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**Weaver Nine**

by **Thinker6**

Summary

A world where Taylor and Jack Slash are born in each other's places. Weaver is the infamous usurper of the Slaughterhouse Nine, while young Jacob forges his path through the underworld of Brockton Bay.
"That's my answer, King. I was *never* your Queen."

I stood above his body. There was no need to confirm his death with my eyes. My insects had engulfed him in a writhing clump of biomass that had grown larger and larger as the fight progressed. My thousands of antennae and feelers had felt it when his breathing slowed and stopped, when his heartbeat shuddered to a halt, when his body fell unnaturally still. A riot of sensory data far more precise than my human senses.

But for once it felt right to look with my own eyes. My enemies never saw me in person, didn't even know that there was a person behind the swarms. They thought I was a force of nature, a mind living in the swarm that spoke through the buzz of insect wings. They fought a futile battle against my insects, and were killed by my insects in return, while I hid in safety a quarter-kilometer away. But this man, my 'leader', had been the only one to hurt me, Taylor, the human. Stealing me from my parents, forcing me into his Slaughterhouse, taking me as his Queen. For that, I had come to witness his end in the flesh.

Ah. It seemed that King was the type of brute whose body's special resilience expired in death. Good. My insects expanded his wounds into wide gashes, working their way under his skin. My swarm would devour every scrap of flesh, reduce the bones to shavings, scatter them to the winds until nothing remained. To die in battle was too good for him. It was more fitting for him to simply disappear. Besides, it wouldn't do for any of the less sympathetic members of our group to catch on to what we had done, and I wasn't taking any chances.

I studied Harbinger. He was sprawled on the pavement, breathing heavily, still clutching his bloody knives. Staring at the body. Despite his skill at close quarters combat he had been hard-pressed to restrain the brute while my swarms did their work. I had blocked King's senses by covering his eyes, ear canals, and skin, then worked around his unnatural toughness by dumping poisons in his eye sockets and nostrils to bypass the blood-brain barrier, suffocated him by coating his lungs with slick secretions and silk webbing, all while Harbinger's best knives managed to open nicks in his flesh precisely over arteries, killing him again and again and again until he finally died.

Harbinger raised his eyes to meet mine. "Fifty two," he said.

"The collateral damage?"

"Yes."

As always, his count was precise. Fifty two was the price to be rid of our 'leader'. The number of people King had touched in the last twenty four hours, the number of people who had just been been poisoned and suffocated and stabbed in their sleep as King's power used them as voodoo dolls to spirit away his wounds before it permitted even a scratch to appear on his skin. Many capes could match King in brute strength, but Harbinger was one of the very few who could deny King the barest moment of skin contact that would let him sentence his opponents to certain death.

I wanted to feel something. I repeated the number to myself. Fifty two. Fifty two people. I wanted to believe that I hadn't done it simply to save myself, that I had also done it to save the hundreds, thousands of people that King and his Slaughterhouse would have killed in the future. I tried to make myself believe it. So I was putting it to the test.
If I was really an altruist, if I deserved to feel pride for the lives I saved, I should also feel regret for the lives I ended. I should see their lives as more than just a distant, meaningless number. Fifty two people. My swarm had seen every single one of them when they had been alive. We had been lying low lately, pretending to be normals. I had watched as King gregariously clapped his arms around his new drinking buddies at a bar, as he shuffled past fifteen people as he made his way through a crowded subway car, as he innocently brushed against the tired looking couple dressed in business casual as they got off the bus. I tried to bring them to life in my mind, to imagine how they had gone about their days, how they had loved their families, to see some value in their hopes and dreams that I had killed...but I saw nothing. Faint impressions of their faces in my mind's eye, pale shadows, no feeling at all.

It was useless. The three years King had kept me as his Queen were a whirlwind of slaughter that blurred together in my memories. A never-ending progression of attacks and retreats, hours spent planning assaults on strongholds, minutes spent frantically pulling together spur-of-the-moment improvisations, always plotting breeding programs for my swarms and weaving more costumes for our ever-changing roster. New strategies, new tactics, never able to afford a single loss, always needing a victory or at least a retreat we could walk away from. Drawing out 'heroes' with flashy confrontations and then using my swarm to follow them back to their homes and families, directing the rest of our Nine in surgical strikes to negate their powers and kill them - or for 'heroes' who had hurt us, not-so-surgical strikes to make them suffer before their deaths. Taking hostages, rich businessmen and dirt-poor drug addicts alike, by planting parasites and worms in their guts, threatening to have them burrow out and let them bleed to death in front of their families, making them commit crimes and bring the spoils back to pad our wallets. I wanted to believe that I had once been able to feel the difference between one life and two, ten lives and twenty, fifty two lives and fifty two hundred. But if I ever had, I had deadened it completely as a matter of survival.

Never mind. It didn't matter. Even if I couldn't feel anything for them, even if lives we saved and ended were nothing more than numbers, the simple fact was that King and his Nine were a mobile disaster area that ruined everything in its path, my own life included. He needed to die, no matter the cost.

That was the epiphany I reached as we had planned the coup. When your goal is truly important, big enough to change the world, then your need for success is absolute - and everything else is secondary. The epiphany gave me a refreshing clarity of purpose. Just ignore all the minor optimizations, ignore the temptation to get too clever and maneuver yourself into a trap, ignore the collateral damage. In exchange you get pure freedom and creativity, the ability to use anything and everything you can imagine to reach your goal.

It was the only way to beat someone like King. We needed dozens of factors to be perfectly aligned and each one had to be paid for with a cost in blood. King couldn't be allowed to be suspicious, so we had to follow his orders up to the last moment, no matter how bloodthirsty. He had to be isolated, away from anyone he could touch to instantly heal his wounds. A rare occurrence for such a gregarious man. He had to be away from the rest of the Nine, who would defend him or who respected him enough to alert the ones who would. He couldn't have had even an instant of skin contact with any of the Nine in the last 24 hours - for me or Harbinger it would be a death sentence, and the other members would be alerted that King was under attack the moment his power redirected wounds onto their bodies. He had to be kept away from any means of escape. Not an easy task when his speed and strength let him chase down normal humans with ease, jump off rooftops, and even plow through the walls of some buildings; and he was a master tactician who was fully aware of his limitations and was wary of entering any place he couldn't freely leave. He had to be positioned perfectly for our first strike - cords of spider silk wrapping around him before he could react, a swarm of the proper insects to block his senses with ample reinforcements nearby to replace those he killed, Harbinger in range to disarm him and block his escape, and me hidden.
out of his conceivable attack range, accounting for anything he could throw as a projectile.

Once all these absolute necessities had been accounted for, the number of opportunities were vanishingly small. We had waited three months before Harbinger finally gave the signal. My old self, before I had my epiphany, would have felt regret. She would have wished she could have optimized even more. If we had waited an hour longer, the fifteen people from the subway could have been spared. If we had waited two hours longer, the couple from the bus could have been spared. Perhaps if we had waited for another day, for another place and time, we could have reduced the cost to thirty lives, or twenty, or ten. Though if we waited we might have lost the opportunity and never gotten another chance at all...

My new self didn't feel any regret. We won. We chose a goal, chose the costs that mattered and the costs that didn't, and we won.

Now my swarm had finished its task. The skin and flesh from the body, the blood on the ground and Harbinger's knives, had all been fed to a legion of roaches and beetles that were dispersing into our surroundings. The last threads of clothing had been buried deep underground, the bone shavings scattered into the sewage system.

Harbinger had watched my work intently, waiting until the last fragments were gone. Now he stood and stretched. "That went well," he said. He was almost smiling.

"Yes. Yes it did." My own smile was radiant. For Harbinger to show even that small hint of pleasure...our shared victory had been something special.

"They'll come after us now." he said. "Without King to protect us with hostages. What next?"

And with that I was adrift. I had spent every free moment of the last three months focused on single goal, a single anchor to tether my thoughts. I had spent precious little time thinking about what would come after. A few stray, half-remembered fantasies of how I wanted to change the world. I had plans for the immediate future, of course. The next steps to deal with the Slaughterhouse. Screamer and Psychosoma could be convinced to join me. Nyx, probably. Crimson and Breed loved King too much to forgive his death, they'd have to be killed. Gray Boy was already disposed of, the necessary first step of our rebellion. I'd managed to find a rare cape who was even more psychotic and overpowered than he was and lured him into her path. Harbinger...

There was the problem. Harbinger had been my best ally, and he would be the greatest asset for what I wanted to do. But without the right incentive he would use his new freedom to leave the group and set off on his own.

It was because of his power. Our enemies thought his power was skill at close-quarters combat, perhaps boosted with a minor dose of combat clairvoyance or precognition. They were wrong. His power was perception, to see the world as numbers. It made him overly precise, methodical. Faced with anything concrete he was almost impossible to beat. He would perceive, calculate, optimize, see the possible paths his enemies could take and see his own paths to seal them off. But anything abstract, fanciful, incomplete - for him, they didn't even exist. You couldn't convince him to follow you with a half-formed dream.

I would try anyway. I spoke, haltingly, trying to put my dream into words.

"For now, we keep the group together. Keep moving, keep recruiting, stay strong, stay ahead of the authorities and the vigilantes who'll come after us for the bounty. Stay under the radar for a while. No more fucking slaughters, no recruiting by force, it's like sending out an invitation for them to
"In the long-term, I...can't say exactly. I have a goal, one worth working toward. To change the world for the better. I can't say exactly how we'll do it. Not yet. I'm sure the idea is there, it's close, I'm just on the edge of seeing it.

"It's...it's a sense of what's wrong with this world. With capes. This endless game, it's all we do and it's all so pointless. Capes against capes, killing, defending, taking revenge, earning money and reputation from normals or stealing it from each other. It's like we haven't learned a single lesson from the wars the normals fought with armies for thousands of years before us.

"The game attracts capes because they're good at it. They have an instinct for it. You and I, we're the best, so we're the most tempted. It's what the bastard loved most of all, pushed us into it every fucking minute of the day and dragged as many people as he could into the mud with us. But I won't accept it. I won't accept that this game is what powers are for."

"'What powers are for'?' said Harbinger. "You think there's a purpose for parahumans? A designer with a purpose you want to follow?"

"No. No, I don't know if there's a designer and if there is I don't care about his purpose. If the designer is like the bastard and loves to watch us squabble in the mud, then fuck him. I won't accept that it's the best we can do."

"What do you want to do, then? What's the goal?"

"I told you, I can't say exactly. I can see its...outline, its shape. To make the world a better place. Not in the cliche way the 'heroes' do, saving lives and all that. I mean changing how we live in a fundamental way. We've got these fantastic powers but the grandest plan any governments can think of is to throw capes at their neighbors to shift a few pointless borders around. It's the same with business, they've kept the same products, the same markets, the same economy. Hell, why is there still an economy at all? Look at the capes in India and Pakistan. They had the right set of powers to make an unlimited amount of rare earth metals, but they lost it because they were too busy slitting each others throats. It's insane.

"We're the only ones who can see it because we're outside the system. We've got kill orders on our heads so we don't have to care what government owns what patch of land. It's not just us. There are so many like us who have the power to change the world and the system threw out like trash. We can use them. We can get them back on their feet, get them to work together, give them the right direction.

"Look at you. The bastard made you fight hand-to-hand all the time since you're better at it than anyone and he likes watching people get their faces beat in. But that's the most useless way to use your power. Are you really going to change the world by punching people in the face one at a time? You could do so much more if you didn't fight at all. Whatever Greenspan does at the Fed you could do ten times better. With your power you could own the fucking stock market, you could be a billionaire who moves millions of lives with a sell order and builds the infrastructure for a new world."

"I see your points. I wouldn't mind sitting back from the front lines." said Harbinger. "I'm not seeing any big picture. The goal you want to achieve."

"I know. I know. Fuck. Look. We don't know what we'll want in ten years, twenty years. Nobody knows. It's too big for us to see right now."
"But we both know one thing. We're the best. We've done amazing things together, and that was when we were working for a bastard playing a shitty game. Now we can choose whatever game we like. I want us to collect the power, build the infrastructure, so we can aim at goals on the worldwide scale. And I'll tell you how we'll do it.

"You'll handle the tactics. I used to think that was my strength. Multitasking with my swarm, directing my allies, finding the right combination of powers to kill our enemies. I'm good at that, yes. But you're better. It's your kind of problem. Given these tools and those constraints, optimize it, find the solution. That's what I want you to do."

"I'll do the strategy. I've always had something extra that you didn't. Creativity, bringing something new into the world that didn't exist before. Weaving armor out of spider silk, breeding skin parasites to tag capes so we can track them down when they escape, putting bugs in their brains to do psychosurgery. More than tactics to kill our enemies. Strategies to make them irrelevant, to turn capes who would have hated us into new recruits.

"That's what I want us to do. You'll think within the box to find the best path, I'll expand it to hold new worlds we never dreamed of. Stick with me and I promise we'll create an amazing new world."

Harbinger tilted his head, regarded me carefully. After almost a full minute of silence, he spoke. "Tempting. I'd like to see what we can do if we really cut loose."

"You're in?"

"I won't commit to anything I can't see. If I don't like where we're going, I'll leave. But for now...I'm in."

I smiled. "Good."

"And I might have some ideas of my own."

Now my smile was radiant. "Very good."

We walked back to the rendezvous point side by side.
2011

"Dad. I'm going out again tonight."

Jacob Hebert leaned against the wall of the alley, fiddling with his cell phone in one hand and a butterfly knife in the other. "Yeah. Like I told you. For cape stuff."

A nice euphemism. He grinned at his new friend.

"Dad. Dad. Yes, I understand but-no, I'm not 'springing it' on you Dad. You know what I-....yes, yes but Dad, listen. I know you don't like me going out alone, but I'm careful. My power keeps me safe. I don't have to get close up in a fight. If I do it right then no one will even know I was there. Like last time. Nothing happened to me, I was fine.

"I saved a boy's life, Dad. I saved him from being shot up with drugs, addicted, enslaved, whatever nasty shit those Merchant fuckers were going to do to him that civilized people like us can't even imagine. Pardon my language. Don't you think that counts for something?"

"Yes, Dad, you're right. It is dangerous. I could get hurt. I could even die. It's still worth it. I went out for one night and I saved one life already. If I die today then it's an even trade. I won't die, though. I'll build up my skills, I'll find friends to cover my back, and we'll clean up the trash in this city until it's safe again for people like us."

The girl beside him nodded approvingly.

"Look, Dad. I have to do this. You know why. It's not about you or me. It's about Mom." He paused. "I know you don't want to think about it. You want to forget about the pain. It was so pointless, it didn't need to happen, it never should have happened.

"But I can't forget it, because I can't forget her. Mom was special, Dad. For anyone else death would have been the end, but she give me one last gift. The trigger event that gave me my power. That's why I can't stop thinking about her. Mom is always with me, Dad, every minute of every day.

"You can't ask me to throw her gift away. When you tell me to stay home and pretend I'm a normal human being living a normal life - what you're telling me is that Mom's death was pointless after all. That she really did die for nothing. Please, Dad. She gave me this power and now it's my responsibility to use it the way she would have wanted. To help people, to save lives, to save other families from the pain we went through."

"...okay. Thanks. Yes, I'll be careful. I promise. I'll tell you all about my adventures. If I won't be back in time for bed I'll give you a call...I love you Dad. Bye."

He hung up, adjusted the domino mask on his face, and turned to his companion.

"Eloquent speech, Jack Slash. Did you rehearse it?" said Rune.

"It's the same thing I told him before," said Jack. "He's a worrier. I'll have to convince him every time."

"Don't you find it irritating?"
"No." said Jack. "He thinks I'm going out alone, and he's right about the danger. I'm glad he cares about me enough to make me work for it."

"Good. Honestly, I'm getting sick of high school kids who join the Empire to get away from their parents. It's such a cliche. We can only carry the cause so far on the backs of disaffected teenage rebels."

"Hah. You get a lot of them, I imagine."

"Tell me about it. You'll see at your initiation. Shall we go?" She adjusted her rune-lined cloak and gestured down the alley. They started off together, walking toward the outline of a warehouse several blocks away.

Rune continued in a put-upon tone. "I keep telling Hookwolf we need to reach a wider audience. All he cares about is how the kids hold up in a brawl. That's all well and good for the Empire, but I'm the one who has to deal with the kids treating me like I'm their best friend just because we're the same age. Trying to win points with me by pulling stupid stunts to prove their loyalty to the cause. Then trying to win points with their buddies by being the first guy to bang the cape chick."
She shuddered. "Honestly. They get in my face boasting about how badass they are, and I'm just thinking: am I supposed to respect you? You were lucky enough to have parents who care for you and you're throwing them away because you have a problem with authority. How far are you going to rise in our organization with that attitude? You'll never be more than a foot soldier."

Jack nodded. "My sympathies. I hope you don't lump me in with them because of the little demonstration I have planned for my initiation tonight. They're the ones I need to impress. After our fearless leader, of course."

"No, no, it's fine. I'm just ranting. It's good to have someone I can really talk to for once. It must be nice to have parents you can rely on for that. A parent, I mean. Sorry."

>> "Good girl," said Hookwolf. He clapped Rune on the back, his eyes less on her and more on the bad guys she had crushed. She bristled. She wasn't his pet dog-
<<

Jack hummed thoughtfully. "I understand. I'm thankful for my family. I imagine the Empire provides more of a commander-and-soldier relationship. Taking care of you the same way they keep their weapons well-oiled."

