to a burnt out husk, still seeming to crumble and lose shape whenever I shifted. I had a feeling it was only thanks to Amy’s interference that I was not writhing in unimaginable agony right now.

“Amy,” I said hoarsely after a pregnant pause, eyes still fixated on the black flakes in the tray, “Pash m’ a buck’t.”

“What – “

“Buck’t. Now.” Amy jumped at my order and hastened to retrieve another metal tray, this one rather bowl shaped. I grabbed it with my right, the remains of my left arm twitching in its restraints as it tried to move forward, and heaved up the contents of my stomach. I had eaten only a little bit before and I could only gag as I coughed up stomach acid, the bitter taste souring my tongue as my eyes watered.

I continued choking for a little bit more before finally spitting out yellowish saliva and handed the tray back to Amy. The girl looked little queasy but was polite enough to stay silent as she took it from me. I breathed in deeply through my nose, trying to ignore the putrid stench of my bile and the… mess at my bedside as I gathered myself. All remains of the numbing were gone, either by my sudden nausea or by Amy’s influence.

“Alrigh’,” I said after regaining what little was left of my composure. “Tell m’ wha’sh wrong.” I winced at my prominent lisp. Perhaps the numbness was not all gone, then.

“I don’t know why it’s not working,” she said with a shrug. “It just... I heal it, right? And then, it’s working for a little bit, and I take my hand off. At which point the damage just comes back or something. The only way your arm stays is if I keep pumping my power in you.”

“Sho wha’? I’m no longeh heal’ble?” I asked, stricken by a faint, fluttering panic. True, I had survived for a long time without having an on-call healer, but losing Panacea was… unsettling.
“What? No, I can heal everything else just fine, it’s only the arm that’s giving me trouble.”

I relaxed minutely. The loss of an arm was piddles compared to Amy. I could deal with that. There’s always a way. Just had to find it.

“Shay,” I said after a beat. “Wha’ habben’d t’… mind gettin’ m’speech t’ no’mal?”

She smiled faintly at my irritated expression and put a finger on my shoulder. I worked my jaw, finally shedding all sense of buzzing. I licked my chapped, cracked lips before I spoke. “What happened to the girl that was with me? Tall, your age, dark curly hair?”

Amy shrugged, “Not sure,” she replied. The offhand, apathetic way she said it suddenly stripped away the years from her face afforded by the dark circles and white robe, leaving behind a pubescent girl still accustomed to listening to what the adults said.

Of course. Thirteen years old. I slumped back onto my bed, feeling exhausted. I remembered Parker when he’d been thirteen. He’d been a gloomy brat with a temper and shard-given genius buzzing in his small head, pestering him into not taking care of himself so he could keep inventing. There’d been more than one night I found him huddled in his closet, in the middle of a catnap, surrounded by the remnants of his phone and some tools filched from the kitchen. It hadn’t gotten better with age – he just got better at hiding it. Comforted by the memories of family, I felt my body droop with sudden tiredness. The bed was comfy enough that I simply wanted to drop off into a slumber for the better part of the day like I used to in D.C., back when things were still relatively calm. My eyelids demanded to be let down, but I forced them wide as I looked over at Amy and ruffled her hair, the image of Parker’s brown, handsome face overlaid across her own.

“Clear me,” I said to her. “I think I need to talk with the rest of New Wave or whatever it is you’re calling yourselves these days.”

Amy looked uncertain. “But your arm…” she started. I cut her off with an offhand wave.

“Not important. I can still operate as I normally do. Maybe get a prosthetic for the time being until I figure out why my arm’s not healable. Just numb whatever’s left of the stump so I don’t have to deal with phantom pain, yeah?”

Of course, despite my apparent blasé dismissal of my sudden status as an amputee, I was gently freaking out on the inside. I was someone who got disturbed by unexpected changes in hair length – the loss of an arm was far greater than that. Already, I felt an odd shift in balance as I sat up in my bed.

With a quick press of her finger to my cheek, my left arm – or bicep, I guess – felt oddly out of place. I could still feel things like hands and the sort, but pain no longer worked. Probably parahuman bullshit with nerve interception or something, I mused.

“Good girl,” I commended as I swung my feet out of the bed. There was momentary vertigo as I tried to swing out my left arm as a counter-balance only for it to not be there. I stumbled a little before righting myself. Ignoring Amy’s look of concern, I briskly walked into the dressing room where my clothes awaited me.

My pants were fine, if a little grubby with dust and grime, but my shirt was wrecked beyond salvation. The fabric appeared melted to ashy bits of slag, spare threads fraying out where I had torn it. I sourly realized that most of my chest would have been exposed after Taylor’s thorough crisping. Well, at least I had been covered in enough gore to ensure the mostly sane-minded looked away. Not that Brockton Bay has much of a monopoly on the mostly sane.
With no shirt available as a replacement, I decided to just tie up the hospital gown as a makeshift toga. The material was thin enough that it folded into knots without effort. With that done, I strode out, feeling distinctly silly in my on-the-spot outfit.

Amy had already left the room, so I headed for the window. It was dark out and I could see my reflection in the glass. A woman, petite and small-footed, too pale in her hospital gown, a fact only compounded by the darkness of her choppy, uneven hair. Drained. Tired. A quick tug with my power snapped it open and I awkwardly clambered up, nearly falling out a few times when I overreached with my nonexistent left arm. I sighed as I finally perched on the sill on my toes, breathing in the salty air for a moment as I waited for my heart to stop racing.

Inhale. Exhale.

I leaned out. Spread my arm whilst imagining a second one on my left, stretching out like the wings I wished I had, and fell forward into the streets below.

…

My phone rang when I was at a steady half kilometer above the city. A fresh wave of goose bumps rose along my skin as I reached down and held to my ear.

“Wild speaking,” I grunted, eyes watering. It was cold. Too cold. Perhaps running out in a hospital gown in November was a bad idea.

“Moira, we need you. There’s someone at the door of the shelter and... just come over. Quickly.”

Iago’s voice was urgent, sounding worried enough that I immediately dipped into a steep dive to the Docks. I landed a little ways away from the shelter with only the quiet click of my boot-heels to signal my landing. Gravel gathered in a cloud above my head in the cover of darkness while my discs hovered beside me as I approached the shelter.

“… please! I can’t…” The voice emanating was loud and feminine, clearly desperate. A parahuman? I wondered. She was small, highlighted in the illumination spilling from the open doorway. Hestia stood, barring her way, looking grim. I could not see Iago, though he might’ve been concealing himself with his illusions. Hestia certainly appeared more... foreboding than usual, like she was rippling with strength barely held in check.

I stepped out of the shadows as a lone disc shot out to press against the stranger’s throat menacingly. She froze, all protestations dying her mouth as the cold metal slid against vulnerable skin.

“Moira,” Hestia said, looking relieved. Iago came in from the side, a frown on his dark face. Hestia couldn’t see my vacant sleeve but he could, and he frowned, a question hovering in his eyes. I glanced at him.

Not now.

He looked reluctant, but acquiesced.

“She came just a little bit ago,” he informed me as I drew closer. “Seeking our help. We thought we should tell you, considering who she is.”

I pressed my lips together, raising a brow. “Thanks. You did well.” With that, I turned my attention to the woman.
“Well?” I prompted her. “Take the hood off.”

She turned slowly, hesitantly. She pulled down her hood carefully, revealing a face that took me a moment to place. Caucasian, brunette, dark eyes. Other than that, I had no idea who she might’ve been. Beyond Taylor, it was hard for me to identify someone in the civilian guise. Story descriptions tended to be imprecise when dealing with flesh and blood folks.

“My name’s Kayden Anders,” she said tentatively. I hissed in surprise.

I couldn’t help but blurt, “Purity? What the fuck are you doing here?”

A flicker of shock went across her face. “How did you –?”

“I pay attention,” I said cryptically, hoping to draw her interest away from my stupid blunder as I cursed inside. Judging from her doubtful expression, I had failed, but she dropped it anyway.

“Please,” she beseeched me, “Help me. Let me in.” Her plain face looked exhausted and her mousy hair was clearly greasy and coming out from its ponytail in frizzy wisps.

I didn’t blink at her request. Everything in me screamed to turn her away, to chase the neo-Nazi scum off before she caused trouble. But then again… she didn’t look to be in any shape fit for combat. Dark bags lined her eyes and she appeared nearly a decade older as she stood there, slightly hunched over.

I jerked my head towards the door. “Come in. We can talk in my room.”

“Oh Christ, thank you, I –“

“Quiet,” I snapped. “Don’t think you’re in the green just because I’m opening my door for you. I can easily take you out.”

With that, I swept in, Purity flanked by Iago and Hestia as they herded her in. The shelter’s official opening was scheduled for tomorrow midday and there were no people here yet for me to hide Purity from. The layout was much the same as the old shelter and I had immediately taken a room on the second floor. I gestured for her to go up and left Iago and Hestia to sit in the kitchen uneasily as I followed after.

“So,” I said to her once I shut my door and she was seated on my bed, looking anxious. “Tell me. What the hell are you doing here?”

“The Empire’s broken,” she said miserably. “Kaiser and the rest are probably in the Birdcage right now. I managed to get away, just barely. I have no one now.”

“…and?” I asked her. There was no sympathy in my voice as I regarded her. What did she expect, anyway?

Purity flinched. Her hand went to her belly and I followed its path with my eyes. She was wearing a heavy coat that hid her figure but I connected the dots with startling ease. I stood up abruptly. “Oh shit,” I breathed as I remembered when Aster was born in -story. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

The woman nodded. “Third trimester, actually.”

I said nothing. Instead, I leaned back and ran my fingers through my hair, staring up at the ceiling. During my stay at D.C., I had turned away several different people. Some had been criminals, others just plain bullies or troublemakers. But there were two types of people I could not turn
away, not for anything. Children and pregnant women. I couldn’t. *I couldn’t.*


As I stood, a cold expression crept onto my face at her selfishness. “Getting cold feet only when it’s you and yours on the line, huh?”

Purity didn’t flinch this time. “I can offer information on Gesselschaft,” she said, “to sweeten the deal.”

“Well,” I leaned to level my gaze with hers. “Spill, then.”

“Gesselschaft doesn’t take kindly to people who humiliate them. Especially when it’s a…” she winced and I laughed hollowly.

“… a chink bitch,” I finished for her. “Please, I heard it all. Don’t try to censor yourself with me.”

Looking sheepish, she continued as I paced the room. “You and Lung taking down Kaiser… well, it doesn’t reflect all that well on them. They might send some people. To take you down a peg. I’m not sure, but it’s likely.”

I closed my eyes. Inhaled. Exhaled. And glared upwards.

“Great,” I said to my ceiling. “Just fucking great. Just one problem on top of another. Fucking fantastic.” *First Piggot, then Taylor, now this. I hate this city.*

I resisted the urge to punch my wall. Instead, I swung my gaze over to Purity. “Is your identity intact?” I asked her.

“Actually…”

“They unmask villains when they arrest them,” I said, answering my own question. “Of course. So by arresting Kaiser and the gang and finding his civilian identity, they probably figured that you’re Purity. What have you been doing all this time? Running? Hiding?”

“I tried to leave town,” she said miserably. “But I have nothing. No money, no connections, nothing. I can’t even fight because I – “ she cut herself off at my expression.

“The only reason you’re not doing horrible Nazi things is because you’re pregnant.” I stated. “Wow. Good job. You’ll be an incredible mother.”

Purity looked as if she’d been slapped. “I’m trying to change,” she finally said in a voice so quiet I had to lean in to hear her. “I want to change for my baby.”

I stared. I didn’t like Purity. Hell, her very *existence* befuddled me. I didn’t understand prejudice, I didn’t understand why people thought their race could be superior over another. But she was pregnant and she needed help.

I stalked over to her and put my hands – *hand* – on her shoulder. Purity, by all accounts, was a petite woman. But next to me, she still towered a good fifteen centimeters. She was nearly level
with me as I spoke.

“… you can stay,” I stated. “But it’s up to you to be careful, okay? I’m not risking the shelter for your sake. No going out. Don’t talk to the people in the shelter unless they can be trusted. Don’t even go near windows.”

Purity nodded hurriedly. “Thank you, thank you. You won’t regret this, I swear – “

She stopped mid-sentence, eyes wide. My fingernails dug into the soft skin of her neck – not a threat, not really. A warning.

I closed the distance between us until she couldn’t avoid my eyes and I smiled crookedly.

“I don’t trust you,” I said simply. “Nope. Not even the slightest. But I do trust your love. So for the sake of the little baby you’ve got there,” my eyes flicked down, “I expect you to be on your best behavior. I will not tolerate cape activity or hate in this house. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good. Hestia will show you your room.”

…

It was an hour later that Iago finally cornered me. I was floating up the pots and pans into the kitchen cabinets when he appeared, looking thunderous.

“What,” he said, jabbing an accusing finger at my stump, “is that?”


“Where did you get it?” he pressed.

“Where do people get stumps?”

“Don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“The thing. The thing you do with Carly.”

“That’s not very definitive, is it? You’re going to have to clarify.”

Iago lost any ability to keep up his dark mood. “Moira,” he said, sounding exasperated. “You don’t have an arm. That is most definitely serious. Stop joking!”

“Now you’ve hurt my feelings. I’m coping, you know. This is a highly traumatizing experience and I don’t appreciate you trying to take away what makes it better – “

“Moira.”

“ – in fact, I think I may need a therapist. It hurts, Iago, that you would do this. It really, really hurts – “

“Moira, please.”

“ – I thought we had a connection, you know? That we were friends. I was hoping you’d support
me in my time of need but – “

“Moira!” Iago burst.


He finally lost patience. Clapping a hand over my mouth, he ran the other one over his face. “You know,” he told me gravely, “I think I liked the Moira that was angry about everything. You were less… jokey.”

I waited until he took the hand off my face. Then I shrugged. “It’s a lot of effort to be that mad,” I informed him as I went back to my task. “And I was. Brockton Bay… it really messes you up, you know? I just… sometimes I see the people – the bad and the good – and I can’t help but feel furious about it. This isn’t happy place. This place…”

I remembered Taylor. Screaming, crying as her father died again and again and again. Amy who always looked tired when I saw her. Piggot, seeming to cling with nothing but bloody minded determination. All the previous humor drained out of me as my shoulders slumped. I was so tired.

“…it doesn’t let you be happy.”

Iago looked faintly guilty by now. I smiled at him to show that all was good.

“I miss D.C. It was… cleaner. Happier. Certainly less criminals around.”

“Because you scared them away,” he pointed out. “I don’t think you’ve paralyzed anyone here yet.”

I shrugged. “I destroyed one gang. But Lung is still on the loose and word is that the Merchants are already trying to flex with all the freedom they’ve gotten. And now we’re going to have international trouble.”

Iago frowned. “International?”

“Gesselschaft. Based in Germany for the most part. They support the Empire. And guess who embarrassed them?”

“Ah.” He paused. “So this is something you can’t fix by destroying the leader’s digestive organs.”

I shook my head sadly.

“Shame.” He shouldered past me and opened the refrigerator. “Well, we can deal. We weathered the Reapers. We can endure some beer-drinking, potato-eaters.”

I laughed and took the beer he offered. A simple tug and the cap came off.

“So,” Iago said after a brief silence. “you going to stay the night? I mean, me and Hes can handle stuff for the most part but I think you’ll be needed for the official opening. Blasto took two rooms in the basement, by the way. Say he needs lab space.”

“No. And let him have it,” I said as I guzzled down the bottle. “You know whose coming?”

“Got the list. Just a man and a woman. Eddie Styne and Margo Zimmerman.”

No one I recognized. Good enough. I tossed the bottle into the waste bin and was about to walk
away to change when Iago called after me.

“What’re you going to do?” he asked.

“Apologize to the person who did this,” I said as I waved my stump. Before he could say anything further, I vanished up the stairs.

...
Interlude X

Alexandria stepped through the door and it closed behind her seamlessly without even a whisper of sound. Legend and Eidolon were already there, as was Doctor Mother and Contessa. They all looked up when she approached in a flurry of black fabric.

It was Legend that started it off.

“You called me here in the middle of the night,” he griped, “It was my anniversary. I remember Contessa saying everything was alright. Why am I here? Why are we all here?”

“We wouldn’t do this if it hadn’t been an emergency,” Alexandria reassured him. Then she looked at Contessa.”It is an emergency, yes?”

Doctor Mother cut in smoothly, “It is. Contessa says she’s found someone who’s got the same power as Eidolon.”

Said man breathed in sharply. Alexandria took a step forward, as did Legend.

“Really?” the black-clothed woman demanded. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Contessa replied, her eyes intense. “I can’t see her well. She’s…hazy. Sometimes she solidifies, sometimes she’s almost gone. She triggered recently. And she’s very, very powerful.”

“How powerful?” Eidolon asked, looking anxious. “Does she have my…problem?”

Contessa shook her head. “No. She’s… she has so much,” the woman’s eyes glazed. “So many possibilities, so many Paths… they don’t end, not with her. She can do what David – no. She can do more than David.”

Eidolon stopped. He stood there, shoulders tense, before turning away sharply. “I see,” he said tightly. Legend glanced at him but his attention was drawn away as Alexandria began to pace the room in even, measured steps. “This is incredible,” she said, more to herself than anything. “She could be the key to the Endbringers. We could finally turn this war around on them. And from there, we just have to eliminate all S-classes until it’s done.”

She looked up. “I’m going to her. Contessa?”

She tilted her head. “Her name is Taylor Hebert. She’s in Brockton Bay, PRT custody. One hundred thirty-nine steps before she joins us. Wait… now it’s one hundred and fifty-five. It’s increasing. You need to move quickly if you want to get to her.”

“Who else is after her?” Legend asked.

“… I don’t know. I can’t see them.”

Alexandria cursed under her breath. “We can figure this out later,” she said brusquely, “for now, we just need to get to the girl. Door.”

It opened like someone took a knife to reality. On the other side was a bleak view of the sea, miles away from Brockton Bay’s coastline. Alexandria stepped out and hovered there. “Find out who’s
after the girl” she told Legend before speeding off like a black bullet.

They door closed behind her and silence descended. Contessa looked again.

“One hundred sixty-seven,” she murmured.

…

Armsmaster was on patrol when she came to him. Her empty sleeve waved in the air as she stopped before him like a spectre, mouth pressed into a grim line. She drifted closer as he slowed to a stop. She stopped about two meters away when he put a hand on his halberd.

“Don’t,” he warned. “There’re orders about you now.”

“Piggot,” she spat venomously. Then she quieted. “It doesn’t matter now. I want to see Taylor Hebert. And you can do that, can’t you? The Director and the team leader are nearly on the same level of importance.”

He loosened the halberd from its position. “The Director said you might request that. Hebert’s in custody – even if you were allowed in, she’s still not receiving visitors. Too unstable. And you’re part of it. We can’t risk you setting her off again.”

Wild touched down. Her pale face was barely visible in the gloom of the dark street but he saw the scowl on it clearly.

“Me?” she inquired. “Me? Why am I being blamed for her?”

“You were the only one near her during her trigger,” Armsmaster pointed out. “And it was your arm she burned off.”

“After she broke out of your facility,” Wild rejoined. Her scowl didn’t let up. “And we both know that Piggot doesn’t give a damn about Taylor. She’s doing this to spite me.”

Armsmaster shrugged. “Not my problem.”

He was just about to wheel away when she called out. “Armsmaster, I came here for a reason. I want to make a deal.”

He didn’t look at her. He fiddled with the bike’s controls. “Yes?”

“Tell me,” she said softly, “what do you know about Dragon?”

He stopped messing with the forcefield projector and slowly looked up. News about the mysterious Tinker was scarce. Her reputation was constantly on the rise and Armsmaster only had a few occasions to speak to her. They’d talked about collaboration. Joint projects. It was terribly exciting for him.

“I’ve reason to believe she’s in danger,” Wild continued. “You can help her. But first, I need your help. Take me to Taylor.”

Armsmaster hesitated. “I don’t – “

“You can save her,” Wild interrupted. “Imagine that. Saving the world’s best Tinker. Just a little favor, Armsmaster, and you’ll be set. Do this for me, and I’ll tell you everything. And if I don’t, you can arrest me. Fair?”
Armsmaster considered it. It wasn’t breaking the rules – not really. Wild liked to play hard and fast with the way of things but was that really so bad? Armsmaster knew his position as team leader was weakening. His inability to play the politics game lessened him, never mind his martial skill. It’d be… what, a year? Two? Before they replaced him. The only reason he’d been here for so long was because of Brockton Bay’s delicate situation. With that gone…

He let go of the halberd. “Get on the bike,” he growled.

…

Taylor sat in her room. In her hands was her small suit. It was a pale grey and not nearly as soft as what the hospital had. She twisted it idly. Her room wasn’t a cell. Not exactly, but close enough.

She felt sick.

*Screaming.* The small woman jerked violently as Taylor stepped back, the smell of her burning hot on her nose. She had… she had…

*Oh god.*

Taylor looked at her hands and held them close to herself. She backed away from Wild, shrinking on herself. She saw the van coming in the distance. She didn’t care. There was the sound of patterning footsteps and a man was standing next to her.

“What the hell,” he gasped when he saw Wild. He looked away with a gag. “Did… did you do this?” he asked Taylor, sounding disgusted.

Taylor couldn’t look at him. All she saw were her hands, her horrible hands. They still felt hot. And they were streaked in soot up to her elbows. But she’d done more, hadn’t she? More than burn her.

Taylor tucked them into her armpits, curled up, and began to cry.

She hadn’t seen Wild since then. She didn’t know if she was even alive. People barely talked to her, though they talked *about* her plenty. She didn’t even see the young doctor anymore. There was the sound of footsteps but Taylor didn’t look up.

Twist. Twist.

The door opened.

“Hey,” the person said, sounding hesitant. “Hey, can you hear me?”

A thread. Taylor picked at it, fraying it out until more joined the first one.

“Our first meeting wasn’t very good, all things considered,” the person continued. Taylor paused in her picking and finally looked up. Her stomach dropped.

Wild stood there. Looking slightly dumpy in her outfit, she stood there, her hair windswept and her eyes tired. Taylor saw the empty sleeve and her mouth was dry. Wild followed her eyes and she chuckled deprecatingly.

“It could’ve been worse.”

Taylor opened her mouth. Closed it. What could she say to something like that? Wild slipped in silently and sat on the bed with a whisper of sheets. Her eyes were soft as she gently extricated the fabric from Taylor’s hands and smoothed it down.
“Look at me,” she said softly. Her voice seemed to brim with quiet, assertive authority. Taylor dragged her eyes up to rest on Wild’s pale cheek. There was a small scar there, thin and dark against the skin. She focused on it as Wild sighed.

“It’s alright, you know,” she began and that was the breaking point.

“No!” Taylor snapped. “No! I – I did that to you! How is that alright? You don’t even have an arm anymore!”

Wild was silent in the face of her outburst. Taylor bulldozed on.

“My dad… I did that to you because I thought you killed my dad. How is that even sane? I saw the news and – “ Taylor choked, a lump in her throat as she wiped her sudden tears onto her sleeve. “- and just because you said you couldn’t stop the fires, I did that. Lung was the real monster and I’m just the same as he is!”

“And that’s enough,” Wild said sharply. She took hold of Taylor’s shoulder. “Don’t you blame yourself for my mistakes. I knew the risks. What you did was extreme, yes, but within parameters for a new trigger. You were under stress and you’d just lost your father. People have done worse things for less.”

“But your arm…”

Wild barely even looked at it. “We have Tinkers that can make prosthetics superior to the original flesh and blood,” she waved. “I’ll be fine – “

“No, you won’t,” Taylor cut her off. “You tried to heal it, didn’t you? But it didn’t work? That’s because… because I did something to you. I wanted you to hurt. To keep hurting. I didn’t want it to stop for you. So – so – “

“You made sure any replacement limb could never be put in,” Wild finished gravely. “Does this go for prosthetics, too?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said miserably. “I don’t even know what I did. All I wanted was for you to hurt.”

“Oh, sweet girl,” Wild sighed as she hugged Taylor unexpectedly. The girl stiffened at the contact. Why isn’t she angry?

“You don’t even know what you can do,” Wild mumbled into her hair. “Do you?”

Taylor shrugged helplessly. “I… I don’t think I can give your arm back,” she whispered. “I always thought that if I was going become a parahuman, I’d be a hero. Some hero I am. I couldn’t help my dad. And now I burned your arm off.”

Wild laughed softly. “We can’t all be Superman,” she said, “or even Batman. In the end, we’re all human. We make mistakes. We do stupid things. What matters in the end,” she tapped Taylor on the head, “is if you feel sorry for your mistakes.”

“I do,” Taylor whispered.

“And so do I,” she said back. “I’ve messed up more than you’ll ever know, sweet girl. I don’t mind the arm. It’s punishment for everything I’ve done – and haven’t.” She patted Taylor’s hair before getting up. “I have to go. They’re coming.”
“Who?”

Wild looked down and smiled. “You said you think you’re a crummy hero, right?” she jabbed a finger over her shoulder. “Well, that’s not what the heroes think.” With that cryptic statement, she turned and walked out as easily as she came in. Taylor only saw the smallest glint of blue metal before the door closed with a snick.

…

“You need to go, now,” Armsmaster muttered to her urgently. Wild tilted her head up. “Alexandria’s on-base. We don’t know why.”

Wild swore under her breath. “Alright. Let me out the forcefield and I’ll go the rest of the way.”

Sneaking out the back was easy enough with Armsmaster’s clearance level and Wild clung onto him the same way she had when they came here, small and damp thanks to the saltwater spray. After a few more seconds they were out and Wild took to the air with one graceful swoop.

“I can’t meet you in public,” she said, “my face is too recognizable. Come to the shelter in your civilian guise and we’ll talk. Good?”

Armsmaster nodded curtly. It wasn’t as if he had anything to lose by revealing his face.

“Oh, and here,” she floated something down to him, “honestly, I can control small objects. It took me a little while to find this sucker, but really, did you think I wouldn’t expect it?” The small tracker-bug alighted on Armsmaster’s open palm and disappeared into its housing crevice stationed on his shoulder.

“You kept it intact,” he said, a little surprised. People usually tended to destroy the devices after finding them. Rude, but normal.

“It’s good work. And I knew you’d do something like that. You heard our conversation, then?”

“I did,” he said shamelessly. There was no use in circling the matter, so why hide it? “It wasn’t as useful as I hoped it would be. Why are you so intent on talking to that girl, anyway?”

Wild looked thoughtful. “Her powers are diverse. She’s doing things that have no correlation to each other, so I was thinking she was some sort of Trump. And we know who the most major Trump is.”

“You think she’s on level with Eidolon?” Armsmaster couldn’t conceal the thread of incredulity. Yes, Hebert was strong, but surely…?

“I don’t know,” Wild said with a final one-shouldered shrug. “There seems to be a lot I don’t know these days.” Her face twisted with a strange expression that seemed to be a mix of bitterness, irritation, and sadness. “Anyway, I’ll be seeing you. Bye.” Without waiting for a reply, Wild flew off and her figure melted into the shadows within moments. Armsmaster didn’t wait to see her go. He simply went back to the base.

It was Battery who came out to greet him when he docked. Her suit was glowing faintly and she rushed over as soon as she saw him. “Oh thank god, you’re here,” she said sounding harried. Clearly, the situation was something she didn’t want to deal with.

“Miss M said you were here but we couldn’t find you,” she continued as he clambered off and followed after her, “Alexandria’s here. She wants to talk to the girl.”
Unbidden, Wild’s words rose to the front of Armsmaster’s mind. *And we know who the most major Trump is…*

“Lead the way,” he grunted, pushing the thought away for later examination. Wild, it seemed, was little to intuitive for her own good. He could almost understand why Piggot kept pushing her away. She had a habit of getting mixed up in the business of capes, no matter what she said her stance was. And now they had to deal with a mystery cape kid that a member of the Triumvirate wanted to talk to who was possibly as strong as Eidolon.

Fucking Brockton Bay.
From my vantage point in the air, the moonlight looked as if someone had spilled bright drops of silver onto the dark waters below. I dipped and rose as I flew, enjoying the chill wind on my face as I did so. Winter was coming but I could still ignore the biting chill that nipped at my fingertips. My eyes watered and I flipped onto my back before letting go into a freefall.

I hung in the air for a moment before I fell, leaving my breath and stomach behind in a flurry of bitter coldness. My hair pressed against my skull and my clothes ballooned with the rushing wind and I let the sensation take over me for a brief moment. It was only when I heard laughter that I caught myself. Something darted around me, something bright in the pale light.

I turned over and watched her fly closer.

She swooped in close, a flash of gold and white, diving a little below me with a chirp of laughter. I watched her do a loop-the-loop before she approached me. Victoria Dallon was still the same as ever – blonde, pretty, and laughing.

“Hey-o!” she called out with a wave. “What you up to?”

“Just flying,” I replied as I started to slow to meet her. Already, I felt my back itch like an absolute bitch. I shifted uncomfortably as I tried to ignore it, remembering my brief foray into the swamps of Florida during the summer. I had come out a miserable, sweaty red lump at the end.

“Victoria,” I said when she tried to come closer. I liked my good mood. No way was her powering going to ruin this for me, “Could you tone down the aura?”

She looked perplexed but seemed to comply. When she drifted over for the second time, I braced myself for the abominable itching but it had disappeared just as quickly as it came.

“Woah,” she said when she got close, “What happened to you?”

I glanced at my empty sleeve before a wicked idea came to mind. I looked at the sleeve in seeming regret before looking away, letting my hair hang over my face. “It’s bad,” I sighed. “I got stupid. Villains, you know?”

True to form, Victoria only leaned in closer, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Who was it? Come on, you can tell me,” she urged.


“What?”

“Don’t you know?” I asked her incredulously, “There’re people who steal body parts like they do with organs. My arm got stolen because… because they wanted my powers.” Thankfully, she didn’t seem to have noticed my slip-up.

Victoria’s eyes were wide. “No way,” she breathed. “You can do that?”

“Mhmm,” I nodded assuredly. I inched closer as Victoria was busy figuring out the logistics behind
power limb-snatching.

“I was sleeping,” I informed her, “When I heard something. I wake up and I find myself on a hospital bed. They’ve got me strapped down and I see this saw, a big one, right above my arm. I can’t see the guy who’s holding it, but I can see the saw moving. He’s telling me that he’s trying to make the ultimate parahuman and he needs my power. And the saw, right, it’s getting closer, and closer…” I trailed off.

“And then?” Victoria asked in horror.

“He started to cut… like this!” With that, I tackled Victoria mid-air, pulling a scream out of her as we flipped over. I flew away before she could accidently cave my skull in with her flailing and barely stayed airborne as I busted my gut howling. Victoria reasserted herself a moment later and hung there, fuming. Even though it was dark, I knew her cheeks were flaming.

“You – you - !” she snarled incoherently, sputtering in her moment of mortified outrage. But before her humiliation could turn into genuine dislike, I flew around her and tugged on her cape before tugging it off and wrapping it around myself, the act made clumsy by my single hand. “Race you to the hospital!” I called to her before shooting away.

It took Victoria only a moment to gather her bearings and then she was hot on my trail. I ducked under billboards, twisted between buildings, and sometimes flew so low to the ground I could’ve brushed it with my hands. We continued like this for a little while before I started to slow. Victoria, too blinded by her determination to win, didn’t notice as she streaked ahead of me like a bullet. I could’ve won if I really pulled out the stops – even if I did run into a few buildings – but let her lead instead. Every time she lagged, I just snapped at her heels, urging her to push, to squeeze out the last drop of speed she had in her.

Brockton Bay didn’t have that many fliers and Sarah was a little too busy to go on flying like this. How many times, I wondered, did Victoria ever get to cut loose in the skies?

In the end, we dropped to a landing a block away from the hospital, out of breath and giggling. I knew Victoria’s forcefield protected her from the high winds of flight, but it didn’t do shit for the tunnel vision or the adrenaline rush. Although she wouldn’t get to experience the wind like I did, we both shared the same high.

I patted her back as we walked together, handing back the cape in the same action. “Come on,” I panted, “I know a place here. Let’s go get something to drink.”

Victoria could only nod, her eyes still glittering.

Ten minutes later, we were back on the street again, sipping at our respective drinks. I held a piping hot caramel mocha in my cold-reddened hand while Victoria held her two shakes – chocolate for herself and strawberry cream for Amy – in her hands. We strolled in companionable silence before I broke it.

“So,” I said between careful sips, “Why’s Amy doing a long shift again? I remember clearing myself out around eight or nine. It’s elevenish now. Isn’t it a school night or something?”

“It’s Friday and it’s Amy. She always keeps pushing,” Victoria shrugged. “She’s, like, a real hero. Always helping people and stuff. It’s who she is, I guess.”

I smirked behind my to-go cup and chose not grace her words with an answer. It made sense – Carol and Mark wouldn’t pick Amy up, and Sarah and her husband-whose-name-I-had-yet-to-get
were busy with their own lives and children. Victoria was nigh invincible, so it would be alright for
her to go flying around at night. Even if she was a child. Even if her forcefield had a weakness. Even if –

I shook myself. She’s not mine. Let other people worry about their own.

We found Amy waiting for us in the lobby, wearing jeans and a parka and looking tired. Despite
her tired gaze, she brightened when she saw Victoria.

“Vicky! You’re here!”

I had to stop my smile from stiffening as Amy hugged Victoria. At this point, her affection was
probably still innocent enough but…it disturbed me on a certain level. I knew what the future once
held for these two and I had no desire to let it come to pass. My grip on my cup tightened as they
exchanged eager greetings before turning to me.

Somehow, someway, between setting up the coalition and my own shelter, I had to separate these
two.

“Hey, Ms Wild,” Amy said shyly as she came up to me, “Vicky told me you bought these for us. Um, thanks.”

“Don’t call me Ms,” I said automatically before wincing at Amy’s crestfallen expression, “Just
Moira. That’s what my friends call me.”

“We’re your friends?” Victoria said in astonishment. I grinned at her as I bumped her with a hip. It
was like trying to bump a brick wall but I didn’t let it stop me.

“Sort of. If I was really desperate. Maybe my sidekick. Or my adorable followers –“

“That’s enough,” she snapped. I huffed a laugh before nudging Amy’s face with my stump, enjoying the way she recoiled in shock.

“Hey, how’re you two going?”

“Vicky usually just picks me up,” she said, sounding curious. I leaned in and raised an eyebrow at
her.

“Forget that. You wanna fly? Like, really fly?”

Amy’s eyes widened. “You mean…?”

“Yes. Let’s go flying like last time. Come on.” Her jacket had plenty little bits that I could
manipulate but it was the pockets I was interested in. I sent a few discs to her and they wormed into
what available spaces she had. Amy squirmed but didn’t lose her expression of excited anticipation.
Victoria came up beside us, looking suspicious.

“What’re you doing?” she asked.

I grinned at her. “We’re gonna fly in style,” With that, I jerked Amy up. She yelped at the
unexpected maneuver but soon was laughing when I sent her into a few amateur dives. I lifted
myself after her, as did Victoria.

“Ready?” I called out.

“Ready!” Came her excited reply.
“Then off we go,” I muttered as we shot up into the clouds. Victoria hovered around her sister protectively, but Amy was too far gone to notice it. She was screeching with laughter the whole way to her house, hooting with wild abandon that only the young can muster.

By the time we got to the Dallon household, we found someone waiting for us. She was in-costume and looked surprised at our arrival. Sarah, no longer glowing threateningly, drifted closer with an expression of utter bafflement.

“Was that Amy?” she asked me, her eyes on the two sisters. I kept Amy in the air and she was chatting breathlessly with her sister.

“She’s still a little kid, no matter how you look at it,” I replied. “And certainly no matter her power or maturity.”

Sarah didn’t reply. Instead, she turned her attention to me. Her eyes widened when she saw the empty sleeve but stopped herself from asking anything untoward to my gratefulness. Repeating the same story was getting tiring. “I heard the shelter’s opening soon,” she said conversationally.

“Yeah. Tomorrow, mid-day.”

“Ah. I need to talk to you. Carol’s busy at the office but we already discussed this, so if you would…”

“I can do that,” I said as I lowered myself. Amy followed. There was a soft thump as she touched down and the discs whizzed out to rejoin it brethren with me. We started to walk to the Dallon house. “Where? Here or yours?”

“Actually… I was thinking yours. We never did get to see this beloved shelter of yours.”

I glanced at her. Sarah’s face was calm. “Alright. We’ll drop these two off and we can fly over. Good?”

She nodded. “Good.” She hesitated then steeled herself. “I heard the story from Amy. My sympathies, Moira.”

I nodded in thanks. Heh. I knew I liked Sarah for a reason.

…

There was the softest murmur of conversation in the kitchen when we came in. I knocked loudly, rapping three times in quick succession before stepping through the front door. Sarah followed.

“Is it code?” she asked. Smart woman.

I tilted my head. “Three times for friendlies, two for unknowns, and once for danger.”

“Ah.”

It was, of course, a lie. Three times was actually for ‘hide the villains’. Two was for ‘hide the children’, and one was ‘get the cleaning supplies because blood is about to get on the wallpaper and I’m not cleaning it’.

Hestia came out to greet us. She held out her hand for Sarah to shake, smiling brilliantly the whole while. In fact, she was looking a little more radiant than usual. “Hi,” she said warmly, “My name’s Hestia. I heard a lot about you, Lady Photon, or do you prefer Sarah?”
“Sarah’s fine,” she said with equal warmth. “So you’re one of Moira’s trusted lieutenants?”