"Exactly right. I know I'm supposed to tell you the Empire is your new family, but it's good that you have someone on the outside to fall back on for support." She paused. "Don't get me wrong, they're all good people. The veterans are good guys, I'll introduce you, and Hookwolf and his lieutenants look out for me when they can. We're just stuck in a military mode because that's what it takes to win the war with the gangs. Things will calm down as soon as we finish mopping them up. It should only take a few months now that the ABB is dead and we don't need to worry about the balance of power anymore. We'll go ahead and crush the Merchants, the Undersiders, the rest of the riffraff. Then we can switch to the politics and business side of things, recruiting for influence instead of brute force. Not that I've seen it happen myself, but I hear that's what it's like in the Gesellschaft."

Jack smiled. "I see you have it all planned out. I'm glad to be joining the winning team, then. Ah, speaking of taking care of your weapons." He reached into his jacket and handed her a smooth black shape. "Your taser. I appreciate it. My power isn't the best for a takedown without leaving a mark." He looked down at their captive.
Sophia Hess was prone, gagged, arms and legs tied with thick cords to a metal frame hovering a foot above the ground, kept afloat by Rune's telekinetic power. Sophia glared at Jack as best as she was able.

"I don't think she's appreciating our heart-to-heart conversation." said Jack.

"No?" said Rune. "No sense of mitfreude?"

"No." said Jack. He stopped and crouched, looking Sophia in the eye. "Not content with taking Emma away from me, are you? You're drooling at the idea that I've made another friend for you to fuck with. I won't let you. From now on you're nothing more than the raw material for my initiation."

He withdrew a small device from his pocket, pressed a button. Sophia clenched her teeth, hissed as a humming sound filled the air. Jack waited until she finally gave in and let out a yelp of pain before relenting.

"That's neat. Where did you get the shock collar, Jack?" said Rune.

Jack grinned. "A pet shop. I figured it would be appropriate for keeping a bitch in line."

"I didn't think they sold ones that hurt humans."

"True. It took some creative wiring to get the current high enough to discipline a bitch as big as her. It was worth it, though. She was on her best behavior while we waited for you to show up."

Rune laughed. "That's great. I didn't realize you were an inventor. Are you sure you're not a tinker?"

"No. Just ordinary human ingenuity."

"Damn. Nice work, anyway. You'll have to show me how it works later. Let's go, we shouldn't keep Hookwolf waiting." They resumed their walk, their prisoner floating behind them.

"I've been waiting for us to get a tinker," Rune continued. "Everyone else is lucky enough to have powers that protect them in a close quarters fight. Wind shields or bullet-dodging reflexes or being a giant fucking wolf made of swords. If I can get a good suit of power armor then I can convince Hookwolf to let me get in close quarters too. I can end a fight in an instant by touching a bad guy and levitating him by his clothes. Nothing says 'surrender' like the threat of your friend being dropped from a hundred feet in the air." She regarded Jack for a moment. "I suppose we'll be working together as long-range artillery types. Any ideas, Jack?"

"Ideas?"

"For how to use our powers together. You're an intellectual type, you must have thought about it."

>> Rune hated herself for blushing as she asked Crusader the question, hated herself even more for having deluded herself about his affections. She could already see it on his face. "I'm not interested in little girls," said Crusader, and-

<<

Jack turned to study her. Rune was the youngest cape in the Empire. She was clearly enjoying playing the role of the experienced veteran - mentoring the new recruit, judging his mindset, testing his intelligence and his potential on the battlefield. But she was also a teenage girl. One who had a power and an Empire affiliation that set her apart from the rest of society, and who was
now speaking with one of the few boys her age she could see as an equal. He had impressed her with his attitude and skills. Now she was hoping for his approval in return.

"Of course," he said at length. "I've thought about how well we'll fit together ever since we met." He was rewarded with a slight widening of her eyes, a flinch as she ducked her head to hide her expression, momentarily forgetting that she was wearing a mask. He smiled.

"I'll start with the obvious." said Jack. "When we take cover you'll make a barrier with slits for me to slash through. When our enemies take cover you'll levitate me on a platform to give me a line of sight to cut them down."

She nodded. "Yes, good. I did that once with Stormtiger when his air currents weren't enough to get him to high ground."

"Next idea. You can reshape the things you levitate, can't you? When you lifted a chunk of pavement the other day you were turning it into a shield."

Rune turned to Jack, her eyes bright. She touched the brick wall of the building they were passing by. With a sharp cracking sound, a chunk of ten bricks separated from the wall and hovered in the air. In the span of a few seconds, fissures grew between the bricks until the mortar broke apart and the individual bricks were set free. They spun end over end, whirling around each other in an elaborate dance.

"Beautiful," said Jack. He watched the dance for a minute, then reached out and touched a brick as it floated by. "My power works as long as I'm touching a knife, even if I'm not the one swinging it. I had Dad help me test that one. If you build a thirty foot long sword and levitate it to help me swing it, then..."

She sighed. "I can make the sword, but my power has a speed limit. If I could move things faster then I'd throw knives at the bad guys instead of dropping cars on them. This is as fast as I can go."

The bricks reconfigured themselves into a line, forming a mock blade that swept through the air making lazy slashes at an imaginary opponent. As an afterthought Rune had them swipe at their prisoner's face, making Sophia flinch as the bricks stopped a inch short of breaking her nose.

Jack smiled. "Ah, but we can work with that. I've found that my power works even if the force of the slash comes from gravity. We'll stand the sword on its handle and let it fall under its own power. With a three ton sword the edge will have enough force to break through the walls of a building, and I can project it halfway across the city. A siege weapon. Imagine the look on the face of that shitstain Squealer when she brings out her next tinker truck and we cut it in half right in front of her eyes.

"That's only the beginning, Rune. I haven't found any limit to the number of blades I can use as long as I'm touching them all at once. With your power you can be a weaponsmith, make me a gauntlet from a single piece of metal joined with a hundred razor blades. I won't need to slash, I'll gesture and a crowd of our enemies will turn into a fine red mist."

>> Rune staggered back, wide-eyed, pulling chunks of the floor into the air to block Cricket's whirling sickles. The woman was crazy! Was this what she called a spar? They had to learn to be ruthless to their enemies, true, but Cricket's eyes were gleaming with nothing more than bloodlust directed toward the nearest target-<<

Jack stopped. He couldn't see Rune's reaction behind her mask. Was he pushing it too far? "That will be more for intimidation than everyday use, of course." he said. "When we take the city we'll
make sure the PRT knows what we're capable of. They won't dare show their faces to interfere in our business."

"Very good." said Rune. "I was right. You are an intellectual type, thinking ahead to see the big picture. I can make you weapons like that, but you'd probably do better asking Kaiser." She paused. "Your power works well with a lot of us, actually. We have a lot of capes who make knives. Me, Kaiser, Crusader's ghosts. Maybe Night counts, if you close your eyes. Oh, do you think...?"

Rune chuckled.

"What is it?" said Jack.

"Do you think you can use your power on Hookwolf? I'm imagining you putting an Empire banner on him and riding him into battle like a war horse."

Jack laughed. "I don't think he'd like the idea. I appreciate the thought, though."

"Ah, speaking of whom." said Rune. They arrived at the edge of the warehouse in front of a high wall topped by barbed wire. Rune tapped two corrugated sheets of metal that were leaning against the wall. The sheets flipped and hovered in the air in front of them. Rune and Jack each stepped onto a sheet and were ferried over the wall. Rune floated their prisoner over as well, flipping Sophia upside down at the halfway point so that her face nearly grazed the barbed wire. Sophia gave out a muffled cry. Jack gave Rune a smile, then turned to face his soon-to-be superiors.

The capes stood in front of the loading dock of the warehouse. A large man in a tiger mask with his bare chest decorated with metal chains, a woman with a metal cage around her face and a pair of sickles at her sides, a wolf-masked man idly shifting his right hand back and forth between human flesh and a massive metal claw. Stormtiger, Cricket, Hookwolf. The other capes he'd met on his first night out, the ones who had offered him a place in their Empire.

"Hello, sir." said Jack.

"Welcome back, boy." said Hookwolf. "This is the nigger you told me about?"

"Yes, sir. Sophia Hess."

Hookwolf leaned over to look at her. Sophia glared up at him and spat an unintelligible curse from behind the gag.

"A troublemaker. Still sure about this demonstration of yours?"

"Hah. She's a bitch like that, sir. I'm looking forward to it," said Jack.

Hookwolf nodded. "Good. Come inside, then. Kaiser is waiting."
Jack watched as the steel door of the warehouse slowly opened. Instead of an empty industrial interior, the inside looked like an auditorium one would expect in a high-class corporate event. Rows of seats were arranged facing a raised stage. There was even a projector mounted on the ceiling for slide shows. Two large tables near the entrance were decked with an expensive collection of refreshments for a reception after the initiation. Kaiser's priorities were clear. An ordinary foot soldier's induction stressed camaraderie above all else - a brutal fight on the streets, followed by a drunken bar crawl with new allies. But for a young new cape who would take a position of power in his organization, Kaiser offered a new life of wealth and power.

The seats were filled with a dozen or so of the Empire's foot soldiers. Half of them fitted Rune's description of the new recruits, disaffected kids with the look of 'rebels' about them. The rest formed an older contingent of veterans, including a group of three police officers. A few clusters had the air of families - a middle-aged couple sitting next to each other, a mother with her son. Jack recognized the boy as Thomas Shoemaker, a freshman on the track team at Winslow. Predictable that he would show up here, given who he associated with at school. There were also a few suits in the front row, the Empire's bankers and lawyers coming to meet the new cape.

But the room was dominated by the capes standing in the center of the stage, the leader of the Empire and his bodyguards. Kaiser stood six and a half feet tall, clad from head to toe in an ornate suit of armor made of midnight black metal blades. His armor would have taken a craftsman a month to make, but Kaiser's power to create metal from solid surfaces let him conjure it in a matter of seconds. Behind him were the identical twins Fenja and Menja wearing elaborate valkyrie-themed armor, one with a sword and shield, the other with a spear. Their armor was meant as much for dramatic effect as for protection. While they were only slightly tougher than a baseline human in their normal shapes, they could warp space to grow to six times their height and mass while shrinking all oncoming attacks to a fraction of their original size.

Kaiser's presence carried with it an aura of power unmatched by anyone else in the city. His Empire was the strongest force of parahumans in the city, including the Protectorate. Even including Hookwolf's lieutenants the capes in the room were less than half of the Empire's full strength.

Rune leaned over to Jack. "Hey, don't be anxious. Kaiser will love you. You're both intellectual sword experts, you have a lot in common."

"I appreciate it, but I'm not worried." said Jack. "I've been looking forward to this."

Hookwolf walked onto the stage and gestured to Jack. Jack followed him and took a place by his side. Stormtiger, and Cricket, and Rune took seats in the audience, with Rune stowing Sophia in the aisle. The Empire's soldiers stared down at the bound form of the prisoner, some eager to see their racial enemy killed in Jack's initiation, others looking at her with mild disgust.

Jack knew it wasn't merely disgust for the captive. A normal soldier's initiation was a fight in the streets where they beat a racial enemy with their own two fists, but for new capes, Kaiser insisted on witnessing them commit murder in person. It would prove Jack's support for the cause and cement his loyalty. Killing an 'innocent' girl in front of a dozen witnesses meant that he couldn't back out of the organization and go to the PRT without being sentenced to the Birdcage. But doing it in Kaiser's presence meant that Jack would be killing a bound prisoner who couldn't fight back - a distasteful and unimpressive spectacle for the warriors who had made their names in brawls on the streets. Jack wouldn't get their respect with a mere execution. For that, he had planned a
demonstration.

Kaiser made an expansive gesture, encompassing the audience and the stage. "Welcome to the Empire, Jack Slash. It's always a pleasure to meet a new cape dedicated to our cause."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, sir."

"You're awfully polite, Jack Slash. Are you certain you wouldn't prefer a name somewhat more...refined? Broadsword, perhaps, or Degen?"

"I like to keep it simple, sir."

"Hmm. I've heard good things about you. You have the power to project the cutting edge of a blade. Demonstrate it for me."

"Of course, sir. Do you have an expendable target?" Jack moved his gaze to Sophia's bound form floating in the aisle. "I brought one with me but I'd like to save her for my initiation."

Kaiser extended his arm and conjured a six foot long flamberge, holding it out to his side with no apparent effort.

Jack backed up until he stood twenty feet away, then reached into his pants pockets. With a practiced maneuver, he simultaneously drew butterfly knives in each hand, twirled them open, and flicked them back and forth in the air in a rapid series of slashes. The clang of metal against metal rang out as Kaiser's sword jerked in place from the blows raining down on it.

Jack flicked the knives closed and stowed them in a single motion. "All the cutting power of the original slash but no damage to my knives," he said. "You can make me a blade as sharp as you like and it will never dull or break."

Kaiser examined the nicks on his sword, retracted it. "Hmm. Your range?"

"I haven't found a limit, sir. At least a mile and a half."

"Very impressive. If we can confirm that, you'll be a unique addition to our forces. How is your aim?"

Jack had prepared for this. It was a drill he had done hundreds of times in his basement to practice his knife work. He reached into a pocket of his jacket and pulled out a dozen small wooden discs that fit in the palm of his hand. He held them in front of him, paused theatrically, then tossed them in the air. In a fluid motion, he drew his pair of knives and cut them in half one by one as they fell. The bisected discs clattered to the floor of the stage. Jack turned to face Kaiser again. "I don't miss much, sir."

"Very good. I've heard as much....yes, I'm satisfied with your display of skill. There is still the matter of your motivation. No matter how highly you've been recommended, I need to see your display of commitment to our cause before I can support your membership. And as a man born and raised in our city, you may not understand the true scope of our cause."

"Our Empire Eighty Eight is an Empire indeed. The strongest organization in our city, stronger than all of the others combined, the government included. There are those who are jealous of our power, who dare to group us with the gangs that blight our city. Nothing could be further from the truth. The gangs are run by street thugs with nothing to prove to the world but their own ruthlessness and depravity. They think nothing of invading civilized neighborhoods and destroying the peace, of forcing drugs on children, of using rape as a weapon."
"We are the first line of defense for the civilized men and women of the city. We fight for many reasons. To protect the innocent, to protect our friends and families. For glory, for revenge, for the sake of the soldiers beside us. But above all we have a greater cause: our mission to purify the world, to defend our civilization against the barbarians that threaten us from all corners. To defend against the degenerates that invade us 'legally' every day, steal our jobs, infiltrate our workplaces and our schools.

"We know well the cost of failure. You need only look to the state of the uncivilized world. Africa, where the gangs find fertile ground in the degenerate population and draw entire nations into chaos. China, where oriental mystics control government policy and freedoms for the common man don't exist. We know well the rewards of success. You need only look to our allies, the Gesellschaft, and the social and economic revival they preside over in Germany. Yes, the success of the Empire is measured in the well-being of the civilized people of this city, but our true success, the success of our cause, is measured on the global scale.

"That is what it means to join the Empire, Jack Slash. Do you have what it takes to join our worldwide struggle? To devote your heart to our greater cause?"

Jack nodded, took a deep breath. This speech he had rehearsed.

"When I got my powers I promised to be a hero, to cut out the filth and clean up the world. To make an impact that would be remembered forever."

>> "I am making a difference. I'm working to make this world a better place." said Kayden. "Of course," replied Kaiser. "You left my team to go do good work, it's just pure coincidence that it's black, brown, or yellow criminals you target."

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Jack met Kaiser's eyes and smiled. "I decided to start small, close to home, and help the other kids in school," he continued. "When I look around today, what do I see? I see half the chinks joining the gangs, still trying to join the ABB after all their capes got killed. I see the niggers and spics getting beaten black and blue by their druggie parents and still rushing to join the Merchants that got them hooked. They're all crazy. It's in their blood.

"Where are the police, the PRT, the Protectorate? They're not doing shit. They're not in the schools. The Wards? They're supposed to be protecting us, but the PRT in their infinite wisdom put them all in the ivy-covered halls of Arcadia High and hung the rest of us out to dry. The only reason we white folks are safe in school is because the Empire's faithful stick up for us.

"Yeah, you're the ones I see cleaning up this city. Last week I ripped apart a few nigger Merchants that were trying to get a boy hooked on crack. It was your Empire who came and covered my back." Jack looked at Hookwolf's lieutenants in the audience. "If you were the Protectorate you'd have arrested me for murder, forced me to join you with threats of jail or worse. But you were the Empire. You didn't force me into anything. You made sure justice was done and you helped me clean up the scene so I could stay free to do justice again. That's a cause I can believe in.

"I don't care if they call you villains. You're heroes. I'll be honored to join you, sir, here or anywhere else in the world you'll have me."

Kaiser had a warm tone in his voice for the first time in the meeting. "Well put, Jack Slash. Your sentiments go straight to the heart of our cause. It's clear that your place is here with us. Now, for your true initiation, your public display of commitment. You'll take proper care of this degenerate girl you've captured for us, yes?" Kaiser gestured to Rune, who floated the prisoner to the center of the stage. "I hear from Hookwolf that you've planned a special demonstration."
"That's right, sir. Slashing a helpless girl from twenty feet away isn't going to impress anyone worth impressing. Any one of your soldiers could do it with a gun. The reason you've got an Empire is that your capes are badasses like them." He pointed to Kaiser's bodyguards, his other capes in the audience. He made an effort to let his finger land on Rune; he couldn't see her face behind her mask, but he was sure she cracked a smile. "You've got no use for a weakling who gets powers and thinks that makes him hot shit. Sir."

Jack slowly took off his jacket, letting the audience see what was inside. A collection of blades of all types, from switchblades to carving knives, with a pistol nestled into a holster in the side. He drew out a wicked-looking Bowie knife with a foot long blade and tossed the jacket away.

"Sophia Hess. I picked you for this because you're a stone cold bitch who no one will miss when you die. Any last words?"

Jack slashed and Sophia's gag fell to the floor. Sophia coughed, licked her lips, looked up at him. She spoke slowly and deliberately. "Fuck you, Jacob Hebert."

Jack heard a gasp in the audience. Jack turned and winked at his classmate, savoring his disbelieving reaction. Jack turned back to his prisoner, drew the remote control from his pocket and pressed the button. The metal collar around Sophia's neck hummed with electricity and she screamed in pain.

"Fuck you too, Sophia. There were plenty of nigger bitches to choose from at school. I chose you because of what you did to Emma. She was my best friend. The sweetest girl without a drop of evil in her. I don't know what the fuck you did to her but she won't talk to me anymore. She follows you around like a puppy and acts like a street thug. Stealing shit from kids and sniping at them until they literally run home in tears. Last week I saw my dear childhood friend laughing at a poor freshman girl while you kicked the shit out of her. What the hell was that? Don't even get me started on that sick shit you two were doing with collecting bloody tampons for a month, I don't know what the fuck you were going to do with them but it was fucking disgusting and you're a sicko."

"You're disgusting, Jacob Hebert. Skinheaded cocksucker."

"It's Jack."

"Fuck you, Jacob."

Jack pressed the button again and waited for her to scream. Then he slashed four times in quick succession. The cords around her arms and legs broke apart, spooling to the floor.

"You're in luck, Sophia. I'm not here to get revenge. I'm here for my reputation. So I'm letting you free so you can take a shot at me, miss star athlete."

Jack kneeled, placed his knife on the floor and slid it over to Sophia. He turned to the audience.

"As a cape in the Empire, I'm going to be in a position of authority over some of you. I don't want to be an immature kid who only gets your respect because of his power. I want to earn your respect with a real initiation, like the rest of you did in the streets. So here I am. No knife in my hands, no extra powers. I'm no different from any other soldier of the Empire." He turned to Sophia. "And you've got a foot long blade to kill me with. Come at me."

Sophia picked up the knife, shakily got to her feet. She looked at Jack, at the capes surrounding her. Kaiser and his bodyguards moved next to Hookwolf to give the two combatants space at the
center of the stage. In the audience the young soldiers whispered to each other, while the veterans and capes leaned forward to watch.

"I hope you know how to use that thing," said Jack. "If you don't put up a fight this will all be pointless. Wait, here." He leaned over to his jacket, pulled out a second knife and slid it over to her.

She let it stay on the floor. "If I kill you, they'll let me go?"

"It's up to them." said Jack. He looked at Hookwolf, but the man didn't respond.

"Give me the key to the collar, then."

>> A shadow fell from the rooftop and landed next to the mugger, lashing out with something long and clawed. A crowbar materialized in mid-swing, embedding itself in the man's shoulder. His cry of pain-

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"No. It's fitting for a bitch like you."

"Get rid of the collar, fucker! You said you'd set me free. You're going to use it to cheat!"

"I'm killing you for the sake of my reputation. I'm not going to cheat."

"Fuck you, get it off!" She put the knife to her neck, tried to work it between her skin and the collar to cut through the metal.

Jack charged her. Sophia stopped scraping at the collar and held the knife in front of her inexpertly. She drew the knife back to make a wild, uncontrolled slash-

>> She raised her crossbow, aiming at the center of mass, and-

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-she drew the knife back to throw it at his chest with an expert's skill. Jack spun to the right, letting the knife fly inches past his side. By the time he had recovered Sophia had picked up the second knife at her feet. She swung the knife a few times get a sense of its heft, then settled into an Eskrima fighting stance.

"So you can use a knife after all. Good." said Jack.

Sophia slashed at Jack, forcing him to retreat. She repeated the same simple attack, slowly advancing until he was forced back to the edge of the stage.

"I'm not surprised, somehow," he continued. "Not after seeing that scar of yours. Like father, like daughter."

Sophia snarled and closed the distance between them. She darted forward and made an overhand slash at his left side-

>> The pusher was dangerous even to Sophia. Backed into a corner, panicked and strung out on drugs, he was liable to lash out with an unpredictable attack. But she knew how to make him predictable. Fake an attack to the left and he would dodge to the right, leaving himself unbalanced and open. It was easy, like leading a lamb to the slaughter-

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she darted forward and feinted at his left side. Jack ignored her feint and reached out with both hands, intercepting the wrist of her knife-hand and wresting it to the side. She tried to pull away from him and he kneed her in the stomach, making her gasp and knocking the wind out of her. He wrestled the knife out of her hand and let her fall to the ground.

The audience was cheering. Sophia tried to stagger to her feet but he kicked her in the stomach again, twice, three times. Pushing her across the stage until she was almost underfoot of the leaders of the Empire. Then he kneeled and cracked the butt of the knife against her cheek. She gave a rattling cough and sprawled flat on the floor.

Jack stood over her, barely winded. "There. I win. You lose. Don't need powers for that, miss star athlete. But what's coming next, this is different. Now you're going to die, and I'm going to make it look good."

Sophia groaned, tried to stand and failed. She coughed, coughed again, spat something red and wet into her palm.

Jack walked to the edge of the stage to pick up the knife she had thrown. As he went, he surveyed the scene before him. The audience clapping and cheering for him, Rune standing up in her seat. Kaiser silently studying him while Hookwolf gave a single nod. Approval from the veteran pit fighter. It was all going so perfectly, better than he could have hoped for.

He felt an electric thrill, a sense of ecstatic anticipation. As though his consciousness was expanding, stretching out to touch the minds of each and every person in the room. Feeling their intense focus with him as their single target. Yes. This was his moment. He was an actor on a stage, and he would give them a performance.

Jack raised his blades, wild eyed. Looked to Kaiser. Kaiser nodded. Jack's mouth twisted into an enormous grin. It was all absolutely perfect. The speeches, the demonstration. Sophia proven to be completely helpless before him, defeated, delivered to the feet of the leaders of the Empire. All that remained was the execution.

"Now die," he said. His blades whistled as he slashed them once, twice, again and again and again—and Sophia's body dissolved into a living shadow, squirmed, spat out fragments. At the leaders of the Empire above her.

Hookwolf's body shattered, expanding outward into a whirling blizzard of shards of glass. Kaiser was faster despite his suit of armor. He lurched out of the way as a piece of shadow flew past his shoulder, detonating with a loud crack and tearing his arm off. Fenja and Menja fell to the floor, throats cut so deeply their heads were barely attached to their bodies.

"Shit, she's a cape!" shouted Jack. He dove toward the fallen leaders, narrowly missed being pierced as Kaiser's power summoned metal swords from the floor, from the ceiling, from his armor.

The shadow ignored the blades impaling it and spat another piece of itself at Kaiser. Injured, prone, he had no chance to dodge. The fragment of shadow passed through his armor and materialized inside his head. The explosion sent the blades of his helmet spinning across the stage, painting it with streaks of blood.

Now there were shouts, cries of panic and fear and rage. The Empire was in shock. They were just catching on to what was happening.
Jack got to his feet and stood, his clothes flecked with the blood of the leaders, watching the sea of faces of the followers. Watching as his message rippled through their minds. The absolute surprise as it dawned in their eyes. The eyes of the true believers, the sheep, the cape-groupies, who had come today to their place of power to celebrate the gain of greater power still. Who had instead found their idols meeting their end. The eyes of the capes who had fought alongside their leaders in countless battles, who had a bond of blood with them closer than even lovers. Who had just seen them slaughtered in a matter of seconds while they stood frozen doing nothing. The eyes of Rune, who had thought of him as a kindred soul to mentor, or perhaps even love. Now the girl was stock still, shaken to her core, literally unable to believe what she was seeing.

He had never felt so alive.

Sophia materialized, picked up an ornate sword from one of Kaiser's fallen bodyguards. "Jake! You just gonna stand there grinning like an idiot?" she said.

Jack could have scolded her for ruining the moment, but he didn't care. As fond as he was of fine words, words didn't matter when you had actions like these to speak for you. Besides, she was grinning too. They both felt it. They knew the right thing to do would be to take advantage of the confusion they had sown, but it was too good to resist twisting the knife. He took a deep breath.

"I told you I'm the hero who's cutting the filth out of the city, didn't I?" he bellowed. He looked into the eyes of the thirteen normal humans and three capes arrayed against them, laughed, and slashed.
Jack slashed and the Empire's soldiers simply fell, threshed like ripe grain. They hadn't been expecting a fight and hadn't brought any body armor. At this distance every slash of his knives cut deep into three or four men. Anything to the face or the neck brought them down. The ones who only received body wounds pressed forward and rushed the stage, but it was futile. He was still surrounded by the forest of blades Kaiser had summoned in his last moments. They couldn't approach to mob him without slowing down for a few fatal seconds.

The only dangers were the soldiers who had brought guns. Sophia was taking care of them, wading into the midst of the crowd and assassinating the troublemakers. She had used up her supply of munitions on the leaders, but her new sword was good enough for the job. Every time she materialized her sword was in mid-swing, cutting through the body of a soldier. Every time they tried to make her pay, she turned insubstantial to let Jack slash through her and cripple her attackers.

After less than a minute of slaughter, the surviving soldiers were running for the exits. That was to be expected. The real fight was with the capes. Stormtiger, Cricket, and Rune. The ones who had recruited Jack, who knew his power the best. The two veterans were quick to recover but Rune was beside herself with confusion and rage, screaming something unintelligible at Jack.

He don't bother to reply. There was no need for more words. He had already sent his message and Rune had received it loud and clear. The shining moment of realization as her preconceptions were shattered, as the foundations of her comfortable world fell apart before her eyes - he had never seen anything so beautiful. But that moment had come and gone. Now she was no longer interesting, merely a walking corpse that didn't know it was already dead. All that remained was the execution.

The fight would be two against three. But the two were perfectly positioned to play to their talents. Sophia was in the thick of battle, using her mobility to engage opponents and her shadow state to brush off their attacks, returning to solid form at just the right moments to cause the most damage. Jack could slash their opponents with impunity, protected by the high ground of the stage and the blades sprouting from the floor around him.

Meanwhile their enemies were caught in the open. Rune could turn turn anything she touched into a weapon, but she needed a line of sight and Jack would slash her the instant she showed herself. She had used her power to form a makeshift barrier out of several chairs, a large chunk of the floor, and a half-dozen sharp-edged metal plates she kept on her person. She was backing away to find something heavy enough to use as a weapon.

Stormtiger was the best match for Jack, able to form claws of compressed air and project them to strike at long range. But it took him seconds to compress enough air for a lethal long-distance attack, and his stupid habit of going barechested and relying on his wind shield for protection made him completely vulnerable to Jack's knives. He had retreated behind an overturned table near the entrance, probably preparing a big attack to take out an opponent in one hit.

Cricket's usual tactic was to draw her opponents into a melee battle they couldn't hope to win. Now that the mob of panicking soldiers were out of her way she was advancing on Sophia, walking with a peculiar light-footed gait and occasionally twisting her body to dodge Jack's slashes or parrying them with her sickles. She didn't bother to dodge his slashes at her head, letting the metal cage she wore around her face absorb the blows.

Jack frowned. That level of prediction shouldn't be possible even with Cricket's enhanced reflexes.
Not when he had more than twenty feet of range on her. A sensory power? Precognition? What was her plan?

>> Cricket shut out the heckling crowed and focused on her opponent. They had been circling each other for minutes, the brute advancing and she retreating. They both knew her blades couldn't break his skin but he was still being cautious. That meant he had a weakness. His eyes? His mouth? Damn, it had better not be his asshole. As soon as he overcommitted, she would-

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Cricket had seen that Sophia was an aggressive fighter - was she baiting her out? Sophia would charge and phase through Cricket to attack from behind, but Cricket had the reflexes to dodge and skewer Sophia in an instant. He needed to warn Sophia to stay back and-

>> Stormtiger watched from above as Hookwolf maneuvered the Tinker into a corner. The girl must have an attack-prediction system built into her suit, dodging Hookwolf's attacks the instant he set them in motion. But in a moment the girl would be denied the space to dodge. "Will you face the wolf, or the storm?" he muttered, aiming his shot-

<<

-but no. Sophia wouldn't have the option of hanging back. Jack's eyes lighted on a hand with air rippling around it, stretching out from behind an overturned table and aiming at Sophia. He needed to get Sophia out of the way of Stormtiger's attack and point her away from Cricket at the same time...

"Go for the gun!" Jack shouted.

Sophia turned to the stage and shot forward in shadow form, letting Stormtiger's claw of air crush the floor where she had been standing. She skimmed across the floor toward Jack's discarded jacket.

Cricket moved to intercept her. Jack sent out a flurry of slashes, knowing they would miss but forcing Cricket to back away. Rune took the opportunity to peek over her barrier and send four of her sharp-edged metal plates his way. Jack stepped aside, letting two pass by and the other two deflect off the forest of blades surrounding him. The plates swerved in mid-air to follow him. He redirected his slashes at Rune, forcing her to duck behind her barrier again and lose her line of sight.

Sophia made it to the jacket, materialized and grabbed for the gun-

>> Cricket's sonar alerted her to a cape around the corner, hovering twenty feet above the ground. He thought he could ambush her? Hah. In a single smooth motion she turned the corner and flipped her sickle into the air-

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The instant Sophia regained solid form, Cricket threw one of her sickles and Jack slashed with both of his knives. His slashes struck the sickle as it flew through the air, sending it off course to clip Sophia's side instead of burying itself in her chest. Sophia grunted, turned to shadow again and raced toward Rune.

Rune sent her remaining metal plates spinning in the air in tight spirals, striking the oncoming shadow again and again. Sophia ignored them and fired the pistol. The first two bullets struck the barrier in a shower of sparks. Then Sophia got into close range and emptied the rest of the magazine, aiming so that the bullets phased through the barrier and materialized to strike the girl
behind it. Rune fell to the ground screaming, barrier collapsing around her. Jack finished her with a series of slashes to her face, shattering her mask and cutting her throat.

Cricket gave up on attacking the shadow and began advancing on Jack, deflecting his slashes with her remaining sickle. Sophia smirked, wagged her finger at the villain, then turned to shadow and glided across the floor toward the policemen she had assassinated. More guns-

>> Stormtiger's claw tore the security guard's hand to pieces. "I told you going for your gun would be a big mistake," he said-

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"Sophia, get back!" shouted Jack. He slashed at Stormtiger, cutting his hand as he reached out from behind cover but doing nothing to stop him from releasing his claw of compressed air. Sophia saw it coming but couldn't get out of the way; she didn't dare materialize and her shadow state was too insubstantial for her to arrest her momentum. The claw shot across the room and detonated, turning the policemen's corpses into pulp and tearing Sophia apart into a shower of shadowy fragments.

"Fuck!" Jack slashed at Stormtiger, trying to make him pay, but only managed to gouge the table he was using for cover. He could see what was going to happen. He could slow Cricket down to a standstill by concentrating his attacks, but he would be distracted for precious seconds every time Stormtiger showed himself. Cricket was already nearing the stage. Soon she would get into close range where he couldn't hope to match her. They would kill him. He couldn't do it alone. But there was still-

>> It was too much to believe. Anh sneaking out in the night and meeting with gangsters? They were arguing in raised voices, something about her family. Then they all went quiet as a man strode out of the shadows. A man in a demon mask. A villain. The man said a single sharp phrase. Anh stood stock still for almost half a minute, then murmured a soft reply. The villain appeared in front of her in an instant, dragging a knife across her throat. No. No. No no no why is this happening don't just stand there and watch do something anything-

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Jack's jacket fluttered down from the ceiling and wrapped itself around Stormtiger's head, the knives inside writhing like a spider's legs. Stormtiger screamed, a cry that was cut short as a knife to the throat took his voice away.

Cricket whirled and ran to help Stormtiger. She made it four steps before she realized her mistake. Throughout the battle she had kept a slow, steady gait that let her turn on a dime to dodge Jack's slashes. Now she was moving fast enough that her path was set in stone, predictable. Jack slashed at her legs and she collapsed to the floor. As Cricket fell she made a final effort, snapping her arm around to send her remaining sickle spinning through the air at Jack. He stepped out of the way, then began his attack in earnest and opened a dozen deep gashes in her body in a matter of seconds. He didn't stop until her guts were strewn on the floor.

Then it was over.

Jack stood at the center of the stage. Breathing heavily, taking it all in. The sudden quiet that filled the room. The bodies of their enemies on the blood-stained floor. He and his allies standing triumphant.

Sophia had managed to survive. A tattered pool of shadows writhed on the floor, slowly pulling itself back together.
A figure in black stood at the entrance. It was a caricature of a human shape, seven feet tall, a stitched-together mass of burlap sacks with two buttons for eyes and a score of foot long metal pins sticking out of its chest. It raised its gaze from Stormtiger and looked at Jack.

"We did it." said Jack. "We beat the Empire."

The figure stared at him. At the slaughter surrounding him.