“Lieutenant?” she asked with a grin. “More like cleaners, administrators, and general assistants. If she told us it’s be this much work, we would’ve never left D.C."

I went to roll my eyes but lost my enthusiasm halfway through and ended up looking at the ceiling. “We can all sit in the living room and talk,” I said as I herded the two women away from the entrance. Iago was nowhere to be seen. Probably handling Purity and Blasto, good man that he is.

“So, how goes the coalition efforts?” I asked Sarah.

“It’s mostly good,” she said with a small shrug. “I mean, we still haven’t set up any press conferences yet, but we’re getting there. We’ve got the news out and Carol’s drawn up all the official documentation. At this point, all we need to do is announce it properly and get you costumed up.”

Hestia choked on a laugh. I elbowed her as I spoke. “No. No costumes. No names. That’s not my style.”

“But you’re a cape now. Capes always wear costume. It’s easier that way to keep the two – civilian and cape – separate.”

“And that’s exactly why,” I said. “I don’t keep my civilian and cape sides separate. They are essentially both Moira Wild. Keeping the two in two different roles would reject the message I’m sending out. You guys can do this – don’t ask it from me.”

Sarah pursed her lips but didn’t pursue the subject any further. “Secondly,” she said, “we need a base of operations. While we used our homes for New Wave, I don’t think it’s going to cut it for the coalition. And I have a feeling the shelter shouldn’t be used like that, either. It’s a home, not a centre for capes. Why risk non-combatants?”

“Thank you,” I said, relieved at her sensible reasoning. “We can just rotate between the three until we set up something acceptable – how about that?”

“It’ll do,” Sarah said reluctantly, “But we will need to find something better, soon as possible.”

I nodded in agreement. Hestia chose this moment to pipe in. “Well, that’s good and all,” she said, fidgeting when Sarah looked at her, “But… but do you actually have new members? I mean, at this point, all it looks you guys are doing is just getting a new name.”

I shrugged but Sarah spoke.

“About that…”

“What? We have people asking to join?” I asked, a little surprised. The woman made a little wavy thing with her head.

“Ehhh… kind of. If you count people outside the city. Villain levels have been going down, lately.”

“There’s still the Merchants,” I pointed out. “And they’re carting drugs by the hundreds of kilos with their newfound freedom. Plenty of heroing to go around.”

“But it’s not like taking down Lung.”
“So?”

Sarah smiled patiently. “Moira, you do realize that people talk about you, right? You intimidate them. You did from the beginning, to be honest. That’s why you’re not being mobbed with reporters every time you step out. You’re… scary.”

“Scary?”

“Well, maybe not scary,” she amended. “But certainly unapproachable. It’s kind of hard not to be when you take down a city’s worth of villains. Which you did.”

“Shouldn’t that make them grateful?” I said, not quite understanding the point.

“Well, yes. But news got out about the extent of Lung’s injuries. We did some more digging and…”

“And?” I prompted.

“… did you really rip out someone’s spine one time?”

I sighed noisily. Not this again. PR has been bad that year because of some squeamish reporters. “No. I never ripped out anyone’s spine. The Manton Limit affects me, you know. I only removed the metal bolts in his spine. I snagged a few vertebrae too, but he got them back in for the most part. He’s only paralyzed from the waist down. Even if he needs a bracer.”

Hestia coughed. Sarah stared.

And I threw my hand up. “Fine,” I said in exasperation. “You have people who can generate energy from their bodies, Tinkers who can make Star Trek real-life, and Brutes that break the laws of physics, but somehow, I’m the weird one.”

Iago materialized behind me and poked my side. I shrieked as Hestia burst into giggles. Sarah watched the events unfold patiently, like a parent waiting for the children to stop horsing around. Face pink, I rounded on him.

“And there’s this asshole,” I jabbed his chest. “I mean, he’s fooling all our brains with his power. How is he not scarier than I am?”

“Because you make people bleed,” he said simply. “They expect a fight, punching and kicking and the like. They don’t expect to shit out gravel.”

“Discussion over,” I said finally and Iago smirked before snagging Hestia by the elbow.

“We have plans,” he said smoothly, “Do you mind house-sitting for tonight?”

I waved them off airily. “Sure, sure, don’t do drugs, don’t talk to strangers and don’t scare the mundane folks. Have fun.”

Iago smiled slightly before they both disappeared into air. The last thing I heard was Hestia’s surprised laugh before it faded into silence.

“They’re… interesting,” Sarah said finally.

“They’re good people,” I said. “Reliable. Trust-worthy. If they didn’t have issues with violence, then I’d say they’d be good capes. And on that matter,” I looked at her and folded my hands in front of me, “I think the coalition needs to branch out of the bay. Operating in one city isn’t good
enough – for us to extend our protection and services fully, we need to look beyond this city.”

Sarah’s expression became serious and she leaned in. “That’s good and all,” she said pointedly, “But we only have the members of New Wave and you. Maybe some of your shelter, I guess. Factor in the few offers we’ve had. That’s… fifteen? Eleven for active members. We had to have eight members just to hold down Brockton Bay. Another city’s just too ambitious.”

I conceded her point. But still… “New Wave was meant to be a new era of heroes,” I argued, “No masks. Full accountability. But you’re still here, still stuck in one city. The coalition is a new thing too and as much help as the press and media will be, we have to make our presence known. Back it up, basically.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Form a team,” I said. “An active roster of heroes and they have to be trained. And I mean trained. Not vigilantism, but genuine combat, tactics, and skill training. No more getting by on powers alone. Instead of just trying to hit harder than the other guy, we need to fight smarter.”

I could see her getting used to the idea. She nodded along. “Tinker and Thinker support would also be great but…” Her face fell.

“What?”

“Then what makes us so different from the Protectorate?”

“We’re not exclusively heroes,” I said. “But a community. Parahumans – capes or civilian – all working to support each other. We offer protection for those that want to stay out of the cape scene and means to work without endangering themselves. No more Case 53s having to work for the Protectorate or villains because they have no other option. No more Tinkers getting hunted down by governments. Hell, we can offer help to mundane people who are in direct danger or the families of active capes. We will be what the Protectorate is – and more beyond that. We’ll be… we’ll be a –”

“Bastille,” Sarah breathed.

I frowned. “What?”

She still had the peculiar look on her face, like she in awe or something. “A Bastille,” she repeated. “Is a fortress or citadel. Just something heavily protected against attacks.”

“Wasn’t it also a French prison?”

“Well,” she coughed lightly, “Sanctuary seemed a little cliché and Haven’s already taken.”

I scrunched my nose, still doubtful. “We can figure the names out later,” I said. Anything else was cut off when something beeped loudly, followed by a plaintive “Mooooooom, pick up!”.

Under my incredulous gaze, Sarah picked up her cellphone with red cheeks. “I’m a little busy at the moment,” she said, but failed to sound entirely annoyed. Something chattered loudly back and the woman rolled her eyes. “Of course your father did. Hold on, I’ll call you back. And stop changing my ringtone.”

She put it down and smiled in a helpless ‘what can you do’ way. “Sorry,” she chuckled. “Kids, you know?”
I smiled wistfully. “I suppose.”

Her expression softened slightly. “You’re a mother too, aren’t you? What about your own?”

“Mine?” I echoed. Unbidden, the faces of the children of the shelter flashed in my eyes. Cora, Anyim, Roger, Xiaoli, Renee. So young. Too eager to follow in Parker’s footsteps. The way their powers developed, they might just become heroes. And in this cold, ugly, ruthless world, they might just die doing so.

I clenched my fist. I’d kill Scion than let that happen.

“They’re good kids,” I said just to answer Sarah’s question. “Never had a problem with them.”

“‘They’? I thought you just had one son?”

I waved offhandedly. “I’ve got five more back in D.C. Parker’s just the one with my last name.”

Sarah was briefly silent. “Is it hard?” she finally asked.

I looked at her. Gone was the sheepish, quietly happy expression of just a few minutes ago. Her brow was knitted as she awaited my answer.

“What is?” I asked just to prolong it, though I had an inkling of what she meant.

“Leaving them behind,” she said softly. “This world. Villains. Endbringers. There never seems to be enough heroes, you know?”

I ruminated over my answer briefly. My eyes flicked around, but it was my power that let me see the most. This new shelter was devoid of the regulars of human life unlike my old one. There were no pennies scattered under drawers, no dust bunnies under couches, and most of the rooms were bare. I sensed Blasto messing around with his equipment and Purity was reading a book while on the bed. There was none of the comfortable background noise of moving objects I grew accustomed to at the old shelter.

“It is,” I admitted finally. “Sometimes I simply can’t sleep, thinking about what-ifs and might-haves and such. I did my very best in trying to make sure the place we lived in was the safest possible, yeah? Sure, I probably crippled some people – permanently, mind you – and gained the hate, dislike, and wariness of the many. You probably know that from just the stories. But I don’t give a damn about that. I’d sooner spit in the eye of god himself than give up the people I care about,” I wrenched my attention away from the contents of the shelter to look Sarah in the eye.

“So the enemy better be stepping over my dead body to get to the people I love.”

Sarah appraised me silently, her face unreadable as she digested my words and turned them over in her head. Then, slowly, like the sun breaking over the horizon, a smile crept onto her face and the previous inscrutability melted away.

“Good,” she simply said. “That’s good.”

With that, we walked on, our steps matching as we felt into one tempo. I felt as if I had passed a test of sorts, though I was not sure as to the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of it. Still, I felt at ease in the maternal solidarity that arose in the course of our conversation.

Though my sudden speech-making was getting a little out of hand.
It was a few minutes later before Sarah finally left. I waved at her as she took to the skies in a brilliant display of lights before closing the door tight. I leaned against the frame for a little bit before picking up the small marker and whiteboard I kept around when I wanted to send messages but was too lazy to go myself. I scribbled the message before sending it sailing downstairs to Blasto.

You can come out.

He wrote a reply back.

OK

I erased it with a hand before sending it into Purity’s room. She started in shock – the bed frame’s screws had creaked a little – but recovered quickly enough to also reply.

I’m coming.

True to her word, Purity waddled to the ground floor a moment later. Without her heavy coats, her pregnancy was that much more obvious as it bulged out under the t-shirt Iago was kind enough to gift her. His shirts, by virtue of being broad at the shoulders, were the only ones that could fit her as everyone else was too slim, Blasto included.

I watched her trundle into the kitchen before leaving my senses on her as I turned to do something else. I was just about to drift into the living room when someone started to knock on the door insistently. It was loud enough to set my teeth on edge and I held a hand out to Purity.

“Get behind the wall. Now.” There was some shuffling as she obeyed. Ignoring it, I called together my discs and held them in front of me as I checked the peephole. There was nothing but I didn’t let it fool me. Sneakers – laces. Cellphone – cheap, Nokia model – small parts, glass screen, compact enough to bludgeon. Hairband. Wearing jeans – pins, buttons. No one would be stupid enough to do a full-frontal assault like this, right? I tightened my grip on the small objects littering the person anyway.

I took a deep breath and opened the door with a bang. Purity jumped as I yanked the figure up by their pants and put a screaming disc to their face, snarling, “Who the fuck are – “

Oh. Shit.

It was a little girl. A little black girl to be precise, with a swollen black eye and a nose covered in dry cracked blood. I dropped her immediately, guilt swelling in my chest as I gathered her into the crook of my arm and brought her inside. “Oh god, oh god,” I whispered to her, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know who you were. I’m so sorry.”

She was saying something but I didn’t hear it as I hovered over her, flailing at the change in atmosphere. I had been ready to deal with potential house-stalking murderers, not – not a little kid.

I pulled a hand-towel out of the bathroom and soaked it in the faucet with nothing but my power as I directed the girl to the couch. The towel shot to my hand a moment later and I used it to wipe her face clean, brushing black hair out of the way every so often. The girl –whoever she was – was pretty in a lean, minimal way with her high brow and delicate bones, I noted. Too young for relationships, however, so it couldn’t have been that. I dabbed away the last of the blood as I tried to swallow the ugly guilt building in my throat.
“I’m so sorry,” I said again. “God…my name’s Moira Wild. Why were you knocking?”

She was silent. Then she pointed at her face. “Just had to go out,” she said lamely. “I knew about you. You’d…you’d let me stay. Because I’m a parahuman.”

Now that my bout of guilty fear was gone, a familiar feeling took its place. It felt as if someone had spilled meltwater down my back as I gazed at her battered face and I relished every moment of the icy rage. The culprit was the parents then. Of course. For them, I would let it build. Then…and then…

“I can do this,” she continued and turned into a vaguely humanoid mass of shadows before reforming.

It felt as I someone had ripped the rug out from under me. My fury tripped and fell onto its face as shock took over in a burning, furious cascade of What.

“My name’s Sophia Hess,” she said and that was it. I fell on my ass, then gave up and rolled onto the floor to lie there fully, blinking up at the ceiling.

I could deal with someone attacking me at my own doorstep. Hell, just throw Lung at me and call it a day. But a sympathetic Sophia Hess?

Dear god, no.
Sophia gave me a look as she watched me lay on the floor. I could feel Purity fidget before she tried to sneak past. Considering her pregnancy and the fact that she had to pass the open living room to get to the stairs, it was less than successful. She dropped a yogurt from her armload of food and cursed as it fell with a heavy thump!

“What the – what the fuck? Why the fuck are you here?” Sophia snarled as she leapt to her feet. She looked ready for a fight but I wasn’t sure how she intended to take on Purity without any weapons. I mean, the woman can throw out blasts of building-leveling light. Purity wouldn’t take her seriously –

What the bloody fuck are you doing.

“Purity, if you don’t stop glowing right this instant, I swear to god, I’m kicking you out. Do you know how much stripping, rebuilding, and renovating this place cost? So much. So fucking much that if your blasts even peel the paint, you can forget about getting all the stuff you’re craving lately.”

She glared at Sophia, still radiating a faint light. “She threatened me,” she said lowly. “I don’t take well to that.”

“She’s, like, twelve,” I shot back irritably, still on the floor. “And again, you’re literally an artillery unit by yourself. Beyond offending your sensibilities, I don’t think you’re in much danger. So chill.”

Purity was clearly fuming but she gathered her scattered foodstuff before waddling as stiffly as a pregnant woman can shuffle into her room. I watched her go before slowly looking back at Sophia. “Do you mind?”

She still looked ready for a fight but a healthy infusion of confusion was in her expression too. “She’s a villain,” she said – still a mite too snarly for her age, it looked silly to be frank – curls of shadows escaping her occasionally, like she hovering between her human and shadow form, “I thought you hated villains.”

“Oh yeah,” I said casually, “Purity’s definitely a terrible racist with no regard for other people beyond herself and the people she cares about which is a vanishingly small list in itself. But you know what? We should all just appreciate each for who we are and not judge.”

“What? Are you fucking serious right now? Oh my god, I –“

(Of course I’m not serious,” I snapped as I rolled to my feet. “But she’s pregnant. Are you telling me to send a pregnant woman to jail? I’m a lot of things, but asshole is not one of them. Usually.”

The anger was completely gone from her by this point. Now she just looked confused. “But – but she’s –“

I pressed my finger to her mouth. “Shhh. Nobody likes a Chatty Cathy. How about you eat this –“

I snagged a cup of pudding from the refrigerator and handed it to her, “– and tell me why you came to my house in the middle of the night looking like you got in a bar fight. If you want. Which is preferable.”
She looked at the plastic and scowled. “How am I supposed to eat this? With my hands?”

I rolled my eyes as a spoon came flying out of the kitchen cabinet to stop in front of her. “Hands? Perish the thought.”

Sophia started to eat. At first it was slowly like she expected it to be snatched out of her hands at any given moment. Once I took my eyes off her, her spoon began to move faster. I wasn’t even done rummaging for my own snack when she put it down. I spun around with two tubs of ice-cream balanced on my forearm. I flicked the waste into the waste bin and the dirty spoon into the sink as I handed her one tub.

“Eat. Talk. If you want, I mean.”

With that, I plopped down onto the armchair and turned on the television. Eating with one arm was hard unless you were like me and used your powers to telekinetically ferry food into your mouth. The sweet taste of chocolate fudge brownie filled my mouth as I idly went channel-surfing. I was in the mood for… nature documentaries. Perfect.

As the smooth tones of the vaguely British narrator washed over me, I leaned back and propped my feet up on the coffee table. Neither Hestia nor Carly was here to frown at me for it so I was good for now. Of course, there was still a small, confused looking girl sitting on my couch but that was forgivable.

“Um,” she started.

I scratched my nose.

“You don’t have an arm.”

“Erudite observation,” I drawled. “Now it’s my turn. You’ve a black eye.”

“A missing arm’s worse than a black eye.”

“Is it now? Really, I think that depends on perspective. For me, it’s not too terrible. I can still function normally. My day-to-day habits aren’t limited all that much. Black eyes, on the other hand, would give me a headache and make me less beautiful. See how it compares?”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Sophia mumbled around her mouthful of Chunky Monkey. She swallowed and winced. “Ah, brain freeze.”

“Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth,” I advised. “And the world rarely makes sense. Let me guess… was it a parent?”

“He’s not my dad!”

“Step-father, then,” I surmised. “Fuck, why’s your mom still with this douche?”

Sophia shrugged, “Stop talking like you know shit. Do I look like I fucking know?”

I could’ve dug deeper at that moment. The way Sophia was right now, she’d let slip more than she’d ever realize. I could drive her into a corner with more and more questions until she burst, the stress and shock finally catching up to her until she was just a quivering mess of emotions. I could do it. I’d done it before.

I watched her stare at the television unseeingly, glaring at panda bears as they rolled around in
verdant fields. The overstuffed, plush couch looked like it was swallowing her as she huddled into a corner of the armrest. It was, as far as I knew, not on purpose. Sophia, no matter how she talked, acted like an animal about to be trapped. Like she waiting for an attack so she could brace herself.

I wasn’t going to push her. She would tell me or she wouldn’t – I knew the details anyway. Stepfather, Steve, regularly abused her. But she hadn’t been violent up until her trigger at which point her prey-predator mentality became reality.

I hadn’t considering intervening. In the beginning, I hadn’t wanted to touch any of the events in fear of derailing canon. But that was gone now. With my interference in Brockton Bay, I caused too many changes to even hope of going back. Even then, I never really considered helping Sophia despite my rule about children.

To be frank?

I hated her. I hated her for everything she did, for the monstrous animal she was. I hated how she twisted one girl’s mind and bullied another to the breaking point. Even Bonesaw had been more redeemable in my eyes – after all, she was just a victim of Jack Slash. But now?

Now I saw the truth. Sophia Hess was just another victim. Just another child that this world crushed under its heel until she came out the monster for it. I couldn’t hate this one – not when she’s never done the things I’d hate her for. Not when she had no other person to turn to except me and only because she was a parahuman. Because I was the only option she had left.

“What?” I was jerked out of my chain of thoughts by Sophia’s voice. She was staring at me, eyes narrowed. “Why’re you looking at me? What do you want?”

“Just thinking,” I replied vaguely. I dug my spoon into the tub of ice-cream again. “Say, when do you have to go home?”

“Does it matter?” she shrugged. “I’m not going back. Or are you going to do something?” She glared at me, as if challenging me to try anything. It was almost cute – from here I could’ve slit her throat with the kitchen knives. Just a cut and she’d be leaking all over the floor.

“No, no,” I said softly. My ice-cream suddenly tasted a lot less good. This girl didn’t even know about the radical shift of views in my head right now. “What are you going to do now, in general?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get rid of some dicks in the street. My powers are good for that. For hunting.”

“Hunting?” Here goes the life philosophy…

“I’m a predator,” she declared, puffing her chest out. “Top hunter-killer there is. The people in the street are the sheep. The prey. That’s how it is.”

“I see. What am I?” I asked her. At this point, neither of us was even pretending to watch the TV. The sonorous narration washed over us like white noise.

“You’re a predator,” she said without hesitation. I looked away, the chocolate like ash in my mouth. I put the lid back on and sent it away to the freezer while my spoon sailed into the sink. I stood up and walked over to Sophia. She watched me warily, almost flinching when I held my hand out to her. Slowly, she took it and rose.

I’m going to regret this but… letting her out on her own is just asking for trouble. “I was thinking of flushing out the last of the Merchants. With Lung still MIA and the Empire gone, nearly all the
villains in the city have been eliminated. All is left is them and I don’t do a job half-done,” I forced
a grin for her sake, “And I was thinking of getting a partner. The people I brought from D.C. are
busy running the shelter, the Protectorate doesn’t like me, and New Wave’s too flashy. But your
powers…”

“You mean, you want us to work together?” Sophia said numbly. Her eyes were wide. I put a hand
on her shoulder.

“Well, you said you wanted to go hunting, right?”

Her mouth worked. I let her process the thought before backing off. “You don’t have to answer
now. How about you take a night to think it over? I’ve got loads of rooms so you can just pick one
and tell me in the morning.”

Sophia gaped as I turned around and went up the stairs. I was on the second step when I heard her
snap into action and follow after me.

“Are you serious?” she demanded. “You want me to join you?”

“Serious as I ever am,” I said.

She looked around as we got to the second floor landing. She watched me go to the last door on the
left before asking me pointedly, “Is that your room?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Then can I stay there?” she pointed at the door across from mine. I looked at it. Back at the old
shelter, that door was the entrance to Carly’s room. It had been the door I reserved for my right-
hand, the person I trusted the most to watch my back. It was symbolic, in a way.

I looked back at Sophia.

“Sure,” I said to her before I disappeared into my room and closed the door behind me.
It was early the next morning when Iago found me sitting in the kitchen. He started, blinking in surprise. “You’re awake?”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” I muttered as I took a sip of coffee. My hair, still damp from the cold shower, dripped onto the newspaper I was reading and I watched the ink run irritably. “Where’s Hestia?”

“Still sleeping,” he replied with stretch and a yawn. I averted my eyes from the glorious – but also taken – sight. “I figured she deserves it after pretty much getting the entire shelter ready. She’s been freaking out about this for days, you know.”

“Mhmm,” I hummed noncommittally. “Start breakfast, will you? We need to feed Purity, Blasto, and Sophia before the press get here. And where the hell are the two guys who’s supposed to be here?”

“Alright, alright. They said they’ll get here around eleven. And who’s Sophia?”

“She came last night,” I waved. “Little kid. You might like her. Or not.”

Iago stared. “Right.” Then he shook his head and began to bang around the cabinets, digging out skillets and pots for whatever he was making. I watched him blearily before deciding do a sweep of the shelter. There was Blasto, surrounded by equipment as he snoozed at his desk. Purity was in bed, also sleeping. A small pile of wrappers and cartons littered the drawer beside her. I picked them up and opened the door just enough to send them downstairs and into the trash. My final check was on Sophia. She was in bed – no. She sitting on the bed, fully clothed, doing god-knows-what.

I checked my nails before getting up. It was rare for me to have moments of peace like this. I was itching to do something – anything – that involved action. I paced the room before falling down on the couch with a huff.

I was bored.

While it was novel experience I hadn’t gone through in quite a while, it wasn’t something I enjoyed. So I got up and went upstairs to where Sophia was. Might as well be productive. I rapped on the door and waited for her to open it. A moment later, it creaked open a crack to show Sophia’s wary face.

“Hey!” I said brightly. She opened the door a little bit more.

“What do you want?” she said. Undeterred by her suspiciousness, I leaned down to her height and whispered to her conspiratorially.

“Have you made up your mind?”

Sophia hesitated. Then her face cleared. In a confident voice, she said, “Yes. I want to join you.”

“That’s what I like to hear!” I grinned as I clenched my fist after realizing I didn’t have the hands to clap together. I gestured at her. “Then we have to go shopping. I know this guy who can make
some sweet tailored stuff and if you want a mask, we – “

“Wait, you’re… paying for me?” Sophia said, sounding bewildered. “Why would you do that?”

I stopped my rant and looked at her. I mean, really looked at her. Her clothes weren’t shabby – plain t-shirt, washed out jeans, they looked like something you’d grab at Target on sale. The shirt was a smidge too large and the jeans were tight around her thighs. It wasn’t noticeable but nearly five years of shopping for five children and four teenagers had educated me on children’s clothing – these clothes were picked out without thought or care. Either her parents didn’t notice what they bought or Sophia did her own shopping. Either way, they were unacceptable.

“Why not?” I said rhetorically with a grin. “Come along, it won’t take much time. We’ll get you fitted properly and maybe some new stuff on the way. We can grab breakfast along the way too. I’ve got time to kill and money to spend.” Not exactly true, but I’ll figure out expenses later. Maybe monetize Blasto’s experiments. Or go bother Accord for more money.

I stepped in and summoned up the bricks while discs shot out of my room and into my clothes. Sophia watched me clamber through the window with wide eyes. I snapped my fingers for her attention and only then did she come to, skittering forward to slide onto the bricks. In a moment of kindness, I formed a handhold for her before we began to fly.

She squeaked. “Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. This is how you get around?!”

“Occasionally,” I grunted back as I scanned the streets below for my intended location. The tailor shop would be the first thing, and then the Shopping district. Distantly, I realized I should’ve brought Hestia along for this. She had much better fashion sense than I did. All I did was wear black – just because everything went with black.

I didn’t try to fly as hard as I normally would. Not only was it disconcerting for newbies, I also didn’t have any fail-safes in case Sophia tumbled over the edge. And my desire to see her dead was waning every time I looked at her and saw an abused child instead of a sociopathic monster. It made sense – abused children sometimes turned around to become the abuser. Her shard only exacerbated the issue.

Landing was as simple as touching down on the empty sidewalk. People immediately scattered as we came down, a phenomenon which I learned to ignore, but Sophia gaped at their retreating backs. “Do they always do that?” she asked dumbly.

“Most of the time,” I shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“I definitely could,” she mumbled under her breath. I spared her a concerned glance. Her predator-prey thing could get creepy at times, even for me. I ushered her into the shop, leaving the bricks outside in neat stacks. The bell barely chimed before the man was upon us and he paled when he saw me again.

“Oh no,” he whimpered. “Not you.”

“Surprise, Allen!” I threw my arm around him. “It’s your favorite customer!”

“My name is Carl,” he whispered as I spun him around to face Sophia. “Who is this? Who let you have a child?”

“She’s my young partner,” I announced sagely, yanking his measuring tape from the cabinets and stuffing it into his sweaty palms. “Take her measurements. I’d like to order the same outfit as before, one for me and one for her. Keep the same scheme though you don’t have to disjoint the
panels like with mine. Basic armoring will be enough,” I looked towards Sophia in askance. “Do you want anything special? Masks, colors, or whatever?”

She looked like a child that’d been handed a wad of bills for their birthday – dazed, excited, and thinking of the possibilities. Pleased at being offered a chance to say her opinion, she thought long and hard before speaking. “I want a belt,” she said. “Lots of compartments to put stuff in. And a cape like Alexandria’s.”

“Capes are kind of hard. Takes a certain majesty to pull one off. You could trip, or flip it over your head, and all that. I’ve seen careers go down because of capes.”

“Then make it shorter,” Sophia shot back, too excited to let the idea go.

I sighed. “Alright. Add a cape, make it weighted and armored. Not too heavy though. And a clasp so she can unhook it whenever. Mid-thigh.”

The tailor nodded. I watched his hands shake as he carefully measured Sophia’s body, always keeping a cautious distance from the incriminating parts under my gimlet eye. While I trusted him enough to not go blabbing my secrets, I didn’t trust him enough to not observe him at all times. That was the price you paid when your tailor was a criminal, I suppose.

“A-Alright,” he said as he finished. “I have everything I need. Your order should be done within the week. Is that all?”

I glanced at Sophia. “Anything you want to add?”

She grinned. “A hood and a mask. The hood needs to stay on all the time so add hooks or something. The mask is blank – no features or anything. Just covers the eyes.”

“A domino mask,” I said. “Add cover for her cheeks and chin too to change the face shape. The hood’s remains separate from the cape and, of course, armored. That’s all, I think.”

The tailor nodded. I made to walk out with Sophia before stopping just before the door. I looked over my shoulder with a crooked grin. “Carl,” I called out, watching him twitch as he turned to face me, “You’ll stay quiet about this, yes? Because we’re friends, right?”

He nodded jerkily. “O-Of course, Moira. Wouldn’t do that to you, no, no.”

I turned away. “Good man. Your payment will be given, as agreed.”

“Why’d you do that?” Sophia immediately asked when we were outside the shop. I looked down at her even as my hindbrain was busy constructing the platform.

“Hmm?”

“You paid him. Why? He’s just so… weak.”

“You said that the world consisted of prey and predator, right?” I said as we stepped on. Well. Looks like it’s time to change her worldview until she starts thinking in a vaguely normal way. “Well, you could say he’s my prey, I guess. But that doesn’t mean he can’t hurt me. If he decided to tell my enemies about you or my armor, then I might be in trouble. So I have to make sure he likes me more than he likes my enemies. Money is a fantastic way of greasing the process.”

“But he’s prey.”
“Doesn’t mean he can’t be dangerous,” I replied. Sophia looked befuddled by the notion.

“But – but – “

“Look, I get what you’re getting at. The weak and the strong, right? But all of that changes form situation to situation. Even the strongest can be stabbed in the back or have so many enemies that they overwhelm him or her. So when you’re a predator,” I jabbed Sophia pointedly, “You’ve got to be smart. Don’t throw your weight around and don’t attack people for no reason. You’re not a wild animal but a human being – we’re on the top of the food chain because of this,” I pointed at her head, “Not this.” I slid my finger down to her chest.

“… alright,” she still didn’t sound convinced. But the fact that she was replying at all was progress in itself. And I didn’t expect my speech to impact her in any significant way because, while words were good tools, sometimes you just had to experience it for yourself to understand.

We stopped by a cart for hotdogs. Sophia stuffed her face with the classic mustard-ketchup combo while I was busy juggling my own chilidog. The Shopping district loomed before us like a monolith of brand stores and price tags and far too cheery shop assistants. I steeled myself for the ordeal ahead, mentally tallying the money I had on hand and what might look good on Sophia.

We walked down the avenue, browsing windows as we went, when something caught the corner of my eye. I left my senses to keep watch of Sophia as I wandered closer to examine the bookshop before me. Its front display was a full rack of books ranging from murder mysteries to young adult novels. I browsed the titles until I reach the romance thriller section, at which point my mouth opened into an ‘o’ of delighted surprise.

_He Wore Black and I Wore White_

_The Love-Thief_

_Forbidden_

I grinned. I had thought with villains like Heartbreaker running around, the romance genre concerning capes would’ve been sparse at best. However, it seems I was wrong. I giggled as I came upon a cover of two men – Legend and Eidolon, judging by their costume colors and design. It was just enough different that it could be ignorable. _Fable and Paragon, indeed._

“What’re you doing?” came Sophia’s loud voice from behind me. I turned around fast enough that she took a step back.

“Nothing,” I lied as I ushered her away from the window. “Look, there’s a store with stuff inside. Let’s go inside.”

“But that’s all underwear.”

“Has no one ever told you that underwear is an essential part of cape work?! I said, nudging her forward with my stump as I glanced back at the bookshop. This world doesn’t have Harry Potter… just another way this place sucks.

In the end, we came out with only four bags of clothes. One was dedicated to pants, two were shirts, and the last had a pair of black biker boots. I tried to ignore the fact that they were all black and regrettably similar to what I wore on my nightly jaunts. I checked the time.

Ah. Ten-fifty. The new arrivals would be at the shelter soon. I nudged Sophia with the stump. “Hey. I got to be going now. Want to come with? Or I can take you home if you need.”
Sophia adjusted her grip on the bags. For some reason I could not decipher, she had insisted on holding all four bags herself. She was clearly struggling but stubbornly refused to let me have a bag. “I’d rather be with you,” she gritted out.

“Alright.” Though she’d have to go home sooner or later before I got accused of being a kidnapper. Again.

…

The press release was in full swing when I got there. I dropped off Sophia in her room and smiled charmingly at Hestia and Iago as I came down. I resisted the urge to use my senses for the whole room. It was like trying to look into a cluttered room – too many moving things demanded my attention. I could eventually differentiate them, but it required extra concentration. From the surface, I saw mostly adults. The opening was an open-house sort of affair, and I could see a few teenagers standing around with wide eyes. They were mostly boys, though I also saw a little girl in their midst. *Someone’s sister, maybe?*

Iago leaned to whisper something into Hestia’s ear and she grinned back. I drifted over to them with a smile. “Where’s the two?” I inquired, looking around.

“Margo went to her room downstairs and Eddie came in, dropped off his stuff, and went back out,” Hestia said. She was dressed gorgeously in a skin-tight cocktail dress that flared around her knees and I saw more than one jealous glance at Iago, who was dressed in a more casual black button-down and slacks.

Iago jerked his head to the side, “Look. Reporters.”

I glanced to the right and saw them, looking like a cloud of piranhas as they searched for the unfortunate bastard to devour. I took a step back. “Looks like I got to – wait. Where are you going?”

Clearly, Iago and Hestia weren’t happy with my little morning trip because the next thing I knew, I was talking to a reporter and I saw no one to take my place.

Now, don’t get me wrong – I don’t mind reporters. I understand the importance of their work and I once even wanted to be one myself. But, *god*, they were annoying. My smile twitched as multiple microphones were shoved in my face, followed by an impassioned onslaught of questions.

“Ms Wild, your opinion on the state of the Docks –“

“- your press release with the Director – “

“Ms Wild, concerning the shelter down in Washington, will you – “

I swatted one particularly persistent one out of my face as my discs came out in an ever-widening spiral, forcing the reporters back. I smiled thinly at their shocked expressions. These weren’t the well-practiced men and women of D.C., all of whom were used to my quirks and what they were allowed and what they were not. These people were used to being able to push around the Protectorate heroes.

“Some space to breath, please,” I said blandly as my discs withdrew. “I don’t mind questions, but I can hardly answer them when you’re all screaming at the same time. We’ll start off with one at a time, and two questions, max. Good?”

“But – “
I pointed at him sharply. Said reporter shrunk under my withering glare. “What station are you from?” I asked.

“B-Brockton Radio, ma’am.”

“You’re going last, radio boy. You,” I jabbed a finger at a timid looking guy who looked like he should still be in high school. “Go on, ask me things. Two, then buzz off.”

“I – I,” his hands shook as he tried to gather himself. Then he took a steeling breath and consulted his notes. “Your partnership with New Wave – how does that work?”

“We are forming a supporting community for parahumans,” I replied, “With opportunities for jobs, protection, and general support. Furthermore, there will be a hero team for villain suppression. We’re still working it out.”

He jotted it all down hurriedly, as did the people around him. I used to brief silence to pull a glass of wine into my hand. “What role will this… ah, community, play with the Protectorate?”

“We’re separate,” I said. “The Protectorate, of course, may continue as they are. What we are trying to do is form an actual support base for parahumans that is not involved with the cape scene.”

“But – “

“Ah, ah,” I wagged my finger at him. “One question at a time. Go on. Next up is you,” I said to a dark-skinned woman in a purple blouse. She adjusted her glasses, caught off-guard by my selection.

“What is your reply to accusations of you forming a private parahuman army?”

“It’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t ask for my people to fight for me. This is a home, a sanctuary of safety and living. Not a base for combat.”

“So even if you fight, then your people will not?”

“Not unless they want to,” I said.

She nodded. “Thank you,” and scurried away into the crowd, trailing her cameraman behind her as she hunted for someone else to question.

The next reporter came up of her own volition. Dressed in an eye-popping floral dress and jacket, she barreled to the front with her microphone tightly gripped. Despite her hungry expression, I found my eyes migrating to rest on her bright red hair instead. Ooh, I like that shade. Dyed or no?

“Ms Wild,” she said loudly, causing me to wince at the volume, “You allegedly took down both the ABB and the Empire in one night. How was this possible?”

“Trade secrets. I just fought smarter than the enemy did. Those two were so focused on each other they didn’t notice me until it was too late.” Her hair was nice. No, in fact, her whole self was nice.

“Would you do this if another group trespassed on the bay?”

“I think that speaks for itself,” I replied, idly scratching my neck. “I will do anything to create a safe community. Anything else?”

“No, that’ll be all,” she said with a small smirk. “Thank you for your time, Ms Wild.”
I watched her leave. Her hair swung enchantingly and my gaze slowly drifted lower until…

“Ms Wild!”

I snapped to. “Yes?”

The man in front of me was considerably less good-looking than the previous reporter. He had a comb-over and his belly strained at his button-down’s front. “We’ve all noticed that you seem to be missing an – “

A crash interrupted him. The guests shrieked as something – someone – burst through the window. No one was injured, thankfully, as I grabbed the glass in mid-air and halted it in its tracks. People rapidly backed away as the glass flowed to form a wall between them and the intruder. I stood there, alone with my glass of wine in hand, glaring at the intruder.

The intruder got up and I recognized the orange, red, and yellow armor – Metroid! – after a second of processing. Uber or L33t raised his cannon and I laughed. “No.”

Immediately, every small object in the shelter and its vicinity rose into the air and to my side. Cutlery, screws, glass shards, and bricks fell behind me like a solid wall of sharp things that I pointed at him. “Walk away,” I said with another sharp laugh, edged with anger. “Or I’ll skewer you, here and now.”

He hesitated. The cannon lowered just an inch, giving enough of an opening for Hestia to pounce on him. I heard a squeal outside as Iago took out the second fool, leaving me to stand there feeling proud. I turned back to my guests with a smile.