"You should have seen them. A ravenous pack of wolves, frothing at the mouth at the thought of Sophia getting cut to pieces in front of them." said Jack. "They've done it to a hundred people before, but now we've put an end to it. The Empire won't hurt anyone again."

He climbed down from the stage and made his way to Sophia. She was finally returning to solid form, exhausted. He wrapped her in a hug. "Sophia, that was badass. You decapitated the Empire."

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Did you see their faces? The Nazis thought we were fresh meat and we fucking pounced and tore out their throats."

She gave a tired grin. "Yeah. We kicked their asses. You got the tiger fucker?"

"No. That was our backup."

Sophia saw Stormtiger's body, the pool of blood spreading around it. She shook her head wonderingly and her grin grew wider. "Fuck yeah, Voodoo. You've got guts after all. Don't put yourself down with any of that moralizing shit about him, alright? The fucker deserved it."

Jack's bloody jacket unwrapped itself from Stormtiger's head and collapsed on the floor with a clatter. The figure in black left the room.

Jack sighed. "She needs to be handled with a delicate touch. She isn't the type to take well to being praised for murder. No matter how justified." He helped Sophia get to her feet. "Let's take care of the leftovers. Then we can celebrate."

Sophia didn't move, stared at the scene of the slaughter for a full minute. She finally shook her head and spoke. "I wish I could take a picture of this. Show the Wards what real heroes do, what real justice looks like."

"Yes. Today we've done more good than the rest of them in all their time in the Wards. More than most of the Protectorate, even. It's a truly a shame we can't let them find out."

"I know, I know, but...damn. Oni Lee was one thing, but this is big, Jake. What we did here is big. I can't go back to...to filing paperwork after this. Patrols with fucking Triumph telling me off for getting in a few extra hits on a skinhead."

Jack smiled. "We both feel it. Real action is what we need to feel truly alive. Yes, opportunities like tonight are shamefully rare, even with the help of our benefactor. But listen, Sophia." Jack made a sweeping gesture, encompassing the remains of the battle around them. "Take a minute to appreciate what we've done. Fix the image in your mind. Keep it close to your heart, because this is proof of who you are, the real you. An apex predator, a tiger in the jungle."

"People are afraid of tigers, they're right to be. That's why they're afraid of real heroes like us. I know it chafes to pretend to be something you're not. Acting like a good little girl for the Wards, babysitting Vista and giving her a shoulder to cry on when she breaks a nail. But that game of make-believe doesn't tarnish your true self, understand? It's just another form of predation, a way to stalk your prey in a new ecosystem. Luring them in with sweet words until you have them in the palm of your hand. You've seen it, haven't you? The gleam in the eyes of an expert player like
Piggot, when she speaks a single word to make a cape who could splatter her in an instant kneel down and pay respects like a priest before his god. Don't tell me you can see that without a pang of envy. You want to be a tiger, but you want to have that too.

"The next time Piggot tells you to put street scum in jail instead of a hospital, just remember what we did tonight. What you do in the daylight with the Wards, what you do in the night with me, they're two sides of the same coin."

Sophia looked at their fallen enemies. "Yeah...maybe. I'm liking the night part a lot more."

"Two sides of the same coin, Sophia. We couldn't have done this tonight if you hadn't gotten into the good books of the PRT, if they hadn't trusted you to help clean up Bakuda's leftovers--"

"Okay, okay, Jake, stop. I get it. I really do. There's no need to break out the inspirational self-help lectures. It's almost cute how you get so goddamn earnest about it. Look, on my way home I'll buy Vista a teddy bear dressed up like a fucking Disney princess. Satisfied?"

Jack laughed. "It's all because I care about you, Sophia."

"Yeah? Then when we go after the Merchants we're not doing any of this cloak-and-dagger hostage shit. Tonight was badass, yeah, but your fucked-up mind games? Totally unnecessary. Just pop out of the shadows and blow the fuckers up."

"You can't take chances with these people. The Empire has spies in the PRT, our benefactor showed us the proof. Kaiser probably knew you were a cape. We had to make them believe you were helpless, get you in close with a concealed weapon."

"Yeah, yeah, the Empire maybe, but not the Merchants. They're a bunch of chumps. So next time I'm not letting myself get tied up by a skank with bondage powers, and I'm sure as hell not stuffing my cheeks with more bombs from a batshit Tinker."

Jack raised his hands in mock defeat-

>> As she left the department store Parian almost ran into a child who was lurking near the door. The girl she'd had to eject for cutting in line and yelling at the other kids. She couldn't see the girl's mother anywhere. Still, it was best to make a good impression on behalf of her employer.

"Hello again, Tanya. Are you feeling sorry for what you said to those boys and girls? If you are, I might--".

The girl cut her off. "I'm not sorry! They said I didn't deserve a doll cause, cause they're jerks who said I'm ugly and fat and a dirty...and nasty stuff too. They made everyone think I'm bad but they're the bad ones!"

Parian frowned behind her mask, felt the fabric of her costume writhe against her skin. To be manipulated like that by a bunch of kids-

<<

Had Voodoo gotten into trouble? Now that the job was finished she should be meeting up with them. "Let's not keep Voodoo waiting," said Jack. He jogged toward the exit, accelerated to a sprint.

"What? Hey, Jake!" called Sophia from behind him.
He left the warehouse and searched for their ally. There, in a corner of the lot that was littered with old shipping equipment. Voodoo had caught the five soldiers who made it out the door, had bound and secured them in layers of cloth. All according to the plan. Except...fuck.

She was talking with one of the captives. Thomas Shoemaker, the freshman, Sophia's acquaintance from the track team. Now standing free, gesturing to the bound form of his mother.

>> Sabah was fuming. "You thought we had a relationship, Alan? Fine. We had one. As friends. Past tense. Because if you thought I would do that for you? No. No way in hell. I'm not the type of person who-

<<

Voodoo turned and stared at Jack.
Jack approached Voodoo with a casual stride. "Excellent job. I see you caught them all." He frowned, looking straight at her, not letting his gaze rest on the boy for an instant. "All but one. Is there a problem? Is he a cape, did he hurt you?"

Voodoo stared at him.

The boy was shaking. "Jacob. Uh. Jake. Or Jack or Jack Slash or whatever you want, okay? Look, I didn't, we weren't with any of them, okay? I, I h-hate them too. I, I mean Mom and I, we were here because the guys at her job, they made her come. M-Medhall, Medhall Corporation, they're-

Jack ignored him. He looked Voodoo in the eyes - not the black buttons sewn onto the face of her costume, but her real eyes concealed in a hidden slot below. "Voodoo, are you all right? We need to discuss our next steps. For tonight and for the future." He glanced at their captives. "We should get some privacy. Why don't you make sure the Empire's soldiers are secured, and we'll talk around the corner? I'd like to hear what you have to say."

"Listen, Jake, we didn't want to come! I wanted to, to play video games with my brother, w-watch a movie maybe. But Mom said, Mom said the guys said we had to go, we had to go and...c-come on, say something, Jake, don't, don't just-"

Ribbons of fabric rose up from the ground and wrapped around the boy's legs, arms, and head, a band of cloth gagging him and cutting off his voice. Jack nodded and walked around to the other side of the large shipping container, Voodoo following behind him.

As they walked, Jack caught a glimpse of Sophia's shadow form lurking in the empty lot, nearly impossible to make out in the dim lighting. A light drizzle was beginning to fall, further obscuring the view. He waved to her and called out. "Hey, keep an eye on the Nazis until we're done talking, okay?" Sophia would understand. She knew he was the best equipped to handle this particular crisis.

He waited until they were in privacy to speak. "Can you keep them bound from here? Without a line of sight?"

"Yeah. I can." Voodoo spoke in a small voice, shaking her head. "I...listen. I thought they were killers, guys like Hookwolf. I didn't think there'd be so many, I didn't think there'd be kids. That boy, Thomas, he said you two know him-"

Jack raised his hand. "Wait. Please. Before we do anything else. I want to thank you for your help tonight, Voodoo. We couldn't have saved the city from the Empire without you.

"I know this was hard for you. You don't want to get in a fight, to stare a gang of Nazi murderers in the face. Nobody does. God knows that putting on a costume and coming out at night takes a lot of courage. I get that, Voodoo, because it was the same for me the night I went out as a cape for the first time. That's why I want to make sure you understand that it was worth it. That whatever else happens now, you did good tonight."

"What Sophia and I saw in that warehouse...the Empire was worse than our wildest dreams. You should have heard the hatred spilling from their lips, their pride in their absolute commitment to evil. They said it's the duty of all the whites in the world to 'purify' the 'degenerate scum' from the face of the Earth. And they were gloating that no one could stop them. They declared a war on our
people, fought the best heroes the city had to offer, and they were winning. When the heroes planned a trap they had spies in the PRT to warn them it was coming. When one was arrested they'd call in reinforcements from Germany and come back worse than ever. That's why we had to put an end to them, perman-

"I didn't want to kill him!"

Jack stopped.

"I know he was a villain, but I didn't want to kill him," said Voodoo. "I wasn't supposed to have to hurt anyone! I heard you yell and I came running, I saw what he did to Sophia, I thought he killed her! I didn't know what to do and I just..."

>> Sabah turned away from the news with a shudder. Another villain on the warpath. It seemed like everyone with powers wanted to be a cape and get into deadly brawls in the streets. She was sure that wasn't for her.

And yet....she was still didn't know what was for her. At first she studied to be an engineer, but that hadn't worked out. Then she tried to take advantage of her power and switched to fashion design. But her power only let her put outfits together faster, not better. She couldn't make true art like Anh and Professor Gray. And every time Alan harassed her outside of class she felt her telekinesis seeping into the odds and ends she carried in her purse, preparing to shove them down his throat and...

No. She calmed down, reassured herself. She was a good person. Inflicting hurt, taking a life, those would never become easy things for her...

<<


"You were brought up in polite society. Your parents taught you that life is precious, that taking a life without hesitation is the mark of a villain. But you know that's not always true, Voodoo. You saw proof on the night you met Oni Lee, when your moment of hesitation gave him the time to take your friend's life. You could have let that experience break you, but you were strong. You recognized your hesitation, confronted it, changed yourself for the better to overcome it."

That's why taking a villain's life comes naturally to you now. Because you're a better person who acts without hesitation to protect the people of our city. What you did tonight saved our lives and ensured that villain will never prey on innocents again. That's the mark of a hero."

Voodoo was silent for a moment. "Yeah. Thank you. I'm glad we won. I don't regret what I did to that villain. I don't like it, but I don't regret it." She turned and looked at the wall of the shipping container, as though she could see through it to where she was telekinetically holding the captives. "These kids, though, we're going to let them go, right? We'll give them a scare to make sure they don't join the gangs again. They're impressionable, they were only at the meeting because they fell in with the wrong people. They won't be a problem now that the Empire is gone. 'Cutting out the root of the problem', right?"

"Yes. Once the Empire is gone, they won't be leading anyone else astray. But the Empire won't be gone until its soldiers are gone. As long as these soldiers exist the Empire could come back worse than ever. You know that, Voodoo. You know why."
"They're just kids. They're not capes, they're not going to pull anything."

"It doesn't matter who they are. Any one of them could identify us. They know my name, they know Sophia's name, they know where we go to school. That was the only way we could get the Empire to trust me, to bring us to the leaders. You too, Parian. Your disguise is good but it's only a matter of time before the soldiers you've captured connect you with the only cloth-manipulating parahuman in town. We all knew this would happen when we agreed to the plan, knew there would be no turning back. We already made the decision. Now we have to follow through."

>> "Come on, Sabah, I stood up for you in front of Professor Hauser. I helped you out big time in study section too. Don't I deserve a little affection? Honestly, I like you better when you're not such a bitch." It was disgusting the way Alan said it with a playful lilt in his voice. Pretending it was a joke when they both knew he was completely serious. He wanted to control her, to own her, to make her think she owed him-

<<

Jack's features softened. "Look, Voodoo. It's not an obligation to me, or to Sophia. We're parahumans, we can take care of ourselves. But do you think these thugs are going to come after us? They'll come after our families and our friends. Sophia's mom, her brother and sister. My dad. Your family too, if they can find out who they are, and they have a good chance of it. I can't imagine what those animals would do to them. A few minutes ago they were cheering for Sophia to be cut to pieces for the crime of being born to a 'degenerate' family. I can't imagine what they'll do to the family of a 'race traitor'. If they got their hands on Dad..." Jack stopped, shook his head. Continued with a lump in his throat. "Dad is the only family I have left. You understand, right? Just thinking about your family being at the mercy of those animals...!"

Voodoo fidgeted with her hands, not meeting his eyes. "I know. I know. I'm thinking I could...I don't know. Keep an eye on them. Keep them out of trouble. I could be something like their...parole officer, or jailer, maybe. Or get the PRT to arrest them. Do something so they don't have to die."

"I wish we could do that, but there's no way to make it work. You can't babysit Nazis twenty four hours a day. Not when it would only take a five minute phone call to the Gesellschaft to ruin us all. Giving them to the authorities would be just as bad. You know how many spies are in their ranks. We can't afford to let them go."

>> "Don't let the bastards get to you, Sabah," said Anh. "The world has an infinite number of bastards who'll try to grind you down. Waste your time caring about what they think and you're just falling into their trap. You don't have any responsibility to them, got it? Think like an artist: from now on your only responsibility is to find the beautiful things in the world, to cherish and protect them, to fill your life with them. Got it?" Easy advice to follow, with Anh sitting right in front of her. Sabah tried to hide her blush-

<<

"The truth is that you can't protect everyone, Voodoo. said Jack. "You have to choose your people, the ones you'll cherish and protect above all else. Your family. Your friends. The people you admire, the allies who stand by your side. Then when you have a choice between the lives of your people and the lives of a pack of wolves that's ready to tear them apart, you have to do what's right."

"Right, we need to protect our families, absolutely. But I don't like how you keep calling these
people animals. It's wrong. You're dehumanizing them. You want to convince yourself it's okay to kill them so you don't have to think of yourself as a murderer."

"No. It doesn't matter if they're beasts or human beings. You don't have any responsibility to people like that. They beat up blacks and asians and arabs for the honor of joining a gang of Nazis, they made a commitment to 'purify' eighty percent of the world population. They literally made it their life's goal to exterminate your people from the face of the earth! Your only responsibility here is to protect the people you love by ending the threat.

"I saw you talking with that boy Thomas. I'm sure he came off as a nice guy. I knew him in school, I thought he was a nice guy too the first time we met. But that's just the mask he wears. In fact-

>> So that's what Vista was saying behind her back. The little snitch! Shadow Stalker returned to her normal form, panting for breath. It was exhausting to keep her shadow state embedded halfway in the wall, but sometimes keeping tabs on the other Wards was worth-

<<

"In fact, if you want proof of what these people are like, you can ask Sophia. She knows better than me, she was on the track team with him and had to put up with his racist shit from day one. Will you at least hear her out? What she has to say about this?"

Voodoo took a moment to collect her thoughts, then seemed to come to an internal resolution. She nodded. They walked back to the captives. The cloth bindings were slowly being soaked through by the rain, but it didn't seem to impair Voodoo's telekinetic control. Sophia was leaning against the wall of the shipping container.

"What's up? A new plan?"

Voodoo pointed at the boy and looked Sophia in the eyes. "Jake says you know this boy from school. Thomas. Are you okay with this? You'd really kill him? Him and his mother?"

Sophia returned her gaze levelly. "Yes. Absolutely. They're Nazis, Voodoo."

Thomas was wriggling back and forth, trying to say something through his gag.

"He said they didn't want to come here. He said the gang forced them."

"His typical lies. He's one of the Nazi ringleaders at school. He and his gang beat up on the freshmen whose skin is too dark for their tastes. He tried to get me and Kayla kicked off the track team, one day he even came after us with his gang when we stayed late after practice. He said his mom was in on it and would cover for them if we told the teachers what they did. Hell, a minute ago he and his mom were cheering their lungs out when they thought Jake was going to kill me. They're sociopaths, stone-cold murderers waiting to happen."

The boy was frantic now. Voodoo watched him intently, speaking slowly. "I don't want to have to kill kids. Or families. ...But I think you're a good person, Sophia. You're a hero. And you know that boy better than we know any of the others. If you can show me this is necessary, if you can look him in the eyes and say that he needs to go, then," she took a deep breath. "Then I'll go along with it."

Sophia nodded. "Okay. Do you want me to be the one who...?"

A long pause. "No. If we have to get rid of them then that means they're villains. Like the villain I killed. They'll keep hurting people until someone stops them. I came here to stop them, so I...I need
to take responsibility."

"Okay." Sophia kneeled down in front of Thomas, pointed to his neck. "You'll want to aim here and here. Best to make it clean and quick, put them out of their misery."

Voodoo raised her right hand. The cloth unwrapped from the boy's head. Thomas was wild eyed, shaking his head, flicking his gaze between the parahumans standing above him. "No, you're lying, they're lying, we never did anything like that! Listen, Voo, Voodoo, I never hurt anyone, I hate the Empire, Mom hates the Empire, I promise we'll never-"

Sophia met his gaze evenly. "More lies. I thought you'd have the guts to be honest with your last words." She turned to Voodoo. "The world is better off without him."

"Please, I promise, we'll-"

>> The villain stood over Anh's body and slowly raised his eyes to meet hers. He must have heard her cry out, realized she was watching. His eyes were hard and cold, remorseless-

<<

Voodoo let her arm fall. The boy's voice was cut off as the score of foot-long needles in her costume shot out on strings and buried themselves in his throat. His struggles surged to a crescendo, then slowed, stopped.

Voodoo stood silently, contemplating the corpse. Sophia moved to say something, but Jack stopped her. It would give the wrong impression. This was an initiation of sorts. Don't praise her, don't lay a hand on her to reassure her, don't say a word. Let her do it herself, let her take responsibility, let her own it. Let it become a part of her. After today she could go back into the daylight, call herself Sabah or Parian or any other name she chose. But Voodoo would be waiting inside of her, born from blood spilled under the moonlight. Ready to come out when she needed her, when they needed her as an ally to fight by their side...

Voodoo turned to Jack and Sophia. Jack nodded. She turned back to the soldiers. With a wet snick, the needles pulled themselves out of Thomas's throat and plunged into the bundle of cloth that held his mother.

...besides, even without those considerations, Jack wouldn't have interrupted her for the world. It was fascinating to watch. When she finished a soldier she stood silently for thirty seconds to a minute, contemplating the life she had taken. For the first two, at least. Then she started to become methodical, automated. Her strikes cleaner and swifter, the death throes ending more quickly. Pulling her needles out of the soldiers before they went still, conscientiously wiping off the debris from the kill to keep them clean and sharp. Routines newly learned in the moment, or constructed from old habits for sewing outfits in her studio?

When the last of the soldiers was dead, Voodoo turned to Jack and Sophia. "We should move them into the warehouse and set up the big bomb inside. We don't want the fire to get out of control."

>> Sabah penned in the last answer to the problem set and looked at the clock. It was 2 am. Strange. She didn't think it was normal for your grades to improve after a funeral, but for the last week even her need for sleep was muted. She opened up the next problem set-

<<

She must have given up on her contemplations, must have been using the time when the soldiers
were bleeding to death to plan the next steps of their job. Practical-minded, focused on getting the job done - she was probably suppressing her emotions. He would have to take steps to minimize the potential for damage when she came out of her trance.

Voodoo was already reshaping the bindings into two cloth golems to carry the bodies inside. Jack approached and put his hand on her shoulder. "Voodoo. Good job. Where did you put the bomb? We can set it up while you work."

Voodoo pointed to the far corner of the lot, and Sophia turned to shadow and set off to retrieve it. The cloth golems had taken shape, roughly humanoid forms resembling Voodoo's costume. Each one looked like it could carry a single body at most, so they would have to make a few trips. Jack helped the golems lift their designated bodies off the ground and followed Voodoo as she walked them into the warehouse.

"Sophia and I need to go home after this, but we should meet some time tomorrow. To talk about our victory and plans for the future." said Jack. "I know it can be stressful to go out as a cape for the first time. I want to give you a chance to talk things over with us, get advice from people who understand what it's like."

"I...fine, if you want. Let's get this over with first." said Voodoo. Still automated. They did the rest of their work in silence, bringing the bodies inside and scattering them among the rest of the corpses on the warehouse floor. When they were done, Voodoo surveyed the scene and shook her head wonderingly.

"There's no way I would have believed this if I hadn't seen it. It's scary." she said.

"Oh? How so?" said Jack.

"There were so many of them. So many sociopaths who acted like normal people during the day but turned out to be ruthless killers. It's scary to think how many people like them must still be in the city, waiting for someone with the right cause to recruit them and set them loose."

Jack suppressed a smile. "Yes, it's scary to realize how many monsters are lurking in plain sight. At least today we've reduced their numbers. A few more nights like this and the city will be safe again."

Sophia was setting the bomb's timer, following an elaborate set of instructions. Apparently their anonymous benefactor had kept Bakuda's workshops under surveillance for some time before killing her, long enough to learn how to operate her munitions. The bomb would destroy any evidence that could identify who did the killings, and the fact that the bomb was one of Bakuda's would ensure that the remnants of the ABB were the prime suspects.

There was still more to do. They would have to make sure the rain washed away the telltale bloodstains left outside, for one. But they had plenty of time. Their benefactor had promised that the remaining capes and soldiers of the Empire would be occupied elsewhere until midnight. Jack suspected that their benefactor was making another major push, cooperating with Jack and Sophia to kill all of the Empire's capes in a single night just as they had done before with the ABB. That was surely a hint at their benefactor's identity. Jack had once thought their benefactor was a fellow vigilante, one with a Thinker power useful for gathering intelligence and coordinating attacks. Now the more likely possibility was a rival gang of villains, with the firepower to kill entire teams of capes. But it didn't matter. After their success tonight he could pressure their benefactor into a face to face meeting. Then he could judge whether-

A wail echoed through the room. Artificial, mechanical. Jack spoke quickly. "Sophia, is that the
bomb? Do we need to run?"

Sophia was frozen in place. The wail returned, swelling and fading in volume. Repeating on a regular cycle.

The air raid sirens.

"Fuck, you've got to be kidding me." said Sophia. She turned to Jack, put out her hand. "Phone, now."

Jack drew the cell phone from his pocket, but it was already vibrating. He looked at the number and handed it to Sophia.

"Shadow Stalker here. What the hell is...fuck! Leviathan? Seriously?"

An Endbringer. Leviathan coming to sink Brockton Bay. No, not now, not at the worst possible time...

"Fuck, fuck, fuck....forty five minutes? Okay. Great, wonderful, peachy. Yes of course I'll 'join you'. I'll be there in twenty minutes. ....Look, I'm at my friend's house. I need to take care of her family, okay? They're freaking out over here. My own family too, probably. ...Yeah, I told you. I'll fucking be there. You have my big gun at HQ, right? Right. I'm hanging up now."

She stayed on the line, waited for a few seconds.

"Hey Emma. You heard all of that, right? Tell your dad you have almost an hour, you can probably get the hell out of town instead of going to the shelters. ...Yeah, of course we're all right. We fucking decapitated the Empire, it was badass. I'll tell you later. ...Yeah. Leave our phones in your room, we'll pick them up on our way. Hey, you relayed our calls with the black phone, right? Good. If we had our normal phones then Piggot would go bugfuck on us when she traced the GPS and found out what we did, it's a fucking slaughterhouse in here. ...What the hell, don't get lame on me Emma. I'm not going to die, I fought the motherfucking Behemoth. You better not die on me either. Got it, survivor? ...Right. Gotta go."

Sophia flipped the phone closed and tossed it back to Jack. Then she took a deep breath, faced the heavens, and screamed. "FUCK!" She kicked one of the bodies on the floor so hard it flipped onto its side, then fixed Jack and Voodoo with an intense glare. "Leviathan is coming in forty five minutes. I'm going to fight. I'm a hero after all. You guys coming?"

Jack closed his eyes, tried to think, tried to find any way to salvage the situation. An Endbringer. An enemy he absolutely could not afford to face. Showing up to the fight would be pointless - his power wouldn't do a thing to an Endbringer, he would simply be slaughtered. Even if he survived, he would have revealed his existence and powers to the public; that would have to happen eventually, but this was far too early for his plans. Worst of all, the Endbringers weren't human. They never showed a shred of emotion, not a hint of pleasure in the mayhem they caused. They were nothing more than forces of mindless destruction, not interesting in the least. Fighting an Endbringer would be as unsatisfying as slashing at a hurricane. No, he couldn't fight. The only thing he could do right now was to find Dad, get in the car, and get out of town.

But his allies wouldn't do the same. Sophia's hand was forced - she had to join Endbringer fights as part of her deal with the PRT or else she would be sent back to juvenile hall for years. And the virtues Jack had taught her meant that she expected him to stand by her side in battle. After all his fine words about planning, teamwork, backing up your allies in a fight...if he abandoned her to face the crisis alone, she would see him as a coward at best and a traitor at worst. The situation was
even worse with Sabah. She would certainly join the fight, thanks to Jack's own efforts to teach her to overcome her fear of conflict. He had carefully nurtured her desire to protect the people of the city. But her commitment to *his* style of protection was still weak. If she saw him respond to an Endbringer by scurrying into the night, while the flashy heroes of the Protectorate stayed and fought alongside her...he had no illusions about which path she would choose.

If only he had more time, he might have managed it. Convinced Sabah that it was better to stay by her mother's side than to rush to an early death. Convinced Sophia that it wasn't a betrayal for him to stay out of the fight, perhaps by offering to steer her family to safety during the crisis. Sophia herself had a good chance to live through the fight, her shadow state would let her recover from anything short of a direct hit. Yes, he and his allies would survive. They would even come out of the experience stronger than before - in a city recovering from a disaster, a small band of parahumans could wield a great deal of power. They would be *needed* to wield that power, to fight the violence and gangs that would arise from the ruined sections of the city. He could see it all clearly. How to convince them of the truth and make them see the light...if only he had more time. But now...

...now there was only one thing to do. Jack opened his eyes, regarded his allies. Took out his cell phone and dialed a number.

"Hi Dad. I told you I'd call if I wouldn't be home for bedtime..."
The headquarters of the Parahuman Response Team was a six-story building standing alone on a hill near the bay. The building was perfectly positioned to give them a view of Leviathan when he rose from the bay, if the view wasn't being obscured by the rainstorm rolling in from the sea. The dense storm was penetrated in a dozen places by a battery of searchlights scanning the waves for any sign of their enemy.

Jack made his way through the masses of evacuating civilians and arrived twenty-five minutes before the projected time of attack. The headquarters were ringed with PRT vans and officers in combat gear. A wide area was cleared in the parking lot where teams of heroes were teleporting in every few minutes. A massive tinker designed aircraft was parked on the slope of the hill, unloading a team of heroes from the Guild. The human members were followed by a motley squadron of mechanical suits piloted by the Guild's artificial intelligence, Dragon.

The squad of PRT officers at the entrance gave him a skeptical look before waving him through the door. His 'costume' was little more than a domino mask over his normal clothing. Still, he had managed to make himself presentable. He had replaced his blood-stained jacket with a new one scavenged from a deserted clothing store, and was keeping himself dry with an umbrella he had found on one of the bodies in the warehouse. When the battle began he would switch to the more practical rain poncho that was folded up in his pocket, but it wouldn't do to arrive at the door looking like a bright orange traffic cone. This was his first public appearance and first impressions were important.

First impressions were the only positive outcome he could expect from the rest of the night. If his power has strong enough to hurt Leviathan then he could have occupied himself planning how to use it to best effect, how to coordinate with the other defending capes. But his power wouldn't scratch an Endbringer. The best he could do was to take the opportunity to make connections, to build his reputation with the heroes and get information about the villains.

One of the officers handed him an electronic armband with a small screen on the front. He knew from his research that this was the system that the PRT used to coordinate the defending capes. When he finished scrolling through a series of instructional displays, the armband beeped and an electronic voice asked him to state his name. He hesitated, then leaned in to speak into the armband. "Jack Slash."

The lobby was set up for a presentation, with rows and columns of folding chairs facing a set of large monitors showing satellite views of the area and the gathering storm. Milling about the room were a sea of capes, easily more than fifty and growing with every minute.

For a moment Jack stood in the entrance, stunned. Ever since he got his powers he had driven himself to become a cape expert. Training his own powers was good, but his power wasn't in the top tier. He would never accomplish anything without gathering a team of allies to stand by his side, and his team would never accomplish anything without defeating other teams of capes in turn. That made it essential to learn about the capes around them, their powers and desires. How did they fight? Why did they fight? What did they want from life, as a person, as a team?

Now he stood in a room with more capes than existed at any moment in Brockton Bay, with A-class capes who were Protectorate commanders of major cities, with new recruits and Wards and villains he had never seen in any of his research. He was flooded with dozens of conflicting urges - talk to him, talk to her, there's Legend, what's he saying to Armsmaster? As if his mind was splitting, stretching to encompass the crowd, the teams, their interactions...
Fifty capes, a hundred capes, with all manners of powers and desires, united under a single banner to fight for a common cause. That resonated with him. It felt right to be on a team of capes, to try to understand them, to guide them, to shape the message they sent to the world.

Yet...there was something wrong about the whole endeavor, something that had been pricking at his mind ever since he heard the air raid sirens. Yes, he and the other capes were gathered with a common message, but that message wasn't theirs. It was their enemy's. The Endbringer had stated its intention to destroy the city, given them forty five minutes to stew over it. And the beast was so strong that the gathered heroes couldn't deny its message, could only put forth a mere reflection. The Endbringer would destroy the city, so they would defend it. For a moment he almost envied the Endbringer and its ability to weld these capes into an army at its whim.

He blinked, forced himself to focus. He had less than twenty five minutes before the battle began. He had to make the most of it.

A quick glance around the room ended his hopes of getting information about the local villains. Not a single one had shown up to the fight. Considering what he knew about them, though, it made a certain kind of sense. The Empire liked to think of the city as theirs and would have shown up in force if they were able...but his team and his benefactor had just killed at least half of their capes. The ABB was dead. The Merchants were scum who wouldn't have shown up even if their powers could have made a difference. The Undersiders preferred hit-and-run tactics and fled at the first hint of a real fight. Faultline's crew of mercenaries had a solid reputation but their heavy hitters were pyrokinetics, useless against Leviathan. The only remainders were odds and ends: Coil, whose gang of ex-military men didn't include parahumans as far as anyone knew, and independent capes with little influence like Uber and Leet.

All there was to do was interact with the heroes, then. Off to the side near the window was a cluster of the most decorated heroes, those who had fought Endbringers ten or more times and lived to tell the tale. Alexandria. Legend, the leader of the Protectorate, and Narwhal, the leader of the Guild. Eidolon, the strongest of them all, who could choose any three powers he wished from his seemingly limitless well of abilities. It was tempting to approach them but Jack knew it was pointless. He would come across as a starstruck rookie, no more significant than any of the millions of admirers in their fan clubs.

Near the front of the room was a more promising target - the local heroes, gathered near the stage. The Protectorate, the Wards, the New Wave, with a few scattered heroes from other cities mingling with the group. Sophia and Sabah were with them. They had gone ahead of him and stopped at their homes to pick up their costumes; for the rest of the night they would be fighting in their identities of Shadow Stalker and Parian.

Jack considered his position carefully. It would be best to position himself as a new cape on his first day out, so they wouldn't think to connect him to his recent adventures. Best to position himself as an independent cape, without strong ambitions of joining the government hero teams. Better to keep his options open, not to make a commitment. Besides, even if he intended to join their team, it wouldn't do to present himself as a starry-eyed recruit they could take for granted. They would treat him better, with more respect, if they saw him as an undecided cape who they would have to persuade to join their side.

Hence the first cape he approached was the single local rogue in the room. Parian had exchanged her imposing voodoo doll outfit for something out of a Victorian stage play, complete with a doll-faced mask framed by blonde curls. She was surrounded by an orbit of scissors and threaded needles working in tandem to shape her cloth into four golems, each tall enough to reach the ceiling - she must have brought her entire supply from home. She was engaged in conversation with a girl.
in a skintight outfit and an arbalest, one of the Wards from another city.

"Ah, excuse me. You must be Parian?" he said.

She looked up from her conversation. "Yes. Of course, don't you- ah, um. Good to meet you, um. And you are?" Stumbling over her words, belatedly realizing that she should pretend not to know him, but she managed it.

Jack smiled. "I don't have a cape name yet but I'm calling myself Jack Slash for now. I haven't been in the cape business myself, but when I heard the air raid sirens I knew I had to answer the call. It's a pleasure to meet our famous local rogue and fellow telekinetic."

"Pleased to meet you." she said.

>> Sabah had thought the concert was a good idea when she bought the tickets last month. Now...the music was good, yes, but she couldn't make herself enjoy it. Not so soon after the funeral. She wondered when she would start living again, stop just going through the motions...

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A noncommittal response, probably still suppressing her emotions. Good in the short term - she wouldn't have a breakdown and let on what they had done tonight. It might put her in danger during the fight, though. Better to nudge her a bit to the side of emotion. Besides, it couldn't hurt to polish her reputation with the heroes who were listening to the conversation.

"I liked your display at the mall last week - beautiful animation, and you made the Stylings mascot look tasteful for once."

"Thanks. I try."

"Anyway, good luck in the fight. It takes a lot of courage to go against Leviathan with," he glanced at her golems, "a pack of inflatable gorillas and rabbits."

That got a flicker of emotion. "Hey, they're tougher than they look."

The arbalest-wearing cape cut in and spoke to Parian. "Don't worry, you'll be in good hands. Just make sure to use your armband and coordinate with us. Send your animals against Leviathan from a distance and we'll protect you."

>> "Ha, thanks." said Lily. "I'll admit it, though, I didn't design this myself. The PRT has people for that. You know, image consultants, fashion designers." She switched to a more formal voice. "One of the many fine benefits you'll receive should you choose to join the Wards."

The girl calling herself 'Rerouter' laughed at the obvious sales pitch. Lily joined in the laughter. It was a ridiculous situation, really. The PRT had just transferred her to New York a week ago, and they were already sending her on recruitment visits. On the bright side, the girl seemed amenable enough to joining the Wards. She could already tell they would be good friends. Lily was new to the city and 'Rerouter' was new to the Wards system, they could support...

<<

Hm, more protective than he would have expected from a cape from another city. It sounded like Parian would be in good hands indeed. Jack said his goodbyes and went to his next stop, the local heroes.
The Brockton Bay Protectorate were standing next to the stage, talking with Protectorate leaders from other cities to plan the defense. The Wards were sitting on a cluster of chairs nearby, some of them talking, others simply staring out the windows at the rainstorm.