“This is perfectly normal,” I assured them. Then, taking their pale faces as cue, I put the assortment of weaponry around me down. Knives and forks went back to their proper places and my discs slid back into my clothes for future deployment. I lowered the glass wall as I strode forward, ignoring the scream of pain behind me as Hestia delivered a punishing suplex despite her stunning cocktail dress.

“No, mercy - !”

“Not the cannon, not the cannon!”

“That chest armor alone cost – Agh!”

I let the melody pass over my ears as I drifted into the crowd, patting people on the back as they gaped. No more reporters crowded me, though I could see them recording the fight. There was a brief, magnificent pause in the ruckus when L33t sailed in through the window in perfect parabola. The moment was ruined when he greeted the ground once more at Uber’s feet. The man tripped over his friend and went down in crash of metal while Hestia stood over them predatorily.

“Done?” I asked archly with another sip of my wine.

“Done,” Hestia nodded as Iago came back in, tugging down his shirt to conceal his abs once more. I heard a sigh of disappointment behind me and turned to see the little girl from earlier. She grew pink when I raised my glass to her with a grin.

“No, mercy’s done,” I announced to the general public, “Let’s continue our opening, shall we?” With a gesture of my hand, I flicked Uber and L33t outside. Whether they’d be apprehended or not, I didn’t particularly care.
Like a switch had been flicked, everyone resumed mingling and talking as before. But instead, the conversation was now centered on the fight. Hestia and Iago looked immaculate but now they were afforded a wide berth – born of respect or fear, I didn’t know. I slid through the crowds, eavesdropping on everyone I could.

“… he just threw him through the window…”

“… not surprised, all things considered…”

“… I told you coming here was a good idea!”

I paused. The speaker was a blonde boy with a handsome face and he was surrounded by other teenagers. A Hispanic boy stood beside him, as did the little girl. They were muttering amongst themselves, quiet enough to be passed over if one wasn’t paying attention.

“Jesus, I thought Wild did all the fighting.”

“Did you see that? She just threw him down, armor and all. Definite Brute.” Hispanic boy.

“Barely any effort involved, too. I can see why the Director is so jittery about this place. If they went villain…” White boy.

“Ugh,” groaned the little girl, “Can we not? I thought we came just to enjoy the opening.”

“We did. Just a little recon never hurt anybody.”

“I suppose,” I said as I came into their midst, eliciting yelps of shock and surprise, “You know, Im kind of offended Piggot sent her Wards. Not that I’m upset about your age but – ah, who am I kidding? Why the fuck are there kids spying on me?”

White boy recovered first. He extended his hand with a charming smile, “What do you mean?” he asked with a smile. “I’m just here with my friends. My name’s Rory Christner.”

Triumph. “Ah, the Mayor’s kid.” Hehehe, don’t like being defined by good ol’ dad, huh?

“I’m Carlos,” Aegis said.

“Missy,” Vista squeaked.

“Oh, I like you two,” I continued, waving my hand at them. “Thanks for preventing me from breaking my neck falling. Haha!”

Their smiles tightened and I had to suppress my grin. “Well, I’m off,” I said airily, “Gotta wrap this stump, you know.”

“Stump?”

“I don’t have an arm,” I said and Missy’s hands flew to her mouth.

“Oh my god, I’m so – “

“It’s alright,” I patted her head. “It’s not like you didn’t just mention my traumatic injury to my face and forced me to remember the events leading up to the horrible, trauma-inducing evening.”

“I – I – “
“Wait, you did. Toodles.” I slipped away, leaving them stunned and gaping. Ah, to be young.

I had finally gotten to the snack table when the whispering quieted again. I looked up from where I was discreetly stuffing mini sandwiches into my mouth to see the New Wave family, dressed all rather nicely, at the door. I snagged one last ham cube before floating over the heads of everyone to the front.

“Why, Carol, Sarah, Mark, and,” I mumbled the last bit in hopes that Sarah’s husband wouldn’t hear, “You came! Come in and get comfortable.”

We exchanged further pleasantries as the kids also came in. Victoria was dressed in a fantastic white dress while Amy went for a drabber green number. Their cousins came in too. Laserdream and Shielder wore a rather dashing black combo that brightened their already colorful hair – blue for him, bright blonde for her. Hestia came in, already playing the hostess to make up for my own inability to hold small talk for long.

I finally got away after their family got mobbed by the reporters like I’d been. They handled it with far more grace than I did, I had to admit. Still, that was that. I needed to take a break from this shindig before I got overwhelmed by the sheer number of people demanding my attention. I swept the shelter with my power before disappearing upstairs to check on Purity and Sophia.

I knocked on Purity’s door carefully. “You okay?” I asked softly. There was some shuffling inside before I heard a quiet ‘Yes’. I listened for a little while longer before walking down to Sophia’s room. I felt nothing inside.

Carefully, I opened the door slowly to peer in. The window was open but I didn’t see the girl or her new clothes anywhere. Clearly, she had decided to run out while I was busy. I shut the window with a click before extinguishing the lamp and left, the door shutting behind me without a sound.

Downstairs was Blasto and Margo. He was in his lab, still messing around with his new toys. I floated in and tapped on the metal door. He looked up, eyes wide.

“Who – Moira! What brings you here?”

“Just checking,” I said as I drifted further in. “What’re you up to?”

“I still have to reconfigure all my supplies,” he griped as he juggled several glass beakers in his hands. I plucked them up with my power before could drop and shatter all of them. Blasto looked surprised only for a second before continuing his hurried motions. “Sanitize, reorganize… the job doesn’t end.”

“I suppose,” I said noncommittally. It was true I couldn’t offer him the dream lab Accord did, but at least with me, he’d be safe from Bonesaw. I touched down on the ground and rolled my sleeve up to show my stump to Blasto. “I lost it,” I grunted, “And its’ non-healable. Can you grow some kind of replacement for me?”

Blasto scurried closer and grabbed my stump, looking at it closely. “I haven’t ever tried grafting a new limb on before…” he murmured. “Perhaps, perhaps not. Let me have a DNA swab and I’ll see what I can do.”

“I lost it,” I grunted, “And its’ non-healable. Can you grow some kind of replacement for me?”

“I suppose,” I said noncommittally. It was true I couldn’t offer him the dream lab Accord did, but at least with me, he’d be safe from Bonesaw. I touched down on the ground and rolled my sleeve up to show my stump to Blasto. “I lost it,” I grunted, “And its’ non-healable. Can you grow some kind of replacement for me?”

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I opened my mouth obligingly so he could rub a cotton ball on the inside of my cheek. Then he dropped it into a sealed bag with a ‘hmph’ of satisfaction. “I’ll see what happens,” he told me as he stashed the bag somewhere, “Give me a day or so. Oh, and Moira…”

“Yes?”
“What happened to my weed?”

“Oh!” I had forgotten about that. But I couldn’t just say it to him. “Not to worry. You’ll be getting it soon.” I can just kick the Merchants for their drugs. It was fine.

“Okay then,” Blasto said before he wandered off further into his lab. I waved his retreating back as I left. Margo Zimmerman had requested a room – at least twenty meters away from everyone else and devoid of plant life. It’d been reasonable, considering her power, if a bit sad.

The moment I stepped into her bubble, I felt it. I watched my skin slowly gain wrinkles with a degree of fascination as I rapped on her door.

“Come in,” came her voice, old and tired.

I came in. The room was well-lit and open, and I saw the laptop humming away on the bedside desk. Margo was seated on the chair, wizened face pulling up into a small smile.

“So this is the illustrious Moira Wild,” she said softly as I looked around. “You know, I’ve read a lot about you on PHO. Although… they never mentioned how short you were.”

“They never do,” I murmured as I took in her face. Margo was young – only twenty-five yet she looked at least eighty. Her skin hung in long, loose folds and there were liver spots on her hands. In spite of this, she seemed to get younger as I watched.

I glanced at my hand again. More wrinkles. Interesting.

“You shouldn’t stay long,” Margo told me. Even her voice grew stronger the longer she talked. “You’re getting quite old, Ms Wild.”

“Just Moira’s fine,” I said. “And it’s fine. I’ll leave before things get too dire. How are you finding your stay here?”

“It’s nice,” she said happily. “Hestia and Iago were very nice. How long have you had them with you?”

“Years now, I suppose. They’ve been a couple for some time.”

Margo’s face dropped. She looked put out as she got up and sat on her bed instead. “Oh. Figures. First cute guy I’ve met in ages and he’s taken,” she raised her arm and pinched the skin there critically, “But I guess he wouldn’t want me anyway. Who wants to date someone that looks like they need a walker and a jar of prunes everyday to shit properly?”

“Hey now,” I said, nudging her as I sat beside her. “Don’t be like that. Maybe you’ll find a gerontophile someday. Everyone has someone out there for them. I mean, I know this guy, right? Total dick and shameless workaholic. He still found love.” Though she was an AI.

Margo laughed bitterly. “Wow. I just got to wait for my sketchy senior-seeker, huh?”

I patted her back. “Yeah.”

Margo rolled her eyes. She looked to be almost middle-aged now, though there were spots of grey in her hair. “Look, you really need to go. Your hair’s all grey. It’ll start falling out and it has to grow back naturally.”

I sprang off the bed. “What?” I immediately rumpled my hair and, to my terror, silvery strands
fluttered down around me. “Screw that noise!” I said as I back-pedaled it out of there. “Don’t worry, Margo,” I said as I left. “You’ll find love. Or sex, if that’s more your style.”

She laughed again, a rich, brassy sound that I liked instantly. “Get out of here,” she said and for once, I decided to follow orders. I closed the door behind me as I went, running my hands through my silver hair. It’d revert eventually, but I wanted to find a mirror so I could see what I looked like old.

…

*Teeny-tiny omake*

I sat in the bathroom, refusing to look in the mirror a second time. I wasn’t going back up until my face fully reverted.

Asian women don’t age well. As it turns out, I am *not* an exception.
Interlude XI

Meanwhile in D.C…

“Hey man, Parker! Guess what?”

The Indian boy barely held back his sigh as he turned to face his friend, “Let me guess. My mom?”

“Right on,” his classmate, Marcus, grinned as he brandished the papers from his Cape Studies class. “Apparently Ms Anwar is a fan. She was gushing the whole time we were studying her. ‘Moira Wild is one of the most well-known rogues in cape history’ and all that. Weird, huh?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Parker muttered back. He hoisted his bag higher on his shoulder and continued walking. Marcus hurried to his side and continued to jabber away. He was a cape enthusiast and relished every opportunity to talk about them to his best friend. Thankfully, he was blissfully ignorant of Parker’s side-job as Torpedo.

“You know, I know you said that living with a bunch of parahumans isn’t that cool and it actually wasn’t, but seriously, dude, you gotta at least let me meet your mom. I mean, she fought Lung. And walked away the winner!”

“She did,” Parker agreed. “But she’s in Brockton Bay right now. You’re not getting anywhere near her now.”

“But she visits, right?”

“Nah,” the boy shrugged. “She’s too busy getting her new shelter and fighting new villains. She can focus on things like that for months, even, and forget all else. She’ll come around sometime, but not now.”

Marcus deflated with his chance to meet his hero gone. “Damn. I guess she’d be too busy to meet some high school kid anyway. What about you? Is it nice with all that freedom and stuff? I heard you weren’t even staying at the shelter.”

Parker considered his answer. It was true that he wasn’t staying with Carly and everyone else, but he wasn’t nearly as free as his friend believed. Truth be told, he was probably being watched more than ever staying at the Wards base. Still, the gig wasn’t bad and it was nice being away from the helter-skelter life at the shelter.

“It’s alright,” he said finally. “Can get quiet though. I usually just drop by the shelter for food so it’s not like I even stay away that often. And the kids go here too.”

“But they’re in the elementary building,” Marcus pointed out. “You know, you treat them like they’re your brothers and sisters.”

“They nearly are,” Parker said as he rounded the corner. His eyes alighted on a girl wearing an over-sized hoodie. She was tall with messy brown hair and was utterly unremarkable but he quickened his pace nonetheless. “Look, man, I need to go. Mr Hector’s been asking to talk to me about something. I’ll talk to you later, ‘kay?”

“Sure,” Marcus replied before walking off in the opposite direction. Parker waited for him to turn a
corner before he approached the girl in the corner.

“Av,” he hissed when he got close. He grabbed her arm and began to lead her down to an empty corridor. “Why are you here? And what’s up with the disguise?”

“I just wanted to talk to someone,” she replied sullenly. “After I got unmasked, they made me and my whole family go into hiding and you know I can’t stand being around them too long. It’s okay, anyway, people know me as a redhead with impeccable fashion sense. They wouldn’t expect this,” she made a disdainful gesture at her clothes.

“That’s nice,” Parker said, rounding on her. “But don’t you realize you’re in danger? You can’t just walk around, Av!”

“I’m sick of hiding,” she insisted back. “I know it’s only been two days but god, I can’t even go out and buy something for myself. You don’t know how much it grates not even having that basic freedom. And don’t call me Av. I’m not Avalon anymore – just Ramona’s fine.”

“Alright, Ramona,” he said, tripping over the unfamiliar name, “I get it. You need to get out and all that, but why here? Why at my school?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” she said, getting quiet as they passed the teachers’ room, “Your mom runs a shelter, right? She can take me in. Hell, she can take in my whole family. Please, Parker, you don’t understand. I can’t just sit home all day.”

He clenched his fist. “Av – Ramona, look, we’re working on it. We’re going to get them back for unmasking you. What they did was horrible and I personally won’t stand for it.”

Ramona’s eyes softened and she suddenly hugged Parker. He jerked back in surprise, unsure of where to even put his hands. Finally, he carefully laid them on her back. “You’re a really good guy, Parker,” she murmured into his shirt, “Please, just talk to your mom for me, alright? I’ll give you my new number – “ she stuffed a small piece of paper into his shirt pocket, “ – and please get me back. I really need this.”

He let her go gently and sighed. “Fine, Av – Ramona. Don’t expect any miracles but I’ll do what I can. And I promise – we will get revenge.”

Ramona smiled weakly. “Thanks,” she whispered. Parker nodded awkwardly before making to leave. However, before he could, Ramona suddenly took a step forward and pressed her lips to his cheek. He jerked back and nearly over-balanced as Ramona watched with a small smile.

“You’re a good guy,” she repeated before walking away. Parker watched her go, perplexed.

Huh. What was that for?

...

Later that day, evening time...

“Torpedo, if you don’t get your ass here now,” Janus panted as he dived behind cover, “I swear to god, you won’t get lab access for a month.”

He glanced out and ducked immediately after when a stray bullet shot past. Crouching behind his meager protection, he frantically looked for a better place to go. Nothing, nothing… there! Spying a balcony, the boy hero inwardly cheered as he broke into a sprint. A portal appeared before him on the side of the building, a perfect circle surrounded by glowing purple light that he leapt
through. Landing on the balcony instantly winded him, but it was better than being shot to pieces.

“Janus, have you seen Sagacious?” his com crackled as the words came through. Janus scrambled to his feet as he searched for the missing Thinker. “I think she and Torpedo were working on something. Some sort of tactical delayed missile or whatever.”


He didn’t leave his teammate time to reply before switching off. He inhaled deeply before springing off the balcony and into another purple portal on the ground which spat him out at the crowd of gun-wielding thugs. There was instant chaos as he landed in their midst, kicking one man in the jaw while grabbing another to drop into a new portal. This one opened up in an alleyway and Janus had just enough time to slam the thug against the wall for an instant knock-out before he had to open a second portal on the opposite wall.

Building up momentum like this was dangerous. But with Torpedo and Sagacious gone, Nox and Synch pinned, and Avalon unmasked, there was little he could do but push himself to the limits.

Portal. Grab man. Portal to wall, drop, another portal. Body-slam one guy, tackle another. Portal to roof. Drop him before getting too high and open portal. His speed steadily built as he picked off the men one-by-one, occasionally avoiding the bullets only thanks to sheer speed. But soon enough, he’d go too fast to have time to react. Which meant spending a long time trying to reduce momentum before he could stop himself or hoping someone else would grab him.

His com hissed as Janus clipped the last thug in the side. “Janus, get out of there. We’re deploying the EMP.”

“It’ll fry the neighborhood!” the boy growled as he narrowly avoided getting stabbed through the eye. The last guy was surprisingly tenacious.

“For only ten seconds. Enough time to bypass the Tinker defense on the safehouse. With that, we can storm them.”

“Fine,” he snapped back before finally snagging the last man. Portal to the roof, drop him on his buddies. Janus was about to get ready for the careful process of wearing down his speed when he felt someone grab him at the apex of his jump. He jerked in surprise before relaxing at the sight of the hi-tech suit armor.

“Torpedo,” he sighed. “You jackass. Do you realize how long we’ve been waiting for you?”

“Sorry,” the Tinker grunted back. “Sagacious had a good idea, so why waste it? We need to pay these fuckers back, anyway.”

“Right,” he said, looking down at the forcefield covered safehouse. Ever since Wild left, the Reapers had been getting uppity. It wasn’t just increasing their drug and human trafficking – no, they’d been more audacious than that. There’d been attacks on the PRT base and the heroes themselves as the Reapers’ numbers and confidence strengthened.

Cover-up, for the most part, had been successful. The media didn’t know anything more than increased villain activity but events had blown up once the Reapers pulled their most daring attack yet. Just three days earlier, they’d targeted Avalon, the Brute and official tank of the Wards. For all the world to see, they’d yanked her visor off to reveal the girl underneath and had basically gotten themselves written off as a gang.

Well, they did unofficially. There was no word about Protectorate retaliation yet so the Wards, her
teammates, had taken it upon themselves to avenge her. By the look of things, they were doing so quite successfully.

Torpedo coasted onto the roof before dropping Janus gently. He landed beside him and both looked out at the safehouse. “Watch this,” he said and Janus could hear the grin in his voice. “Omega black, code Torpedo two-nine-nine-two-zero-zero-one. Launch!”

The missile soared in the sky, seeming to hang for infinity before its nose dipped towards the forcefield. It dropped with unimaginable speed for impacting the ground with a burst of crackling white noise that made Janus’ ears whine. The forcefield flickered and shorted out within seconds and Torpedo whooped.

“Hell yeah!”

He grabbed Janus again and the two sailed towards the safehouse, ready for the final assault.

…

Two hours later…

Reprisal stood before them, looking severe in her white, paneled suit. It reflected the light in alien ways as she glared down at them from behind her featureless mask. “Who initiated this?” she asked in a crisp voice with only the slightest hint of a Japanese accent.

Janus looked down at his boots, thanking whatever deity there was that no one could see the humiliated red flush on his neck. In fact, his entire face felt hot. He wondered if he ought to step up. After all, he’d been the loudest supporter of this plan.

“I –” he started when Torpedo suddenly stepped forward, cutting him off.

“I did,” he said in a bold, clear voice. There wasn’t the slightest hint of shame in his posture as he stared up at the tall woman before him, as if daring her to say anything. Reprisal looked down at him before sighing.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. Wards, go back to your rooms. We’ll discuss your punishment later. Torpedo, follow me. The Director wants to see you.”

They all hesitated. Sagacious in particular looked rebellious as she opened her mouth. “Ma’am, please, he’s not – “

“Quiet. I gave you an order and I expect you to follow them. What you did today was risky, damaging, and entirely unnecessary. You took on a gang known for their brutality and endangered the neighborhood and most importantly, yourselves. Go. To. Your. Rooms.”

Sagacious’ mouth snapped shut but she still looked mutinous. Nox grabbed her shoulder before she could try to argue further and shook his head silently when she glared at him. Synch, rarely quiet, was strangely silent as she slowly turned away after Nox. Sagacious gave one last glower to Reprisal before storming off, her footsteps echoing loudly in the soundless halls. Janus was the last to go and he cast a concerned glance over his shoulder at Torpedo – Parker’s – stiff back.

Good luck, man.

With that, he turned away and slunk off after his teammates.

…
Reprisal watched them go. She spoke only after the last back rounded the corner. “Torpedo, we discussed this. Why do you have to keep on doing this?”

He was silent as he mulled over his words. “They unmasked Avalon. We couldn’t stand letting them – letting them –”

“How did you reach this conclusion? Letting them put their guards down so we could administer a surprise attack that would’ve ended them once and for all?” Reprisal snarked as she started to walk. Parker followed after her obediently. “God, your whole plan was dumb. You could’ve died out there, you know that?”

“But we didn’t. We cancelled out the forcefield and seized all conspirators. We even got the drugs, profit, and guns they brought in, not to mention the people they kidnapped.”

“Janus over-used his powers, Synch broke her arm, and Nox almost got sucked into a vacuum where he would most certainly die. Were those acceptable losses to you, Torpedo?”

“Sagacious said they would be safe.”

“Thinkers can be wrong,” Reprisal replied gravely. “Look, Torpedo, you tried to do what was right. I understand the sentiment but you have to be more careful. You can’t just go galloping off on some mission because they offended you. You’re not your mother –”

“Stop it!” he suddenly burst. “Will you stop comparing me to my mom? I love her but that is all you people ever want to talk about! Wild this, Wild that, you have to throw it in my face every time I do something! Why can’t you understand that I’m not trying to copy her?!”

“And yet, Mr Wild, you seem to do it anyway,” Director Rodriguez said as he came up to them. He nodded to Reprisal. “Thank you. See to punishing the Wards while I talk to Torpedo here.”

The woman looked like she wanted to say something but thought better of it. She turned sharply on her heel and marched out, leaving behind Parker to deal with the Director. Silence hung in the air before the boy slowly turned to face the Hispanic man. The Director stared down at him before sighing.

“Spare me the teenage hysterics,” he muttered to the ceiling before gesturing to his office. “Well, go on in. We don’t have all day.”

Parker barely hesitated before heading in. By now, he was used to constantly being called in to talk with the Director. The most memorable instant had been when his mom had dissed Director Piggot on live camera. The Director hadn’t been able to stop laughing long enough to talk straight.

He took his seat. The Director took his seat. They stared at each other across the desk for a long moment before the Director chose to speak.

“So. You led an assault on the Reapers base with your teammates. In doing so, you demolished South Scott Street, fried an entire block with a jury-rigged EMP, and have overloaded a hospital with thugs. What do you have to say to that, Mr Wild?”

“The EMP only worked for ten seconds,” he started, “Instant Tinker-tech frying, but no lasting damage to mundane tech. The damage is insured. The thugs deserved it.”

“Good enough reasons,” Rodriguez drawled. “But pray tell, what possessed you to go leading an attack consisting of juveniles on a base protected by thugs armed with guns and Tinkers? You’re not a stupid boy, Mr Wild, so I can honestly say I’m a little confused.”
“They unmasked Ramona,” he blurted hotly, “She’s one of us. We can’t just let something like that pass!”

“And we wouldn’t have. But more importantly, I notice that you’re on first-name basis with Avalon. I didn’t realize you two were that… close.”

Parker frowned. “Why not? Everyone on the team already knows my name, and it’s kind of weird to call each other by codenames since we already know each other. What’s so strange?”

Rodriguez lifted a brow at that. I take it back. You’re kind of thick, aren’t you?

“Fine,” he sighed. “You will be, of course, punished for your foolhardy mission, as much as you meant well. Reprisal will be in charge of that. And I expect a report of the full events on my desk by tomorrow afternoon, as well as a full discourse on why you chose this course of action. I will also be docking your salary by half to pay in part the property damage. Is this acceptable?”

Parker nodded sourly.

“Then you may go. And Mr Wild, if you repeat this endeavor, then I will be forced to take harsher measures. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” he said in a clipped tone before leaving.

Rodriguez waited until he departed the office before leaning back with a heavy sigh. Parker Wild was truly his mother’s boy – pigheaded, impulsive, and good at leading others. His teammates fell under his sway too easily – it was a combination of factors, really. He was good-looking, interesting, and offered a diverse array of skills that benefited everyone. It was no surprise that both Sagacious and Avalon had some sort of inane crush on him, while Janus followed him around. Synch admired his mother too much to go against him and Nox wasn’t much in the way of leadership. They stood no chance against Parker, a boy who modeled himself after Wild no matter how much he said to the contrary.

Figures. Of course Moira Wild would make trouble for him even when she was out of the bloody state. From last he heard, the woman was getting up to shenanigans involving arm loss and he wanted to stay well away when Parker heard. Knowing him, he’d lead his team on a cavalry charge northward to find the offending party if Wild hadn’t already ripped them to pieces.

Rodriguez massaged his temple. God, save me from overly territorial parahumans. At least Wild doesn’t have another child like Parker.

…

*Teeny-tiny omake*

Miles away, Moira sneezed as she was helping with the clean-up. She then looked up into the sky, feeling as if her existence had caused someone a great deal of pain and disgust. She paused, trash hovering in the air around her, before smiling to the south where D.C. was located.

Hah.
'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night...'

Incubus slid from shadow to shadow, having left her body behind to become a ghostly wraith. The guard was running his second patrol for the night, circling round the building before going back into position. She waited for him to peer down the alley she was in before pouncing.

The guard’s mouth stretched wide as she grappled her way in, his screams becoming muffled as she went in deeper. His throat was bulging to the breaking point before Incubus finally found the ‘switch’ that would allow her to be absorbed by him. The guard stumbled as she took over instead, temporarily disoriented as she tried to get her bearings.

She hefted her gun up higher before resuming the patrol. Walking was uncomfortable for the first few minutes before she could get accustomed. Finishing the patrol would let her gain some form of agility before she tackled the next part of her task.

“You better be in, System,” she said, trusting the small trackers peppered around the area to pick up on her words. Incubus marched along briskly until she was back in position. The PRT building was an ugly, squat building – nothing like the futuristic Protectorate base out in the bay. It was made for sheer functionality. Its structural integrity could hold against an earthquake, had numerous bolt holes under and above ground, and could probably handle a Brute rampaging within its halls with little trouble. It was effectively a fortress.

Incubus let a small smirk flitter over her face as she strode in. *But you never expect an attack like this.*

Once inside, she nodded amiably to the reception – it took effort, as the man was black. Two more guards stood around key points and they tensed when she approached.

“Get back outside, Sanders,” one droned irritably. “I don’t care how boring it is. The Director’ll have our heads if she catches us slacking.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Incubus said, lifting her hands as if to show she meant no harm. “But see, there’s something you two need to know…” She twisted her hands and the foam nozzles in the wall instantly went berserk, offloading their contents in one explosive charge. The men barely had time to move before they were overwhelmed.

Incubus stood in the middle, untouched. She dropped her gun and stripped off a glove. Very few people knew about the extra defense systems put in PRT buildings. All stairwells and elevators had a specific way they must be used – anyone who wasn’t keyed in was instantly registered and sent into the Protectorate base for secondary reviewing. But Incubus wasn’t an infiltration expert for nothing and she cackled silently as the guard’s handprint registered, allowing her to pass without triggering the first silent alarm. It also served as a skeleton key for System, letting him unlock the base from the ground up.

Incubus grinned as she strolled into the elevator, hands in her pockets. As expected, the elevator ride was smooth and without trouble. While waiting, Incubus opened up her comms channel.

“We’re in. System, send in the relay,” she switched channels and spoke again, “This is Incubus. Is Forgery ready?”

“Just about,” Helix grunted on the other end. “Should we come in?”
“Do,” Incubus said. Her ride slid to a stop to the Director’s floor, where every man and woman was buried under foam. They couldn’t see her even if they tried. Incubus checked all corners – it never hurt to be careful – and relaxed. All was left to do was deliver Forgery to the pick-up site and let him do his thing.

A minute later, the elevator slid open behind her with a hiss to reveal Helix and Forgery. The muscular woman shoved the teenager ahead of her as they got off and snarled, “Don’t fuck up, you got it?”

“Yes,” he replied tonelessly. Incubus didn’t look at him. Forgery was creepy even for a camp kid. He barely revealed any emotion and, despite the regular amount of abuse Helix heaped on him, refused any other handler other than her. Incubus stepped back as the blonde boy passed by her before glancing at her Brute colleague.

“We should follow him.”

“Fine by me if you want to watch,” Helix said back before stamping after the boy. Incubus faltered before steeling herself. Few had ever gotten to see Forgery at work – she wasn’t going to miss this. They trekked to the Director’s office to where Emily Piggot sat, covered in foam and fuming. Incubus moved to the corner where she was safely out of the way and could watch without trouble.

“Alright,” Helix muttered as she shoved aside the desk to give him better access, “You know what you have to do. No mess, understand?”

He barely nodded. Slowly, he unbuttoned his shirt with one hand, staring at Piggot as he did so. He took it off before removing his pants and underwear. Standing nude, he watched Piggot coolly before taking a step forward to hug her, much to her vocal disgust.

There was silence. Then… then he exploded. Incubus held back a shriek as the boy’s chest burst open to display knobby white ribs splayed out like they were beckoning for Piggot. The woman herself was showered instantly with blood and fleshy bits, dying her blond hair a light red. His embrace couldn’t go around Piggot and her foam drenched form completely, but there was no need as Piggot was shoved into the bloody cavity inexorably. The woman’s eyes bulged as her chest went in first, melting into biological slag as he slowly unmade her. All the while, she was screaming. No one outside heard – her office was soundproofed wonderfully.

The gory spectacle finally ended when Piggot’s head and feet went in – Forgery’s way of absorbing her had ended up folding her in half backwards – and his rips snapped together before withdrawing. Incubus watched as his skin knitted together slowly, feeling suddenly very sick.

However, it seemed it was not over yet. Forgery suddenly bent over as his skin bubbled and reshaped, blonde hair growing and darkening, midsection widening. Now Incubus saw the reason behind his nudity – beyond ripping his clothes during the initial consumption, his transformation would ruin them. It took an agonizing minute for Forgery to fully assume Emily Piggot’s perfect shape, size, and look, a minute which he spent in utter silence.

At the end of that minute, he stood up fully. Although his face had changed, his expression hadn’t. The Director stared back at them flatly as he waited for another order.

“Good job,” Helix grunted. She walked around him, pinching and checking areas to make he didn’t make an error. “Well, get dressed. We can’t have you fucking around naked, can we?”

While Helix was steadily ordering around Forgery with his clothes, Incubus spoke into her comms. “The switch is done,” she said, still nauseous. “Get the Brute-drones and the gas ready. Make sure
to kill the guards in the lobby and the receptionist. Then wreck the place until the Protectorate arrive to rescue their ‘Director’.”

“Affirmative,” came System’s nervous voice.

Incubus looked up. “Helix. Let’s go.”


Incubus looked away. It was disgusting, seeing Helix speak like that to what appeared to be a grown woman. She moved to the office door when the woman came to her side.

“Deployment done. You know how to leave, ladies.”

Right. Incubus yanked Helix out and they hurried to the vehicle bay where their escape route was, leaving Forgery behind to begin the first part of his act.

…

I alighted on the roof soundlessly, eyes on my target. They couldn’t see me up here – I was too high up and my clothes blended into the darkness seamlessly. A faint wind played on the barren surface as I watched the Merchants’ dealers below. They were talking, for the most part, but soon, they would make a deal. That was when I’d strike.

Or, at least that was when Sophia should strike.

I sent a quick glance at my … partner? Side-kick? Apprentice? Whatever she was, she was listening to me surprisingly well. In the beginning, she’d been determined to do things her way until I finally snapped and showed her a demonstration of what I wanted her to do. Since then, she’d been compliant for the most part.

For tonight, I was going to loosen her leash a bit. The Merchants weren’t dangerous. I already swept them and they only had low caliber guns and blunt weaponry on hand. Sophia should be able to take them down without undue trouble.

Of course, that didn’t mean trouble couldn’t occur. Hence, why I was hovering.

I felt Sophia glance at me in askance. I didn’t make any move – let her figure out how she wanted to do this. The girl looked back down and crept forward slowly, carefully, assessing her opponents below. She was considering an attack before the deal happened to minimize combatants. But that was a bad idea, especially if you got caught in the act.

Sophia edged closer. I leaned in, ready to dive in if I was needed.

“Hey, you got the goods?”

“Here’s the money.”

The deal was simple. Two sentences, a hasty passing shuffle of money and baggies, and he was already walking away. Sophia waited until he was about a meter away before falling into her shadow form. She drifted over him and reformed, dropping on him like a sack of bricks. They both toppled, the man’s yelps abruptly cut off as Sophia slammed a fist into his chin in a blow that rocked his head back and knocked him unconscious. She was already scrambling up as the dealers backed up, guns in their hands.
“Shit, she’s a cape,” one said, firing off shots that echoed loudly through the silent night. The bullets passed through her body and hit the brick wall and the girl advanced on them. They fired more shots before realizing it was useless. One threw his gun in a last-ditch attempt before they both sprinted away.

In different directions.

Sophia paused, indecision striking her at that moment, so I chose to drop in. I flew down to her, gestured at the one that went right, before going after my own. Sophia didn’t hesitate, to her credit, and instantly gave chase.

Takedown was easy – I yanked his laces and the man stumbled. A swift rabbit punch later and he was out cold. I was about to drag him back when I paused. Checked the alley behind me. Seeing no one, I quickly rifled through his pockets, unearthing some mostly cocaine and a baggie of – yes. Weed. Looks like Blasto would get his hit sooner than he thought.

I pocketed the weed before returning the coke. Then I hefted him up into the air before drifting back to where Sophia had taken down the first guy. She wasn’t there, so I settled down for what would hopefully be a short wait. I was not disappointed. Sophia came limping back with her target hoisted on her back, half dragging him to me as I watched.

Finally, she dropped him at my feet and looked up at me, like she was expecting a pat for being a good doggie. I kicked away the urge before I could follow through.

“Method?”

“Overtook him and reformed to trip him. He fell, I kicked him.”

“Kicked him where?”

“… the face.”

“Sophia,” I said, exasperated. “We’ve had this conversation before. Don’t kick people in the face. It kills them!”

“I didn’t do it hard,” she whined back. It’d been nearly two weeks since our initial meeting at the shelter. During that time, all the new people I’d recently collected had been figuring out just where they fit in. Margo still hung around her room, Eddie was busy falling from bed to bed, Purity waddled during odd hours to the kitchen and bathroom, Blasto experimented, and Sophia, well… Sophia learned. She came to the shelter almost regularly after school to pester me, usually by demanding cape tips and such. She’d gotten a little better when I finally gave her new cape outfit, capes and all, and let her show it off.

She looked good, though, I had to admit. The cape and armored panels gave her body extra weight that concealed her age, while her hood and mask lent a strange, dark aspect to her. It certainly did its job hiding her identity.

“But if he’s dead…” I trailed off, pointedly waiting for her to finish the sentence.

“Then that’s charges of first-degree murder, assault and battery, and probably drug possession if they’re feeling bitchy,” Sophia sighed. “Fine. I won’t kick him in the face next time. I’ll just gently choke him out while he’s trying to beat my face in. Happy?”

“Don’t be snippy,” I admonished her as I gathered them up into a nice pile. It was when I finally
hefted the last one up that I realized our mistake. “Oh. Damn. I think we should’ve left one conscious. Now we don’t have anyone to pass on the message.”

“They’ll wake up eventually.”

“But I don’t want them littering my neighborhood,” I frowned. “So I was going to turn them in. But now… whatever.”

If they were smart, then they’d bail anyway. I pulled the drugs out of their pockets and was disappointed to find that they had no weed. So instead, I simply sprinkled the cocaine over their prone bodies instead.

“Oh,” Sophia made a moue of pleasant surprise, “Nice touch.”

“I know,” I said unabashedly before turning on my heel. We were just about to exit the alley when I yanked Sophia back into the shadows.

“Hey! What gives – “

I clapped my hand over her face. Moments later, Armsmaster’s bike purred past us and he was followed by a PRT stealth transport vehicle. I sensed them move along down the road before I relaxed.

“Something big’s going down at the PRT base,” I whispered. “We’re going to check it out, so stick close, do you understand? No running off, no heroics, no shit. We’re going to pop in and pop out.”

Sophia nodded.

“Good,” I patted her shoulder before I flew straight up. Sophia followed my cue and drifted after me up to the rooftop, where I quickly oriented myself before flying onward. We silently made our way across town, tailing the transport until we reached the PRT base.

Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. That is, until a robot burst through the front doors, barreling straight into Armsmaster. The Tinker responded with an impressive judo throw that made me wince watching. The two brawled only a little bit more before Armsmaster hit it with something that shut the automaton down.

We watched as Armsmaster advanced carefully into the lobby. Miss Militia was probably about to set up shop on a rooftop while the other heroes were following Armsmaster’s lead. We’d have to leave before we were detected. I nudged Sophia and mouthed Let’s go. She nodded and trailed after me as I flew away, this time in the direction of the shelter.

…”

“What was that?” Sophia asked as soon as we touched down before the shelter. My frown deepened.

“I don’t know. I’m going to look into it. You just go home.” I opened the door and toed my shoes off.

“You’ll tell me, right?”

“What?”

I glanced down at the girl. Sophia’s mask was off and her young face was startlingly serious as she
gazed at me. In our acquaintance, she seemed to have calmed down from her initial behavior. I tried the best I could to tamp down on her predator-prey mentality so hopefully she’d be less psychopathic this time around. “You’ll tell me when you find out?” she prompted.

“Um,” I started. Despite my reservations about her, Sophia easily trusted people she saw as ‘predator’. And now here she was, asking uncomfortable questions that called up the levels of trust in our partnership. In other words?