Shadow Stalker was having an animated discussion with Kid Win, gesturing with her grenade launcher. After Jack had come up with the idea of using her shadow state to phase bombs into their targets, she had convinced Kid Win to build her a gun to launch grenades with high precision. The PRT had only cleared her to use grenades that released containment foam laced with tranquilizing gas, to be phased through walls to incapacitate rooms of enemies. The grenades in the launcher today were a new model he didn't recognize - high explosives or equally destructive tinkertech, he supposed.

"Ah, excuse me. That's an impressive gun, Shadow Stalker. I didn't know you used high powered weapons."

"I do against Endbringers. Do I know you?"

Jack smiled, raised his voice so that all of the Wards would hear. "You're a personal inspiration, the reason I volunteered to protect the city today. You probably don't remember me but you saved me from muggers in an alleyway two years ago. When I got my power I was in a bad place. If I was anyone else I probably would have fallen to villainy. But I had you as an example. I've been training for months, learning to use my power to kick ass and protect people like you do. I'm calling myself Jack Slash."

Shadow Stalker chuckled, put out an arm and shook his hand. "Back when I was a vigilante, wasn't it? Welcome to the Endbringer defense, Jack Slash. Always a pleasure to meet a fan."

That got the attention of the other Wards. The young girl, Vista, spoke with a faint tone of disbelief. "Shadow Stalker inspired someone to become a hero? That's...Wow. Miss Militia says that's the biggest compliment you can get as a hero."

"Hey, I did that once too." said another one of the Wards. Clockblocker, slouched on a chair behind them.

"Really? I don't remember it." said Kid Win.

"There was this hot girl I saved from villains. She promised me that if she got powers she'd become a hero so we could shack up. Then she got shadow powers, and-ow!"

"Can it, Clock. We all know you're jealous." said Shadow Stalker. "So what's your power, Jack Slash? Something that can hurt Leviathan?"

Jack frowned. "I'm hoping you can help with that. My power is a form of telekinesis, force-projection from hand-held tools. Most effective when focused through a thin edge, like the the blade of a knife."

He flipped out his butterfly knives, twirled them in the air in a practiced series of tricks and returned them to his pockets.

"My power has range, at least a mile and a half, but my cutting power is limited by the original blade, the sharper the better. I have a few knives I've sharpened the most I can with civilian equipment. I doubt they'll do much against an Endbringer. Do you heroes have tinkertech for this? A knife with a monomolecular edge?"

Jack looked at Kid Win, but he shook his head and pointed to the crowd of Protectorate leaders.
"You'll want Armsmaster for that. He's busy with the bigshots but I can introduce you."

"I'll take him." said Shadow Stalker, rising from her seat.

Clockblocker chuckled, started to say something but was cut off when she interrupted him with a kick.

Shadow Stalker led Jack to the congregation of Protectorate leaders. Armsmaster was a tall figure in a blue suit of power armor, a pair of massive halberds strapped to his back. She tapped him on the shoulder and spoke.

"We've got a new local cape, Jack Slash. Says he can project the cutting edge of a blade for more than a mile, wants a super sharp tinkertech knife to cut Leviathan."

Jack grinned at the hero. "It's an honor to -"

"Show me your power," said Armsmaster.

"Right." said Jack. He flipped his butterfly knives out of his pockets, made a rapid series of slashes to cut grooves into the ceiling above them.

Armsmaster glanced at the results for only a moment. "Show me the blades."

Jack held out his knives. "You can give me a fragile blade as long as it's sharp. It won't wear down no matter how many times I cut."

"Does your power grant enhanced vision? Enhanced accuracy?"

"I've trained my aim for months. I don't miss much."

"You can't stay a mile away from the battle. Against an enemy as fast as Leviathan you'll be just as likely to strike the defending capes."

>> Armsmaster winced as Gallant blocked the criminal's crowbar with an armored gauntlet, staggering back and almost falling to the ground under the force of the blow. Inefficient. Gallant should have leaned into the blow, taken advantage of the force-multiplication of his upper arm strength. A real Tinker would know his own equipment.

It still rankled him. Gallant wasn't a Tinker, merely a rich Ward who paid the Protectorate handsomely for him to build and maintain his power suit. That was an acceptable arrangement in itself, but having to pretend that Gallant was the one who built it? Supposedly the ruse was to keep criminals off balance, but the only consequence that had materialized so far was that boy got praise for using his equipment, poorly, and took credit for...

<<

"Fine, I can accept that risk. It's worth it if I can help you multiply your influence on the battlefield. You've built weapons to hurt Leviathan, now I'm giving you a chance to strike double, to deploy a second set of your weapons to the battlefield to strike at a distance from the rooftops."

Armsmaster studied Jack for a moment, then nodded. He drew a small gold-colored metal rod from a compartment on his armor. "Use this. Press the button on the handle to activate it." He demonstrated, making an impossibly long blade spring out - a three-foot blade from a six-inch handle. The blade was made of the same gold-colored metal, and the edge reflected light with an
"Odd shine. "The edge is fragile. Don't let anything touch it. Don't try to clean it. This is a loan, not a gift. Return it after the battle." Armsmaster retracted the blade and handed the rod to Jack.

"Thank you." said Jack. Armsmaster wasn't listening, though. He had already turned back to the other heroes and resumed his conversation.

Shadow Stalker put her hand on Jack's shoulder and led him back to the Wards. "Don't let him get to you. That went better than I expected. I think he liked you."

"I didn't mind him. He's a straight shooter, easy to work with." Jack used a small hook on the metal rod to loop it onto his belt, then winked at her. "You know, you've been such an inspiration to me that I feel like I know you well already, like a close friend. Why don't I leave you to the Wards and introduce myself to the other local capes before the battle?"

"Yeah, I know just what you mean." Shadow Stalker winked back at him. She paused, then squeezed his arm in her hand. "Don't get yourself killed out there, okay? I'm looking forward to kicking ass with you."

"You too, Shadow Stalker," said Jack. He squeezed her arm in return and grinned. "I can hardly wait."

Jack ignored an exchange between Clockblocker and Shadow Stalker - something about her getting a boyfriend - and scanned the room for the next group of heroes he planned to visit. The New Wave were as powerful as the Protectorate or the Wards but were much closer to his own approach to being a cape, a family of independent heroes who fought crime outside of official channels. Unusually, they went without masks and made their identities public knowledge. That made it possible for a diligent researcher to find out a great deal about their personalities. Two of them were of particular interest....ah, there they were now.

Glory Girl was standing next to a window with one of the Wards, Gallant. They were watching the rainstorm, holding hands, her head resting on his shoulder. A couple? Glory Girl's sister Panacea sat alone, in a chair a few rows away from where the rest of her team were engrossed in a planning session. Odd that she set herself apart from the group. She was staring morosely at her sister, probably brooding over the odds of losing a loved one during the fight. It would be easiest to approach her first...

"Ah, excuse me." said Jack. "You must be Panacea?"

Panacea blinked and looked up at him. "Do I know you?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you." he said, extending a hand. "I'm a local, calling myself Jack Slash for now. My first night out as a cape and an Endbringer shows up, can you believe it? I thought I should introduce myself to the heroes I'll be joining in the fight."

"Hi, Jack Slash." she said, accepting his handshake. Panacea could heal almost any wound with a touch, and his research suggested that she gave her team 'tuneups' before their missions - optimizing metabolism for a prolonged battle, healing cuts and scrapes, killing bacteria that could lead to an infection, and so on. He didn't feel any different after the handshake, but then again, he had come out of his operation against the Empire without a scratch.

"I'm a big fan of your team," said Jack. "You and your sister, especially. You're something of an inspiration."

"Oh. If you want to talk to Glory Girl, she's over there."
He looked at Glory Girl, then at Gallant beside her.

>> Dean watched Victoria place her flowers on the grave. She straightened, then stood silent and still, surrounded by a ghostly, billowing cloud in deep blue and black. As if he couldn't tell her emotions well enough already from her body language.

Victoria had wanted to visit her old teammate's grave, after seeing her cousin have a brush with death on a mission. Dean didn't know why she brought him along or what exactly she expected him to do here. He hadn't known Fleur, didn't have any well-chosen words of comfort. Still, it was his job as a boyfriend to be there for her and to offer whatever comfort he...

Hmm. A man was standing at a grave behind them, a man who kept giving them furtive glances, a man whose cloud of emotions was less suited to a mourner at a grave than to a tabloid reporter eager for a scoop. Another part of his job as a boyfriend was to protect her against unwanted attention...

"Hmm, I'd hate to interrupt your sister and her friend in a private moment. Besides, the media gives the other members of your family most of the attention for crime fighting, but I think we both know that you're the one who makes the biggest contribution."

"Oh, you think so?" she eyed him warily. Her power made her a celebrity, especially in the medical community. She would have plenty of experience with unwanted admirers trying to ingratiate themselves with her to get her to heal their relatives.

He smiled. "There's no need to be shy about it. It's clear from how you handled yourself in the Hightower Apartments video."

Panacea's expression twisted into a grimace, and-

>> Amy stared wide-eyed at the blood-spattered body. "Glory Girl, you can't go full force like that! You could have killed--"

Victoria flew across the room in an instant and stopped her, hissed in her ear "Sssh! The thug in the corner, he's livestreaming it, he wants to make us look bad. I would have smashed his phone but it would make us look even worse. Just heal them and knock them out so we can leave it to the police."

Amy frowned at the man in the corner, slumped over but training his phone camera on them a steady hand. This sort of thing could ruin reputations, hurt her team, even get her sister sent to jail. She put her hand on the villain and sensed his wounds. Shit. Shattered jaw, bones of his hands crushed to a pulp, spine split in two. He'd be dead in five minutes without her help.

"He's fine, just a few bruises and a hairline fracture in his jaw," she lied, and began healing his wounds...

Ah. She probably thought he was insulting her. He quickly raised a hand. "Wait, wait, I know your team caught a lot of flack for that video, but I meant that as a compliment. The public doesn't have a right to criticize you about 'excessive force'. They think you're playing a harmless game of cops and robbers. They don't realize how dangerous villains
truly are, how a single moment of hesitation can be the difference between life and death.

"I saw it in your eyes, in that video. The media praised you for being so concerned for the villain, rushing in to heal his wounds and scolding your teammate for hurting him. But you weren't concerned about the villain at all. You were concerned about your sister, your team, about how the incident would hurt their careers. That's how you help your family. Your power gives them an extra margin of safety, lets them fight their hardest without worrying about how badly they get hurt or how badly they damage the villains. Your team knows that if they go beyond what the public accepts, you can patch up the criminals as good as new. I bet you've saved more than one of your family's lives that way."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about, Jack Slash." said Panacea. "The New Wave is all about public accountability. If the public uses their freedom of expression to criticize how we treat villains, nothing would please us more."

Hah. One of Lady Photon's sound bites, but she couldn't stop a sly smile from creeping onto her face as she said it. Jack returned her smile. "Of course, of course. No one will dare criticize you after tonight, in any case."

"Oh? You mean because we're defending them against the Endbringer?"

"Not only that. Everyone knows that the PRT is soft on villains because they want the villains to help during S-class disasters, the famous 'truce' where we agree to overlook their crimes. But look at the crowd today." He gestured, sweeping his hand over the growing collection of capes in the room. "Not a single villain from Brockton Bay. The next time your team has a Hightower incident do you think the villains will be able to cry to the public about miscarriages of justice? After you and your family put your lives on the line to protect the city while they ran and hid like cowards?"

Panacea scanned the room. "Huh. You're right. Not even the Empire." She scowled. "After all the times my sister had to fight those racist thugs and their obnoxious posturing about Brockton Bay being 'their' city...I thought they would crawl out of the woodwork to defend it for once."

"It's only to be expected. They're using the attack to their advantage, hoping we'll die defending the city while they conserve their strength. They know they're raising the odds of disaster but they don't care how much of the city is destroyed. All they care about is their chance to rule the ruins. The only thing we can do is survive this disaster so that we'll still be around to stop them."

"That's...disappointing. Depressing." said Panacea. She gazed again at her sister, who was now in a conversation with a Protectorate hero. "It's already hard enough on us, fighting the gangs in the city as it is now. We're spread so thin that Glory Girl has to do solo patrols."

"I understand. I've been training to become a hero for a few months now, and I've seen how hard it is to go it alone." Jack smiled. "Maybe I can lend a hand sometime, work together with you to stop the gangs. My power is excellent for defeating villains from a distance but I can't do it without leaving a mark. I have some ideas for how a healer-"

Jack was interrupted by a sudden rush of air at his side. Glory Girl stood next to them, a small smile on her lips.

"Hey, Panacea. I see you've found an admirer." said Glory Girl.

Panacea pursed her lips. "Just talking shop with one of the locals."

"Oh? Well, I've brought you another admirer. One of the Protectorate team leaders has been
looking for you."

A woman rippled into existence next to Glory Girl, appearing with a flourish of a voluminous cape. She spoke with a voice that was confident, commanding, and...overdramatic.

"We meet at last! The noble Panacea, goddess of universal remedy, here to heal the heroes I valiantly save from the jaws of defeat. And who might this gentleman be?"

It was the famous, or possibly infamous, Mouse Protector. A short woman with a permanent grin and a ridiculous mouse-themed getup, she was known for humiliating villains by defeating them while performing an over-the-top hero act and spouting cheesy puns. From the video Jack had seen of her public appearances, she seemed relatively subdued today. That was to be expected - her power set included a Mover ability to 'tag' people and then teleport to their locations, which meant that her major role in the fight would be rescuing injured capes and bringing them to the hospital. The prospect of carrying dozens of dying capes in her arms must have taken some of the wind out of her sails.

"Hi." said Panacea, shying away from the bombast. "This is Jack, um..."

"Jack Slash. A local cape on my first night out." said Jack.

"And I am Mouse Protector, defender of the innocent." The woman's grin ratcheted itself up a tick, and she shifted to an informal tone of voice. "So, Panacea, you're showing a rookie cape the ropes? Good for you. Good for me, too. Your civic spirit makes my job easier. I'd like to ask you for a favor."

"A favor? I can't put a priority on healing your team, if that's what you're asking. We have triage for that, there are rules."

Jack considered leaving them to their conversation, but he didn't have any other groups of heroes he planned to approach. There were less than fifteen minutes before the battle would begin, anyway. He may as well listen in on their negotiations and pick up experience in hero politics.

"Ahaha, worry not, Panacea." said Mouse Protector. "It's just the opposite. One of my new Wards is a healer who'll be joining you in the hospital. She's a good kid, true hero material. But she's young, inexperienced, and her trigger event left her in a bad place. What she needs is friendship and wisdom, grounding in the reality of being a hero to get her head out of the clouds.

"I'd like you to talk to her, Panacea. Give her the benefit of your experience. You're a healer close to her own age, and she's developed a bit of hero-worship for you. I'm hoping that you can reach her in a way that the rest of us old farts can't."

Panacea didn't seem pleased. "Oh. I'm not sure I'll be a good inspiration for your Ward. I'm not a therapist, either. But if we're going to be working together then...yeah, sure, I can talk with her."

"As humble as you are magnaminous. You have my thanks." said Mouse Protector. She gave an elaborate bow, flourishing her cape, then turned to her team and beckoned. A child in a white robe broke off from her team and scampered over to the group.

"It is my honor to introduce my newest Ward, the self-proclaimed greatest surgeon in the world..."
"I'd like you to talk to her, Panacea. Give her the benefit of your experience. You're a healer close to her own age, and she's developed a bit of hero-worship for you. I'm hoping that you can reach her in a way that the rest of us old farts can't."

"Oh. I, um...I'm not sure if I'll be a good inspiration for your Ward." I said. "I'm not a therapist, either."

Mouse Protector continued to stare at me, her incandescent grin not moving a millimeter. God, I hated this.

People insisted on seeing me as a paragon of virtue. I wished I was, but the truth was that anyone with a shred of human decency would do what I did with my power. When you saw people with cancer growing out of their spine, skin burned off in a fire, babies born with their heart outside their body...it was impossible to say no to healing them.

At first I was happy to help them, my spirits lifted by the praise of my patients, the encouragement of my family, and the public adulation for me as a hero. So I healed, and healed, and stayed at the hospital overnight on weekends to heal some more. I heard the same endlessly repeated words of praise until they didn't mean anything to me anymore. And then, once that superficial social pressure was removed, my heart was free to reveal it's true feelings. That I didn't truly care for my patients. That I resented them, hated them even. Deep in my heart I selfishly resented them for being ill, for being injured, for forcing me to give up my chance to live my own life, for making me cloister myself in a hospital with nurses and doctors for company instead of friends and family.

Which meant that I was exactly the worst person to give psychological help to a healer. The only healer in the world who hates the people she's supposed to heal.

It was rare, very rare, for anyone in the public to see the sickness in my heart. My patients should have been able to read my feelings on my face, but they were too preoccupied by the miracle cures I gave them to care about what I felt. The rookie cape I was talking to was one of the rare ones. A boy who saw that I was a real person, that I cared more about my sister's career as a hero than some theoretical ideal of justice.

Victoria knew it too. My sister, my confidante, the one who loved me the most - of course she knew what was in my heart, she knew me better than anyone else. But...she also truly believed that I was a hero at heart. That the sickness in my heart was just a phase, that I would recover, that I was a good person after all. Sometimes she even made me believe it. Now seeing Victoria stand next to Mouse Protector, an expectant smile on her face, the heady pulse of her aura washing over me, giving me the confidence to believe in her belief in me...I couldn't say no to her.

I sighed. "But if we're going to be working together then yeah, sure, I can talk with her."

Mouse Protector's grin increased yet another notch. "As humble as you are magnanimous. You have my thanks." She gave an elaborate bow, then turned to her team and beckoned. A child in a white robe broke off from the group and scampered over to us.

She was a young girl no older than twelve, clutching a worn-out notebook in her hands. She wore a costume similar to my own but with the crosses and serpent-entwined staffs in blue instead of red, and had a belt at her waist filled with surgical tools. Odd that she didn't have a mask - ah. I recognized her. A rare biological tinker, she showed up in the news five months ago when she
triggered after her parents died in a car accident. She used her powers to cobble together a machine from the wreckage that brought her parents back to life, making her first known cape to have that ability. At the time I had been relieved that there was finally another cape with healing abilities like mine, another hero to share the burden of treating the patients no one else could save. But after the initial news report the media went completely silent about the girl, and the PRT was tight-lipped when I asked them for information. I had assumed the worst, especially because her identity became public during her trigger event. Had she been kidnapped by villains? Had she cracked from the stress of being a healer?

My worries were dispelled as girl approached, practically skipping with eagerness and a huge smile on her face. Clearly a cape following the Mouse Protector tradition of heroism.

Mouse Protector spoke in a dramatic tone. "It is my honor to introduce you to my newest Ward, the self-proclaimed greatest surgeon in the world, known as Good Girl!"

The girl blushed. "Hi, Panacea," she said. "Wow, I'm so glad to finally meet you. It's an honor." She stuck out her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Good Girl." I said. I shook her hand-

I flinched. Most of her body was normal, but her arms and legs were a mesh of biological components taken from a dozen different organisms, their DNA modified to reshape them and make them compatible with each other. Organs for chemical analysis of tissue, for secreting and injecting pharmacological agents, even opposable toes on her feet and the beginnings of extra hands sprouting just below each elbow and shin. Threaded around the biological additions were metal devices that my power couldn't penetrate. Both the biological and metal components were wired to a network of nerve fibers that branched haphazardly throughout her limbs, at least ten times as many as there would have been in a normal human.

If she noticed my reaction, she didn't give any indication. She drew back her hand and began rapidly tapping her palm with the fingers of her other hand. Typing? "Wow. You were using your power, right? I barely felt anything but I'm saving it all to a file anyway. I want to find out how you diagnose people with your touch so that I can do it too. Oh! I hope you don't mind. I forgot to ask. Is that okay? Recording your power, I mean?"

A tinker device to sense powers? Was that even possible? "Um. No problem. I'm assuming you've been trained in medical ethics and doctor-patient confidentiality. Keep it confidential."

"Of course, of course!"

"Very good." said Mouse Protector. "It looks like you girls have things well in hand. Now I must go, to plan for battle with the other big cheeses."

The hero dramatically wrapped herself in her cape and vanished into thin air. What a show-off.

"Hehe, the boss does that a lot." said Good Girl. "She's kind of silly, but she's why you're my favorite hero, Panacea! After I got my power I was feeling kind of, um," her smile flickered for a moment, "kind of down at the time, and I didn't know what to do. But then Mouse Protector told me about you, how you spend all your time healing people even though you don't have to, and I said, 'I can be a hero like that, too!'. I want to become as good as you someday. Hey, you can heal people if they're alive but not if they're dead, right?"

"That's right, I-"
"That's great, we can be a team! The boss said she'll tell the heroes to bring all the bodies back to the hospital. I'll revive them and you can heal them the rest of the way. I bet we'll have the lowest death rate against Leviathan ever!"

There was no way a kid her age should be so excited about casualty rates and collecting corpses to raise from the dead. Something in my expression must have given away my unease.

"Sorry, sorry." she said. "I'm being all 'wow, I'm meeting the Panacea!' at you, aren't I? You must get that a lot, but, well, I'm a big fan of yours."

I managed a smile. "Thanks. I noticed. Your costume has a certain familiarity."

"Yes! Yes! You noticed! I, uh, I hope it's okay with you. I didn't mean to steal your thing. I was just, uh, inspired by your design."

Victoria laughed at that. "Yeah, I'm sure. Your name has a certain familiarity, too, 'Good Girl'. I can't believe that name wasn't taken."

"Yeah! See Panacea, I'm just like your cool sister, but I'm Good instead of Glorious! That means we can be a team. You can't use your power on yourself and it's tricky for me to do surgery on myself, but we'll overcome our problems with the power of teamwork. I'll give you super strength and toughness and speed, and you'll do the same for me, and then I'll join New Wave and we'll fight crime together!"

"Well, um, you're certainly an ambitious kid." I said. "I think Mom and Dad would have something to say about us taking on a new team member, though."

"You should make them let me in, then! We'll help each other out, it'll be great. Your big problem is that you're a Striker so you have to touch people to use your power, so I'll extend your reach." Good Girl flipped to a page in her notebook filled with technical diagrams. "See, I'll turn part of your arms and legs into stem cells and grow them into muscles on a flexible titanium mesh, wire them up to your nervous system, add some glands to hold compressed air and maybe a few eyes for sensory feedback, and bam!"

"Just imagine it. There's a bank robbery and those jerks Sparrowhawk and Flutterbye are flying a hundred feet up in the air and saying 'Ha, there's no way the heroes can catch us now!' Then you show up and say something cool like 'The sky's the limit for you, evildoers!' You unwind your tentacles and use your pneumatic jets to launch them up into the air, 'pchooo!', and the villains try to dodge but you use your armeyes to make in-flight corrections, and you grab their stupid faces and they're like, 'curses, you got me!', and then you use your power and pow, they're anesthetized!"

"Um."

Good Girl turned to the next page of her notebook. "While you're doing all that, I'm chasing their evil boss the Ravager. She can't get away because you made me a pet unicorn pony with wings, so I can fly, and she can't hurt me or Luna because we're wearing the armor you made us out of-"

Victoria chuckled. "It looks like you've been watching too many Saturday morning cartoons, Good Girl."

"What? No, what do you mean? We can really do it, right Panacea?"

With a sinking feeling I realized that the girl was telling the truth. The diagrams in her notebook had a quality that I had only seen in a select few diagrams in medical textbooks. A kind of fractal organization, sketches of how organs were laid out in the chest cavity meshed seamlessly with
subcellular details of protein organization. She managed to cram the same level of biological understanding that I got from touching a living being into a twelve year old's scribbles on a sheet of notebook paper. The 'pony' would have hollow bones like a bird reinforced with lightweight metal alloy, layers of armor made of chitin and spider silk, a biological jetpack for emergency speed boosts, and a 'horn' with a pressure ejection system to spit out containment foam and a dozen chemical cocktails. And the shape of its brain looked more human than animal...

Dear God. This girl was a living embodiment of my power. A biological solution presented for every problem. Only for her it was running all the time, in her imagination and probably even in her dreams, and she was too young to understand the need for limits. Too young to know right from wrong, to know that I wouldn't appreciate being turned into a tentacled freak in the name of combat effectiveness. It was no wonder the PRT was keeping her under wraps. Did Mouse Protector expect me to take time out of healing people during an Endbringer attack to supervise a ticking time bomb and teach her restraint? In my mind's eye I saw a vivid image of Gallant waking up in the hospital with extra limbs and a dozen computer chips implanted in his brain where I couldn't remove them. Mom and Victoria would be furious at me for letting the crazy girl work on one of the Wards, on Victoria's boyfriend. No. I couldn't deal with this.

Jack Slash peered at Good Girl's notebook. "Impressive," he said. "You're quite the genius. I'm sure even an expert like Panacea will need a long time to think through your designs. Maybe you can stick to normal healing for now, and wait until after the battle to show her your more original ideas?"

Jack's eyes met mine for a moment, and he winked at me. Thank God, rescue.

"Oh. Oooh! You really think so, Panacea?" said Good Girl.

"Yes," I lied. "Your designs are pretty complicated. I have to go now to finish preparing with my team, but we can look at your designs later, if you want."

"That's...that's...um." she said. Her smile flickered for a moment. "I hear that a lot, maybe later, but you're not saying it because you hate me and you want me to go away, right? You really do like my ideas, right?"

"Yes, of course. I might even have suggestions for improvements." Fewer tentacles, for one.

"That's great! Thank you, Panacea!"

"See you later, Good Girl."

I turned to escape the conversation, but Good Girl tugged on my sleeve.

"Um, there's one more thing," she said. "It may be a lot to ask, I know you have rules, but please, please...can I ask you to take a look at Mom and Dad? You probably saw on the news that I saved them, but, well, I'm a surgeon, not an artist. Director Lee won't let them go out in public because he doesn't like the way they look. He's even, even," She leaned forward, changing her voice to a whisper. "He's trying to take my parents away from me. He wants to replace Mom and Dad with one of his, his lawyers. That's illegal, that's discrimination, everyone should be treated the same way no matter how they look. But all the heroes agree with him, they're all against us. Even Mouse Protector! They won't even let me ask the hospital for raw materials to fix them up properly, it would be 'unethical'. Please, can you help us? If you make Mom and Dad look normal again, make us look like a normal family, then, then..."

Damn. I couldn't help but feel sorry for the kid, but it was another strike against her. It meant that
her resurrection process had side effects after all, nasty ones from the sound of it.

I managed to keep up a positive front. "Okay, Good Girl. I promise I'll try my power on your parents. A favor from one healer to another, okay?"

"Yes! I knew you would! Thank you thank you thank you!" She spun to where her team stood near the edge of the room. "Hey, Momdad! Come over here and meet Panacea!"

What? Her parents were here?

A hulking figure stepped forward. I had seen it earlier and passed it off as one of the monstrous capes, a case 53. Now that it approached...fuck me. It was two human bodies mashed together, interspersed with chunks of metal that must have been salvaged from the car wreck where her parents died. Its head was a Picasso painting, a jumble of male and female features with three eyes, two noses, and two mouths. Everything was held together with rows and rows of stitches, with stress marks on the skin where they had been repeatedly removed and replaced.

I stared, frozen in place. Victoria and Jack backed away from me, away from the monstrosity.

Good Girl beamed. "Momdad, stop. This is Panacea, the amazing superhero I told you about! She's going to get you fixed right up. You can go back to being Mom and Dad again!"

The monster didn't reply.

"Momdad, handshake."

It stuck out the rightmost of its three arms.

I swallowed. "Um. Nice to meet you, Mister and Miss...um, Good Girl's parents?"

Again, no reply. They couldn't talk? I worked up the courage to shake the monster's hand. My power activated, and-

It was worse than I thought. I could see the faultlines where the bodies of the two parents had been torn apart in the car wreck, where the dead and dying tissue had been hastily stitched together with the supplies that had been at hand, circulatory systems joined so that the battered remains of a single heart and lung kept both of them alive. Every organ had gone through repeated cycles of failure, necrosis, regeneration, and mechanical augmentation. Their bodies were dotted with irregularly shaped zones of dead flesh where infection had taken hold, each bearing deep needle tracks from injections that had quelled them. Scrap metal was embedded everywhere, reinforcing the remains of the two spines and replacing most of the bones in their lower bodies where the crash had reduced their hips and legs to a pulp.

The brains of the two parents were shriveled, more than half dead, joined by an unnatural bridge of tissue to let them coordinate their shared body. Neither one had an intact brainstem, so the heart, lung, and other vital systems were being coordinated by the brain of a...a squirrel that Good Girl must have captured at the scene of the crash. The animal's brain was wired into the parents' spines using nerves harvested from Good Girl herself. Good Girl's own tissue was also the source of the blood vessels that perfused the two brains, the muscle and tendons that formed their neck and jaws, and a half dozen smaller reconstructions. Dear God, she must have defleshed her own legs to get that much raw material.

Worst of all, all throughout the body stretched a sprawling network of tissue from a fourth human being. It was female, genetically similar to Good Girl but locked into a permanent state of immaturity, its cells constantly dividing to replace dying tissue. As far as I could tell, it was the
remnant of a fetus that had been developing inside the mother at the time of the crash. It must have been the only source at hand for the pluripotent stem cells and growth hormones Good Girl needed for her resurrection process. In fact...

My eyes were involuntarily drawn to the 'MOMdad's abdomen. There. The mother's womb was still intact, concealed under layers of tissue and metal designed to deflect x-ray and ultrasound scans. Inside was a twenty five week old-no. An eight week old fetus that was growing at an accelerated pace and had already reached the twenty fifth week of development. It was a clone of the fetus that had been used to save the parents' lives. If the fetus was born she could have powers, too, probably along the same lines as Good Girl's. I could see the Corona Pollentia forming...

Good Girl leaned close to me and whispered. "Oooh, you noticed! Don't tell anyone, okay? Director Lee says I'm not allowed to create new lifeforms but I could never abandon my little sister like that! Melanie is so brave, she helped me save Mom and Dad after the accident and she still takes good care of them every day. When MOMdad gives birth to Melanie Two the stupid Director will have to admit that Mom and Dad are really alive, not legally dead, so we can be a family again like we're supposed to."

...what the hell was I supposed to say to that? I had seen the worst of the worst. People crushed to death, half-dissolved in industrial accidents, born with spines outside their bodies. None of them were even half this level of fucked up. The 'MOMdad' was a tinker device, its biological parts in a precarious balance with the mechanical parts that my power couldn't penetrate. I couldn't heal her parents, I had no idea where to start.

I shook my head, trying to find a way to say it that wouldn't set off the crazy tinker. "I'm...I'm sorry, Good Girl. Too many interacting parts, too many tinker devices, it would take me weeks to understand how to help them. Even if I grew them new bodies from scratch their brains can't operate independently anymore. They have the intelligence of a child, they can follow simple commands, but if you separate them they'll become vegetables."

Good Girl wilted, her eyes downcast. Then she shook her head and put on a forced-looking smile. "I know, I know, but you can fix that with your power! You have to. You're, you're the one who's supposed to save them. I can't do surgery on synapses so I can't bring back memories and skills. I mean, I could make Melanie grow brain systems for speech and then teach her to pretend to be Mom and Dad. But that would just be a game of pretend. I want Mom and Dad back the way they were. I want Mom to teach me to cook the fancy apple pie she makes on Thanksgiving. I want Dad to tell more stories about how the evil Chinese-American Trade Agreement was defeated by the heroic lobbyists of the National Business Council. You can fix them, I know you you can!"

"No, Good Girl. I can't. I don't do brains."

"No, no, you do!" said Good Girl. She flipped through her notebook and found a page with a list of dates, crammed with tiny annotations until the page was almost black. "See, November 2, 2010. You regrew a man's eyes. He could see again right away, that means you regrew the axons going from the eye into the thalamus and wired up all the right connections. That's healing inside the brain! You knew exactly which synapses to make to rebuild his visual map, just like how I want you to rebuild Mom and Dad's memories."

No.

"Or look, December 12, 2010. A woman who had a broken spine for thirty years. All the brain neurons that connect to the spine should have degenerated by then, so you must have regrown them and wired them up! Plus, she could do her old ballet routines right away, that means you reconstructed the motor skill memories stored in-"
Victoria was studying me, an unreadable expression on her face. Fuck. I had never told my sister why I wouldn't heal the brain. I couldn't tell her. But at the rate this kid was going, I was expecting her to deduce my deepest secrets from the publicity stories we put on our website. If she said something that made Victoria guess my reasons...

"It's not like that!" I said, cutting her off. "Yes, sometimes I can heal nerves for the senses, nerves for moving muscles. That's just the...input and output. I can't do nerves for thinking and feeling. I can't, I just can't do it, understand? Don't push me on this. I don't have anything else to tell you."

"But, but, that doesn't make any sense!" cried Good Girl. She flipped to another page of her notebook. "If we work as a team I bet we can solve your problem! See, we can start simple, like with flies or squirrels, and you can heal them, and then I'll make them more and more human-like until you break right through your limitation. Think of all the people you could heal, then!"

"No, no, I can't. It won't work."

"You never know until you try! True heroes don't ever give up, they just keep on trying until-"

It was too much. I needed to escape but Victoria wouldn't back me up, she agreed with the girl, she had said it dozens of times. Nobody understood me enough to-

"Ahem." said Jack Slash. "Good Girl, what Panacea is saying is that she can't help your parents because of her Manton limitations. You're a smart girl so I'm sure you know what those are. Some people have powers that can't affect their own bodies, or affect bodies but not minds. You know that the Manton limits can't be overcome simply through willpower or training."

"But it doesn't make any sense! Neurons are neurons, it doesn't matter where." said Good Girl.

"Powers don't have to make sense, Good Girl. That's why it isn't polite to press someone about their limitations. It's wrong." Jack leaned forward. "Think about your own feelings, Good Girl. You want to heal your parents more than anything. But your power isn't good enough. You can't do it no matter how hard you try. You think about that a lot, don't you? Every night since you got your power. You invent new tinker devices and treatment plans every week just to keep them alive, but you fail every time you try to bring back their normal selves. Every single time you fail you feel a little more helpless, a little more lost. It's slowly sucking all the joy and color out of your world."

"Uh. I, uh-

Jack gestured to me, still holding Good Girl's gaze. "Now imagine what it's like for Panacea. She's a legendary hero. She's saved thousands of lives, and the biggest regret she feels is that she hasn't saved more. Every day she sees patients with brain damage she can't heal, and it eats at her that she can't do more for them. You saw how upset she became when you brought up her limitations. When you press her like this, what you're doing is forcing her to remember every single one of the people she couldn't save, every one of her regrets. You're forcing her to feel the same thing that you feel in your lowest moments, when you curl up with what's left of your mother and father and cry your heart out with guilt."