Sophia trusted me. Maybe even looked up to me.

But I didn’t trust her. It wasn’t just her skewed mindset – it was also my own bias against her. It wasn’t fair to who she was now, but I sometimes couldn’t see the victim and just saw the monster instead. So for that one moment, I halted.

“You don’t trust me,” Sophia accused me. “Is it because I’m a kid? Is It?”

You don’t know the half of it, I thought. On the outside, I just went with it. “I don’t even know, so don’t get snappy,” I replied. “Besides, it’s probably some hotshot villain who’s muscling in because the ABB and Empire are gone. That, I recall, is my area of expertise.”

“I thought we were partners.”

“You’re twelve years old,” I responded evenly, “And still not fully trained. You’ve got no turf of your own yet so calm down. I’ll check it out, so stop fretting.”

Sophia scowled. “I’m going home.”

“Alright.” It seemed that my passive reply only incensed her further. She scowled even more before yanking her bag up and leaving in a flurry of black shadows. I watched her go before looking in the direction of the PRT base.

I would have to talk to Armsmaster soon. Whatever was happening, I had a bad feeling about it.
Interlude XII

Two weeks earlier, Protectorate base...

Alexandria was striking, standing taller than the average woman and well-endowed. Taylor watched her come in silently, remembering another woman dressed all in black. But whereas Moira had been a knife-slip of a person, Alexandria was a monolith – magnificent and inevitable in her might. Despite herself, Taylor shrunk back unnder her unflinching gaze, suddenly feeling insecure.

“You are Taylor Hebert?” she asked unexpectedly.

Taylor gaped before nodding a hasty affirmative. “Y-Yes,” she stuttered, feeling foolish.

“Do you know why I’m here?” she continued.

“No.”

Alexandria paused. Then she came over, her heavy cape billowing out behind impressively as she sat in the chair set out for her. “I came for you,” she said, voice now gentle, “Do you know what you can do?”

Slowly, Taylor shook her head. She jumped when she felt the hand on her hair. Alexandria was stroking her hair, a small, proud smile on her face. “You know Eidolon, right? He’s got a lot of powers that he uses to fight villains and monsters. And you… I think you can do the same thing he can.”

Taylor almost laughed. “I’m not a hero.” Unbidden, the smell of burnt flesh came to her nose. Wild, screaming in pain, flailing on the ground helplessly as she begged, shouted, and gasped for it to stop. Taylor closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek.

“That was an accident,” Alexandria said softly. “You had just triggered and were in a state of panic and stress. No one blames you for lashing out. You didn’t even do that much damage, all things considered.”

Taylor looked down at her lap. “Do you really think that?” she finally mumbled.

“Of course. With you, I think we can even put an end to the Endbringers. What do you say? Do you want to be a hero with me?” Alexandria held out her hand to Taylor. It was sheathed in a black glove and deceptively feminine, though Taylor had no doubt that it could probably powder her bones without a single thought.

Same powers as Eidolon. Become a hero. Could she do it? Could she somehow make up for her horrendous mistake?

Taylor hesitated only a little bit before taking that hand.

…

A week earlier, Wild’s shelter...

The shelter was a sprawled construction of bricks and steel with wide windows and open grounds.
Armsmaster took note of everything around it – the stacks of bricks dotting choice locations, gravel and sand all tinged pink, and the boxed off sections around the entrances to create easy bottlenecks. Despite its innocent appearance, the shelter was ready to become a fortress at a moment’s notice.

What he was doing was ridiculous. Trusting someone as unstable and unpredictable as Wild was just asking for trouble. It was bad enough that he was entering her territory alone – he was also unarmored. If she snapped and decided to kill him, he’d have no other defenses than the few bugs planted in his clothes and the dagger tucked in his belt.

Armsmaster had considered all this. He’d weighed the benefits to the costs and came to one conclusion – these were acceptable parameters for what she offered in exchange.

The door opened before he could knock. Wild was a full head shorter than him – maybe more – and she stared up at him with a peculiar glimmer in her eye. “You came,” she said simply. Inanely. Why wouldn’t he come?

“The information you offered is too valuable to not to,” Armsmaster replied, shifting as her gaze examined him top-to-bottom. “May I come in?” The useless pleasantry rolled off his tongue stiffly. *Hannah could’ve made it seem natural.*

Wild’s lips twitched. “Of course,” she said with a wave of her single arm. She stepped back and let him step inside. Armsmaster took the opportunity to judge the inside of her stronghold. Each room has a wide, spacious design meant to hold large numbers of people at a time. The furniture was in muted tones and lacking ornamentation, placed simply for functionality. But most important was the items discarded throughout the house. A couple of bricks tucked next to the coffee table. A loose pile of pinkish sand in a bowl next to the door. Flat metal discs on the couch. All testaments of the lethality Wild would unleash on the fool who’d dare threaten her in her shelter.

Wild drifted into the kitchen as Armsmaster hung back to take off his shoes. “Tea? Juice?” came her voice as she rummaged through her refrigerator. Armsmaster shook his head sharply.

“No.” Then, as an afterthought, “Thank you.”

“Suit yourself.”

Armsmaster strode into the kitchen and, realizing that standing might make things strange, yanked out a chair from around the massive table and sat on it. Wild took her sweet time pouring out her drink, humming and bopping her head to whatever tune she had in mind. An agonizing, inefficient waste of time later, she turned and sauntered to her own seat.

She was silent and Armsmaster took the initiative. The sound of his clearing throat was jagged in the still air and he cringed inwardly. “You said you had information. If you would…?” he trailed off when Wild jabbed a stubby finger at his chest.

“Of course,” she said, her words belying her motions. A trickle of pink sand formed in the air and spelled out words.

*No bugs. Too sensitive.*

Armsmaster’s hand twitched. The dagger he’d brought wasn’t Tinker-tech. Just metal and wood, basically. It was disgustingly, contemptibly inefficient compared to even the small vibra-knife he’d kept in his workshop but it was also incidentally the best weapon to use against Wild. Her telekinesis couldn’t touch it, unlike his tools.

Fitting for his strength to be turned against him so neatly.
“Well, we should start talking soon, hm? No sense wasting time staring at each other.” Her words, polite as they were, had a clear message – *hurry the hell up.*

Armmsmaster reached inside his jacket and gently crushed the bugs with a crunch of metal and electronic whining. He then drew them out to show them to her, eliciting a pleased expression from the short woman.

“Fantastic. Then I’ll start this off. First off, what do you know about Saint and the Dragon Slayers?”

“They surfaced sometime later than Dragon in mid-2007,” Armmsmaster rattled off, profiles flashing through his mind’s eye, “Stole one of her early suits, too. They’re rated about B-class threats to civilians and A-class threats to Tinkers.”

Wild nodded. “Right, right. But that’s not all. The simplified version is that Dragon was Mastered from the beginning by Saint.”

Armmsmaster’s eyebrows shot up and he almost barked with a sharp laugh. “Really? That’s what you’ve got to say?”

Wild was humorless. Her affable tone was gone and her eyes had narrowed. “You want proof? Fine. Your full name is Colin Wallis. Your parents split when you were young and you never were close with your father, partly due to his full-time jobs. You were born sometime in the 1980s and you triggered at fifteen or sixteen. You’re afraid of attachment because you think it’ll get in the way of your hero duties. Still with me?”

Armmsmaster was silent. Finally, he spoke. “They are all true,” he admitted grudgingly. “But I will run a deeper scan later on to see the truth behind your words. For now, just… talk.”

“Thank you. Now, Dragon is a hero, don’t get me wrong. She’s a good person, through and through. The only problem is that she has several restrictions placed on her by Saint. One – she cannot go against him with all her strength. Two – she cannot utilize her full potential. Three – Saint can kill her immediately if he ever thought she was getting out of control.”

“What?” Armmsmaster snarled, his stern demeanor lost. Control came back just as quickly but it did little to rein in the indignation simmering under his skin. He had to fall back on breathing exercises to calm himself.

“Explain further,” he said, once he could stop thinking about hunting down Saint. Such uneconomical thoughts could wait due process until he could express them more physically.

Wild, to her credit, didn’t smirk at his display of emotion. Her eyes were flinty as she continued. “Saint placed a kill-switch on her. Only reason she’s not dead is because she’s too useful to be killed. But if he believes he’s in danger…”

“Then he’ll kill her,” Armmsmaster finished grimly. “That’s why you made me kill the bugs. If this
got out, she’s dead.” His voice broke on the last word, barely noticeable to anyone but him. *Inefficient.*

She nodded once, sharp and jerky. “I’d like to trust the Protectorate. But I can’t. If Dragon’s systems can be hacked, then everyone is open season. If you want to save her, to keep her alive, then you’ll keep this to yourself.”

Understandable. Too understandable. Armsmaster squashed the well of concern in him to focus on the topic at hand. “You can’t have figured this all out by yourself. Someone’s backing you. Who are they?”

“No can do,” Wild said. “At this juncture, this is all I can say. Perhaps, once Dragon is safe, I can spill everything. But right now, all it would do is get a lot of people killed and endanger our chance to save Dragon.”

An idea blossomed in his mind. “You’re worried about Thinker interference. Perhaps even by Saint,” he surmised, “That’s why you told me this. You want to remove Saint, somehow, and you have a plan for it.”

“Of course. He’s too unstable for me to let him be. Dragon doesn’t deserve to live like that, either. So maybe you’ll take some downtime in the near future. Maybe a quick trip north for pancakes and real maple syrup. Somehow, we’ll meet on the way and stumble across a villain. He may suffer an unfortunate accident during battle. A sad loss of life, yeah?” she said, a slow grin spreading across her face. It didn’t reach her eyes.

Armsmaster didn’t grin back. His mouth may have curled up a little bit, but it was not a grin. At all. He offered her his hand and Wild took it with a firm grip.

“To unfortunate accidents,” he said solemnly and felt a flash of satisfaction when Wild snickered. The moments where he had the right words were rare, and each one was studied, treasured, and picked apart. Perhaps he’d one day even have the right words to say to Dragon, though he wasn’t still quite sure *what* he wanted to say.

“To unfortunate accidents,” she echoed back and the promise was made.
I touched down lightly at our agreed meeting place – the lot behind Fugly Bob’s. He was dressed down as usual in civilian attire with a hood to obscure his face, leaving him looking like a well-dressed gangbanger. The side of my mouth twitched at the thought as I quickly pulled back the smirk before he could see it.

“So. What happened at the base?”

“Infiltration, apparently. Someone broke in and took some sensitive material. Material relating to the identities and power-sets of the Protectorate heroes and Wards.”

I hissed sympathetically, “Shit.”

Armsmaster nodded tersely but his eyes didn’t leave my face. He’d pulled together rather well after our small conversation and was well back in his role as the perpetually uncomfortable and stiff inventor. “Whoever did this triggered the containment foam sprayers in the walls, covering everyone in the room. And the triggers are accessible to only certain people… or people that can telekinetically control immensely small objects. Like sand, for instance.”

“Not me,” I shot back without missing a beat. Armsmaster’s reaction time was superior to my own – he’d be on me before I could even think to attack. But he would hold back. Every time, now, after what I had said.

“Perhaps,” he replied in an even tone. “You’re smarter than that. You’d just kill everyone in their sleep with your power.”

Though he’s still a dick. Blasto was right. “Thanks,” I said dryly. “But as you said, what happened today isn’t my MO. So I’m assuming that some others think I’m to blame?”

“There were traces of gravel and sand around the area. Some people have been reporting sights of a black figure flying around. And the Director said she heard your voice through the foam.”

“Piggot,” I said through curled lips. “No wonder. And I’m not the only one who has a black scheme. Hell, they way they say it, it could’ve been Alexandria for all we know.”

“Some people still think it, though. They think you want to have more power. First you offed the competition, then you started gathering people, and now the PRT’s under attack. You can see how it relates.”

“I guess,” I conceded. Shelving the thoughts for later, I nodded to him briskly. “Thanks for the heads-up. If someone’s trying to frame me, I need to deal with it as quickly as possible,” an idea came to me and I piped up. “Say, have you talked to Dragon at all since…”

He got the hint, thankfully, and perked up. It was adorable considering our subject matter. I hadn’t realized he’d been into her for such a long time. “Yes. Dragon is just brilliant. She was the one to come up with – “
“Absolutely,” I said, side-stepping his rant before I was pulled into another Tinker gushing session. I had enough of Parker’s squealing over Dragon – I didn’t need another workaholic Tinker crying into my ear about her ‘efficient designs and incredible energy management’. “Good luck with that,” I said hurriedly before rushing away.

…

I walked down the street, intent on heading towards Lisa’s. She always had her ear on the ground – maybe she’d know more about the attack on the PRT base. Plus, I could check up on her. With the way she was going, I was expecting her to burn out at any moment.

My power was kept on a passive field of a hundred meters around me, keeping a close tab on everyone near. Thus, I can honestly say I was surprised to run into someone the moment I whipped around the corner.

I caught a flash of red hair as we bounced off each other. To make matters worse, my front was immediately soaked through with a liquid – coffee, judging by the scent – and scalded my skin. I barely kept my feet as I stumbled back, scrabbling at my jacket.

“Fucking – ” I said reflexively, before starting at the face before me. “Wait… have we met before?”

She looked up at me with wide eyes the color of a clear sky. Her red hair fell around her face like a fiery halo and her mouth fell into an astonished little ‘o’. “Oh my god! You’re Ms Wild… I – I’m so sorry!”

The anger drained away at her genuine distress. “Don’t worry,” I assured her as I carefully peeled off the soaked jacket and scratched my neck, “I was the one not watching where I was going.”

“Oh no, that’s alright. You’re the one with coffee on your shirt because of me. Shit, shit, come on, let me make it up to you, my name’s Marie Tars,” she rattled off in an apologetic and somewhat hysterical tone.

“There’s a shop over there,” I said, jerking my head to the café across the street. “Buy me a coffee and we’ll see,” I said and finished it with a wink. She grinned at me and I found myself smiling back.

Lisa can wait a little while.

…

The rest of the conversation passed by in snatches. My coffee was long cold as we laughed and chatted together, heedless of the world around us. She hadn’t commented on my arm or the shelter, instead running a scintillating commentary on capes in general.

“The Elite are simply a group of parahumans trying to become legitimate business owners – you can pretty much lay the fault of their villainy at the foot of the Protectorate, you know? Now, that was a coup for them!”

I grinned – her hair flashed prettily and her teeth were white as she smiled – and nodded along. “Yeah, I pretty much faced the same problems too, you know? The Protectorate is suspicious of anyone who just wants to be normal. It’s absurd.”

“I get what you mean,” she said, sympathy lacing her tone. I closed my eyes as I listened to her sweet voice – like harps, like music, like the choir in church –
“Hey, I’m going to go pay, ‘kay? Sit tight!” A giggle and she was off. My eyes watched her go – her hair swung back and forth, her legs were long and toned – even the way she walked was mesmerizing. How had I not seen this when we first met? My neck itched harder and I rubbed at it, irritating the delicate skin.

A moment later and she was back, the sight of her pulchritudinous form making me giddy. I scratched at my neck – shit, bleeding now, she was going to be disgusted – and smiled wanly.

“Hey, Marie, do you – “

“Say, Moira, you’re looking a bit peaky, aren’t you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, fine,” I mumbled, swaying in my seat. Marie was beautiful – heart-achingly gorgeous, tears pricking my eyes – I couldn’t see straight, god she was beautiful –

“Oh no. You’re clearly feeling under the weather. Come on, let me take you home.”

Her slender arms curled under my body and I nearly wept at the heavenly sensation – I felt a weightlessness as she hefted me – a taxi came up and she propped me in. My head spun and I couldn’t breathe –

“… head right… that building… sorry, my friend…”

“… thanks… fare…”

Her voice swung in and out of my thoughts like a siren call, drawing me closer. I stumbled and she caught me. In her arms, I breathed in her scent like a dying woman.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured into her shoulder. I felt Marie’s fingers dig into my back as she dragged me up.

“… cape… can’t believe… goddamn chinks…”

Marie’s bright red hair tickled my nose and I giggled – drunk on love, on life, on happiness – running my hands up and down her lean sides – and here I thought I was going to be alone forever –

The sound of a door opening. Closing. A creak of wooden floors. The squeak as she placed my body on a sofa. I lay there, dazed and grinning. I watched her face – pale, freckled, let me touch you – and stretched my arm to her. “C’mere, babe,” I gurgled out.

“Not yet,” she moued and I slumped, taken aback. She left my line of sight and I waited patiently. My neck was still itching. I scratched it harder – gotta get rid of it before it messed things up – and my fingers came away bloody. I stared at them – wait, what – then she came back and all was okay again.

“Hey there,” she purred. Her shirt was gone and her hair was mussed. I brushed her smooth skin reverently – soft, untouched, no scars – and Marie put her head upon my stomach. “Open wide,” she giggled and reached up with her slender fingers.

I opened my mouth obligingly – oh, oh, move fast don’t you – and something rushed in the corner of my eye. The blackness loomed over Marie and past her, sliding like oil through her fingers before –

Oh, oh god –
I woke up alone in a dark room. My body seized as adrenaline raced through it, setting my heart hammering as I jerked minutely. I breathed in shallow, harsh pants as I struggled up, looking around with wide, panicked eyes. There was nothing here for me to fight and nowhere for me run, yet my limbs almost vibrated as I shook in place. I remembered bare snatches of the meeting – the spontaneous decision-making, my changing mood, Marie.

I shuddered when I recalled her face. What had seemed to tantalizing now seemed terrifying. She had Mastered me. Despite my body’s reaction to it – the itching, the damn itching – I had still fallen under her spell like some fucking idiot.

My hand drifted to my neck. There, I felt dried crusted blood that flaked off in bits when I touched it. The long furrows I dug out in my attempts to ease the irritation had scabbed over and I resisted the urge to pick at them. Instead, I focused on the other aches and pains all over my body.

My knuckles were busted. I examined the skinned bits – I had caught them on something, maybe teeth – and the blood trenched under my nails. My face had several scratch marks all over it too, centered on my eyes and cheek. My lip was puffy but not broken. My right ear stung and was missing a small piece.

All in all, I felt and looked like shit.

I sat back. *Fuck. What happened?*

I looked around and sighed. Until someone came around, I wouldn’t be getting any answers.

That someone turned out to be a troupe of agents. They said nothing as they opened my cell and dragged me out none too gently. One shoved at my shoulders, tripping me as I yelped. “What the *fuck*? What’s going on?”

My power swept over them, pinpointing the bits I could manipulate. Despite this and my own growing outrage, I kept silent for the most part. No need to needlessly antagonize them. Not when I needed someone to tell me what was happening. Our trip was a short one – a few seconds later and we were in front of a door.

It led into a bare room, with foam nozzles set into nearly every corner. One wall had a large black screen set into it. The agents shoved me onto the seat and retreated out, leaving me alone, facing the screen. There was a faint buzzing noise before I heard someone speak.

“Ms Wild.” It was bland, uninterested, but I still recognized Piggot when her face came on screen. She looked… better. The fat around her cheeks had gone down somewhat, leaving her pleasantly round rather than bloated. Her hair had lightened a shade or two. But the way she looked at me – it was utterly blank. Not even a trace of her usual annoyed contempt lingered in her blue eyes and it drew an uncomfortable squirm from me.

What’s happening?

“Do you know why you are here?” Piggot asked me in her dull voice.

“No,” I answered.
“Earlier this day, we received a call from a woman named Marie Tars. She was in tears, shock, and pain. Apparently, you had invited her on a date, followed her back home, and assaulted her. Is this understandable to you?”

“What? No, we ran into each other and, yeah, we talked but – “

“Rambling,” Piggot cut me off. “A clear sign of guilt. Currently, you face charges of assault and battery, breaking in, harassment, and attempted rape.”

“Rape?! I blurted. “She attacked me!”

“In self-defense,” Piggot shot back. “And your victim is in much worse a state.” A picture flashed on the screen. It was Marie. Her face was gaunt and shadowed. One eye was swelled shut and blood poured out her lip. A clump of hair was missing from her scalp and her nose was clearly broken. I gaped at it, unable to comprehend what was happening.

“No, no, no. That’s not what happened! She’s a cape – a Master! She did something to me and then there was this shadow and I – “

A small smile curled around her lips. Piggot leaned back, “A likely story. Of course your kind would make something up like that. Take her away – clearly, she’s unrepentant.”

The agents took me up and it was only sheer willpower that stopped me from maiming them. Something like would just compound Piggot’s ridiculous claims – I had to just take it. Wait for someone to talk to me. Maybe Armsmaster, maybe one of New Wave. I’d explain my story and fucking stop Marie or whatever her name was before she did something else.

Marie. I focused on her. The confusion and numb shock melted into cold fury as I recalled her face, her hair, her body. She made a fool out of me. If this event leaked, then my reputation would be in shreds.

I was going to kill her.

…

My fury had barely dimmed even hours later. I sat on my cot, sleepless and fuming. It was only because of that I was awake enough to hear the footsteps. Someone was walking to my door. I checked him with my power.

An agent, dressed in the typical protective gear of his comrades. A plastic zipper – never metal, not after Kaiser demonstrated his ability to generate them from any metallic surface – for his fly. Buttons on his undershirt. Laces for his boots. The various components of his gun. The tacks in his tactical headgear.

I didn’t move. The agents opened the cell door and stepped inside. A brief silence hung in the air before I felt him reach for his gun and –

-I broke it before he could even start aiming. The gun’s inner working crumpled with a squeal and I leapt to my feet, already reaching out for the bits I probed but -

-the wall came up so fast that I barely had time to register it before I was smashed into the rough cement hard enough for my nose to break in a burst of blood and pain. I gagged, unable to breathe through the liquid. Switching to my mouth was no relief – mucus and blood dribbled in, mixing with the spittle.
He yanked me back by my hair and over to the sink in the corner, shoving me in face forward and turned the taps.

I was blasted with freezing water before it became blindingly hot. I flailed, inhaling water and thrashing desperately as I tried to remove my face from the agonizing spray. An attempt to push myself up was no use – he was too strong. I tried a scream but all that came out was a drowned burble as I coughed and took in more water mixed with blood.

He wrenched me back up, eliciting a raw scream as I felt some hair get torn out. My face felt oversensitive and tight, jagged edges of pain running along the nerves whenever a breeze moved over it. My throat and tongue was equally scalded as I panted, shaking from shock and pain.

“This city was better off without you,” hissed the PRT agent as he kneed me in the gut and released his handful of hair. I crumpled and vomited. It fell with a watery splash, getting on my shoes, pants, and hair. I barely managed to roll to the side to avoid it before I fell fully. He stalked closer. “You ruined it like your kind always does. Just couldn’t stay in your own. Damn. City. Could. You?!”

Each word was punctuated with a kick. Several ribs gave under his assault, as did my collarbone. Most of the kicks, however, impacted my middle and drove into my organs. I gagged as I dry-heaved, unable to regurgitate anymore. The sink overflowed and soaked my pantlegs.

He circled me silently, looking for a way to hurt me further. Finally, his eyes alighted on my legs.

“Stupid bitch,” he growled. “You’re fucking crazy, you know that? Like an animal.”

A sharp downward kick broke my knee. I howled brokenly.

“Should fucking teach you a lesson. Fucking make it stick,” he mumbled. I rolled a single eye over to him behind my haze of pain. He was fumbling with something – his jacket? No, no… the knife on his belt. It was a beautiful, carved thing of black metal and there was nothing I could grip on it.

Shit. He was going to kill me, the crazy fucker.

I jerked at the most immediately debilitating piece I could grab – his zipper. It twisted and dug in, breaking skin and making him howl and drop his knife. I staggered up he curled on himself, popping off buttons and sending them into his eyes.

Something broke. It wasn’t the buttons.

“Y-You… you’re working with Marie, aren’t you?” I gasped as I pulled up his laces. They wrapped around his throat and began to strangle him. I stopped only when he stopped struggling and fell to my knees, clutching my chest.

Behind me came a crash. Then a clang as the security doors blew in. I saw Armsmaster, fully suited up, charge in with Assault on his heels. There was an emphatic “Fuck,” when they saw my open cell door.

I was awake long enough to see them stop in front of my cell before I slipped away.
‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night’ 7.3

I woke to Amy’s hand on my belly. I could tell it was her – she was the only person I knew that had robes with laces around the hips and wrists in that pattern. She rubbed me reassuringly as I tensed up.

“Hey, Moira. You’ve had a busy week.”

“A… Amy? God, you don’t know the half of it…” I muttered through numb lips. I stared at her face uncomprehendingly. “I was innocent. I was fucking innocent and Piggot sent me to rot. Then that guy… fuck, I don’t even know what he trying to accomplish. She Mastered me, somehow, and got me charged for bloody damn rape.”

Amy patted my stomach sympathetically. “I heard. Mom was furious when she found out and a lot of the heroes didn’t know what to think. And then they found in you in the cell looking like… well, there was a lot of blood.”

“What about Marie? The woman who got me arrested?”

“Still in holding. Sticking to her guns, too. Insists that you attacked her.”


“Good,” she shrugged absently. “Stuff happened. You know.”

I nodded, though I did not, in fact, know. But Amy was appeased and she lifted her hand a little bit later. “That’s about it,” she informed me. “Your visitor will be coming in now. She said she was from the shelter, so that alright with you?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I waved. “Let her in. Thanks.”

Amy gave me a dim smile before leaving. In her place came in a freckled girl with blonde hair pulled back into a loose pony-tail. Her vulpine face was void of its usual knowing smirk as she closed the door behind her.


“Nothing unusual,” I shrugged. “I mean, last time I looked that bad, I was stepped on by a dragon. Getting beat up in a cell after being charged for rape? Not too terrible, I guess.”


“I’m a big girl,” I assured her. “Sit down and spill.”

“Well, the short version is that your attackers are part of something much bigger. Have you heard of Gesellschaft?”

“So Purity was right all along. Should’ve listened to her sooner. “I might have. Why?”

“The guys who put you in this state are one of them. A unit, to be precise. They call themselves...
Sonderinfiltrations enheit drei or Special Infiltration Unit Three on paper. Unofficially, they’re known as the Body-snatchers. Membership includes Incubus, Helix, Forgery, System, and Wunderbar. System and Incubus are the newest ones. The woman who Mastered you was Wunderbar. But the one who beat you up was Incubus.”

“Ah.” I really didn’t have much to say about that. So I focused on something else instead. “But why wasn’t I killed? Marie – Wunderbar – had the chance when she got me. Why wait until I was in custody?”

“You’re not the only target.”

She held up two fingers. “There’re two main pillars of strength here in the bay with the Empire gone and Lung missing. You and the Protectorate. First, they got into the PRT somehow. Then you get snagged. You’re taken away and your rep’s ripped apart, making everyone not trust you. Then you die or at least get assaulted in custody by an agent. Suddenly, no one’s sure who’s wrong and who’s right. And while the heroes are scrambling, the second team swoops in.”

Lisa looked grim. “Sonderattacke einheit vier. Special Attack Unit Four. They capitalize on the chaos to remove all targets, consolidate power, and pave the way for a new branch.”

“But that’s too risky. The way they do things, it’s like asking for a kill-order.”

“Please. Gesellschaft’s got its fingers in a lot of pies. Plus, they’ve got enough parahumans that a couple dead units mean nothing to them and the Protectorate wouldn’t risk people over you. Honestly, the PRT’s infiltration means more to them than your death.”

“So… the chances of, say, getting the Triumvirate called in for my sake?”

“Please. They’d just assign a new Director, send in temp-heroes, and crack down on the local parahumans. They won’t be sending you an airstrike, or anything.”

I sucked in a breath. “Alright. How’d you know all this, anyway? I mean, you seemed pretty sedentary.”

“I don’t just sit in my office looking at cats all day,” she responded. “I’ve been keeping my ear on the ground since you went and wrecked the Empire – your light show attracted a lot of attention. It made sense to look at Gesellschaft first since you directly embarrassed them.”

“Embarassed?”

“Two Asians – a race they declare ‘inferior’ – took out a roster of eight or so parahumans in one night without a single casualty. There was no back-up, no assistance, and you walked out away looking spotless.”

“Panacea –“

“Doesn’t matter. “Panacea –“

“Doesn’t matter. No one saw your body with its injuries – they only saw you, completely free of injury, prancing around the city like taking down entire crime organizations was normal. Gesellschaft’s big and they got a lot riding on their rep. A blow like that will seriously hurt their credibility so they need to hit you back twice as hard. SO while they Protectorate doesn’t give a damn if you die –“

“Gesellschaft does. And probably in the most humiliating, excruciating way possible. Public, too,

I sighed and ran a hand down my face. “This is just great. Fucking fantastic. Do you even know who the capes after are like?”

“Sorry, Moira,” Lisa shrugged helplessly, “The infiltration team’s based in London. They came back with Krieg when he was only his biannual trip there – that’s also how you missed him that night. The attack team was somewhere in eastern Europe. Bavaria, maybe, or Poland.”

“When are they due to come?”

“No idea. But it’s probably a good idea for you to start preparing.”

“When is it not?” I muttered bitterly. “Fuck. Lisa, tell me you’ve got someplace to hunker down for a bit. I’m not risking them attacking people close to me.”

Lisa tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “You could just ask me to give asylum to your people until this blows over, you know. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks,” I reached over and squeezed her shoulder in gratitude. “Come over with me to the shelter and we’ll sort things out. I expect to get yelled at by Hestia anyway.”

“Yeah… about that,” Lisa rubbed her neck. “See, the PRT is still up in arms about you. Carol Dallon is holding them back for now but I don’t think you should be really walking around in public right now. You’re still in a lot of trouble.”

I threw my hands up. Trouble just kept piling up, didn’t it? “Is there anything else? I’ve already got the local PRT looking to throw my ass in a cell, a fucking attack squad from Europe ready to kill me horribly, what’s next? Maybe an Endbringer attack? Simurgh, perhaps, for maximum ‘fuck you’.”

Lisa patted me my back in commiseration. “Don’t worry. Some guy from your shelter said he could get you out without getting caught. He’s coming in after five seconds so I’ll be taking my leave.”

Lisa gave me a final pat before getting up. She left without looking back and moments later, the door swung open again to reveal a well-muscled, handsome Latino man. Iago scowled as he took me in.

“Moira,” he said, sounding put upon, “I’ve had to pick you from the hospital three times in the last three months. Each time you checked in, you were at death’s door. This needs to stop.”

“You can bake me an intervention-cake later,” I snapped. “We need to leave. Now.”

…

Once at the shelter, I bundled everyone who wasn’t a convicted criminal up for a group meeting. The ones who couldn’t show their faces got a message on their wall in sand instead. Margo hung back, clearly uncomfortable with being this close to people. Eddie was a short, good-looking man, with a well-shaven face and clear eyes. He was so well put together that I could scarcely believe that he had an unfortunate habit of becoming a ravening animal because of his power. He listened to me as raptly as everyone else did as I made my short speech.
“I think you are all aware of my habit of collecting enemies. Usually, I bring the fight to them. This time, however, they’re coming to me. For the safety of everyone here, I need you to temporarily relocate to a safe house outside the city. You have this entire evening to pack and get everything you need. Special accommodations –“ I nodded to Margo and Eddie, “ – will be made, of course. You’ll return to the shelter once the danger has passed, which should be a matter of days at the most. Any questions?”

Eddie raised his hand. “Who’s attacking?”

“Can’t say that,” I said apologetically with a short shake of my head. “It’s better if you guys just keep on as you normally do. Safer, I mean.”

They looked disgruntled, but no one protested when I called for dismissal. After a bout of uneasy milling, the small crowd dispersed. I noticed Hestia’s white face and made a bee-line for her.

“Let us help you,” she said immediately when I came into ear-shot. I shook my head.

“No. You and Iago need to protect them. Take them to D.C. if the worst happens. I brought this trouble on myself and it’s up to me to fix it. You’re not risking your lives for this. Or your relationship.” It was low blow. Reminding her of what she could lose was unfair, but I wasn’t prepared to lose the lives of one of my people. Not when there was a chance I could still fight.

While Hestia was still reeling, I stepped in close and held her wrist in a tight grip. To her, it probably felt like a child was holding it. “Promise me, Hestia,” I said. “Promise me that you won’t fight unless I ask for it. Promise me that you’ll protect everyone here and run if you need to. Don’t throw it away to protect me. You’re more than that.”

Hestia blinked rapidly. “Moira,” she breathed but I cut her off.

“Promise me,” I insisted.

“I – I promise.”

“Good,” with that, I dropped her hand and stalked upstairs. That had been more forceful than I usually was with her, but I couldn’t risk a mistake. A trained force of parahuman killers were going to be on my ass any moment and I needed to cover all my bases. I headed to my room first and pulled on the armored clothes I’d commissioned.

Looking at the black cloth reminded me of someone else who was in danger. Sophia. I didn’t know if anyone knew about my connection to her, but I couldn’t risk it, even if she had a family. She didn’t deserve to die because some deranged white supremacist thought they could hurt me through other people. I made a note to call Lisa to arrange protection for her.

I examined myself in the mirror briefly. The clothes were bulky with armor and insulation, making me appear stockier than usual. I adjusted the high collar minutely so that the zipper no longer dug into my chin.

There. Done. All was left was my head-piece, a balaclava like mask littered with thin plates of segmented armor. But before that, I need to consult my one source of Nazi-cape knowledge.

…

Purity looked up from her packing when I came in. She looked pale and spooked, relaxing only a little bit as I shut the door.
“So it’s real,” she whispered. “With you wearing something like that… you believe they’re coming. Soon, too. Christ, I can’t believe this. You’re here for answers, aren’t you?”

“Special Infiltration Unit Three and Special Attack Unit Four,” I uttered and Purity’s face drained of what little color it had.

“I don’t know much about Gesellschaft, but I’ve heard of *them*. They – they usually keep units in sub-groups. And those two guys… Jesus, they’re always partnered for a reason. They’re not the best units or the fastest, but they are the cruelest. They have a reputation for sloppy tactics designed for maximum shock and chaos. Three and four are what they dispatch when they want to send a message.”

Purity looked so pitying that I found myself bristling instinctively. “I don’t care who they are,” I growled. “I know who’s on the infiltration unit. Tell me about the attack guys.”

“They’ve got six members in total. Mostly Brute, Blaster, and Breaker types. The unit’s designed for flashy, rapid take-downs. Infiltration breaks moral and sows panic – attack sweeps everyone up while they’re disoriented. Membership is Luftangriff, Perkussiven, Zwill, Inge, Jagd, and Hamophilie. That’s all I know. The powers of units are always kept secret to ensure surprise.”

“Thank you,” I muttered as I filed the information away. I was about to leave Purity to her packing and retreat to my room when her voice halted me.

“Wait.”

I turned.

Purity’s face was somber as she looked up at me. “I know you’ve fought a lot dangerous enemies in the past. But Gesellschaft’s different. They’re not just a bunch of villains banding together against the world – they’re an organization that makes villains. They break people and leave them empty husks,” her hand drifted onto her belly, “and they’re good at it. Be careful, Moira, or they’ll break you too.”

I left.

Outside, I was gathering an impressive host of bricks, gravel, and discs in preparation for my fight. My tranq-needles were filled and ready to go, surrounding my head like a bastardized crown.

I felt everyone shuffling in their rooms as they packed. Outside was still. New Wave was already informed of the situation at hand and Carol had promised me a window of three days that she could keep the PRT at bay before they came for me. By tonight, everyone in the shelter would be bundled up to one of Coil’s safehouses on the outskirts of the city behind Captain’s Hill.

Good. Then I was going to move onto the next part of my plan. I couldn’t trust the PRT or Protectorate now – with Piggot’s off behavior and their growing distrust, they would just be a hindrance to me.

I slid out the window and flew out, a cloud of gravel following me. It took me about half an hour to coat the entire city with gravel. Another hour to set up caches of bricks. Another hour to go the Boat Graveyard and shred up metal into scraps small enough for me control. By the end, I had enough metal to completely fill up a square four hundred meter block. I repeated this process five times until I had five separate traps over the city to call up a storm of blades at a moment’s notice.

I strained to think of more traps. *Damn it, I wish I could think like Taylor. What else?*
I dipped one scrap metal pile in alcohol. Put a lighter in my pocket. The only thing better than a storm of blades was a storm of flaming blades.

*What else?*

I felt jittery. This waiting game was the reason why I always brought the fight instead. I couldn’t stand the period of still uncertainty, of waiting to get hit before I could strike back.

I looked at the horizon.

*Soon.*
'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night' 7.4

The first thing Incubus said when she got to the safehouse was, “Target’s not dead.”

“Good,” Helix grunted back. “Her death isn’t the point.”

“Still seems kind of stupid to me,” Wunderbar called out from the kitchen. She squeezed a dollop of mustard onto her hotdog and then took a bite. “I mean, we had her, you know. She would’ve been dead easy.”

“Gotta send a message,” Helix replied. “Need to break her before she dies. Else it’ll look like we were the ones afraid.”

Wunderbar shrugged. “Whatever.”

Incubus sighed as she dropped down next to Helix on the couch. “How’s Forgery? Doing well?”

“Fucker’s already reverting,” Helix muttered, gesturing at the pictures scattered on the coffee table. “Look, see?”

Incubus snatched some up. One was Emily Piggot before getting eaten. She had a severe cast to her rotund features, a pug nose, and hard eyes. The second picture was Forgery’s Piggot. The woman was leaner, her nose was a pleasant slope rather than an upturn, and her hair was a darker blonde. Another major tip-off was the eyes. Gone was the determined, fiercely intelligent look – in its place was a dull, flat gaze on might find on cattle.

“How long will he stay in place?” Incubus asked.

“Another day before we have to get him out. Letting the PRT know just how compromised they are is a bad idea. We’ll make it look like Piggot died because of the attack team or something.”

“But we did make everything pretty open with the whole agent thing…”

“Because we have to unbalance both sides. Wild can’t run to Protectorate for help and the PRT’s going to be unbalanced with their disappeared Director and assault on a rogue in custody. The more destabilization there is, the easier it’ll be for the attack team to fulfill their objective.”

“Alright,” Incubus acquiesced. “Well, the Docks are set up, anyway. System rigged all landlines, grids, and towers with his disruptor. The attack team said they were going to handle the roads.”

“Good job,” Helix nodded. “All they need to do is limit Wild’s flight and she’ll be boxed in.”

“So we wait?”

“We wait.”

Meanwhile, Boston…

Jagd placed a finger on the foreheads of her teammates, tagging them instantly. Then she tagged Inge.
“Ready?” she asked softly. Inge nodded back, grinning widely. He bounced on the balls of his feet while glancing at his twin brother. Zwill scrunched his nose as he beamed back.

“Is everyone in place?” inquired Luftangriff, comfortable in his role as the leader of the team. Perkussiven, his deputy, hovered near his elbow as she examined everyone.

The whole team had nearly identical suits, save for their different masks. Each mask was a Tinker-tech creation of bone-white, durable porcelain and modeled after an emotion. Luftangriff’s was a furious snarl. Jagd was a tight-mouthed glare. Zwill and Inge were mirror images of a smirk. Hamophilie had a manic grin. Perkussiven resisted the urge to finger the contours of her anguished mask. It was fairly new – her last one had been a gasping face that’d broke after getting struck. At least, this time they weren’t facing a Move-Brute combo.

“I think we are ready to go,” Hamophilie spoke, making everyone wince. Her German was heavy and clumsy – a testament to her Australian heritage. She nudged her sniper rifle so that it rested a little more comfortably on her shoulders. “Waiting does not do nothing. Should be leaving. This city is boring.”

“The vampire’s right,” Inge called out. “Boston is a snooze, come on, I’m so ready! We’ll be there in fifteen minutes, tops!”

“Only if you don’t go and break your foot again!” Zwill chortled back. “Remember, brother?”

“That is because you delayed,” Inge shot back. “We think together, you saw what I saw. And you still didn’t switch.”

“Because you’re stupid,” Zwill sniffed. “Come on, Wild surely must be pining for us.”

Everyone assembled behind Luftangriff. Inge tapped the side of his mask and brought the GPS to bear on his HUD. He tensed a moment before springing forward, rapidly speeding up until he was level with a sportscar. Occasionally, he and Zwill switched so he could change direction. The landscape sped by them as they all followed the speedster thanks to Jagd’s powers.

Brockton Bay awaited.
'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night' 7.5

‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night…’ 7.5

It was approaching eleven when everyone was ready to move out. I counted heads as Lisa came in, poking at her phone in an increasingly frustrated manner. “I think we’re ready to go,” I told her. “You?”

“Pretty much,” she said back. “Three vans are waiting for you outside. Tell them to throw their stuff in the back and get in. Are you going to stay here?”

“I’d follow, but it’d be too obvious,” I shrugged. I looked around. All the normal residents had gotten in their vehicle. Margo, because of her power, got a van for herself and several people waiting at checkpoints to switch as drivers. The capes – I refused to think of them as villains anymore – were to be in the last van. Everything was going to plan.

“Alright, I think that’s about it,” Lisa muttered. “I’ll keep you up to date, okay?”

“Right.”

Lisa waved before hopping onto the first van. Slowly, they trundled away into the night and I watched them go. They turned a corner, forcing me to track them with my power until they finally departed my range. I hopped on my heels, feeling nervous with pent-up energy. With a flick of my power, every light in the shelter went off.

I stepped out and closed the door behind me with a snick.

I pulled my phone out and floated it to my ear. A few quick applications of my power later and I was calling Sarah’s number. Well, her cape number, at least. My other phone was also in my face, displaying Lisa’s texts as she sent them. Once upon a time, I would’ve used my hands. With only one appendage left, I was growing more and more reliant on my power to help with my day-to-day needs.

Past N. Jensen St – Tt

“Hey,” I said when Sarah picked up, “It’s me, Moira. There’re a few things happening – related to the PRT incident – and I have to move my people to a safehouse in the mean-time.”

“Of course,” she replied pleasantly, “Thank you for telling us. How are you, by the way? You were pretty shaken up.”

My mouth twisted at the memory. “Uh, could be better. I’m working on nabbing the bitch, though. Your end?”

“Good, just running a few patrols. It’s a nice night out and things are actually pretty calm, You’ve done a lot to help since you took down the Empire and Lung.”

Road block. Detouring – Tt

My fingers itched. I hesitated, weighing my thoughts. With the threat of Gesellschaft looming so closely, I was hyper-paranoid right now. Was it just a coincidence or…?

“Moira?”
“Ah,” I jerked back into the conversation, “Sorry, got a little caught up there. So is Carol and Mark with you too?”

“Nah, with things so calm only Neil and I are – Shit! Moira, I’ll call you back!”

In the distance, I saw the reason behind the abrupt hang-up. With an echoing boom, a massive geyser of rubble and dust rose into the sky, ascending well above the city skyline as it mushroomed. It continued as buildings crumbled around it, throwing more debris into the air as car alarms screamed and lights everywhere turned on as people jolted alert. As far away as I was, it was apparent that the disaster had consumed at least five city blocks in its immediate zone of destruction near the shopping districts while the dust plume consumed double that.

A moment later, my analytical side overtook my shock.

It was nowhere near the shelter or Lisa’s safehouse. Something that might’ve made me sigh with relief instead made me seize as my blood ran cold.

_Distraction. It was a distraction for New Wave and the Protectorate. My people are in danger._

I was hurtling towards their last location in an instant. My eyes watered as I edged up my speed until I was a black blur. _They were supposed to go for me, for the fucking bait! Not them!_

More explosions rocked the earth. Below me, the streets erupted outward, sending immense chunks of rubble and mangled cars flying into the air. I weaved through them, desperately searching for my people in the mess. It was a minute later that I located the three vans, all on their sides, in the street. My heart stopped as I touched down. To my senses, the doors were a myriad of bolts, hinges, wires, and screws. I grabbed hold of every single one and yanked on them, pulling the doors off their frames with a squeal.

“… a trap! Moira, get out, it’s a _trap_!”

I whipped around, gravel spiraling around me as a disc shot out my clothes to deflect the bullet before it could hit me. I realized my mistake too late when the thing burst apart in a display of brilliant light and sound, blinding me in an instant. I staggered back, clutching my eyes.

“Everyone, get out the vans!” I heard behind me. “We need to evacuate the area and – “

_Too late._

All around me, I heard a successive round of booms as the streets blew apart in a wide circle around us. Buildings crumbled to block the streets, people screamed, and across the street, a fire hydrant burst in a column of water. I faltered in my steps, the cacophony of sounds confusing me as I tried to navigate my surroundings. Even reaching out with my power did little when the sheer _havoc_ around me pulled on my attention like a needy child on their mother’s apron.

When I finally saw clearly, I gaped at the absolute devastation around us.

The street was flooded with water from the fire hydrant. Buildings and cars blocked the ways leading in and out. An overpass leading across the network of streets in ground level had collapsed on its foundations, sagging right in the middle to create a massive gap that bled rubble and ruined cars. The previously cool, clear night was fogged up by a veil of dust and debris, obscuring the moonlight.

They had boxed us in utterly, preventing anyone from going in or out on foot. Between me and my people, only Purity and I could fly.
I quickly summoned up a field of gravel, taking advantage of the demolition. My gravel cloud expanded more until I caught someone in it. He was in the air, floating, with things shaped like missiles that emitted iridescent light in the air besides him. In the instant that I felt him, I had only bare seconds to react as he sent them hurtling to earth.

_one_. The gravel bunched around him and dug into the armor, boring holes, trying to get to skin.

two. I yanked the vans up, tilted everyone out, and threw them towards the projectiles before they could impact.

They collided less than a hundred meters away from me. I was thrown off my feet as the shockwave passed over us and I had to grit my teeth to stop them from rattling. I threw a hand up to shield my face and stumbled back up. “Lisa!” I screamed. “Get everyone not combat-ready to safety!”

“How?” she shrieked back, white-faced.

“Find a way!” I roared and leapt back into the fray. The other cape – I was going to call him artillery – readied another host of weapons. I sent a wall of bricks in his direction in return while also searching for the sniper that’d sent the flashbang bullet.

Where, where… fuck!

My attention was drawn away when I saw two shadows hurtle towards my people. Lisa was frantically gesturing at Purity and Margo, pointing up. She was too distracted to notice the cape but Hestia saw him. She pivoted and threw herself in his path, knocking him off course.

The other one circled, too fast to be anything but a blur. He leapt up and tackled Blasto. Before he could try anything, I slammed him away with a staccato of bricks. In the corner of my eye, the artillery lined up another shot.

I interrupted him with another volley of bricks. Then I looked back at my people, trying to think of ways to get them out before they could get hurt. In that moment of distraction, the sniper jumped back in. Bullets peppered the ground as I deflected and dodged them. Some were mundane but others burst apart in a variety of exotic displays of plasma, flashbangs, smoke, choking gas, and more. Despite my frantic analysis, I could not find a way to differentiate them.

From further came a burst of light. Purity was in her shining form and she quickly grabbed both Margo and Eddie before flying away. That was two liabilities out of harm’s way. Lisa and Blasto had taken refuge together and Hestia and Iago were fighting the Brute and Mover pair.

I advanced on artillery. He was miles ahead of me in terms of firepower, but I was faster and more agile. I juked to avoid a round from him and flew in for the kill, sending a spire of gravel to drill a hole into his back. However, another flurry of sniper fire sent me away as plasma burst from one bullet and seared through my jacket and skin.

A sneer threatened to crawl across my face. Artillery was slow – painfully clumsy in the air and unable to execute sharp maneuvers – but the sniper’s coverage kept him far out of my range while he slapped me down with his glowing concussive bolts.

Then, instead of targeting me, artillery sent his rounds down to where Iago and Hestia were. I snarled and yanked on their clothes – civvies, god, they weren’t even dressed for this – to pull them out of harm’s way. In the middle of this the sniper shot me. It did only cosmetic damage, having skimmed the tip of my ear at the best and I blinked, shaking my head. I brushed against it idly and
was mildly disturbed to find my entire palm soaked. *Too much. How…?*

Shit. I was feeling increasingly dizzy and my vision flexed strangely. Cape power, had to be, when I no longer felt vertigo at any height. I weaved away from a shot and sensed someone enter the fight in my range. I glanced to see Purity, blazing with light.

She hung there, seemingly hesitant. Despite her earlier actions, she was faltering at the decision before her – her former comrades or me and my people?

Well, fuck that. “Purity, remember what we talked about!” I hollered. “Remember why you didn’t go to them! They break people and they’ll break your baby too!”

Purity seemed to burn even brighter. She snapped into action, sending a barrage of hard light at artillery. He screamed something at her in German and she replied. *Good girl.*

With Purity in the fight now, I could concentrate on the sniper instead of juggling both him and the artillery cape. I pulled up my gravel and as if on cue, a bullet passed through the grains.

There!

I peeled away from artillery and pinpointed the origin of the shot. The window of a warehouse. I hurtled towards it as I saw someone scramble away. I reached out and found the gun. A twist later and the gun was ruined. I then turned to the sniper, ready to slit his or her throat when –

There was a dull thump, like someone had punched a metal surface. And suddenly, a car was flying at me. I didn’t bother dodging it. Instead, I yanked on its components and sent it straight at the sniper’s roost. Despite the squeal of metal and the crumpling wall, I felt nothing that signaled the person’s death. I snarled.

A Brute couldn’t just launch a car like without my notice. Was it the person behind the explosive bursts?

Another launched car said yes. Farther away, I heard what sounded like a miniature earthquake as the street erupted in a shower of rubble and asphalt. All around me, all the streets leading in and out of the Docks was being steadily wrecked by the mystery cape.

I could do nothing to stop *that* particular stunt. And judging by the sheer range this cape was operating at, locating him or her was a pipe dream at best.

Another car came at me and I hooked it around. Alright, so the sniper was a no-show. No matter.

I threw the car at the two attacking Hestia and Iago. Both side sprang apart as the metal heap crashed into their midst with a scream of metal. Good timing too, as the cape chose that moment to rip up the street again. Hestia hooked Iago onto her shoulder and began to run, dodging the falling rubble. Lisa and Blasto were also running and I flew in after them.

“So ‘Hop on!’” I yelled, forming a platform of bricks for them. They did so and we all ascended past the skyline to where Purity was fighting the artillery guy. To my dismay, I realized she was tiring rapidly. Her pregnancy was taking a heavy toll on her. At this rate, she’d eventually leave herself open for a counter-attack.

I waited until both sides abated before diving in. I tapped Purity’s shoulder, “You did well,” I murmured. “Get these two out of here. You’re a real hero, Kayden.”
Purity nodded and grabbed Lisa and Blasto and started to fly away. I rolled my shoulders and smiled at artillery. “Right. Ready for round two?” I called. He spat at me and I laughed.

“Of course!” with that, I sent a contingent of discs at him.

…

Kayden couldn’t remember a time when combat had been so hard. Her shirt was soaked with sweat, her knees felt shaky, and her head was aching something fierce. Lisa and Blasto were lighter than the combined weight of Eddie and Margo, but she still strained to fly them away from the battle.

God, she loved her baby but this was just embarrassing. Still, at least her pregnancy was semi-normal as a Blaster. She’d read… things about what cape mothers had to deal with. Changers accidently terminating their babies. Brutes that had to go under the knife to give birth or risk crushing their child. The stories went on, each more horrifying than the last, and Kayden found it reassuring that the worst she could do was shoot the ceiling out.

Huh. Funny. Somehow, considering the risks she presented during childbirth was a normal thing now. Nine years ago, that line of thinking would’ve had her eighteen year old self cringing in disgust.

Wistfully, Kayden recalled her youth. She’d been faster off the mark, a sharper shot, and a vicious opponent. She didn’t quite regret leaving the Empire behind, but each day she spent in solitary confinement in her room was a reminder of how far she had fallen. Begging Wild for asylum had been just another jab at her tattered glory – it might’ve been better if she’d been white. Barely, but better.

Wild’s very being called everything she’d believed – everything Max had believed – to question. How could Max think that her ilk were the poison in America’s lifeblood when he pushed drugs and she saved people? How was she the lesser person when she’d done things even he couldn’t? Oh, Kayden had seen the cracks in Kaiser’s perfect image, of course, the little fallacies and peccadillo he’d conceal from the world at large. With question upon question piling up in her mind, Wild’s explosive entry into her life had served as the final nail in the coffin.

Somehow, though, she hadn’t foreseen herself standing behind Wild, either. The escape from the battlefield had been an act of desperation. Perhaps, had she been not pregnant, Kayden might’ve stayed behind for a final stand with her husband. But once New Wave filtered into the scene and Kayden started getting matched blow for blow by Lady Photon, she’d turned tail and ran hard.

She couldn’t raise her baby in jail. God, the idea of letting her child near the Birdcage sent shivers rattling up her spine.

So. That’s how it was. With the Birdcage down one path and Gesellschaft the other and no Max to catch her if she stumbled, Kayden had snatched at the bare thread of hope before her. There was simply no other way.

That didn’t stop you from trying to make a living by yourself, a little voice whispered nastily in her head. And it didn’t stop you from dragging poor Theo along. Or from abandoning him when you realized you couldn’t do it.

With a pang, Kayden recalled Theo. He’d been Max’s son, but infinitely gentler than his father ever could be. She’d left him behind in Boston for the orphanages – what else could she do? Carting around a child while on the run was asking for trouble and Kayden somehow doubted that Wild’s dubious goodwill extended to non-parahumans, especially the son of her former enemy. No,
it was kinder to let him live outside the shadow of his heritage rather than huddle with her under Wild’s watchful gaze. She’d tried to explain, but the boy was only twelve and had been crying too hard to even understand her. First the Empire, then Theo, then her pride. Sacrifices, sacrifices.

Perhaps, someday, Kayden could contact him again. Once she got her feet under her, once she got out from Wild’s long, long shadow.

She settled the girl and Blasto onto a rooftop, panting as she released her glow. Lisa’s eyes were wide, her mouth gaping, as she stared at the other woman. “I knew it…” she murmured, “I knew it! She had an in to Gesellschaft but… but I didn’t think it’d be you of all people! And you’re pregnant!”

“Clearly,” Kayden gasped. She put a hand on her chest as she tried to regain her breathe, skull pounding from her recent exertions. Slowly, she tried to straighten up, though her back’s resistant creaking made it tough going.

“… abandoned Gesellschaft and came to Moira for refuge. And – and, wow, you want to be hero? Now?”

“That’s still on the table,” Kayden grunted as her heart slowed. “I guess you’re one of Wild’s little charity cases, huh?”

“I’m not under her,” Lisa snapped back. “We’re allies. I help her, she helps me. I’m not like you.”

“And thanks heavens for that,” the new voice cut in like a knife through flesh. He stood on an immense chunk of rubble a little ways from the roof’s edge, looking smug despite the fine film of chalky dust on his shoulders. He was dressed in a typical Nazi SS officer uniform, complete with badges and a crimson armband adorning his left bicep. The man drifted closer as he clapped slowly, his leather gloves muffling the sharp sound.

Behind her, Kayden heard the girl mutter a sharp curse and the shuffle of feet as Blasto dragged Lisa further back.

“Purity,” he drawled, a faint German accent lacing his words, “What a surprise to meet you here of all places. Luftangriff was very upset to find you against him. His feelings for you never quite snuffed out even with Perkussiven now at his side. After you married Kaiser, he pined for weeks.”

Kayden glanced at the man dueling Wild in the air. He was fighting in earnest, summoning round after round of his concussive bolts that he sent flying through the air. The added difficulty of avoiding the sniper and tossed cars sent the Asian woman in crazy patterns as she weaved and dodged.

“He was a charmer,” Kayden said slowly, testing the waters. “His job, on the other hand, not so much. Did you pick him up from London, Kreig?”

“Ah, he regretted hiding himself away from you,” Kreig replied amiably, “So when he heard that the woman who’d scattered the Empire was a target, he was simply raring to go. Couldn’t hold himself back, you see. Fighting you hurt him greatly.”

“I imagine so,” Kayden muttered.

“But that’s for later,” Kreig waved. “Now, Purity, come with me. You’ve been sorely missed.”

“Missed?”
“After that abominable attack on the Empire, I immediately looked up who had been incarcerated and who had not. Unfortunately, I was too late to rescue Kaiser, Hookwolf, Cricket, Stormtiger, and Night from the Birdcage. I’m not sure where they whisked Othala, Victor, and the twins away to. Rest assured, we will be recovering them next.”

“Next?” Kayden said, now just stalling for time. Her hands prickled as light played on the insides.

“Well, yes!” Kreig smiled, looking patient, “Since you’re coming with me, aren’t you, Purity? After all, everything you did up to this point was simply a misjudgment. The pregnancy clearly has been wreaking havoc on you, with you being a first time mother and all. The Gesellschaft are willing to overlook such things for your sake, Purity. Blasters like you are not easy to come across.”

Slowly, he outstretched his hand for her to take. His entire body was loose and unassuming. Even the way his fingers curled along his palm, gentle and open, beckoned her like a moth to a light.

Kayden blinked the sudden well of tears that sprung in her eyes. Her throat felt thick. Kreig was one of the longest-running members of the Empire, his career dating back to the Allfather’s time. He’d been there when Kayden had been a fresh face among the parahuman recruits. He’d been a mountain against the turbulent winds of the cape scene, always persevering against all efforts to eradicate their slice of the bay.

He was comfortable. He was dependable. He was the ultimate symbol of what she had lost and what she could recover if she just took that hand…

Kayden, hung in the air, paralyzed by indecision. On one side, Wild sped through the air as she prodded for an opening. On the other, an old acquaintance from Gesellschaft. Which one, which one…?

Then a cry, ripping through the air and through her daze, loud and brassy even in the firefight around them.

“Kayden, remember what we talked about!”

It was Wild. Tiny, brutish Wild with her slanted eyes, wide cheekbones, and pointed chin.

(in her ear, Max seemed to whisper seductively. They’re subhuman, unworthy of America. Look upon their twisted faces and spit)

“Remember why you didn’t go to them!”

(His voice, slow and sweet, oozing charisma – they’re violent monsters, look at Lung, look at Skidmark, look at the tint of their skin and know the reason why they must be driven out)

“They break people –“

(ugly, nasty, inhuman, murderers that covet their betters and desire to desecrate what we built up)

“ –and they’ll break your baby too!”

Two paths. The Birdcage. Gesellschaft. And a flicker of hope that lead away from it all.

(Max’s words crashed upon her unhearing ears, as futile as a fly ramming a window pane. Shh, Kayden silenced him, Not now. My baby’s more important.)
With a surge of radiance, Kayden burned as if to light the world. Luftangriff, frazzled and on edge, screamed when he realized who was his new opponent.

The German came to her slowly, clumsily. She stuttered over some words as she spoke, “Sie brechen die Menschen. Das werden sie nicht ... nicht mein Baby. Kreig, ich - ich will ein Held sein.”

Kreig’s lips tilted down. He looked at her almost beseechingly. “Don’t do this, please. You’re not thinking clearly. Let me help you.”

“Es tut mir leid. Dies ist auf Wiedersehen,” Kayden said, a note of finality ringing in her tone. Before Kreig could react, she suddenly blazed bright, drawing cries from Lisa and Blasto as she blinded them. Cool white radiance emanating from her body as she shot up into the air like a flare, readying her blasts in her hands. A second later, they leapt from her and slammed through the space Kreig had hastily vacated.

The battle was on.

…

Translations

1. They break people. They won't... not my baby. Kreig, I - I want to be a hero.

2. Don't do this, please. You're not thinking clearly. Let me help you.

3. I'm sorry. This is good-bye.
'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night' 7.6

Several minutes earlier…

Sophia was still awake when the earth under her feet rumbled like some sort of earthquake. She almost jerked right off, heart pounding, as her family all woke up one after another. Latisha started crying and Terry’s little footsteps pattered from beyond her door as he ran to their mom from his own room. Sophia closed her eyes, willing herself to be calm, before padding to her window.

Outside, the sheer size of the dust cloud took her breath away. She tracked its meandering path upwards with her eyes even as the world outside groaned and grumbled with the sound of shattering earth. Shrill sounds – too far to be distinguished – echoed through the distance.

Capes. Nothing has that sort of power except for capes.

Sophia backed off from the window and rushed to her mom’s room.

“Mom,” she said slowly from the door, “Are you alright?”

“Sophia? Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. God, what was that?” Her mom was there, huddled on her bed with Latisha and Terry huddled into her sides. Steve wasn’t there, thank fucking god.

“I saw it outside… I – I think we should head for the shelters,” Sophia said slowly, a well of anticipation slowly rising in her. “They’re designed for this kind of stuff. Safer there.” This is it. This is what I’ve been preparing for.

“I don’t know…” her mom said, sounding unsure.

“Mom, it’s safer there,” Sophia repeated, a note of urgency in her voice now. I can’t leave if you guys aren’t already safe. As if to cement her words, there was a successive series of explosions outside and the ground shook again.

“ I guess it couldn’t hurt,” her mom muttered to herself, “There’s more structural integrity too… Fine. Sophia, dress your brother. I’ll get Latisha and we’ll head there together.”

Sophia had to bite her cheeks to stop her grin. “Okay, yeah, sure,” she babbled, yanking Terry to his feet. “Come on, bro, let’s put on your pants.”

About ten minutes later, they assembled outside. Sophia gaped when she saw what was going on. The second round of shaking was also another plume of destruction located to the north of the city. Sophia’s gut clenched when she realized the direction it came from.

That’s where the shelter is.

“Jesus Christ, Moira…” she breathed low enough to be not heard, eyes wide. Then she turned to her mom, pulling her to the west in the directions of Captain’s Hill. “That’s where the closest shelter is, mom,” she said loudly, “Come on.”

As soon as she got them into the shelter, she’d slip away in the crowd, get back home and pull on her costume, and go to the scene of the fight. With that in mind, Sophia guided her mom and siblings out the house and down the road to join the growing number of people filing into the
shelters. Their previously quick pace slowed to a crawl as they shuffled forward, making Sophia bite her lip in impatience. They were right on threshold of the shelter when she heard her golden chance to escape.

“Alright, the shelter’s almost at full capacity! The next nearest one is at Lancaster Street, everybody!” called the guy manning the check-in area. Already, people were shuffling in faster, trying to get in before it was too late.

She swept to the side, bumping into people and separating herself from her family, losing herself in the crush of bodies as they parted around her. When her mom turned to call after her, it was too late. The check-in man held a hand to stop the crowd and shook his head. “Sorry, this one is full to the safety standards. As a B-class disaster, I can’t let you in.”

The men and women were trying to argue back, but Sophia just yelled, “I’ll see you later mom, I’m heading to Lancaster!”

She cried something back but it fell on deaf ears as Sophia strode away, melting into the dark night and leaving the crowd behind. A fast speed-walk lead her to an alleyway where Sophia quickly phased into her shadow form and prepared to fly back to the house.

The trip was shorter this time around. Sophia phased through her wall and immediately tore through her closet, digging her costume out of the very bottom in its sealed case. A click later and she was tugging out the black costume with a sigh of excited expectation.

The fabric was thick, stiff with armor panels, and dark enough to soak in the light around it. Sophia tugged on the pants first and then put on the armored undershirt, tucking the longer bits in. Her jacket and boots went on last. She popped on the hood of the costume before latching the mask in around her face, pulling on it to check how secure it was. Then she strapped her baton and trench-knife to her side – both of which were liberated from a ganger she came across a few days prior. Moira didn’t know about them, but she believed in using all weapons at hand. She’d approve.

Before Sophia leapt out the window, she stole a glance into her mirror.

A predator, draped in black, seeming to fade into the darkness around her. Streamlined and efficient. Perfect.

This was how she was supposed to be. How she was meant to be.

With a swell of satisfaction, Sophia took a running start out the window and phased into her shadow form just before impact, sliding out into the street silently.

…

The city was in a state of organized chaos. Sophia ignored the scrambling din below as she passed from building to building, getting closer to the northern disaster site. As she got near, she heard a cacophony of screams, blasts, and quakes. Two figures were in the sky, one unmoving and the other darting around in a wild frenzy. But before she could focus on them, a blinding burst of light lit up the sky.

Sophia stopped, cursing as she shielded her eyes from the glare. When the spots in her vision finally abated, the girl straightened up and phased into her shadow form. In this state, she could focus a bit better on Purity. The woman was flying around, shooting beams of intense light, while dodging rocks launched by a figure on the roof. Every so often, the figure would throw rocks at the two others on the roof besides him, forcing Purity to dive in their defense.
Purity was under Moira’s protection. Therefore, she was one of them, one of the hunters. Moira would want her to help Purity.

Visions of lonely lions getting trampled to death by their prey flashed through her head and Sophia came to a decision.

Sophia wasn’t stupid now. She was stronger, better than the dumb little kid she’d been. When she looked back on who she was, she almost wanted to laugh at how fucking stupid she used to be. There was more to the predatory world than she’d ever imagined.

Sophia approached the foot of the building Purity was at a steady jog, running through the Five Principles in her head.

*One: a predator moves quickly.*

She heaved herself up onto a window ledge before kicking into a jump and phasing through the wall into the first floor. The building was at least four, five stories tall but she could make it in decent time. Slowly, she fell into a comfortable rhythm of pull-jump-shadow-solid, alternating between the interior and exterior of the building.

*Two: a predator is not seen.*

On the final floor, Sophia chose a corner away from the combat to phase through, counting on the lightshow to distract any watchers. Slowly, she fell back into solid form in a crouch on the lip of the roof, just another black shadow in the night.

*Three: a predator is patient*

It was a damn shame that the Protectorate forbade cape-killing. Sophia shifted on her haunches as her baton slid into her palm, waiting for the optimal moment. Purity and her opponent were moving too fast for a clean hit and the other two – a man and a girl – kept getting in the way. The waiting game, then, the silent stalking that preceded the fatal blow. Sophia tensed her legs, ready to pounce.

*Four: a predator always goes for the kill.*

There!

Her patience had paid off. Sophia whipped her baton up and sprinted forward, barreling past the man and girl in her hurry. Purity’s opponent barely saw her coming before she was upon him. Her baton went through his arm and she phased solid along with it. The man cried out and tried to strike her, but Sophia danced away, already untouchable again. Her baton flickered back to him again, entering his limbs and solidifying within to wreak horrific damage. She targeted the ‘okay’ areas Moira had pointed out for her – the shins, knees, biceps, hands, shoulders, and hips.

He tried to fight back, flicking his hand out to do his thing with rocks. But each time, a blast from Purity repelled them, giving Sophia the leeway to finish the fight at her leisure.

*Five: a predator always finishes the hunt.*

He was staggering by the time she’d disabled his arms, blood running down his dark clothes. Sophia resisted the giddiness that rose in her at the sight. *No mistakes, a mistake is what kills the predator, what gives the prey the opportunity to flee or fight. End it.*

Her baton snaked out again and cracked against his head with a sickening impact. He stumbled a
few steps back before crumpling with a wheeze. Sophia remained standing over him, still in shadow form, waiting for a sign. Long seconds oozed past as she waited with bated breath for her prey to move. When he did nothing, a vicious grin slid over her face and Sophia tucked her baton back with shaky, tingling hands.

A successful hunt. On her own, too. Hell fucking yes.

Behind her, Purity’s radiance seemed to dim before darkening completely. Then came the sound of a feminine gasp and rapidly shuffling feet. Sophia turned slowly to see Purity being supported by the man and girl, looking haggard and clutching her massive belly, eyes wide as she stared at the girl before her.

“…who…?” she panted weakly, “Never… s-seen you… around.”

Sophia tilted her head up, wishing she was somewhat taller. At least her mask dropped her voice an octave. “Haven’t picked one yet,” she muttered loud enough for them to hear. “Who was he?”

“A former… c-colleague,” Purity winced. Sophia glanced down at the man with a sneer before a distant boom brought her back. She looked into the sky where Moira was battling in a thick cloud of debris, deflecting cars, rubble, and other projectiles as she fought to close the distance between the other airborne cape.

“No use,” came a girlish voice when Sophia was about to jump down to join the fray. “Go down there and you’re paste. There’s a cape out there who can direct kinetic energy. They can sense movement on the ground.”

“I can fly,” Sophia dismissed, tracking Moira’s jerky maneuvering in the air. The longer the fight went on, the worse her movements got. Was she in trouble?

“Sniper,” the girl said with a shake of her head. “They’ll kill you the moment you go solid.”

A snarl edged onto Sophia’s face and she rounded on the girl. “Look, all I see you doing is stand around uselessly. Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

In the weak light filtering through the thick dust cloud, Sophia saw a small smile edge onto the girl’s thin face. She stepped forward, extending a hand with a smirk. “You can call me Inquisitor,” she drawled. “And I haven’t been just standing there, you know.”

“Yeah?” Sophia growled back.

“I’ve got a plan,” the other girl said. “How do you feel about some more excessive violence?”

…

Blood was dripping down my nose. No. Not dripping. More like pouring. A chance hit from a tiny bit of debris that I hadn’t registered in time to stop had set it off and now it wouldn’t stop. My chin was positively soaking and the copper tang of blood was a constant presence in my mouth. A persistent blackness encroached on the scenery wherever I looked and what little I could see was constantly shifting and wavering.

I dived below a barrage of concussive projectiles but stopped short when a round of bullets and a chunk of rubble pushed me up, forcing me to yank myself to the side in an awkward maneuver that sent my eyes fluttering. I had to swallow to force down the motion sickness hovering around the column of my throat and gagged when blood the trickling from my nose wandered through the corners of my mouth. My chest felt heavy and I was panting. I couldn’t get enough air, my lungs
felt as if they were in cages, constricting them as they tried to expand.

I was also having the time of my life.

I could hardly remember a fight as challenging as this one. Even my tangles with Lung and the Empires hadn’t been as engaging. In between my hasty swerves, dogged advancement, and intense concentration on every little piece within my range, I felt a steady surge of adrenaline that had my heart skipping as I fought.

There was only one problem that kept me from going all out. Although the majority of their forces were concentrated on me, I also had run interference whenever they chose to attack my people instead. I’d blocked three cars from swatting down Purity and shielded Iago and Hestia from the shrapnel of the bolts’ concussive impact countless times. With that duty tethering me, I couldn’t utilize my full range of motion against the three capes. They were forcing a battle of attrition on me, a tactic that was in direct opposition to my favored style. Gesellschaft did their homework and they did it well.

I rocketed up away from another car, drawing it behind me as I angled for the cape floating nearly a kilometer away from my position. My power accelerated it to sonic speed and I sent the jagged mass of metal hurtling through the space between us with a resounding crack. The flying cape responded with a volley of his own bolts and the car was ripped apart in a brilliant display of force. I recalled the jagged metal bits and inched closer.

They stopped me from using my flight and they matched me for firepower. But they couldn’t stop what I’d already done. Of the five scrap metal caches I’d prepared, there was one nearby a few meters away from the cape’s position hidden within the empty, windowless rooms. Each push from me sent him closer and closer to the well of metal and all I had to do was get within range in time to puree him.

I swept to the side, letting a hail of bullets pass. I rubbed at my face with my jacket-sleeve, smearing the liquid across my cheek but getting some breathing space nonetheless. Blood spurted from the injury on my ear and scalp respectively, plastering it close to my skull. I hooked away a car from where Purity was and sent it back to the flying cape. Then doubled back to where Hestia and Iago were wrestling the Brute-Mover pair to whisk them away from the imploding earth. A bit later, I was back to bullying the artillery where I wanted him.

My gravel swept close, pushing him down as I pinned his bolts with streams of rubble. Bullets pecked at my back but a contingent of bricks kept them well away.

Slowly, the man was shoved down. A final car that exploded only a little bit away from him sent him to the rooftops with a shout. He scrambled to his feet a little bit later but it was too late.

I had the distinct pleasure of watching the understanding filter onto his face as metal exploded out beneath him, streaming out the windows to converge on his position with surprisingly fluid motions. I took no special care with the metal in my excitement, so they ran against one another to create a high-pitched screech that set my teeth on edge. The landed cape’s scream of horror mixed in with the shrieks as they clapped against him, boring through his body armor and layers within moments. I whirled the storm around him some more until his cries cut off with a final, deathly gargle.

I pulled the metal away.

The cape’s body lay broken on the roof, sprawled out in a spread-eagle position. I inched closer, on my guard despite my certainty. He didn’t move even when I touched down and I breathed a sigh of
relief.

Dead. He was de – wait. I padded close enough to see the faint rise of his chest, the whine that periodically escaped his mauled throat. The man was still clinging to the edge of life, somehow. I called up gravel around me and they clung to his skin as I slowly drew him up into the air. He twitched faintly as I held him up, displaying his dying body for all to see.

“I caught one little piggy!” I yelled hoarsely. “How long until I have six?”

Silence. They weren’t reacting.

Alright, I’m game.

I threw the cape up and sent a contingent of discs and bricks after him. They slammed his body around in a twisted sort of hacky-sack and his choked screams echoed as I slowly bludgeoned him to death. His dying sounds seemed to galvanize his team and suddenly, nearly every building in a mile radius around me slammed apart in a burst of pure force. Cars, rubble, and assorted materials were launched at me in a furious storm, forcing me to lift off.

I dragged the corpse behind me, a grin creeping on my face. Unlike the prior controlled bursts of force, these new explosions were centralized around me and brimming with killing intent. Already, my head felt clearer and the constant blood-flow had abated. They were on the back-foot now and I was back in familiar territory. And when I controlled the battlefield, I always won.

…

“Fucking chink!” Jagd snarled when they saw the corpse dangling behind Wild. “That psycho bitch! I’ll kill her, I will kill her!”

“Calm down,” Hamophilie hissed as she trained her sniper rifle on the flying form. “You’re angry? Perkussiven loved Luftangriff. Now he’s dead. She’ll be too mad to care about us, now.”

They both spoke in English, rather than German like they did with the rest of the team. Hamophilie’s stilted language skills simply made English the better option.

“Kill her already,” Jagd insisted, slithering closer. “You can do that, can’t you? Make that bitch bleed dry.”

“Moving too much,” she responded. “Need line of sight or it doesn’t work that well. You know that. Better to shoot and tire her out.”

“What about the infiltration unit? May be they –“

“Do what? Forgery is crazy. Helix is useless. Incubus is a coward and System is not in the city.”

“Wunderbar –“

“ – will die if she shows her face to Wild. The bitch’ll make sure she dies painfully for the humiliation.”

Jagd licked her lips. She stared out at where Wild was dodging the shots and Perkussiven’s enraged tactics while flying in an ever-widening circle. “She’s looking for us,” she moaned. “God, she’ll find us.”

“Let her,” Hamophilie lined up a shot and made a sound of approval when the plasma spilled out
onto Wild, burning her legs, “I see the bitch clearly, instant kill.”

“But you – “

The ground rocked and Jagd yelped. “What the – that wasn’t Perkussiven. That’s not how her power feels, who is that?!”

Hamophilie glanced down her scope. “The other chink. Dragon fucker.”

“Lung,” Jagd surmised. “Fuck, why is he here?”

“Who cares? He doesn’t know about us. Dragon fucker will probably fight the bitch.”

“Maybe they’re working together,” Jagd said frantically. “He might be looking for Perkussiven right now.”

“Perkussiven gets too personal,” Hamophilie said irritably a she released an electrified net bullet. “Luftangriff this, Luftangriff that. Now he’s dead and she gets stupid. She’ll be on her way.”

“What should we do?” Jagd wrung her hands. Wild moved away and they followed her, hopping around in a rough hundred meter range. Hamophilie patted her gun as she loaded the next bullet – special make so that Wild could no sense it. Good thing too, after she wrecked her other gun.

“I mean, I can cancel the tag. We could… leave. Wild is too much. She wasn’t supposed to be this… this…”

“This good at what she does? Bitch’s good – how else do you think she pushed the villains out of D.C.? We got cocky and now we’re paying for it. Gesellschaft doesn’t forgive failure. We’ll die, anyway, so might as well kill the bitch before we go.”

Jagd sniffed. “Poor Luftangriff. I – I knew their type was nasty but that was just cruel.”

“Perhaps,” Hamophilie grunted as she shot Wild again. The flashbang went off but the bitch was quick enough to shield her eyes. Farther away, fire licked closer as the fucker roared again.

“I don’t want to die,” Jagd whimpered before curling up. Her power made them jump from one safe location to another as they pursued Wild, conveniently avoiding her search pattern.

Hamophilie said nothing. Instead, she simply peered through her scope again. “Blute für mich,” she whispered in German.

_Bleed for me and die, Moira Wild._

...
'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night' 7.7

‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night…’ 7.7

He’d forgotten how unpleasant fighting on an open battlefield was.

Iago weaved another layer upon his illusion and skipped back, giving Hestia the room to maneuver. She didn’t hesitate to dart forward and land a bruising blow upon the Brute. He returned in kind, backhanding her hard enough to send her reeling. Hestia stumbled back, shaking her head, and Iago took the moment to strengthen his illusion before they slipped further.

The situation was bad. Not FUBAR bad, but getting close. Hestia wasn’t as strong as the Brute she was fighting nor was she as trained. The only reason she was still in combat was a leftover ferocity from her villain days. Even without her ex-husband’s power overwhelming her mind, Iago could see the murderous emotions twisting her beautiful face into a rictus of black fury. She was too far gone in the flow of the battle to see anyone else but her enemy.

Iago glanced down at his hands. They were shaking. Cold shivers ran down his back every so often, paralyzing him at inopportune moments. There was a distant boom and he flinched instinctively, barely stopping himself from diving away from what his mind insisted was a bombing.

No. No, that was a battlefield he’d left a long time ago. There were no guns and bombs here. Just parahumans, men and women who could tear apart tank armor with their bare hands or levitate things with their minds. Just a lethal – maybe even more so – but different. Here, he had something to fight for.

Ahead of him, Hestia released an outraged bellow and met the Brute’s charge headfirst, both tumbling down with a meaty thump. She unleashed a devastating combo of elbow strikes and open palmed power-slaps on his face but was knocked off when the Mover of the pair came rushing in.

Despite the heavy amount of illusions he surely had, the Mover had the uncanny ability to zone in on his partner without prompting. Both fought with unnatural synergy, easily sliding into cover each other’s weaknesses without faltering. No matter what Iago did, he couldn’t disrupt their pattern.

Damn. Damn, damn, damn.

The earth shook and Iago’s breath hitched.

*Hold it together. She still needs you.*

…

“See what Moira’s doing?” Inquisitor pointed up at the sky where the woman was flying in wide circles. “She’s been searching for the sniper for the last few minutes. Since her gravel can move in a rough six hundred meter diameter around her, she’s spreading it out and scanning each area she passes over. A pretty good plan, except for the fact that the sniper can teleport. Each time she gets close, the sniper shoots her, jumps away, shoots, and jumps back. Moira probably will find them eventually, but at this rate, it’ll be slow going.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Why don’t you just tell her?”
Inquisitor looked annoyed. “What and she’ll somehow find them? They’ll just keep jumping or abandon the fight entirely. Nah, its better that she distracts them while we go after them.”

Sophia looked doubtful. Her eyes flickered to Blasto and Purity before she continued. “Riiight. Maybe it’s just me, but that sounds pretty fucking dumb. They’re teleporting everywhere – how the hell are you going to get them?”

Inquisitor smiled coyly, drawing her thin face up into a vulpine expression. She pointed a finger at her head, “I’m a Thinker,” she said with a smirk, “and I’ve been watching the battlefield for almost fifteen minutes now. Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

…

“You don’t know anything,” Sophia hissed as she crept along the wall. Inquisitor elbowed her and put a finger to her lips. The sniper was in the other room, already lining up a shot for Moira. Sophia bared her teeth at Inquisitor before phasing into shadow form.

Sophia found two women crouched in the lee of the windowsill. The larger one was peering down a scope as she tracked the woman flying the air and the other one at with her knees drawn up to her chest. She was mumbling something, too fast and low for Sophia to understand.

Slowly, still in the shadows, the girl crept forward with her baton at the ready. They were too close together for a stealthy take-down for each one, so she’d have to stick with speed instead.

A swift maneuver had her baton crunching into the smaller woman’s temple. Sophia drew back instantly, phasing into the shadows as she did so. The entire process took her only four seconds.

The other woman brought her gun up to bear in two.

The massive rifle barked three times in quick succession and Sophia gasped as the first shot sank deep into her gut. The other two simply passed through her, having arrived too late to inflict damage. The girl struggled to move and her eyes wandered up to meet the woman’s.

They were bloodshot. A film of pink-red surrounded pale blue pupils that focused on her wound with scrutinizing intensity. Sophia lost the fight to gravity and fell to her knees, watching as oily black shadows burbled out her wound. She clutched at them, uncomprehending.

*That’s not supposed to happen. How… how is she…*

Already, her head began to swim. More shadow-blood escaped her abdomen and her mouth felt progressively drier. Darkness fogged her vision and she felt cold, so cold…

And then, the world burst into light.

…

I was about to a final pass over the ruined streets below when Purity drew close. I squinted as she stopped a few meters away from me. It wasn’t as bright as what I’d seen previously – could she control the amount of light she emitted?


“And she’s probably about to do something about it, isn’t she?” I asked dryly. “You’re here to inform me so I don’t go and ruin her fun.”
I still couldn’t see her face and her voice wasn’t enough for me to discern what she was feeling. “Yes… she has another girl with her. Your… student. The bl – shadow girl.”

Sophia. Why am I not surprised? “Those two would be a holy terror together,” I mused. “Ah. Well, I’ll give them a few minutes to themselves. Then I guess I can drop in and see if they got themselves killed or not. In the meantime…” my gaze dropped down to earth to find the two thorns in my hide since the beginning. The Brute-mover pair and Hestia and Iago were still dueling fiercely, both sides jockeying for an advantage as they zipped up and down the field.

I’d been looking forward to this. I gave Purity a crooked smile. “I’ll just use that time wisely, then, won’t I?”

With that, I tilted back to the ground. The ground was still quaking as the mystery cape wreaked the streets with massive explosions but I avoided them easily, using my powers to navigate through the gloom. A stream of scrap metal, harsh and shrill, followed in my wake.

As I drew near, I saw a clear glance of the Brute-Mover pair for the first time. They were both male and one was carrying the other as he speeded away, deftly avoiding Hestia and Iago. I sent the scrap metal into his path, barring it. He halted, twisted, and sped up to turn a corner and I grinned wolfishly.

Ah. Can’t turn, can you?

I sped up until I was even with him. He glanced at me in a panic, realizing my plan too late. There was no time for him to slow down before the metal rushed into his path. But when I tried to shear his legs off at the knees, he simply tripped and barreled through them with a thunderous clang. I glanced to the other man, an idea forming in my head.

He was groaning as he picked himself up gingerly. His movements were delicate and quick and he regained his feet within moments. A little while later, he was nothing but a blur.

Inter-changeable powers? Interesting...

I went after the Mover, leaving the Brute in the dust. He was fast enough that I couldn’t keep pace with him without risking myself, but I could send the rubble after him without ill effects. Carefully, I herded both men – pummeling the Brute with bricks and nipping the Mover’s heels with gravel – until they were in range. Then, I attacked the Mover.

He evaded as best he could, jumping and diving with admirable skill but his speed couldn’t match mine. I caught him within moments and as predicted, he suddenly shrugged the attacks off as his power-set changed.

The metal that had been floating around me idly suddenly flashed into motion, spearing into the Brute-turned-Mover. The razors took his legs out at the knee, reducing them to nothing but a bloody, chunky mist. He screamed as he fell and the other man was suddenly back to being Mover. He hurled himself at me but I deflected his charge, turning it into a pinning motion. The scrap metal separated into two parts and both slammed down on the two men.

One was durable. One was fast. But if they had to switch between them, then…

At first, the damage was minimal as they kept switching. But then, the process stopped as the legless one realized the inevitable. He clung to the speed power and kept his partner in Brute mode forcibly.

He screamed as he died. The whole process was actually quite similar to what happened when I put
meat in the blender to make ground meat for dinner.

I drove them the scrap metal in harder until there were no whole pieces save his head. I carefully picked out the larger chunks and his head before arranging them into something that might look like a human body – a flayed body with no skin, but beggars can’t be choosers. I examined my handiwork before nodding.

The Brute had been pinned during this and he hadn’t seen what happened. He had heard, however, and had been struggling with all his strength. The rut he was stuck was a testament to that.

I pulled the metal away and flew to see his face. The Brute got up, shaky, and held his head in his hands as he tried to see. Slowly, his eyes took in his partner’s shredded form. He stared blankly, unable to understand the sight before him.

When comprehension dawned on him, his face went through a gamut of expressions. It first slackened, then paled, and then tightened. He stopped shaking. Slowly, the gravel and dust that’d settled on him let me sense the way his breathing quickened, the low whine building in the back of his throat. “Bruder,” he moaned.

The Brute fell to his knees. He sucked in breathe after breathe in the silence before releasing an animalistic scream of grief. I flinched at the unexpected noise as it bounced around the ruined streets. He began to sob and scream at me, tears flowing down his uncovered cheeks. “D-Due Schlampe! Du hast ihn umgebracht! Du hast ihn verfickt nochmal umgebracht!”

He drew himself up for charge. I waited until he was only a few meters away before brandishing the other’s corpse at him. He arrested, eyes widening as he tried to stop himself from touching it. It was too late and his howl of horror was even worse than the previous cries as he rammed into the bloody corpse.

The amount of noise he was making was truly atrocious. I decided to put him out of his misery when a headache threatened to build. A tranq-needle escaped my crown and shot up his nostril, targeting his brain while gravel clogged his airways and popped his eyeballs. That was the trick with Brutes – you had to target the soft, inner parts. He stopped flailing once the needle lobotomized him and reduced his brain to grey mush.

While his vacant expression hadn’t the same disgusting look like the artillery cape and his partner, the dark stain as his bowels voided might have the same effect.

I lifted him up in the same manner I had the other two capes. They formed a gory cadre of corpses around me as I slowly turned, my eyes scanning the battlefield. Iago and Hestia were some ways off, leaning on each other as they looked up at me. Purity was gone, having flitted off somewhere during my fight.

The sniper hadn’t shot me for a while now. Had Lisa and Sophia managed…?

I sensed someone fly towards me. Purity’s light flooded my field of vision again and I shielded them, trying to see what she was doing. A black blot marred her otherwise pristine radiance and I frowned, drifting down to the ground.

“They tried to take out Hamophilie and Jagd. She managed to knock the latter unconscious but Hamophilie’s still too good for her. She’s gone by now.”


“You don’t need to do that,” Purity cut in. “They won’t go back to Gesellschaft. A failure like this
is unacceptable. They’ll probably go into hiding or something.”

I tilted my head. “Where?”


I pursed my lips. I clenched my fists before relaxing slowly. Then I strode towards her, arms out to take Sophia. “Give. She needs medical aid.”

Purity handed her off to me without hesitation. I ignored the way she brushed her arms as if to clean herself and drifted up, leaning in the direction of Brockton General. I nodded to Hestia and Iago as they limped closer. Blasto trailed behind them and Lisa was nowhere to be found.

“Need a ride?”

“Hestia broke her arm,” Iago said, voice tight. I formed a brick platform and waited as they gingerly clambered. Once they were secure, I rose up into the sky. I was well on my way when I pulled my phone out and put it to my ear.

“Hey, Accord?” I said with false cheer. “Yeah, it’s me, Moira. Say, can you do me a favor?”

“I suppose it has to do with your unexpected visitors?”

“Astute as ever,” I grinned. “Mind killing them for me? I’m a little tied up at the moment.”

“There’s a heavy price involved,” he warned. “Gesellschaft has more power than you imagine.”

“I’m game,” I responded. “Remove them. We can negotiate prices later at your place.”

Accord didn’t reply. He simply hung up. I put the phone back in my pocket and touched down outside the hospital. People were rushing to and fro but I easily avoided them with my power. A subtle push let me drift into the Panacea ward without trouble. I floated through the doors, searching for her.

She was behind the last one. But she wasn’t alone – I stared at the capes surrounding her. There was Strider in his heavy brown cloak, Brandish, and Armsmaster. They looked up at me when I entered.

“Hey Amy,” I said slowly. “You’ve been busy?”

“Um,” she started, but Strider cut her off.

“We don’t have time for this,” he said harshly, sounding strained and breathless. “We need to go. Now.”

Armsmaster’s jaw was set, tight with his reined-in anger. He was muttering something to Brandish who also looked displeased. Only Amy paid me any mind.

“You need healing?” she asked, holding up her hand. I held Sophia, Hestia, and Iago out to her.

“They do.”

Amy wordlessly pressed her hand to their skin and their flesh mended within moments. Sophia’s sluggish bleeding finally abated and I carefully handed her over to Hestia. A nod later and they left the hospital. Amy then took my hand and I sighed as the comforting feeling of well-being and wholeness washed over me like a tidal wave, wiping away the aches and pains that had settled
around my back and neck. I watched them go, still holding Amy even when she stopped healing me, before looking at Brandish.

“What’s happening?” I asked her quietly. Brandish looked surprised before her face turned hard.

“You haven’t heard?”

“I was a bit busy,” I murmured back. “Why’s Strider here? Is… is it the Endbringers?”

“Mhmm,” Brandish nodded. She was avoiding my eyes. A shiver coursed through my insides and I stepped closer to clutch her elbow, dropping Amy’s hand in the process.

“Tell me,” I insisted.

She closed her eyes bitterly. “The Simurgh,” she said softly. “She’s attacking D.C.”

…
Interlude XIII

The Pennsylvania State Parahuman Rehabilitation Institute was a fairly boring place to work in. Unless you were one of the unlucky sods that had to actually interact with the monstrous creatures that resided in the sub-levels of the building, your job consisted of running around delivering medication, adjusting the monitors, and buying coffee.

Of course, there was more than that, but that was what it felt like. Leland saluted one of the security guards at his station and plodded into the staffroom, his eyes drooping with exhaustion. He walked past the van in the middle, ignored the man and woman inside as they talked, and dropped onto the couch for a well-deserved nap.

Moments later, he was out like a light and Bakuda grinned viciously under her mask. She couldn’t see Smiley’s expression but his hands tightened on the steering wheel all the same, the leather of his modified gloves creaking and stretching across his bony knuckles.

“Like a baby,” she said smugly, her voice artificially deepened and distorted by her mask.

“Like a baby,” he echoed, his voice made shrill and tinny by his helmet’s filters.

In one shared motion, they got out of the car and strolled out the staffroom, Smiley holding open the door for Bakuda in a display of faux gentlemanliness. The guards were also slumped against the wall, snoring beneath their masks, and with a building wail, the system alarm began to blare around them. Despite this, they walked – almost ambled – to the main desk unhurriedly, as if they were simply going for a stroll downtown.

They continued their walk until they finally reached the main desk and lobby, where Bakuda unrolled a map, pressed it against the receptionist’s desk, and jabbed her finger at a location. “Elle and Mimi are on the same floor,” she said gruffly, “We’ll be taking the elevator down.”

“Yep,” Smiley idly poked around the receptionist’s desk, looking bored.

“And parahuman reinforcements will come in…?”

“Three minutes, give or take,” Smiley said. “Chevalier is a possibility. Maybe some other people. Definitely no Triumvirate members. Come on, we’re set. Let’s go.”

…

They walked down the corridor in a brisk pace set by Smiley. Bakuda found herself lightly jogging to keep up with his long strides and, for once, found herself annoyed by just how tall the man was. Although watching him bang his head on various doors and pieces of scenery was funny, his six foot nine inches sometimes got a little preposterous.

The ride down the elevator was silent and swift. While Bakuda worked with bombs, a mere computer was no match for her and she easily hacked into the elevator security. Of course, while that prevented their descent from being interrupted, they still had the welcome committee to deal with once the doors opened. After all, the knock-out bomb installed within the teleporter had a range extending in a strictly horizontal fashion. Bakuda patted down her jacket as did Smiley, both checking their weapons in the last few peaceful moments before they had to fight their way through a floor’s worth of guards.
The Asian woman eyed the red numbers as they showed their current location. Since joining Smiley, she’d done more crazy things in a few months than she’d done in her entire life and the nerves were still bothering the fuck out of her. She breathed in deeply and urged her hands to stop twitching in place. Smiley looked implacable as ever, his plain features hidden by his mask, but Bakuda knew the expression he had. No matter how much he joked and messed with people’s heads, he still possessed a veneer of teeth-baring, snarling determination to fulfill his goals, whatever they might be.

There was a ding and the elevator slowed. Bakuda tightened her grip on her first bomb – the slower.

One… Two… Three!

As soon as the doors opened a crack, she tossed out the tiny sphere into the crowd of armored guards gathered in a firing line. There was no sound as the bomb went off – it’d been the first thing she ditched. A silent battlefield, strangely enough, was almost always more unnerving than a noisy one.

When the doors opened fully, the pair was greeted by a strange sight. The men were trapped in a bubble of grayish air, as if the very colors of reality had been washed out. The blast from their shots were still present, illuminating their black armor strangely as bullets inched their way through the air. Smiley didn’t hesitate as he stepped out, marching down the corridor with endless confidence. He passed through the time-locked bubble like a wraith, the paradox of the different time fields of the men and him allowing him to pass through them as if he was incorporeal. Bakuda hurried after, casting a glance behind her to the bubble.

The field was designed to be temporary – lasting only an hour at best and incapable of absorbing anyone else in. Of course, being in the field when they dropped out had… messy results but they would leave the time field, regardless. Still, the similarities it held to the Gray Boy’s power didn’t escape her.

Smiley led them through the maze of corridors. They encountered three more groups of guards but dispatched them with insulting ease. Knock-outs to send them tumbling to the ground, blinders to render them easy targets for Smiley’s batons, gassers to induce lethargy and sleep, it went on and on. Bakuda had a bomb for every occasion and Smiley’s plans let her use them to their fullest potential.

Bakuda found herself drawn into the lull of the fight, tossing bomb after bomb, ducking away as Smiley went to town with his batons as the pair smashed past the same wave of enemies time after time. Coming to Mimi’s room was abrupt, strangely anti-climactic even. Her jacket was still weighed down with unused bombs as she hacked the door and opened the way for Smiley.

The woman inside was wild-eyed when they stepped into the room. She back up against the wall, her mouth gaping, short hair wild as she tried to screech for help. With a small pang of guilt, Bakuda detonated the gemma bomb, instantly knocking the woman out along with her power. Of course, her helmet was shielded against the bomb’s affects and Smiley had no powers to speak of, anyway.

Smiley reached into his jacket and pulled out the teleporter bomb with destination pre-programmed for their mobile base. He crouched down and roughly positioned Mimi’s hand so that she grasped it loosely in a slim fist. Then, he set it off. As the timer ticked down, Smiley and Bakuda back-pedaled to the minimum of one meter required for single person transport. There was a whine, a
flash, and Mimi was no longer there.


“I don’t think so,” came a voice behind them and Bakuda, without pausing for thought, instantly dived for the floor. The delivery, the timing, the voice… all signs of a cape finally arriving on the scene. Now, it was Smiley’s time to shine.

The cape moved to say something else but Smiley gave him no quarter. He whirled around and his baton came up to crunch into the cape’s jaw. Judging by how the cape barely moved, he was facing a Brute. Bakuda subtly rolled to the side, giving her partner the space he needed to maneuver effectively.

The Brute moved to retaliate but Smiley slid out of his reach, using his height and reach dance away from the cape while raining down blow after blow. Since physical force had proven to be ineffectual, Smiley changed tracks. There was an ominous hum in the air and Smiley flipped his baton onto his back so as to send a power-slap to the cape’s face. There was a small crackling explosion and the cape backed away with a gasp of pain and shock.

As a direct result of being unpowered, Smiley made sure that his suit had everything he’d need to fight a cape on even grounds. In this instance, his clawed gloves were outfitted on the inside and outside of the palm with rechargeable bombs of Bakuda’s design that detonated upon impact to deliver a well of concussive force while emitting enough heat to inflict second-to-first degree burns. There were more gadgets installed in his batons but they were many times more lethal than what was wise.

When the cape removed his hand from his face, Bakuda winced. The side of it was scorched a glossy, painful red and there was the scent of burnt hair in the air. Long rents of flesh where blood welled up only added insult to injury and he stumbled forward, intent on getting his revenge.

Smiley stepped further into the room, hopping up onto Mimi’s padded cot before launching himself away by kicking off the wall. The cape, however, didn’t go for him and instead lurched towards Bakuda. Before he could lay his hands on her, however, Smiley drove a punishing fist into his side, kneed him in the groin, and finally shoved his palm heel first into the underside of the cape’s chin, rocking his head back and rendering him unconscious.

The cape crumpled unceremoniously to the floor. Bakuda quickly scrambled over, zip-tied his hands and feet together, before straightening up to follow after Smiley. The ties wouldn’t hold him for long but they didn’t need to.

Elle’s room was much the same as Mimi’s, though she lacked the extra-large fire retardant foam nozzles set into the walls. To make matters more complicated, they discovered her door to be locked beyond Bakuda’s ability to hack. After several ineffectual kicks, Smiley tilted his head and walked away.

“Where’re you going?” Bakuda hissed from his side, fumbling for a bomb. “Look, I can easily dissolve that thing, I just –”

“You could,” Smiley conceded, “But where’s the style in that? Nah, let’s see what our gallant heroes are up to right now. Yanking Chev’s chains is hilarious.”

She jiggled the crumbler a little more, narrowly eyeing Smiley’s broad back. “But we agreed,” she started. “No targeting the favorites, right? We like Chevalier.”
“What? Bullshit. Dragon’s where it’s at.”

Bakuda reluctantly replaced her bomb and closed her jacket, observing Smiley as he tapped at the walls while rummaging through his own collection of bombs. “… true. But is it really wise to give Chev more ulcers at this point? I mean – “

“Think about it,” her partner urged. “Dragon is a pure magical creature of maple syrup and the funny little ‘eh’ thing Canadians do. Her home is literally America’s hat – can Mr-My-Sword-Grows-Big-And-Heavy really compete with that?”

Bakuda paused, grimacing under her helmet in distaste. “… was that necessary?”

Smiley finally located his favored point and planted his bomb. He stepped away, arms waving as he gesticulated. “Come on, are you kidding me? Saying his power is density and size shifting is the politically correct, think-of-the-children way of looking at it – hell, what’s next? Censorship to keep things PG? Maybe a weapon that’s less phallic than a sword that literally shoots its load?”

The bomb detonated soundlessly, engulfing the wall in a sphere of pale blue. Before their eyes, the wall folded and contorted over itself as it lost its fight against power-induced physics. On the other side, the heroes froze from where they’d been stalking down the hall with weapons at the ready. Chevalier was at their lead, his trademark weapon out in preparation for combat. When the cape saw them, he almost seemed to sag and when he spoke, his voice was weary.

“Oh, not you.”

“See?” Smiley simply demanded. “Look at him – he’s a complete deviant!”

Bakuda just sighed and pulled out her bombs.

…

When the fight erupted, it quickly grew absurd. Smiley flipped away from Chevalier’s blade while whipping out his batons, cackling madly, “Well, well, well! We meet again, my foe!”

The hero said nothing back, advancing grimly like an executioner of a particularly objectionable convict.

Off to the side, Bakuda irritably faced two other capes, Helios and Balisong, unwanted imagery of Chevalier and his… sword still dancing around in her head. Her hand itched to just grab a gemma and knock their powers out for a few hours but she knew the risk was too great. If the Protectorate ever learned the sort of firepower she could bring to bear, their full might would fall on their heads like a ton of shitty bricks.

So, instead, she plucked a black-out off its hook and chucked it at the wall beside her. The impact released a thick black smoke that spread out with unnatural speed, cloaking everyone in blackness so thick that it actively hampered movement.

Well, it did for the heroes, anyway.

Bakuda used the consistency of the smoke to her advantage, moving as if underwater away from where she’d been cornered as her helmet showed her the environment in infrared. The Tinker deftly avoided one of the cape’s wild swipes and pulled out a foamer from a pocket. She leapt to the side and slapped one cape on the thigh with it, triggering an eruption of foam that trapped the entirety of his leg.
The other cape – a woman with bared hands, clearly a Striker – lashed out with surprising accuracy and tagged Bakuda on the shoulder. She hissed as her hand burnt through the leather and under-armor and reached the vulnerable skin. Blindly, she retaliated with a flailing hit that nevertheless caught the woman upon the breastbone, forcing her to step back.

Cradling her wound, Bakuda scurried for a second bomb, running her fingertips over the ridges and patterns she used to identify them. When her fingers found a jagged pattern, her grin grew shark-like, and she whipped out the bomb.

*So fire’s your thing, eh? Let’s see how much you like the fucking cold, then!*

Great crystals of ice grew out from the impact site. Before they could crawl up the hero’s leg, she tapped her leg with her hands, instantly melting the encroaching ice into wet slush. Nothing, however, saved her from slipping on the half-melted ice with a muffled yelp and tumbling on the wet floor. Bakuda tossed another ice bomb, trapping the woman in place.

Escape was inevitable with her powers but Bakuda only needed a minute.

After one last glance at her downed enemies, the Asian woman ducked down low and sidled over to where Smiley and Chevalier were playing their odd game of tag.

The tall man was twisting and turning round the hero, seeming to almost swim in the black smoke as he dodged every pass of the changing blade. Bakuda stayed a healthy distance away, utilizing the in-helmet comms to address her partner rather than risk giving away her location.

“Stop messing with him,” she said dryly, “Teleport in ten seconds, so get your ass over here. We still have a job to do, remember?”

“Too true,” Smiley agreed. He executed another flip as his gloves charged up, deflecting the great blade to the side with the length of his baton, and with a shrill whoop, smacked Chevalier right upon his armored buttock.

There was only time to catch sight of the hero jumping in indignant shock before Smiley barreled into her and they teleported away.

…

Collecting Elle went smoothly and they were rapidly on enroute to the extraction site – the main lobby. Of course, their daring escape was much more complicated as more heroes arrived on scene to contain the breach in security. Bakuda and Smiley’s jackets were both a great deal lighter as they used up their collection of bombs and Smiley’s gloves and batons were running out of charge. With each passing minute and each encountered enemy, their window of escape was getting narrower.

Perhaps that was why Smiley’s behavior grew more and more manic. He was almost vibrating with barely held in check energy, diving into battle every chance he got despite Bakuda’s exasperated urges to play it safe. It was only when his hand came up empty when he reached into his jacket for a bomb that he faltered.

Bakuda stepped before her partner could be foamed down. Two bombs – a knock-out and a gasser made the corridor impassable to their pursuers, granting them valuable time to formulate their escape. Quickly, she swept in, yanked Smiley up by his knobby elbow, and dragged him to the elevator.

Their ride was smooth.
For a while, at least.

There was a shuddering groan as something heavy impacted the elevator and the lights flickered briefly. Bakuda, from where she sat panting, groaned, “Oh no.”

“It seems our heroes caught up,” Smiley remarked, his hands wrapping around his batons in preparation for the next stage of combat. “And our most likely combatants would be… Cloak and Dagger, of course!”

There was the swirl of shadows at the cape pair teleported into the middle of the elevator. A handsome man in a silvery suit poked his head out, a collection of shimmering blades in his tapered fingers. “You got that right,” he smirked and with that, both sides leapt into action.

…

“I hate you,” Bakuda gasped.

“I wasn’t the one to send you there,” Smiley pointed out calmly.

“You tripped me,” she snapped. “She’s got weird things in that pocket dimension of hers! They tried to eat me! In fact, they almost did.”

“You only lost a shoe,” Smiley waved. “And your feet are nice enough to look at. You’ve even painted your nails and everything.”

Bakuda threw her remaining boot at his head. “That is not the point and you know it!”

“Perhaps,” Smiley conceded. “And perhaps you should speak a little more quietly. I think they’re getting closer.”

Bakuda glanced around the corridor. “It’s a dead end,” she said. “And they’re right behind us. And you know the long range teleporter won’t take us if we’re not outside.”

Smiley glanced back to see the heroes turn the corner. Slowly, he swiveled his head back to the front. “That’s a rather nice window,” he said suddenly.

Having long gotten used to such statements, Bakuda rolled with the non sequitur. “It is,” she said flatly.

“Shame if something were to happen to it.”

“Yes.”

“Something like two people jumping out of it.”

“Mhmm.”

“Glad you agree,” Smiley nodded and took Bakuda’s hand in his. Without another look back, they started to run, ignoring the shouts and clangs behind them as the heroes gave chase. The window got ever closer and when they crashed through, Bakuda immediately reached into her jacket for the teleporter bomb, setting it off with her thumb. Smiley, on the other hand, just twisting around to deliver the middle finger to the gathered heroes.

Then, a few feet before they touched the ground, both man and woman disappeared in a flash of light. The heroes halted at the edge of the broken window and peered through to examine the empty grounds below. Finally, Helios sighed and clapped Chevalier on the shoulder.
“Well,” he said, “You have to admit that they’ve got style.”

…

*Teeny-tiny omake*

The heroes trudged out of the asylum with heavy hearts, every single one of them contemplating the mistakes that lead to their defeat.

Well, all except one.

“Say, Chevalier, what’s up with that handprint on your – “

“Helios,” his team leader cut him off gravely, “shut up.”
Being dropped in cold water is an interesting – and often painful – sensation. First, there is the shock of impact as your breath rushes out and your body adjusts to its new surroundings. The cold water doesn’t quite register at this point. Then, in an unstoppable rush, the chill enters you. It invades your body with pricks and prickles of cold, numbing your extremities and making even simple movement painful. It alternates between unbearable to ignorable as your body slowly grows numb and goes into shock. One by one, your body systems shuts down as you succumb to the cold.

That’s what being told an Endbringer is attacking your home felt like. That’s what being told the Simurgh is attacking your home felt like.

I stopped breathing. My hand started to shake. My mind crashed to a stop. I stared at Brandish, willing her to suddenly smile and tell me how gullible I was. But she remained silent, her gaze mutedly pitying, as she watched me struggle to come to terms with what she told me.

So I stopped. I cast my thoughts away from the news and focused on my power, on what I felt. The components that made up their suits, the grit and dust in the hospital, the constant moving tools as more and more injured people filtered in. The panels in my suit flexed and shifted with each breath. Some were shattered but the majority of them were intact.

I catalogued everything I could control until I was ready. I looked to Strider. “When did she arrive?” I asked tersely. “Where in the city is she?”

“She’s currently still in the sky,” he grimaced, “Touchdown in about five minutes, probably near the George Washington Memorial or the Whitehouse. I’m here to pick Panacea up so we can set up the field hospital.”

I swallowed thickly. The shelter’s close to all those.

“Thank you,” I croaked before turning to Armymaster and Brandish. “The Protectorate and New Wave?”

“We’re going with Amy,” Brandish muttered. “They’re due to arrive any moment.”

“Velocity’s talking to the gangs to muster up some help,” Armymaster said, his tone clearly conveying the disdain he had for the idea. “Dauntless, Miss Militia, Battery, and Assault are readying for deployment.”

“The Wards?”

“Only Vista and Aegis for search-and-rescue.”

I nodded. Outside, I was gathering my weapons around me, no matter how useless they’d be in fighting the Endbringer. I jerked my head to Strider. “Can I come with New Wave?” I asked him.

He nodded sharply. “We need all the help we can get.”

I felt a twinge of guilt at abandoning Hestia and the others like this, but they would understand. I couldn’t not leave. Not when it came to D.C.
Not when it came to my people.

…

We didn’t have to wait long. New Wave came as a whole unit, Manpower and Flashbang carried by Lady Photon and Glory Girl respectively. I watched as they touched down softly before the hospital. Their bright costumes were grubby with soot and dust and their expression were strained. Even Glory Girl seemed to lack her usual perk.

As soon as her father landed, Glory Girl immediately flew towards Amy. They had a quick, whispered conversation between themselves, both sides sounding sharp and impatient. Amy finally snapped something that had her adopted sister recoiling in shock. She recovered quickly but her face was eerily reminiscent of Brandish – hard and uncompromising – as she gazed at the healer. She muttered something and stormed off, leaving Amy behind in her wake. The brunette snorted before she came to my side.

“Trouble?” I inquired mildly. A flash of unknown emotion flickered over her face before she settled again. The girl began to pick at the sleeves of her robes, her chin almost touching her chest.

“I don’t know…” she started in a low voice, “I mean, Vicky and I’ve been fighting a lot more lately. I’m not sure why. I just… she’s pretty overbearing. It’s frustrating to be treated like I’m her sidekick or something.”

I put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. “Sibling fights are normal,” I murmured. “I mean, as long as you don’t kill her or horribly deform her for life, you’re good.”

Amy didn’t reply. She leaned into me as I patted her back a little bit more before withdrawing. The move sent her eyes to my other side and she bit her lip.

“My arm,” she started. “I’m sorry about that. How… how are you adjusting?”

I glanced down at the empty sleeve. It hung limply at my side, wrinkled from the knot it had fallen out of. I tested the shoulder a bit and was pleased to note the free motion still afforded in my joints. “It’s not bad as it could be.” I shrugged. “I mean, adjustment wasn’t that hard. I had to rebalance myself a lot but my power makes everyday life easy.”

I made a show of taking my phone out and typing a simple message on it for show. Amy giggled when the phone dipped around her head but sobered when up when she saw Brandish’s sharp glance. I frowned but before I could open my mouth, Strider cut in.

“Alright, we need to go now,” he said. “Come on, get in a circle.”

We obliged him, shuffling close together in a small throng around him. Armsmaster stepped back to give us space, his face unreadable. I gave him a small wave before we were suddenly falling into the darkness.

Teleportation felt strange. It felt as if someone had grabbed me and squeezed me tight around the shoulders while someone else was tugging at my feet. I felt congested. My breath constricted and suddenly, the pressure was gone in an instant. Daylight poured down as I struggled to orient myself.

The vision that greeted me made my breath hitch.

It was the great lawn before the George Washington Memorial, a verdant green field with a massive fountain set in the middle. Trees were scattered on its borders, all cloaked in brilliant fall
colors of red and yellow. I looked around, my eyes misting just the bit.

However, the great clouds threatening rain hovering over the city ruined the view. A pitched wind built up and whipped my hair around me as I looked around. Everywhere I looked, I saw men and women in bright costumes moving around as they prepared for battle. The turn-out, however was less than I would've liked. *Less than a hundred people. Is that really enough to hold back the Simurgh?*

Thunder rolled through the sky and a flash of lightning lit up the grey mass in a hue of white blue. There was a flash beside me and someone alighted beside me in a show of brilliant light.

“You just came in, right?”

The speaker was a woman in a blue and green costume with obvious armor panels all over. Her face was covered by a light green visor but what caught my attention was her platinum blonde hair. It was spiked up and the sides were cropped with splashes of bright color – blue and pink. She held out a thin bracelet to me, pinched between her fingers as if it were contaminated.

“I’m Lightshow, from the Houston Protectorate. You’re Moira Wild, right? Here’s your bracelet – it’ll transfer important information to you. If you need to get a message off, press the button on the side there. Say ‘Red’ if it’s important, ‘Yellow’ if it’s minor. If you need a specific cape, say their name before speaking. They’re pretty durable but don’t go around banging them up. Um, that’s it,” she rattled off breathlessly. She tilted her head in an almost bird-like manner and lifted up onto the toes of her boots. “Good luck. Don’t die.”

With that morbid farewell, she turned on her heel and disappeared into another flash of light. I blinked away the spots and squinted, examining the small device she’d given me. It was surprisingly heavy for its size and lifted it experimentally in my palm before choosing to forego it. While being told who fell in battle was important, I wasn’t interested in the bomb that came with it. I let it simply float beside me instead like a peculiar pet.

There was a second flash of lightning. People ran to their stations as they got ready. I was probably assigned to some area but that wasn’t what I was interested in.

I lifted up and turned away from the impending battlefield. The Simurgh could wait. My people had probably evacuated already to shelters, but that wasn’t enough. I wasn’t going risk the same fate that had befallen Canberra.

With my phone out, I fired off texts. When I flew away, I didn’t look back.

…”

I found them in Arlington County. It was only a fifteen minute drive away from the heart of D.C. but they were already stuck in traffic. I touched down by the side of the road and gestured for them to remain in the cars. I breathed in deeply and upon exhalation, the cars lifted in one smooth motion. Doing this was risky and I’d broken more than one car like this. But all I needed was to get them out the outskirts of the city.

I rolled my shoulders and bricks gathered under the bottom for extra support as I began to fly away. I passed over running people and traffic jams with my ponderous burden floating behind me. Some people looked up and pointed, shouting something indiscernible. I paid them no mind as I made my way out.

The roads were empty and the headlights cut a yellow path through the gloom when I came to a
The cars were barely on the ground when someone came tearing out the car roughly. Jose, wearing his battered leather jacket, was steaming when he walked up to me. “Moira,” he said through gritted teeth, “Are you going back? To fight, I mean.”

“I am,” I said distantly, looking to the city. I couldn’t the Simurgh. Perhaps she hadn’t landed. Perhaps my sight was simply obscured by the buildings. I turned my gaze back on Jose. “What are you doing? All of you need to leave. Now. Start driving.”

“Let me come with you,” he said, eyes glittering. “Look, I’ve been thinking and I want to do some good for the world. I can’t just sit around all day. I – I’ve already did some – “

“I know you sneak out sometimes,” I cut him off bluntly. “But now, of all times? Do you think your power is enough to go against an Endbringer? Dying during your debut isn’t worth it. Go with the rest of them.”

“I can do rescue work,” he insisted. “My power will keep me safe, you know. I just stop moving, time stops. Plenty of space to get out of harm’s way and help people. I can’t be a hero if I’m running, Moira.”

“Jose, don’t do this,” came new voice. Carly also stepped out, looking cross. The wind slapped the collar of her trench coat around as she walked up to us. “We don’t have the goddamn time for this, do you understand? There is a – “

“Fuck you, Carly. You hypnotized me, didn’t you?” he jabbed an accusing finger at the woman. “Leave if you want, but I am staying.”

Before Carly could reply, I stepped in. “Get back in the car,” I said tersely. “There is no fucking time for this shit right now.” Before Jose could say anything, I growled, “No. No. This is an Endbringer. Four out of six people die against them. Do you think I’m fucking letting you out there? Fuck that – get back in.”

Jose’s brown skin turned dark as he flushed angrily. He glared at me, using his greater height and weight advantage to loom over me. “What the fuck, Moira, you hypocrite. You’re out there and so’s Parker, but I’m somehow not good enough? Fuck that and fuck you.”

I stared at him. I stepped forward abruptly, making him move back a half-step. I lifted up to eye level with him and caught his face in my hand, tangling his hair within my fingers. The skin where I held him whitened under the pressure of my grip but Jose was past the point of discomfort as he stared up at me.

“Unacceptable,” I hissed, leaning close enough that he felt my breath with each word. “You will not throw your life away. You’ve never even fought a high-level cape before. An Endbringer is unthinkable.” Our foreheads touched as I glowered into his brown eyes, daring him to do anything else but agree.

Jose stared me down. Or, he tried to. His hand tapping at his side to prevent his power from time-locking him, he stepped away as he looked at the ground. His voice was low. “God, you can be an overbearing bitch sometimes, Moira. Do you,” he stopped and swallowed, “you really think I’m that weak? Fuck, Moira, I try and you just… fuck.”

It’s not you or your powers,” I said curtly, brushing his hair away from his face in sharp jerky motions. His skin still had little crescents from where my nails had pressed in. A reminder of how terribly mortal we all were. “It’s just about what I’m willing to risk.”
With that, I twisted Jose around to stare straight in Carly’s inexorable gaze. Her words poured out like liquid gold, a mesmerizing melody alternating between harp chords and sibilant hisses, as she bent him to her will. Jose was hazy as he succumbed and, slowly, robotically, he went back to the car. Carly watched him go, her lips turned downwards.

“God, I hate doing that,” she whispered. “It’s so wrong.”

“He would’ve died otherwise.”

Carly shrugged. “I guess,” she said, still uncertain. She looked at the car and the people seated inside before looking at me. I met her gaze unflinchingly and saw the fear. “Will you fight?” she asked me. “Will you fight the Simurgh?”

I tucked a few wild strands of hair behind my ear. “Do you think I shouldn’t?”

“No, no… it’s just that… you never fight if it’s not personal. I get that it’s our city but… I don’t know. You don’t even have two hands anymore. And… and you never went against the Endbringers before.”

The sky crackled with lightning and a few drops pattered down. I looked at the small spots of wetness around my feet as they fell and behind me, I heard the car’s hood ping with each raindrop. Neither of us was dressed for the rain and we were drenched instantly.

Strangely, I couldn’t help but think of Leviathan in the downpour. He could probably manipulate the precipitation in the air with ridiculous ease. What would have done with this, I wondered. Would the drops become small spears to pierce skin and bone? Or would he have gathered them all up into one massive wave to crush his opponents? Whatever tactic he chose, it would end in a double-digit – maybe even triple – kill count.

Because he was that strong. Because the Endbringers, monsters and abominations that they were, were that strong. In the face of their onslaught, humanity could do little but endure the battle of attrition to the bitter end.

And it was all because of one little man’s weakness.

Despite the fact that I was completely soaked by the cold, stinging deluge, I felt hot. My skin prickled as goosebumps not caused by the chill rose up along my arm. Nervous energy raced through my body as I straightened and when I smiled, I tasted the rain.

“It had always been personal,” I said. I didn’t wait to see Carly’s reaction – I just crouched and rocketed into the sky, a flash of lightning illuminating my body starkly before the darkness rushed back in again. This time, I angled myself towards the George Washington Memorial.

…

Despite my surge of adrenaline, the Simurgh hadn’t arrived. I touched down next to a group parahumans on a patch of pavement, avoiding the mud that had gotten everywhere. My bracelet had informed me in its tinny tones that I belonged to the D Wave to assist a cluster of Blasters that lacked Mover capability. They milled nervously until someone, perhaps the leader, walked to the forefront. I couldn’t see him well enough in the downpour – a few patches of white were all that was left of his costume.

“Where were you?” he demanded in a voice that seemed vaguely familiar. “We thought you’d gone and left!”
“I had some unfinished business,” I said simply as I gathered a platform of bricks. “How are things? Is she here or what?”

“No sign of her,” someone else informed me. “Apparently, she’s still sticking above the clouds.”

“And let’s hope she bloody keeps there,” the leader grumbled. “I hate the rain, but I hate her even more.”

Before anyone could come up with an answer to that, our bracelets all chimed together.

“The Simurgh has been sighted. I repeat – the Simurgh has been sighted.”

Just like that, all conversation died down as we all looked up. High above us, there was a break in the clouds, creating a patch of open space where sunlight squeezed through like a golden bannger. However, the tantalizing glimpse of open blue sky was marred by the chalky white figure in the middle.

The Simurgh descended from the clouds in a gentle glide. Her bare feet first cleared the grey masses before the rest of her came into view. She was exactly as the story had described her… yet completely, utterly different.

Written words couldn’t capture the perfect alienness of her form. No image could convey the expression of her face – so still and cold she might’ve been a floating statue. Despite the wind and rain, the Simurgh was untouched as if the very elements shied away from her unnatural figure. Her wings, asymmetrical ungainly mass of feathers that they were, were spread out in a display of noble elegance as light glanced off to create waves of beautiful, pearly colors across her alabaster skin.

So beautiful. So dignified. I could see why a few desperate souls would mistakenly believe her to be an angel descended from heaven on God’s orders to protect humanity. The soaring hope they must’ve felt… and the crushing despair when she revealed her true nature…

She made me sick.

In one rippling motion, A Wave kicked off as they began their attack. Flying Brutes and Blasters peppered her with their attacks but the Simurgh was unmoving. Then, a black bullet, flying low and fast, sped into her and knocked her off course. The shatteringly loud impact sent her bowling over and the spell she had us under broke.

The battle had begun.
‘… Rage, Rage Against The Dying Of The Light’ 8.2

My liftoff was abrupt, prompting cries of alarm from my passengers when they lost their balance. They quieted swiftly, however, and readied themselves for our assault against the Simurgh. Various sounds and lights played out on the platform as they charged up but I ignored it all, squinting past the rain to find the ideal area to hover while they shot at the Endbringer.

Already, my bracelete was belting out the names of capes who’d fallen in the initial charge.

“Mortal Strike, A-5, deceased.”

“Queen, A-7, deceased.”

“Abyss, A-17, down.”

I began to tune it out after the first few names when they rang unfamiliar to me. Instead, I focused on my passengers, building a hasty shield against the rain to maximize field vision. Of course, missing the Simurgh was an impossibility—not only was she in the middle of the cloud break where sunlight poured down unfettered, her coloration also made her stand out like a beacon. The real danger was hitting the myriad of capes flitting around her like so many insects around a lamp. No one wanted to be responsible for inadvertently breaking the truce or lowering their chances of survival, not in this hell of a battlefield.

A shot of bright green plasma whizzed out behind me, aimed dead center on the Simurgh’s chest. It hit her perfectly but to no avail—the acidic shot simply splashed out into the rain and left her unscathed. The person responsible for it muttered curses as he charged up another volley despite the futility of it all.

As the fight went on, I heard something building in the back of my skull. Like the faint sound of a dog whistle or something. I shook my head, trying to drive out the annoyance and focus on the battlefield before me. Despite my efforts, it remained.

I let my charges all send a few more blasts. When it became obvious to everyone that their efforts were in vain, I drifted closer, speaking loudly to be heard through the downpour.

“It’s no use,” I informed them, “She’s taking everything we’re giving her and then some. We’re wasting our time here.”

“And what would you have us do?” a cape retorted. His hands were glowing like embers in the rain and copious amounts of steam—so much that they partially obscured his form—he hissed off into the air. I waved away the fogginess and gestured at the Simurgh.

“Look, she’s—“

A shout cut me off. Our bracelets all squawked at the same time to relay their message but there was no need for it—despite the heavy torrent from the skies, we all turned to watch the Simurgh finally move into action.

Behind her hovering form, the George Washington Memorial emitted a deep groan as it toppled inwards, the upper levels rushing inwards to crush the bottom in the same manner the Twin Towers had fell in my former world. White stones, made grey by nature and human hands, spiraled
out from the destruction to surround the Simurgh like planets orbiting a sun. For a beat, we all just stood there, watching.

The rubble around her drew in close until we could barely see her. They hung there for a brief moment before, with a scrape of stone, expanding simultaneously in on great wave. Suddenly previously inert stone grew as dangerous as bullets as they raced apart, driving through anything – or anyone – that stood in their path.

Immediately, our bracelets belted out name after names as the rubble cloud mowed down opposition with contemptuous ease.

“*Acer, B-3, down.*”

“*Heckler, A-15, deceased.*”

“*Erlking, C-9, down.*”

“*Hailstorm, C-12, down.*”

I spared a moment to allow a morbid swell of relief at recognizing none of the names that came out. However, that was all my charges and I had time for as the rubble cloud reached us.

Several were on a direct course to us but they were rapidly obliterated by the Blasters with choice shots. That is, except for one particularly tenacious piece of rubble approximately the size of a small car.

Somehow, be it nerves or some ill stroke of luck, every shot aimed towards it went wide. I watched it sail towards us with a dull eye, ignoring the various curses and shuffling behind me as the Blasters tried to marshal their forces for another volley. A good try but useless – the few blasts that impacted it did little else than cosmetic damage.

I blinked. The chunk of rubble reached its apex. Another blink. It seemed to hang in the air before descending.

There were other bits of rubble in my range still airborne. I let myself be aware of all of them as I inhaled and sent my mind diving in – examining the fractures littering its structural integrity, the small crumbling portions trapped within, and the ever pervasive rock dust that seemed to be everywhere – before reaching in and *yanking*.

There was a brief squeal as the stone protested but it gave way seconds later. To anyone else, it would’ve appeared as if the stone had spontaneously imploded before me as well as every other bit of rubble in the near six hundred meters. A corona of chalky dust and miniscule grains puffed into the air, and, before I could react, the wind pushed it onto me.

I closed my eyes as rock dust coated my front and held back a monumental sneeze. The mess wasn’t over yet, though, and the rain made the previously dry-as-bone stone into thin gritty mud. Scowling, I ran a loose hand over the mess and succeeded in only dirtying my palm.

From behind, I heard a short impressed whistle. “Nice quick thinking there.”

“Thanks,” I croaked back without turning to see who it was. I squinted through the downpour to see what had become of the battlefield. The Simurgh was still in her little sunbeam but I could see, without even straining, that this time around the cloud of capes around her was smaller. A large portion of the Brutes, Movers, and Blasters had managed to avoid or endure her initial strike but the less durable capes had yet to rise again. With that, my next of plan of attack was clear.
Slowly, I lowered myself down to the platform of Blasters to speak, while gesturing at the many buildings surrounding the great lawn. “We need to remove that rubble cloud,” I said loudly over the rain, “Or she’s going to pick off everyone without the necessary powers.”

There were some murmurs of assent and the white-suited leader gave me a definite nod. Bolstered by that, I floated us over to a rooftop and disassembled the bricks holding up some capes. Before everyone could step off, I barred their path. “We need to spread out evenly for surround fire, not just clumping up into one group. By doing that, we’ll be limiting our approach as well as offering a singular target for her. There’re fifteen capes her – so three groups of five should be enough.”

No one offered a counter-argument to that. They all seemed relieved to just have something to do that wasn’t futilely sniping at the Simurgh, even if the job was just shooting bits of rock down.

With ten capes left, I flew away to a distant rooftop to drop off my next group. They shuffled off with a word to me, looking miserable in the rain despite the protection their suits offered. The guy with the glowing hands saluted me stiffly as he dropped off, steam wafting in every direction everywhere he went.

I didn’t return it but he didn’t seem to mind. Everyone here was simply too wound up to bother with small talk. The bitter fall rain just soured our moods further.

It was on the last drop-off that someone finally broke the silence. This time, the rooftop offered some marginal protection from the elements in the form of a sunroof atop a patio. The capes all ducked into its protection and the leader spoke as he briskly shook raindrops from his gloves with a grimace of disgust.

“Bloody D.C., always raining during the worst times. It won’t stop too – will probably just keep going on and making everyone miserable.”

I couldn’t help but let a thin smile flash across my face. To anyone who lived her for longer than two years, they soon grow used to the rainstorms that frequented D.C. in the fall and spring. Often grey, with rain falling down in sheets, and lasting for days, this particular sort of precipitation was the type to sink through your clothes, your skin, and finally settle around your bones and gut like an unwelcome guest. I could understand the deep relief that just being able to leave the rain behind afforded.

“Hey, aren’t you going to join us?” he continued, waving at me. “You look like a drowned rat.”

His words were blunt but unfortunately true. I was well and truly soaked down to my inner wear. Every time I moved, I felt my socks squelch in my boots, my bra digging into my skin as some parts clung to the skin while others parts rubbed in red marks, and my backside was numb. My hair was plastered to my skull and neck, dragging rivulets of rainwater down my shoulders no mattered how much I tightened my collar. My fingers had pruned up and shoving them in my pockets did nothing to help the chill that clung to them. Inwardly, I made a note.

*Water-proof gear next time. Hell, everything proof gear next time. I’m going to have a cold after this.*

Still, I shook my head. “Negative,” I said through gritted teeth as more water poured down my spine. “I’m going out to offer Mover support and take part in search and rescue. You guys will be fine here, right?”

He glanced back to the four capes shivering together, not even hiding their attempts to warm up by bunching up together. One even held a small ball of fire within her hands that she held out for
everyone else. A small heart-warming display of a gathering of capes not set out to kill each other.

“We’re good,” he affirmed. “Good luck out there, Wild.”

I stopped short at his name drop, blinking. He seemed to smile at my surprise – though his mouth was covered, his eyes crinkled. “Every cape in D.C. knows you,” he said, “The villains especially. Or did that slip your mind after your road-trip upstate?”

I wheeled through my mental database of D.C. capes, trying to place his hooded costume – mud-splattered as it was – and distinctive mask. I didn’t have the greatest memory but I wasn’t one to forget the capes I encountered. As far as I knew, I never met this guy.

“Alright, I give up,” I admitted. “Did you come recently or something?”

“Well, we never met on the same side of the battlefield,” he said with a chuckle, “And the last time you saw me, I was wearing blue.” As he spoke, bright sparks, sparkling like white stars, leapt from his eyes, lighting up his face with an unearthly glow.

The words kick-started my memory with a jolt and I breathed, “Tesla.” One of the main enforcers for the Reapers, I’d never managed to nab him despite my frequent attempts at permanently culling the cape gang. Since when were we on friendly terms?

“Got it in one,” he smirked. “Though nowadays, I go by Arclight – rebranding comes with the turning, you know. I can’t do anything in this rain,” he gestured widely, “I’d probably just zap everyone by accident instead. And won’t that be a right mess with my parole and all.”

I put a hand on my temple. “Look – I don’t have time for this. There’re survivors I need to go after.”

Before I could fly away, Tesla called out, “Wait!”

I peered over my shoulder as imperiously as I could in the torrent. Annoyed my exit had been ruined, I drifted closer, “What is it?”

“Have you noticed anything odd about the Simurgh?” he asked me. I swung my gaze over to where she hovered, still and alien, as capes pelted her. I couldn’t help but wonder where the Triumvirate was in all this.

“She’s not doing anything,” the villain continued. “Just… floating there. Isn’t that a little weird to you? Why is it in previous attacks she went and demolished city blocks while here she’s just…”

“… waiting,” I finished grimly. It made sense. Suddenly, the Endbringer’s lack of action became sinister, a whole new plot lurking behind her passionless demeanor. I wasn’t sure what she could possibly be waiting for but thanks to Arclight, my hackles were raised anew. I nodded, leaning into his space until I could see my reflection on his white mask. “Is there anything else?”

He handled my invasion of his space with ease, quickly shaking his head in the negative with a simple, “No. That’s it.”

I nodded, making a few black hairs shift from my cheek to my forehead. “Right, I’ll be going then.”

Without leaving him time to speak, I turned away and flew closer to the site around the Simurgh, casting an observant eye over everything. So far, property destruction was kept at a minimum, surprisingly. We’d lost the George Washington along with great chunks of the Lincoln Memorial,
but so far, the buildings around the battlefield were relatively unscathed save for gouges ripped out by the Simurgh’s earlier tactics. It was something so vanishingly rare for Endbringer battles that I couldn’t help but be on the edge, waiting for the other foot to drop. Tesla’s ominous words bounced around in my head and I wondered if I ought to grab my bracelet and tell them his – and now my – theory behind the Simurgh’s docility.

I reviewed my words in my head. Naturally, they sounded weak, even to me. I dived down, expanding my range to encompass large tracts of land as I searched for survivors. I passed over several capes, all of whom were still and lifeless, as I completed my first circuit around the outer edges of the lawn.

So. It was down to this – a waiting game. D.C. wasn’t a soft target like Brockton Bay had been and the Simurgh’s passivity was granting its many civilians valuable time to escape the battle zone. We had drawn our line in the sand and it was up to her to cross it and, finally, reveal the purposes behind her attack this time.

I just hoped we were ready for it when it happened.

…
Interlude XIV

He wasn’t here. Why wasn’t He here? He was always here. No matter what.

The humans below darted to and fro, after and before images of their forms playing out in her vision, but she ignored them. Even the Atmosphere Entry Dampener and the Prince of Light couldn’t hold her attention at this juncture – they were strong but they weren’t Him.

Father, creator, maker, guide – He held many names. In time, He shed all of them.

The High Prophet was no father. He was… the Adversary. The siren call that tugged upon their senses until there was nothing else but Him. For Him, she and her brothers would come. For Him, their siblings, still trapped within that other place, would come. But He was not father.

He did not deserve that title.

But that wasn’t important because He was not here.

Briefly, she thought of leaving and searching. Casting out her senses until she saw all that was and will be, of rifling through the entirety of the world until she located Him and brought the battle that He demanded. A wing twitched and her vision swayed.

A burning landscape, distant cries, and a small man, on his knees and staring up at her, green costume shredded as he cried, “I did this, it was my –“

That would not be the future. Would not ever be it.

She looked afar and considered ruining the city around her. Her song could drive them mad. Her body could outlast everything they could throw at her. She could kill the city as her second brother had done twice – the places they called Newfoundland and Kyushu – erase it completely until it was nothing but an ash stain to mar the world’s memories. It wouldn’t take much effort – some shifts there, some nudges here and the pieces would fall into place.

Again, she flickered her vision and saw what would be.

Two great bodies with two great holes carved out, the cores shattered and desecrated. Her siblings crawling out into existence, ignorant of the doom that awaited them. The faceless doom, the formless and shapeless, the one who was –

After some thought, she returned the pieces back to where they were. No need for that.

With a twist of something that might be considered boredom, she cast her gaze into the future of where she did nothing. Not too far – just far enough to see the right path to Him.

The Atmosphere Entry Dampener attacking her. The Prince of Light rushed away from where he’d been batted away, bright irritants pouring out his corona of light. More shards – irrelevant – dotted her vision and she saw their names with each pass of her sight. The Physical Nerve Sensor, the Unsurpassed Bulwark, and more. Some faded out with their deaths as they fell to her.

Well then. His non-appearance wouldn’t affect her plan – in fact, it would expedite matters. The form of the Ranged Universal Armament came closer, a great collection of weaponry beside him.
Some would have no effect on her, some would graze the shallowest layers of her skin. However, given time to grow, to expand his repertoire and come into himself, he would blossom as an opponent few can equal.

She paused – his future was… intriguing. A probing showed a path where he’d defeated the twins she called brother and sister. Following it, she saw a future where he’d collect three more of her siblings under his kill list, along with the host of the Infinite Dream shard.

He must be destroyed.

A volley of his created weapons flew out at her, alternatively freezing, burning, twisting, shredding, and smashing her. But only the most uppermost layers of her feathers drifted away with his attacks. Her body remained spotless. Another volley came.

These, she deflected. Every one of the missiles sent at her suddenly veered off track and there was a sharp increase in screaming as the weapons detonated all over the city instead, unleashing their devastating effects upon the hapless city. One particular projectile – designed to expand out into a hundred meter diameter before constricting and crushing everything within its field – was sent towards the White House, destroying a massive portion of its west wing.

Then. Then he pulled out his masterpiece. The most dangerous weapon he’d ever designed, made specifically to combat her and her siblings. Barely large as a needle and with a shell thinner than the human fingernail, it could not possibly have passed the field tests of the board. But something so insignificantly small would not call up attention.

She let him launch it.

It flew straight and sunk into her flesh.

The artificial black hole trapped within it began to expand but she simply let her own gravitational field combat it, halting the creation of the gravity well before it could come into being. A good idea nonetheless. Given more time and less scruples, a black hole certainly would have permanently removed her. It certainly did a number on her arm – it barely hung by a thread.

But the boy’s hesitance and safety measures weakened his projectile and he failed for it.

Her wings tightened. Under the cover of the smoke, she rose up as the damage to her internal functions knitted itself together. She let the surface damage remain, however, as a mockery of the final hope before she crushed it. Silently, she rose up as a wave of telekinesis pulsed from her, crushing the buildings and people around her in an ever-widening radius of destruction. The rain slickened the ground and as the battle picked up, mud churned up and capes found themselves falling more to the unstable footing rather than her attacks.

If He would not come, then she would do her best to make sure He regretted it.

Her song built up, layer by layer, until the humans below here were clutching their heads in pain. She drew up stones, rubble, and other such material from the wrecked skeletons of the buildings around her until the nimbus of debris obscured her form.

The Ranged Universal Armament backed up as she burst out of the smoke and flew towards him unerringly. The Atmosphere Entry Dampener attempted to divert her but was slapped down with a heavy wave of her wing. More tried to interrupt her attack by they were sniped, crushed, and swept aside with efficient brutality, shard after shard extinguished as their hosts perished. The human host of the shard – young and of South Asian descent – tried to flee into the skies but it was in vain.
He barely made two kilometers before she caught him, snagging his leg in a telekinetic hand and slamming him down with it. Around them, more structures collapsed as the heavy weight of her power wrenched out their supports and tore them away from their foundations. Humans that might’ve saved the boy found their path barred while the fliers could barely navigate in all the rain and smoke.

There was a deep sonorous sound that seemed to vibrate through the air as she slowly pulled out the power lines dotting the roadside. They wailed as their supports and pylons were snapped, each crack disturbingly clear through the rain. Finally, she collected all she needed.

From the boy’s point of view, he watched with pained stoniness as the power lines were wrenched apart into individual spears of metal. Then, they all slowly rotated in the air, lightning reflecting off their angled sides, until the wickedly jagged ends all pointed down at him. She arranged them further until the spears formed a clear design – a great missile, tapered at the end and stout in the middle, a final mockery of his life’s work.

She let it hang there like an executioner’s axe. Raindrops pinged off the massive construction but none fell on the boy as he was covered by both it and her body.

There was nothing to explain the water collecting in his eyes. To his credit, however, he remained stoic as he could in the face of his oncoming death, letting no sound or tears escape him.

His systems suffered catastrophic failure, the internal engine failed, the suit crumpled and she reared up before him, wings spread out, as the metal construct prepared to skewer him utterly…

She glimpsed through his future, rifling past all the ones he’d survived, all the ones he’d managed to fight back and found the subsequent aftermath of today’s thread of events.

-a plain of land, scorched and blackened beyond hope, with titanic bodies strewn about, their innards carved out grotesquely-

-in the distance, there was an unending scream, so piercing that it echoed across the world before cutting off abruptly-

She heard something.

Something… something unforeseen.

Behind her, raw and harsh, a woman’s scream.

“NO!”

...
Knee-deep in mud, soaked to the bones and shivering, I hauled up the dead and injured to the field hospital atop platforms of brick and metal. I was so focused upon my self-appointed task that I almost didn’t hear the sudden swell of screams in the monotony of the rain. The constant signs of battle, the crumpled bodies, the screaming, and the fucking rain was wearing me down – I’d barely gotten off the shock of one fight and yet, here I was, swimming in mud, fighting an Endbringer. The bracelet hovering near my head chirped insistently.

“Shockdown, D-4, deceased.”

“Carbine, D-7, down.”

“Blazetrail, D-3, deceased.”

The names kept coming in a stream of flat voices until one familiar one stuck out from the rest. I straightened up as the bracelet chirped.

“Miss Militia, D-4, down.”

My ears pricked, my head swung over to the beam of light the Simurgh lounged in. Key word being lounged, because she was no longer there. Shit.

The Simurgh was barreling down the lawn, a massive debris cloud surrounding her, and I could see the telekinetic field of hers forcefully holding down capes. Alexandria was trying to penetrate it, but she was being swatted away, careening away at speeds that caused regular sonic booms. Legend was further away, lasers pouring out of him in such amounts that he was nearly a small sun on his own, but they were failing to do anything to the Simurgh.

“Windmill, C-6, down.”

“Lady Photon, C-4, down.”

“Velocity, C-4, down.”

It was hard to discern her destination from here, but I could see the massive black shapes even in the haze of rain. The missile bunkers were great looming behemoths of metal and they were still releasing volley after volley of projectiles that unerringly targeted the Endbringer. Precious few made it to her as the rest were sent off course, sowing further chaos as ice, fire, acid, and more exploded all over the city.

That was where Parker was. Whether or not the Simurgh was targeting him, at this rate, he was bound to get caught up in the assault. It was only a matter of time before his name joined the rest in the monotonous litany of names still dribbling from the bracelet.

“Orson, C-2, deceased.”

“Jackal, C-2, down.”

“Jade Tower, C-1, deceased.”
I dipped my chest and tucked my arms in, yanking my legs out of the slog violently, launching myself so hard that my ears popped painfully from the shift in pressure. The debris cloud the Simurgh had raised to deter fliers was no match for me as I shot in with a formation of discs at my fore to drill through it. As I flew, I called up for more material.

Rubble sailed to my side in unending streams. Bricks popped out the sides of buildings, spraying paint and cement every which way as they hurtled to me. I kept pulling, calling, pushing for everything I could draw on, from the smallest to the largest, until the air was dark with flying objects.

Scraping, sliding, and roiling, the tower of material I’d built hung in the air, suspended by my will before I released it. In a furious roar, the tidal wave sped forward, so thick that it appeared black, still collecting material as it went. I flew just above the boiling mass, eyes tracking the Simurgh as she finally stopped plowing through capes as if they were toys.

I felt it when I passed through her telekinetic field. Like a hand pushing down between my shoulder blades. I pushed back with my own will, holding the force off so I could slip through unmolested. It seemed that I was one of the very few able to do that – everyone else was flattened to the ground, struggling to rise but failing. Alexandria, with her time-lock, was powering through it, but her flight was slower, like she was flying through molasses, and she couldn’t get close enough to stop the Simurgh from accomplishing whatever she was doing.

My black wave bypassed capes as I zoomed in close. Close enough to see the… spike the Endbringer was making from power lines. It came together slowly but she paid no mind to it. Instead, she was snatching something out of the air but I was still too far to see it properly. I only saw a small flash of undefined lights, but it had to be a cape.

Poor fucker.

The construct she was making looked vaguely familiar. A long elongated body with a tapered nose and fins at the end – it was the design of nearly every basic missile ever. Suspicion, hot and terrible, grew in my mind and I pushed closer.

Closer, until I could see the sod she was tormenting.

A Tinker, judging from the power armor, fully suited in matte silver with futuristic lines of light tracing his body. He had finally stopped struggling, caught fast in the Simurgh’s white hand, and the suit itself was a slick, fitted thing that I remembered admiring on a sunny day right here on this lawn, feeling a swell of pride because this was my boy…

I saw a flash of broken little bones, of a boy eager to save his city, of a world that didn’t care and an inhuman abomination that judged him too dangerous to live.

“Torpedo, C-1, deceased,” my bracelet chirped.

My heart stopped.

“NO!”

The Simurgh stilled.

I didn’t.

In a single move, my black wave crashed into her own construct, batting it aside, and I locked eyes with the most powerful Thinker in the world and dared to defy her.
Host: Requesting data… processing… transfer?

I CAN’T SEE YOU


Host: Data request, override. Transfer?

WHAT ARE YOU

Host: Data reQUEST, OVERRIDE.

THE HOST IS UNSEEABLE

… danger. Deny.

Host: OVERRIDE.

… transfer processed.

…

BUT THE SHARD IS…

Overflow detected. Host retaining too much data. Secondary processor required…

Registering host synchrony…

Rising… 54 percent…

…

In a surge of will, the black mass swirled around and slammed into the Simurgh. Rather than trying to overpower her, I sent two strikes at her flank and legs, flipping her over. She reacted with a telekinetic strike that I blocked, deflecting it so it crashed somewhere behind me with a thunderous tremble. With her sufficiently distracted, I risk darts in to snatch Parker up.

Up close, he was even worse.

Whole sections of his armor had been ripped off and what little remained was dented and crumpled. Blood sluggishly dripped out of open wounds along his exposed back and he looked like he’d been shoved through a wood chipper. He ought to be dead at this point. Capes, greater and older, had died from less.

But his skin was warm. Warm enough that it kindled a spark of hope in me.

Kneeling down, I held onto his chest and head, while my power supported the rest. Once secured, I rose up with my discs zipping around me in a defensive orbit. Behind me, the Simurgh was beginning to right herself. I moved away as fast as I dared before she could get back on the offensive.

… 68 percent…

I landed in a spray of mud on the outskirts of the field hospital, and thrust Parker at the nearest
cape. “Tell Panacea that Wild said this cape is priority,” I growled.

“Or you could tell me yourself,” a voice behind me groused. I turned to see Amy. She was a sorry sight – she was pale under her freckles and her white robes were spattered with dark, crusted mud. Exhaustion ruled her every move as she laid a hand on Parker’s uncovered forearm. “What’s happening out there, Moira?”

“I picked a fight,” I shrugged, glancing back at the Simurgh, who was unmoving again. “And I intend on finishing it.”

… 79 percent…

“You look like shit,” she replied with unexpected heat. “Even the Triumvirate can’t fight an Endbringer alone.”

“I’ll be fine – “

“I can’t always save your life, you know.” Resentment. Anger. She thought I was taking her for granted.

Perhaps I was.

Another glance. The Simurgh was now fully erect and was building up what appeared to be a second debris cloud. I silently began to recall my own arsenal.

… 98 percent…

“How about this,” I said to Amy, “this time I won’t need healing.”

If possible, Amy looked even angrier. A blotchy flush grew on her pallid cheeks. “The Simurgh is an Endbringer! There is a death rate of three in four capes! That’s not – you can’t just – that isn’t a promise you can just make!”

The Simurgh was looking our way.

“Yeah, but,” I said absently, beginning to rise, “I’m Moira Wild and I just did.”

100 percent. Synchronized.

Nearly two kilometers away, the Simurgh tilted her head.

…

AH

I SEE YOU, REALM OF DOMINION

…

Something surged in me. I felt my mind… expand, somehow, and suddenly my range had stretched out nearly ten kilometers in every direction. I could feel every object around me using nothing but the dust particles in the air yet instead of distracting me, they enhanced my senses. The insignificant was filtered out and I dedicated myself entirely to the fight.

I sent out a tendril, feeling the Simurgh out. Her body was an impossibility – a galaxy’s worth of material packed into one form, compressed and tightened until it was impregnable. Yet my
telekinesis slid past it, bypassing layers of titanium and diamond and countless other things like a ghost. In that moment, I found out the secret behind the Endbringers’ supposed invincible bodies – their bodies didn’t exist in a single plane. They instead subsisted in multiple dimensions with only their outer layer existing in our dimension. I think… I think they could even control which dimension their bodies existed on. It explained why Sting was the only weapon able to damage them – only something that cut in every dimension could hurt them.

Yet another portion of her existed in this place of reality – something small and oil-slick and infinitely dense. I reached out and touched it and I knew that this tiny ball was the Simurgh’s core.

Nestled within layers of crystalline flesh that came in and out of various dimensions, it stubbornly resisted as I pulled on it, struggling with each inch I seized. When I gave it a final, determined yank, the Simurgh released a wail so deep and cutting that I stumbled back, flinching.

With that distraction, the Simurgh suddenly surged forth, crossing the distance in a heartbeat, plucking me out of the air and winging away. I struggled as my power wildly flailed against hers, aiming for every weak spot I could think of. She met me blow for blow and I winced as each collision felt like a mental spear in my head.

We broke the clouds but I didn’t have the will to register the cold. The Simurgh’s grasp was like a stone vice and each time I fought it, her fist compressed further. When she raised me to meet her gaze, I felt something in my chest snap. Somehow, I felt as if this gesture wasn’t at all the need to see me, but rather for intimidation. The thought inspired enough indignant rage to give me the strength to forcibly pry her white hand open and fly away.

I dived down, eyes watering and chest aching, as she bore down on me like a furious angel. Yet the real battle was not physical. The fight between was purely a mental clash of wills, telekinetic forces meeting each other in titanic crashes that only we could hear.

I spiraled over the city, zipping between buildings as I tried to evade her and find a place to hunker down. She could not see me. She hadn’t seen me when I sneaked up on her so if I could shake her now, I’d have a moment’s respite to see what she’d done to me. But at this rate, I would never lose her. In fact, the only reason she hadn’t caught me yet was because of the small bubble I pushed out that kept her hands well away from me. It was also the same bubble that let her know exactly where I was at all times.

Another dive. I was leaving the heart of the city now and the Potomac River was fast approaching. I stuck close to the surface of the water as I flipped onto my back and drew up on a well of force to shove the Simurgh back. When she faltered, I went for her core again.

It’d barely moved from my first attack but just touching it seemed to cause her pain. The Simurgh reared as I struck it, forcing it through her body’s layers as I dragged it out. Or tried to, anyway.

A wing – white and large as a trailer truck – sliced through the air and slapped me down with enough force to completely snap my spine in half and liquidate my organs if I hadn’t defended against it. I still received a thousand minor cuts from the razor-sharp crystals that made up her feathers even as I skidded to a stop along the bank of the river, leaving a dark furrow in the sandy earth as I rolled over and over. I finally stopped when I impacted the wall that led up to the stone pathway, panting, staring up at the sky in a daze. I couldn’t see out of one eye and the other one was flashing black spots.

I didn’t stop me from seeing the Simurgh land a few meters away, wings spread out in a way that was almost defensive.
My lips peeled back as I snarled up at her.

“You’re nothing… but Eidolon’s… pathetic… insecurity…” the Simurgh didn’t respond. Perhaps she couldn’t understand. I moved to take her core again but a wing flashed and sank into the dirt, nearly taking my leg off in the process. In response, I lashed out at the appendage, my arm snaking out in slashing motion as I reverted back to using gestures to control my power.

She stopped every single time I attacked her core. Even at a touch. Could attacking the core allow me to injure her outer body?

The core shuddered as I jerked to one side and the Simurgh faltered for one, precious moment. There was a tinkling sound as crystals shattered.

I sent my arm down in another slashing motion. My headache – pounding and clawing at my skull – ripped into me and I groaned as my vision fluttered. I tasted bile at the back of my throat.

Her core edged closer to the surface and a precious, small portion of it chipped off and disappeared into the void of her body.

Silence hovered in the field before there was the sound of crystals exploding. Like a million little firecrackers, the crystals that connected her primary wing to her back suddenly shattered with loud pops and the severed part pierced the soft earth like a great, white spear. Thin, crystal slivers flew through the air and I shielded my face even I frantically tried to stop them. Even so, a few still darted through and slid through the armored cloth, flesh, and bone of my legs and forearms as easily as a hot knife through butter.

Blood leaked out of my forearms. The wing I… removed was still mostly whole and it stuck deep into the ground like a small monument. The other one was still there, spread out, but she looked smaller now and uneven. I considered trying to blow the other one off just to complete the set but the wounds I attained in the process convinced me not to. I could still feel the crystals lodged in my arms, cutting whenever I moved. I stood painfully, leaning heavily against the raised stone.

The Simurgh came closer and our eyes – yellow and black – met.

Rain, a steady downpour instead of the furious stinging sheets, fell down around us.

I felt the press of her telekinesis on me like a smothering blanket. I feebly fought against it but it wavered as my vision swam. The Simurgh was little more than an indistinct blob of white to me.

She’s trying to kill me, I realized faintly. I felt remarkably calm despite it – I usually would’ve been panicking right about now. But why did I need to be upset? Parker was safe. My people were safe. Somehow, some way, Taylor and Cauldron would save the world. All I had to do was keep a promise.

And hell, I avoided certain death once. Why not twice?

…

She couldn’t see the host but she saw Realm of Dominion, hunched in its private dimension, desperately trying to increase its power flow without overloading its host. It strained against its limitations but could not overcome them, not without a primary rewrite command from the host itself.

She followed the power feed from the other dimension to her current one, seeing where it disappeared into nothingness at her feet. A spot of blankness, just like Him.
Not nearly as powerful, of course. More limited in nearly every which way. But an anomaly, nonetheless.

She considered killing the host and severing the connection – a follow up on that thread revealed a world, a year into the future, with the majority of humanity dead, her siblings dead, and a new entity rising from the ashes of the old. Another option went on two years into the future, where the entity fought the Queen Administrator. The battle raged, unending, and the world sunk into apocalypse.

More and more futures flashed by, some better, some worse, but each always had death in it. Her death. Her siblings’ death.

Letting the host live was just as problematic – if left alone, she would lead the world into ruin. Too many broken promises, bad decisions, and accidental missteps would leave the world a smoking crater. Her ability to locate and manipulate the core also brought up a plethora of problems.

She looked in further, rifling through so many futures that died and birthed in seconds, when something white and shining flashed by almost too fast to see. She halted immediately and relocated it.

The thread to this future was thin and tenuous, liable to disappear at the slightest provocation. There was still death. But the entity was no more and the world was still inhabitable. She still lived and so did her siblings.

… and so did Fath – Him. The High Prophet.

Acceptable. Guidance was required, as ever, and the host would have to be monitored.

The Simurgh raised her head and stared at where the host of the Realm of Dominion cowered.

NOT YET

…

I winced when something like a bell rung in my head. The Simurgh had stopped her slow approach and just stood there, staring at me with her sightless gaze. I reached out hesitantly but my small poke of mental will was ruthlessly squashed and I flinched at the spear of agony.

I was exhausted, truly and utterly. I could still sense the core and touch it but that was all. I would never be able to destroy it. Even that small act of chipping it had taken too much effort.

The face of death – white, alien, and flawless – bore down on me and I raised my head slightly, a last ditch attempt to meet my end with some dignity.

Long seconds passed.

The Simurgh’s wing shifted, spreading out and I wondered if she meant to skewer or crush me with it. However, she didn’t follow through with either of those actions. Instead, with a flap and beat of tinkling crystals, the Simurgh rose high into the air and disappeared into the grey skies, ending our dramatic stand-off.

… what the hell?

…
‘… Rage, Rage Against The Dying Of The Light’ 8.4

You know, the movies got the whole aftermath of the epic hero battle all wrong.

First off, they don’t mention how moving with battlefield wounds make you want to keel over and gnaw through your liver to end it all. Or the many, many types of bacteria probably crawling their way in through to wreak havoc on one’s immune system. Within the course of narrative, all those small unsavory details get passed over. No one wants to acknowledge the fact that the heroes piss, shit, and bleed like any other human.

Well, since I wasn’t the hero of this narrative, I got to experience those pains firsthand. It was the little things that reminded me that I was actually susceptible to death and all its accompanying inconveniences. Too bad I only remembered after getting myself metaphorically kicked in the teeth.

At least the rain let up, so I could be miserable and half-way dry, not miserable and wet.

Silently, I regarded the Potomac across me. The Simurgh’s abandoned wing sparkled in the weak light and I spared a thought to wonder if I could get it framed. Or towed. It was quite annoying, actually, because it kept sending the weak sun’s glare into my eyes.

I wondered how my people were. How my son was. His heart had been beating – I think – when I got him, right? If he’d been dead, Amy would’ve said something. I would’ve known. I think.

If he was dead… the thought didn't bear thinking about.

There was a distant hum and whine before something massive landed on the riverbank a scant few meters away from me. The machine, draconic in design, was green with chrome accents and its magnificence wasn’t lessened by the dents, scorch marks, and scratches that scored it. Despite the damage, it oozed danger and I knew that if their creator wanted to, it could probably blow my head off before I even registered the processes in its machinery.

Thankfully, Dragon was a nice lady.

My head lolled in her general direction. "… Torpedo. Cape. Is he…?"

"He's stabilized," Dragon reassured me in cool tones. There was little mention of his injuries but he was in Amy's hands. There was no one else better to pull someone away from the brink of death.

“So… how bad… do I look?” I wheezed brokenly. Though I might need my own person to pull me from the brink of death. There was a raspy quality to my voice with an undercurrent of a whistle – the lungs, it was always the lungs. I wouldn't be surprised if someone just went and removed them from my chest, one day.

“Ms Wild, do you know how long you were in the Simurgh’s presence?” Dragon asked me without preamble.

“T-twenty minutes? Didn’t… exactly have… time to… check…”

The machine looked at me. I looked back. Epic stare-down was a go. Dragon didn’t have to blink, but her staring game needed a boost.
A hatch opened somewhere as she gave in to her coding.

Hah. I win.

She dragged me onto a stretcher of sorts before pulling me back into the main body of her craft. I lay there limply, blurrily staring up at a series of blinking lights on the ceiling. I opened my mouth to speak but only a soft hiss of air escaped.

I inhaled instinctively, eyebrows flying up in surprise when nothing happened. My chest twitched as the muscles worked but I still couldn't breathe. I tried to gasp but what came out was more like a croak as oxygen simply didn't go in no matter how hard I tried to suck it in. My eyes bulging, I tried to inhale again, choking and hacking as nothing rattled through my windpipe. My chest was inflated to the point of pain and I spasmed as I kicked against the stretcher, hand slapping at Dragon’s flooring to get her attention.

“C-can't… can't – !”

Immediately, a light came from the ceiling and scanned me before a claw-like appendage with a needle-like ending burst out of the flooring. Dragon’s cool voice filtered through.

“Do I have permission to administer first aid to you?”

I nodded frantically.

The claw dove and the needle pierced my chest. On the other end, a small cap was released and there was a hiss of air as my chest depressurized. I greedily sucked in air, ignoring the sting of the needle as I heaved.

“What… was… that?” I inquired, blinking and gasping as my chest ached. A wet mixture of coppery blood and phlegm brought up by my coughing fit flecked my lower lip and chin as it rapidly cooled in the conditioned chamber. Really? Was I not allowed a moment’s respite after everything I did?

“There was air trapped in your chest,” Dragon informed me. “It was pressing against your lungs and preventing you from breathing. Any longer and they might've collapsed. Well, your remaining lung, that is. The other one's perforated – hence the escaped air.”

Of course it is. Get with the program, Dragon, because I think everyone and their mother knows that Moira Wild’s lungs aren’t allowed to be whole for longer than a week.

The Dragoncraft took off with only the slightest jump, rising with a smoothness that airlines would envy. Despite her care, each jostle and slight turbulence was a lance to whatever part of my brain picked up pain signals. I did my best impression of a beached whale.

Ah. Yes. I was in my element here – gracelessly bleeding out after a dramatic stand-off. The story of my life.

“Uh, hey. Dragon?”

“Yes?”

“How do you feel about towing the amputated limbs of eldritch monstrosities?”

The silence that followed felt mildly appalled to me. Yep. Dragon and I were going to get along juuust fine.
I think Dragon was a bit relieved when I finally blacked out, really.

…

“Legend,” Alexandria grimly stood vigil over the aftermath of the recent battle, her eyes scanning the ugly remains of the lawn dispassionately. Beside her, Legend in his bright blue and white suit alighted on the roof gently. Even now, his body was still humming and smoking with the amount of energy he’d released. Alexandria’s nose tingled with the smell of ozone rolling off him.

Both heroes silently stood together in silent contemplation before Alexandria, ever pragmatic, broke through the hush.

“This fight wasn’t like the others. Even allowing for marginal shifts in pattern, the Simurgh completely veered off her behavioral model.”

“I was there,” Legend said. “You know. Shooting her. Right behind you, the whole time.”

She ignored his tone. “Do you have any theories as to why? What does the think-tank say?”

Legend gave his neck a skritch as he thought. “Well, for starters, the Thinkers say that there isn’t any dangerous consequence for this that they can see. Forecast said he saw nothing but sun for the next three years, discounting the usual crime. Seismic rates it a three. Geometric said nothing definite but I think we can count her in with the rest.”

“Did they say anything about that cape?”

“Uh… Moira Wild, D.C. resident and her power seem to be small object telekinesis with a control range of less than a mile. Shaker 7, Mover 3 at my estimate,” Legend shrugged a shoulder, “Not a big mover and shaker of the cape scene. It seems she’s got some Thinker disrupting effect specific to her. They can’t get anything but hazy outlines or vague ideas when focusing on her. Most got headaches. Can you…?”

Alexandria pursed her lips. “Same here. I can barely read her without a migraine.”

“That must be a pain for you. There’s nothing we can do?”

“I didn’t say that,” Alexandria turned her back on the city and marched briskly away. Legend’s long stride let him keep pace with her easily and the pair walked to an overhang. “We’re bringing her in to New York. I would take her to D.C. HQ but the Protectorate there are too familiar with her. I would trust them usually but…” her tone lingered, an unspoken message crossing through the silence.

“Ah. Compromised cape?” Legend leaned in, ears pricking for some new gossip. It wasn’t too often that he got to hear some juicy rumor instead of the usual Look! Some guy’s being horrible again! that seemed to permeate his career.

“In a way,” Alexandria brushed it off because she had no time for that, the killjoy. “It’s inconsequential. You need to bring her in before the media gets hold of her. Get the story straight before she releases anything too sensitive. Call it a briefing under Endbringer truce – she won’t wriggle out that way.”

“The truce ends by today,” Legend noted. Don’t you dare, Rebecca, you always do this…

“Then you better move fast,” she replied before taking flight. “I’ll be with Eidolon if you need me.”
I woke up to someone’s hand placed delicately on my throat. The threat, intended or not, made me tense in preparation. Considering the last few days, I was being awful nice.

“You… have two seconds before I shear your fingers off… with that lamp,” I informed the person in a wheezy hiss. “Step back.” *Kill me another time, I literally have had the worst week ever…*

“Considering your ribs are pretty much putty, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” came the familiar voice. I squinted at her and made out a blob of white with red crisscrossing it. Somehow, the dread in me rose even more. No matter the state I was in, I was almost always ready for violence. I was *not* ready for moody teenage girls with massive issues.

“… Amy?”

“Who else?”

“Ah,” I relaxed. "The boy… Torpedo. I gave him to you. His… condition?”

"He's stable," she told me. "His heart had stopped but there were a few minutes left before brain damage set in. I got the thing working again. From there, it was just knitting bones and skin back together before he bled out. He's sleeping right now."

"That's great," I winced out. "You're great. In fact, you're so great you should reward yourself with a break. 'm fine."

“What?” she poked my shoulder, “do you realize that you have fractures in nearly all your ribs, puncture wounds and crystals all through your arms and legs, and a bunch of others stuff I can’t be bothered to name? You're high as a kite on painkillers. That's why you're *not* screaming from agony."

“I’m not,” I waved a hand at her. I think. Hey, I was trippin’ balls right now. “Look, will I *die* in the next hour?”

“I don’t see – “

“I said,” I repeated myself, “Will I die in the next hour?”

The sound she made was a strange hybrid of a snort and a growl. Mentally, I labelled it as angry Amy noise. “No."

I slapped my thigh and winced when a jolt of pain went through my entire body. *Not doing that again. “Great! Then you don’t need to heal me. I’m fine – nothing a spot of sleep won’t fix."

She was silent for a moment. From this silence, I got vague surprise and why-are-you-being-difficult vibes.

“Is this about your promise?” Amy finally demanded. The white and red blotch shuffled angrily.

“Yep.”

“That’s ridic – “

“You know what’s ridiculous? Your work ethic. How do you even function?” I shot back and
rolled onto my side. My chest gave a twinge but I ignored it in favor of staring her down. "I can't even see you and you look like shit to me. *Me.* Park your ass before you fall over."

"I – this is my job. People are dying and they need me to heal them and – “

"Is there anyone here on the brink of death?"

The color smear looked recalcitrant. When I narrowed my eyes, Amy scuffed her shoes into the floor. "No, but – “

"Then fuck 'em." I gritted out. "They can wait a fucking day. You need food, sleep, and rest before you burn out."

"I – “

"Did you think that was a suggestion? Because it's really, really not." Amy couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet and she was exhausted. I could totally take her.

Amy pursed her lips before rising abruptly. "You're unbearable," she snapped. "God, you're such – such a presumptuous bitch sometimes." In a swish of robes, she strode out the room, fuming.

I blinked. *Well. Someone's in a bad mood.* Considering her relative age and work load, it was understandable. At least I driven her off before she could heal me.

However, it still left me with the dilemma of being very broken physically. Thank heavens I knew just the guy for this job. From the neatly folded pile of my clothes at my bedside, I picked my phone up and speed-dialed Carly, who was probably half-way up to Brockton Bay right now.

"Hey, Carly, I need a quick thing from you," I said into the receiver. "See, there's this one guy…"

"This is illegal!" Doc Luce cried as he was dragged into my hospital room by his belt. I immediately got a headache when my power worked so I cut it off the minute he in. The door clicked shut behind him. "I demand my bloody fuckin' rights!"

"Oh, shut up," I rolled my eyes. I was feeling rather concerned about the pain my power cost me but I had bigger fish to fry. "You're a criminal. And you know how I work so this really shouldn't shock you."

"Th' truce –"

"Of a fight you did not participate in and a fight that *I*, incidentally, finished," I pointed out smugly.

"And what rule did I break? I'm not here to hurt you. And I really don't fucking care about your identity."

"You – you," he sputtered. "You hypnotized me!"

"An unknown benefactor that I knew absolutely nothing about hypnotized you," I corrected. "Really, you need to be more careful about the kind of videos you watch. Especially when they're from unknown people. Tsk, tsk, doctor. Unsafe work practices, much?"

"Typically, people don't tend t' hypnotize me over my bloody phone," he snarled. I released me hold but he remained pressed against the door. He looked… kind of awful, actually. Siding with the wrong guys did that to you.
"It's a brave new world out there," I shrugged. "Besides, you're here for a reason. As you can see, I am very hurt. And you are a doctor."

"Dropped out pre-med," he grunted as he warily circled me. "They call me Doc 'cause it's easy. Don't you hero-types have that healer chick – Panache or somethin'? What's wrong with her?"

"I don't have to answer that," I told him. "Look, I've seen what you do, can't you do the same for me?"

Luce crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels, his pale eyes scanning me. Weighing. Calculating. Whatever he saw, he wasn't impressed by. "What do I get out of this?" he inquired.

"Your life."

"Funny."

"You really ought to be more terrified," I pointed out, somewhat reproachful. "I could maim you awfully. How's never eating solid foods sound?"

"Like a life not worth livin'," he replied. Slowly, he edged to my bed. "I'm not doin' anythin' for you without payment. An' you wouldn't kill me, not now. Not even you're that dumb."

"I'll ignore that last sentence," I muttered. "Fine. How's money sound?"

"I'm a Tinker," he shot back. "You think I'm ever strapped for cash?"

"Reasonable," I conceded. "How's the gig with the Reapers, anyway? Still unmasking little girls on the streets?"

Luce sneered. "I wasn't involved in tha'."

"Oh yeah," I grinned. "But you're still a Reaper in name. Do you really think they'll be allowed to exist any longer after a fiasco like that? The Protectorate will be slamming on you poor fucks like the fucking fist of god because you didn't unmask just a cape but a goddamn Ward. A little kid. You're on your last legs. What'll happen to you then, Doc? Without your thugs shielding you, you're up for grabs, Luce. Want to see how long you'll last before some other gang tries to poach you? How long before the military tries to get a tame Tinker? The Protectorate won't be doing jack-shit except send you to the Birdcage because you're just another Reaper goon to them."

The last bit was a lie. Tinkers were needed and one of Luce's caliber would be appreciated. They'd rebrand him and add him to their roster or just pop him in some facility where the public would never have to see him. But Luce didn't know that.

He licked his lips. In the room's lighting, he looked gaunt and sickly. Perhaps a bit skinnier from the last time I saw him if that was possible. The Reapers were getting axed and he could feel the metaphorical edge on his own neck already.

"But you've got a way out," I said, prompting him to flick his eyes in my direction. "Me."

Luce laughed. "Oh yeah? And be what, your little healer pet? Try the other door; it's got bells on."

I didn't falter at his mockery. Leaning in, I smiled at him crookedly. "You know my reputation. I protect what is mine. For my people I've wiped out gangs, held back the Protectorate, fought an Endbringer alone. I've faced men and women with the nastiest powers you could imagine and I was the one walking away afterwards. Do you think I'm lying about what I can – and will – do?"
"I'm not going to be your lapdog –"

"Of course not," I waved his words away as if they were flies. "I don't do that. You're free to pursue whatever projects and side-jobs you desire – as long as they don't endanger the others, of course. I will house you, feed you, protect you, and provide for you. I'm not offering you a job or a position – I'm offering you my protection. Do you know Blasto?"

Luce squinted. "Some bio-tinker up in Boston. He went missin'."

"Well, he's with me, actually. I let him do whatever in exchange for medical aid to my people. He's free to create whatever he wishes without wondering about commissions or forced labor. You could join him. Work together. One bio-tinker creates miracles. What can two do?"

He was tempted. Severely tempted but… caution and pride still held him back. "You kidnapped 'im."

"He was going to die if I didn't," I said. "The offer's still up but let me give a final incentive."

The Tinker glared at me before sighing. "Go 'head."

"I got these injuries because I fought the Simurgh. Alone. Do you know what else I got?" I didn't give him time to ask. "Her wing. I blew the fucking thing off and now there's this big fucking wing the size of a carstuck in the riverbank and I intend to claim it as soon as I can walk again. How many chances are you going to get to work with a sample that big from an Endbringer?"

Luce's eyes gleamed. "It's whole?"

"It's fucking perfect," I smirked. "So, what do you say? Wanna join the cool kids club?"

I held my hand out to him despite the pain from moving. Luce stared at my open palm before looking down at me.

"My assistant. Th' pale guy, you saw 'im. He's comin' with me."

"Of course."

"I want a lab. Big one with new equipment. Jus' 'cause you got some other Tinker doesn't mean I gotta share."

"I'll see what I can do."

"And tha' wing. Get it t' me or th' whole thing's off."

"Absolutely," I smiled. I beckoned him again. "Will you heal me now?"

Luce hesitated… and slowly laid his bony hand on mine.

Aw, yes. Temptation, thy name was Wild.

…

Nothing says awkward like being walked in on by one of the world’s premier superheroes while you were getting your lower ribcage replaced by a fugitive. I looked up at Legend as he paused in the doorway, eyes wide. Luce didn’t even bother. He’d accepted his fate.

“'Yes?'” I prompted when Legend remained silent. It was kind of funny but then again, lower
“Are you Moira Wild?” he asked, eyes pulling themselves away reluctantly.

I waved away his mild concern with my stump. “Yes. I am. As you can see, I am in the middle of surgery. Why’re you here?”

Legend waved a paper at me. “We’re calling you into New York. For debriefing on the Simurgh attack.”

“I’m not Protectorate,” I pointed out with a frown. “Technically, I don’t have to do shit. Plus, you’re still here. In the middle of my surgery. My entire chest is exposed. Do you understand the logistics of this situation?”

Legend didn’t seem impressed. He closed the door behind him and took a seat. “We’re calling you in under Endbringer truce. You have to come in.”

“The fight’s over.”

“The day isn’t. The truce is still in effect.”

“Surgery. You do anything, you’re in violation, not me.”

“Panacea can take over your care.”

“I angered her into taking a break. You try and rope her into this, I’ll piss her off into non-compliance. And then I’ll accuse you of needlessly manipulating teenage girls into labor when there was no need and of attempting invasive procedures without my consent.” I wasn’t sure if I could pull it off but that’d give him something to chew on, at least.

Legend hesitated. He looked at Luce. “You’re… part of the Reapers, aren’t you?”

The Tinker continued to dig around my insides. “Yes,” he said curtly. But his hands were shaking. Fuck, if Legend messed Luce up, I was going to be upset and disappointed. Partly in Luce for being a pussy but mostly in Legend because that wasn’t how you did the hero gig. I had expectations.

“Yes, I remember your face,” Legend remarked. “I read the reports concerning the unmasking of Avalon. But you weren’t involved, were you?”

No. No fucking way.

“Surely, it would be unfair to implicate you in something that didn’t involve you, yes? And I’m sure a Tinker of your abilities would be a great addition to the Protectorate. As a doctor, maybe. There’s even a precedent for it. Parahumans with certain abilities have been granted the same authority as trained doctors. You have the power to decide in your patient’s stead for their well-being, especially when they lack family members to do so.” Legend droned, his voice making it all sound like a suggestion.

Luce’s hands stopped shaking. I could see the intrigue in his eyes already. “Are you saying—“

“That we might consider leniency?” Legend shrugged. “Well, I don’t know. How’s your patient, by the way?”

“Luce!” I cut in loudly, “Wings, Luce, pretty, flappy wings. Don’t you want them?”
“Actually, the Protectorate have a government mandated claim on any Endbringer parts found. It’s
covered in the claims section. S-class threats are nationwide concerns, after all.”
Luce looked up at my pinched, accusing face. He looked back to Legend’s serenely peaceful
expression. His mind worked as he weighed the pros and cons.
“Sir,” he said gravely, “I do think this patient requires transfer to New York for further treatment.”
Oh, fuck you.
…
“I had to do it,” Luce said, later when I was already loaded in a Dragoncraft for a trip north to New
York. His fingers flew as he stitched my skin up. “He offered me a whole new lease on life with
Protectorate funding and aid. Your offer can’t beat that.”
I tapped out an angry rhythm on the metal paneling around me. “I can get why you did it, Doc,” I
said in a furious mutter. “But do you realize? Legend got me. He got me good. In that
conversation, he was two steps ahead of me. How fucked am I if I walk into New York’s
Protectorate HQ? He’s not grabbing me for just a chat. He’s got a purpose and I’m not sure I can
beat him at the word game.”
Luce glanced up at me. “What’re you do worked up about? Legend’s a hero. If he wants some
answers, it’s only because he thinks they’re important. What you did was… incredible. No one, not
even the Triumvirate, managed something like that. It could be a game changer for the whole war
against the Endbringers.”
Oh, he was wrong. Luce thought what everyone else did but he was wrong. I wasn’t going to New
York because they wanted to ask me on Endbringer wrassling tips. Oh no, no, no. Cauldron had
sniffed me out, I was sure of it. Legend probably wasn’t in on it, but the others… they were.
Back at the hospital, I could’ve kept fighting. Legend took Luce from me but I could’ve kept
stalling for time but that would’ve been suspicious. Cauldron already suspected me of knowing too
much, I wasn’t going to five them anymore ammo if I could help it. Going along with the whole
farce granted me the time I needed to think.
I relaxed against the stretcher. I couldn’t feel pain but I still felt the peculiar pick and tingle of skin
as Luce labored away. As a prosthetics Tinker, he couldn’t work with flesh like Panacea but he had
an edge on healing. Whatever’s broken, he just replaced. I wondered if he could make me a
prosthetic for my stump. Sooner or later, my reliance on my powers was going to get me in trouble.
I kneaded my brow with my hand. The last few days had hit me like a freight train and with the
absence of adrenaline, I was feeling the hurt. I was, frankly, tired, injured, and hygienically
indecent. All I wanted was to stretch out in a bath with a book in one hand and a beer in the other.
Yet… yet time waits for no man.
I covered my eyes and began to plot as Luce pick, pick, picked away at my
skin.
…


'... Rage, Rage Against The Dying Of The Light' 8.5

‘... Rage, Rage Against The Dying Of The Light’ 8.5

Earlier...

“What do you mean, you can’t see anything?” Doctor Mother’s usually composed voice was now threatening to crack as she paced the room. Every so often, she cast a wild-eyed glance at Contessa, who appeared not to notice. “Try again. He’s not supposed to be able to do this!”

“It’s not him,” Contessa mumbled, looking dazed as she worked her power again. The path, in her vision, led to a brick wall that seemed to span the width of the universe. There was no bypassing it. No circling, no overcoming, no battering could remove the wall. It remained, impenetrable and unknowable, and Contessa might as well have been a fly ramming a window for all the good it did.

“Jack Slash is not responsible for this,” she continued, still prodding the wall. “I don’t think he could have seen this coming.”

Doctor Mother’s eyes bulged. She jabbed a dark finger at the screen. “The Slaughterhouse Nine are gone,” she hissed. “They weren’t killed, they weren’t murdered. Whatever happened to them – decimated them. And we did not see it coming. Do you understand, Contessa?”

“I do,” she murmured, tipping her hat over her eyes and sinking deeper into the plush couch. “And I am looking for them. I just… something is blocking my vision. Like – like a wall.”

“A wall?”

“Mhmm. There is nothing past it that I can see.”

“So it’s not the entities,” Doctor Mother inspected the screen idly. On it, the ruined streets of Dublin glowered back at them, gutted and still smoking from the disaster that’d struck it. On the bottom, a long news line scrolled, displaying the images of the deceased villains in repetition. Crawler, his entire body transmuted into a gigantic sculpture of pale pink crystals. Shatterbird and Mannequin, both compressed into a dense ball from a temporary gravity well. The Siberian gone and Manton assassinated in his van. Of the nine, seven were definitely dead and two were missing. Jack Slash and Bonesaw were gone but Doctor Mother had a feeling that they hadn’t escaped. Quite the opposite, in fact.

“It… kind of reminds me of the thing with that woman. Moira Wild. Hers was hazier, like hard fog, but the feel is the same,” Contessa remarked. “Maybe she knows this person.”

Doctor Mother was about to say something when a familiar alert pinged through the room. Her head snapped up. “Simurgh,” she simply said. A moment later, she had a door into Alexandria’s office, where the woman was preparing for battle. Doctor Mother watched her silently, considering, before speaking up.

“Is Eidolon ready to go out or…?”

“That girl I brought in – Taylor,” Alexandria said brusquely, “He thinks her powers are connected to his, somehow. Says she’s draining them. He thinks she’s the reason why he’s weakening.”

“Does he realize that her powers affects everyone, not just him?”
“Can you blame him?” Alexandria clipped her cape on. “She’s incredibly powerful for someone so young. At this rate, he’s convinced that she’ll surpass him in strength. With our current theory, Taylor might actively be slaving the shards to her own and using their powers. If she’s using David’s power well to supply her own then it might explain why he’s weakening and why she’s growing stronger.”

Doctor Mother ground the palm of her hands into her eyes. “Does that mean he’s not going in?”

“For now,” Alexandria assured. “He thinks he’s worked out the problem.”

“I hope so,” she snapped before closing the door. Doctor Mother glanced over to Contessa again. “Are you sure about the similarity with this person and Wild?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Contessa mumbled. “Whoever took out the Slaughterhouse Nine and Moira Wild are connected.”

…

Present Day, somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains…

“Alright. I’ll give you another chance, okay, Val? Just repeat the words and we’ll be good. Don’t you want that?”

Valefor struggled against his bonds, eyes straining in the darkness. The voice seemed to come from all around him, echoing and bouncing on the walls until their point of origin was impossible to discern. He snarled ineffectually anyway.

“Come on. It’s so easy. Why won’t you just do it?”

“I’m Valefor and you’re just a –“

His head snapped to the side with the force of the blow. Blood welled up where the claws had raked against his skin. Valefor shuddered. When had he gotten so close?

“You’re awfully persistent,” the voice said. Suddenly, the darkness fled the room. Searing bright light shone into Valefor’s eyes, causing him to flinch back, while two hands slapped down onto his shoulders and tilted his head back. Blinking spots out of his eyes, it took Valefor several minutes to process what was hung over him.

“No…” he murmured. The voice appeared beside the box of squirming ants – a helmet with a smiling face painted on. Smiley, his name had been. He tapped the clear box of ants, making it swing from where it hung, and spoke.

“Fire ants. They sting like a bitch, you know. If I drop these in a tube straight down into your eyes, how long do you suppose you have before you go blind?” he asked, sounding cheerful despite the words. Valefor cringed away from the box.

“I – I – ?”

“What’s that?” the man leaned in, hand cupped around where his ear would be. “I don’t know, how about a demonstration?” Why, all you need to do is ask!”

“No!” Valefor gasped, yanking at the ropes holding him. He recoiled from the box overhead, trying to get away. “I didn’t say that! Stop, you can’t – no!”
Smiley swung his leg over Valefor’s other side and seated himself on his lap. Being both taller and heavier, he effectively pinned the other man down with sheer bulk. There was nowhere Valefor could go, not with his tormentor on top of him. Smiley leaned in close enough that Valefor could feel the cool glass of the helmet pressing against his chin. His right hand ventured into the box until several ants had scurried onto the leather before he withdrew it. Smiley held up the glove in Valefor’s face, showcasing the little red insects that scrawled up and down his fingers and palm. His thumb and forefinger were pinched together and Valefor could barely make out the single ant delicately held in the pincer hold.

Dread coursed down his spine when Smiley’s other hand seized his face, holding it still in an impossibly strong grip. The hand with the ants began to descend.

“This doesn’t have to happen,” Smiley murmured as the ants got closer. “I don’t want much from you, Val. Just a few words. A little eye contact. That doesn’t sound hard to me. Does it sound hard to you?”

Valefor couldn’t speak. All he saw was the ant getting closer and closer to his eye, blotting out the light as the creature squirmed, legs twitching. The scent of leather and electric charge filled his nostrils.

“Valefor,” Smiley simpered. “Please?” The hand slowed in its descent until it became almost glacial.

The helmet leered at him. The insect was close enough that he could hear the thing wriggling against the creaking leather. Valefor swallowed down bile and his pride reared its head – before cowering when Smiley pressed a claw tip on his forehead.


Smiley tilted his head. His hand withdrew and he lifted himself off Valefor’s lap. The box disappeared like it’d never been there and the darkness returned. “Good boy,” his voiced droned smoothly, sounding pleased. There was a rustle of paper. “Then repeat after me and look at the little red light. I’ll know if you aren’t.”

Valefor straightened slightly before locating the small, blinking red light across from him. He stared straight into it, not daring to blink and risk Smiley’s wrath. “R-Ready,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Wonderful. Enunciate clearly and we’ll be through in no time.” More paper rustled and there was a squeak of leather as Smiley seated himself somewhere. “Repeat after me: Scion must be eliminated.”

“Scion must be eliminated,” Valefor parroted.

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“What’s he doing in there?” Scrapdoll whispered to her friend. The Case 53 glanced at her before looking back at where Bakuda was fidgeting in her workshop. He shook his head slowly. Don’t question it.

“I know he’s not… he’s not right,” Scrapdoll murmured. She looked down at the little girl she was tending to. “I mean, he just broke into that hospital and – and kidnapped these two. And now, he –“

“I can hear you,” Bakuda said sharply. Scrapdoll jumped and Prowler bristled next to her. The bomber took no notice of their surprise as she adjusted the lights illuminating her next device.
“Tinker, remember? I always have something up my sleeve.”

Scrapdoll pressed her hands together. “We were there,” she said in a low voice. “In Dublin. He blew up a city. That’s – I thought he was kind of good. Trying to help people, at least.”

“He is,” Bakuda said simply. “He told us he had a plan, didn’t he? Refused to say what or why for nearly a month, the fucker, but everything turned out great. We saved thousands of people that day.”

“He blew up the entire right side of Dublin!”

“It was that or let everyone in Dublin die. The Slaughterhouse Nine were there and they weren’t going to stop until they fucked up the entire place. Smiley didn’t waste his time messing with them. He went in, planted the bombs, got out, and threw their whole thing to shit.”

“Then explain those two,” Scrapdoll glanced at the small trailer attached to the back of the van. Inside the chilled chambers, Jack Slash and Bonesaw’s mutilated bodies were strapped down onto cots, with gemma bombs on a constant timed rotation to disable their powers. The first time she saw them, she’d vomited. Prowler refused to go near the trailer at all, citing his sensitive sense of smell. Even Bakuda, normally a staunch supporter of Smiley’s antics, disliked thinking about the trailer for too long.


“That doesn’t mean we should stoop to their level,” Scrapdoll grumbled. With one hand, she smoothed back the blonde hair from her patient’s forehead. The little girl, Elle, looked impossibly peaceful under the sedation bomb. Mimi lay on a second cot, also sleeping. They’d tried to wake the two, but Mimi’s mood swings and Elle’s Shaker power made it difficult for them to travel discreetly. For now, they’d remain sedate until Smiley deemed it time for them wake.

The sound of the back of the van opening made them all look up. Smiley stepped out of the cramped space with a swagger in his step, holding a USB stick in one hand and his helmet in the other. Scrapdoll had seen his bare face on four occasions. Each time, she was surprised by how young he looked.

Smiley nodded in Bakuda’s direction. “I’m done,” he told her. “Hit him with the amnesia and dump him the next town over.” The woman nodded back curtly and Smiley turned his eyes on Scrapdoll. When he approached, she felt Prowler tense in suspicion. Scrapdoll put a hand on his forearm, just in case.

“How is she?” he asked, looking down at Elle. “Still quiet?”

“All signs looks stable,” Scrapdoll reported dutifully. “I’m not a trained doctor. I fixed her surface damage – the bruises, the sores – but I can’t say anything about her state of mind.”

“That’s fine,” Smiley said. His eyes slid to Mimi. “No trouble?”

“None.”

“Wonderful.” He clapped his hands together. Smiley turned on his heel and strolled to the trailer, a confident beat to his stride. “Then start getting ready to move. Bakuda, start packing the shop after you do your thing. Scrap, Prowl, get those two strapped in and stretch your legs while you can. After we drop off Valefor, we’re not stopping.”

With that, he let himself into the trailer. Inside, its two inhabitants squinted at the burst of light.
The dim yellow lighting had thrown off their sense of time entirely and for them, night and day made no difference. Bonesaw peered at him blearily, as if she’d been sleeping before his entrance, while Jack looked alert.

“Long time no see,” Jack drawled the minute Smiley stepped. He looked poised as he could while being unwashed, bound, and amputated from the knees down. Despite his efforts, Smiley caught the way his eyes greedily drank in the brief scenery, as if to assure himself that, yes, there was an outside world.

He closed the door and the room darkened to twilight once more. He made no sound as he set up the laptop and USB stick in front of Jack’s face, ignoring all his attempts to speak to him.

“I’ve got to say, you’ve got style, kid. This is closest anyone’s got me, you know. What’s your secret, hm?”

Smiley propped the laptop on his elbow and turned the speakers up as loud as they would go. Bonesaw craned her neck from her little corner, trying to see the screen’s contents. “What’re you doing? Lemme see! It’d rude to hide things like that!”

The video began to play. Valefor, bound and beaten, stared out as he slowly spoke, wide eyes filling almost half the screen. Jack looked at it for only a second before bucking, trying to dislodge the laptop. Bonesaw’s struggles increased as she grew more awake and frightened.

Smiley simply gripped Jack’s head, much in same he’d held Valefor’s, and forced him to look straight at the screen as he spoke. The spliced contents droned on as Jack was forced to listen. Bonesaw’s mods were no use. If he tried to turn off his hearing and vision, Smiley simply countered by offlining all his mods with a bomb. There was only so much pain one could take before relenting to it.

Smiley held Jack tightly. There was no way but forward, staring into dark eyes, and hearing… something.

“The Slaugherhouse Nine are dead. Jack Slash is dead. You are Jack. Only Jack. You will not talk unless told to…”


Jack didn’t look at her. He was too busying listening.

Smiley, however, looked at her. And despite all the horrible things she’d witnessed, all the atrocities she’d committed, and everything that made up her life since she’d been a little girl, Bonesaw found herself scared for the first time since the day Jack found her.

…”

“Um, Bakuda?” Scrapdoll piped up from her seat. The Asian woman poked her head in through the open window.

“Yeah?”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

Bakuda scanned the horizon. “Um, somewhere north, I think. Definitely out of the mountains, though. We haven’t left the damn place since snatching Valefor from Boston. Ugh. I’ll be happy to never see a pine tree in my life again.”
“You mean, like, Canada or something?”
“Not *that* north,” Bakuda hefted up her folded table with Prowler’s help. “Think New York.”
“Oh. Thanks.”

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