"Uh." said Good Girl. She stared at the floor, unable to meet his gaze. "I...I didn't think of that, I'm sorry, I-"

"That emotional manipulation would be bad enough if you did it to just anyone. But doing that to your personal hero, Panacea, in the middle of an Endbringer attack?" Jack slowly shook his head, put his hand on Good Girl's shoulder. "Our time here is running out. In a few minutes Panacea will have to say goodbye to her sister, to her family, maybe forever. You'll never forgive yourself if you
take that away from her. Maybe someday, long in the future, you can ask Panacea those questions again. When you've become a legendary hero in your own right and you've earned a position as one of her friends. But right here, right now, there's only one thing for you to do. You need to pull yourself together, apologize to Panacea, and get ready to do your work at the hospital as a hero. Understand?"

Jack leaned in close to her and whispered something, a handful of words so quiet that I couldn't catch them.

Suddenly the girl was blubbering, in tears. She took two halting steps toward me, her gaze fixed on the floor.

"I...I'm s-s-sorry Panacea. I didn't mean, I, I'm sorry, so sorry. I just w-wanted to be friends, to ask for your help but I d-did everything wrong and, and...and I'm sorry for making you feel bad, I'm sorry!"

Good Girl ran back to her parents, clutching at their hands and burying her face in their side. The monstrosity wordlessly reached down, picked her up in its arms, and carried her to a seat on the other side of the room. I watched them go, letting out a sigh of relief that I hadn't realized I was holding in.

"Um. Thanks for your help, Jack Slash. I thought she would never go away."

"You're welcome." said Jack. "I could see that she was disturbing you. Your sense of biology must have made her much more unpleasant."

I shivered. "Yes."

"Yeah, but that was brutal." said Victoria. "Don't get me wrong, Jack, that kid is messed up in the head, but remind me not to recommend you as a babysitter."

Jack laughed. "It was for her own good. I like the kid, really. She's clearly a genius, she could become as big as Panacea in a few years. She just needs to learn to stop relying on her parents as a safety blanket. And to stop offering combat tentacles to her patients."

Damn it. I felt guilty, hearing that. I had promised to talk to the girl and act as a mentor, and then the moment she picked on my hangups I panicked and bailed out of the conversation. Meanwhile Victoria and the rookie cape were paying attention to the girl's feelings, looking out for her better than I did.

"Your attention please!" called out a voice from the front of the room, where the leaders of the Protectorate were gathered. It seemed that they were going to give us a pre-battle speech.

Victoria hovered a few feet in the air to see where our team was sitting, then leaned over to me. "Good luck at the hospital, Panacea. Amy. I'm going to sit with Gallant to give him a last goodbye before we get separated."

It made sense. I would be safe in the hospital while Gallant would be at the front lines. It still hurt, for her to abandon me like that. I touched her arm to get one last glimpse at her with my power. She smiled and her own power flared, bathing me with a brief moment of awe as I closed my eyes and tried to memorize her down to the last cell. I gave her a final tuneup before the battle, adjusting her metabolism for prolonged physical activity, optimizing her adrenaline response to stress.

"Good luck, Victoria." I said.
With that, she was gone. I was left to face the Endbringer attack alone.
Jack had assumed that healers were more mentally stable than average hero, given that they avoided the risks and violence of front-line combat. Apparently not. The two healers he met today were riddled with psychological hangups. Which was fortunate, in a way, because it gave him leverage for seeking allies.

From Panacea's emotional reaction to Good Girl's demands, he was fairly certain that her power wasn't restricted from working on brains, from the Manton effect or otherwise. She probably had the same ability to heal brains as she did other parts of the body. Yet for some reason she refused to even consider the idea, letting patients die every day as a result. Her family must know about the situation, judging from Glory Girl's reactions, which meant that they hadn't been able to pressure her into breaking her self-imposed rule.

Why did she refuse to heal brains? A hidden cost? A bad side effect? Whatever the reasons were, they were deeply important to her mental life. Which meant that discovering her hidden reasons would give him a firmer grip on her psychology, give him an angle he could use to convince her and her sister to join his operations. The Endbringer attack might supply an additional push. Cities generally suffered a surge of crime after Endbringer attacks as civil order broke down, which would add pressure for independent capes to team up to combat the villains. It might even be possible to recruit Panacea and Glory Girl to his team in a permanent capacity, if enough members of the New Wave died during the attack that the team was disbanded.

As for the new healer, Good Girl, he was confident that her healing was far less disturbing than it seemed at first glance. The only reason her parents had become such a grotesque creature was that Good Girl had been forced to do the initial surgery with the meager supplies she could scrounge from a car wreck. Hopefully adequate supplies and Panacea's supervision would ensure that her healing abilities were under control during the Endbringer attack. If so, her presence would give him and his allies a better chance to survive the battle. In fact, Jack was certain that Good Girl would make an extra effort to heal him, in particular, out of guilt that Jack had needed to lecture her to make her realize how she was treating Panacea. That would give him a slightly greater margin of safety in the battle.

...not that he had any intention of testing it by carelessly rushing into the thick of battle. The PRT records of Endbringer battles weren't available to the public, but the statistics he had managed to dig up showed that in battles like this one, where the defending capes had a chance to prepare for the fight and deploy together, the largest chunk of cape deaths generally happened in the first five minutes of the engagement. The Endbringers found a way to surprise the defenders or simply hit so hard that they crushed the concentrated defending forces in a single strike. It would be best to stay back and get a sense of the flow of battle before committing to a route of attack.

Ah, there. Jack saw a loose congregation of capes suited for long-range attacks and support roles gathered in the back of the room. A woman with a five foot long tinkertech gun strapped to her back, a man surrounded by a dozen floating mechanical drones, a girl with a ghostly wisp of light hovering above her head, and half a dozen others. Regardless of Armsmaster's reservations about his aim, his own power made him a natural fit for the group.

Jack tapped Panacea on the shoulder, pulling her out of a reverie, and pointed out the group. "Panacea, why don't we sit with the other capes who'll be going to the back lines? They'll probably teleport us out together."

Panacea took a last look at her sister, sitting with Gallant and the rest of her team, and nodded.
They took seats in the back row, close to the windows facing the ocean. The rainstorm was intensifying now, nearly opaque even to the searchlights.

Thus far he had made a fairly good first impression on the local heroes, so-

>> Mouse Protector wrapped a sterile bandage around her Ward's arm - not that it would do much good, with that foul woman's power infesting the wounds. Did she think she could strike down an innocent boy like Squirrelinator and get away with it? This time she would get a beatdown with triple the cheese. A hop to the thug she had tagged and she found her target. "Ravager! The time of retribution has come! Don't think you can turn tail, I'll beat you 'till you squeak!" she declared, striking a...

<<

Hmm. Except for one. Mouse Protector sat on opposite side of the room, comforting a distraught Good Girl and directing an uncharacteristic glare at Panacea. Mouse Protector had entrusted her Ward to Panacea's care and the girl must have come back an emotional mess. She probably hadn't been able to get a clear story out of Good Girl about what happened. He would have to find a moment to clear up any misunderstandings. After all, it would be hard to convince Panacea to become his ally if she thought his lecture to Good Girl had made her enemies in the Protectorate.

Legend waited for the capes to settle down in their seats, then strode to the front of the stage. He slowly swept his eyes over the audience as if to rest his gaze on each one of them personally.

"We owe thanks to Dragon and the Guild for our early warning of Leviathan's arrival. With this advantage, some luck, teamwork and hard effort from all of you, I hold out hope that this could be one of our good days.

"But you should know your chances going in. Given the statistics from our previous encounters with the beast, a 'good day' still means that one in four of the people in this room will probably be dead before the day is done."

A wave of emotion passed through the audience, murmurs and exclamations, capes reaching out to touch their friends for support. A natural reaction, but capes who volunteered for the fight should have already known the odds.

Much of it hinged on praying for intervention by Scion. The first and greatest hero tirelessly traveled the world saving innocents from disasters, but he was out of touch with humanity, silent and unresponsive to all attempts to communicate. The running theory was that his power granted him strength at the cost of his ability to understand language. If the golden man took notice of the destruction and put pressure on the Endbringer in the first minutes of the battle, casualties among the capes could be as low as one in ten. That was rare. If he took an hour to arrive, or if he failed to come at all, the number could be greater than one in two.

Jack himself scanned the audience for-

>> A gathering of eight parahumans, honor guard of the regime. The leader outlined his plan to defend against the rebel attack, then gave a speech to inspire his men. He was charismatic, stating blunt, harsh truths about their odds of success but never once wavering in his confidence.

What was delicious was that they actually believed it! Intonation, breathing, heartbeat - all vibrant with passion and bravery, passing from him to his men like waves traveling through the air. The truth was that none of it mattered. Their plans were exposed, the attack was underway, the honor guard was receiving a call from their
soldiers this very minute but they would never live to hear it...

<<

Jack looked out the window and stared into the rainstorm. Storm clouds were nearing the beach, and torrents of rain were stirring the water into a froth. The wait for the Endbringer's attack was itching at his nerves. Facing the Empire had been nothing like this.

"I'm telling you your chances now because you deserve to know, and we don't always get a chance to inform those individuals brave enough to step up and fight these monsters." said Legend.

>> "The next scenario is an alliance born of necessity: when you are on poor terms with your allies but must combine forces to defeat a common enemy. A betrayal by either you or your allies may lead to defeat for both. This scenario occurs, for example, when so-called 'heroes' and 'villains' ally to fight an Endbringer. Steps must be taken to account for many eventualities.

"Minimize the chance that your allies will betray you. Effective measures include deterrents: weapons of mass destruction, blackmail capable of destroying their organization, subjecting their leaders to a poison which only you can cure, et cetera. Two of the three named methods are available in this case.

"Minimize the damage your allies will do, should they choose to betray you. Effective measures include consolidation of forces, a system to evacuate forces and thus escape the fight, a system to reposition forces and thus ensure that your allies bear the brunt of the assault from your common enemy, et cetera. All of the three named methods are available in this case...

<<

Why was he so nervous? Jack took out a butterfly knife, flipped it open, twirled it in his hands as he scanned the faces in the crowd. When he fought the Empire he had felt a calm sense of satisfaction as his plans unfolded. Then there had been the intense thrill during his climactic reveal, battle, and eventual triumph. Nothing like this.

Perhaps it was because he had known the enemy he was facing in the Empire. He had researched them, made a plan and executed it perfectly, to the point where he could see their attacks coming even before they made them. There was no reason to get a case of nerves because everything had been going according to plan. But now, against an Endbringer, that wasn't the sort of opponent you could plan for...

"The primary message I want to convey, even more than briefing you on the particulars of his abilities, organizing formations and battle plans, is that I do not want you to underestimate Leviathan. I have seen too many good heroes," Legend paused for a fraction of a second, “And villains, too, die because they let their guard down.”

Jack took out a second knife, fiddled with the two blades. No, no, it wasn't simply that he was facing an Endbringer. He had been conscious of the threat ever since he heard the air raid sirens, and he had taken less than ten minutes to get his nerves under control. Then he had improvised a plan to make a good impression on the heroes and had executed it perfectly. Why was he getting a case of the nerves now? Was it-

"Hey, calm down." whispered Panacea. "You're creeping me out with those knives. You were holding up well for a rookie cape. In a minute they'll teleport us to the back lines, then you can leave if you don't want to fight."
"I...no, no. I'm fine. I'm staying," said Jack. He forced himself to grin. "Hey, after this is over we
can say we faced the scariest monster in the world and came out alive. That's-

>> Scarier than what's right behind you?
<<

Jack whirled, drawing knives in both hands and slashing at-

Nothing but a blank wall.

"Calm down!" hissed Panacea. "You're making a scene."

Jack let out a deep breath.

Nothing but a blank wall. Blank except for the two slashes made by his knives, neatly intersecting
the quartered remains of a single mosquito. And half a dozen flies, stirred by the commotion,
drifting off into the air toward the audience. And a dozen more flies scattered across the wall. And
two dozen flies crawling in a wave along the ceiling. A growing cloud of fifty, a hundred, two
hundred, two thousand insects flooding in through the air ducts, massing in the corner of the
room...

"Uh. I think we've..." Jack raised his voice. "I think we've got an uninvited guest!

The growing swarm coalesced into a dark sphere, then bulged outward to form projections, arms
and legs, taking the shape of a person. On the patch of the wall where a head should have been, a
handful of flies formed a stylized sketch of facial features.

Weaver, a.k.a. Queen. The villain who lived as a ghostly consciousness in the minds of insects,
impossible to truly kill. One of the founders of the infamous Slaughterhouse Nine, she had killed
the leader and taken it for herself, rechristening it The Society. Weaver's Society had taken to
prowling the world, targeting countries in the midst of wars and internal conflicts, collecting new
'citizens' by snatching up powerful parahumans - mass murderers, criminals sentenced to the
Birdcage, even innocents who she forced into service against their will. While they typically stayed
under the radar, the times they surfaced to attack were devastating, massacring teams of heroes or
making coup attempts on national governments. After their involvement in a string of city-plus
scale disasters - Ciudad Bolivar, Cologne, the Mordovia Bubble, El Obeid, the Egyptian Biosphere
- the PRT had given them a maximum-level threat rating, to join Nilbog as the only S-class threats
besides the Endbringers.

What was she doing here? He had researched the infamous villains but the odds of encountering
them in Brockton Bay had seemed exceedingly remote. They were rumored to have a vast, palatial
estate somewhere in the vicinity of Ethiopia, filled with Tinker technology and bizarre biological
creations. Weaver herself was only sighted in North America on rare occasions, apparently to
recruit capes she fancied for her Society and to murder other villains for the bounties on their
heads. Attacking heroes during an Endbringer fight didn't fit the picture. The only times her
Society had been sighted at Endbringer fights were...a large part of the reason they were ranked as
an S-class threat, actually. And for certain provisions in nuclear arms control treaties.

Jack joined the capes around him in scrambling back, away from the intrusion. After a moment he
caught himself, forced himself to stop and stand his ground. Yes, his knives would be useless
against an endless swarm of insects. But if Weaver had come to kill or capture the defending capes
she would have attacked without warning. The fact that she was announcing herself meant that she
was here to send a message. A chance to see what one of the most dangerous villains in the world
had to say to an assembly of the most powerful heroes...yes, he definitely needed a front row seat.
At his side Jack was dimly aware of Panacea shrinking down in her seat and muttering to herself. "Fuck! We trained for this. They're coming after me, they found out I made-"

Panacea was cut off as Glory Girl appeared in the air above her, grabbed her, and flew her back to the rest of New Wave. Her team must think Panacea had a strong enough power to be targeted for forced recruitment by the Society.

As Glory Girl fled, a handful of capes approached Weaver's swarm and readied attacks and defenses. Shadow Stalker was among them, ghosting across the room to appear at Jack's side with her grenade launcher raised. Foremost of them all, however, was Legend. He had moved the very second Jack gave the warning, placing himself directly between the villain and the heroes.

The flies forming Weaver's 'face' on the wall scuttled into a caricature of a smile, while the insects forming her 'body' flexed their wings to produce an odd, buzzing speech.

"Hello Legend. I'm offering the support of my Society to defend the city against Leviathan."

As Weaver spoke, her words were spelled out by insects forming large block letters on the wall above. A message she wanted all the heroes to see - was this a performance?

"I appreciate your offer, Weaver, but you know our policy is to refuse help from villains who are subject to a kill order." said Legend. "Particularly you, given your history with the Endbringers."

"We have forty citizens willing to fight. Make an exception."

"Forty capes? Here? That's more than half the size of our force. How...it doesn't matter. We have the rules for a reason. The more capes you have, the more reason we have to be concerned that you could stab us in the back while we're occupied with the Endbringer. The answer is no."

The insectile face shifted into a slight frown. "Extend the truce to us and we won't break it. That's a generous offer, given your history."

Legend shook his head. "I understand your sincerity, Weaver, but we don't have time for this. If you contact us in a week we could possibly make arrangements for a truce to accept your help for the next attack. If you want to help our odds today, leave the area now. Your presence here is already interfering with our preparations, and will continue to hurt us if you stay here during the fight. Leave now."

The buzz grew louder and the swarm reshaped into a whirling sphere, still expanding from the flood of insects coming into the room through the air vents. The heroes tensed for a fight. After a moment, the swarm returned to its original shape.

"You're afraid we'll stab you in the back? Fine. We'll take on that risk in your place. I'm now deploying my citizens as the first line of defense on the shoreline. If you want to save your city, help us beat Leviathan. If you want to stab us in the back, try your hand. Anyone who attacks my citizens will be punished severely."

"Weaver, no. I have no idea what you're trying to accomplish, but you don't want to do this."

"We do. Ask your Thinkers if they're done verifying my sincerity."

Jack caught a glimpse of movement outside the window, near the bay. Three sparks of light in shades of red and yellow rose into the air. They grew and expanded until they were too bright to look at, so hot they turned the rain around them into clouds of steam. Illuminated beneath the sparks, the raging waves were being cut off by a twenty foot thick wall slowly rising up out of the
sand, decorated like a fairy-tale castle and stretching from one side of the bay to the other. The top of the wall was studded with dozens of what looked like antique artillery cannons, all aimed toward the sea.

Weaver was making her true intentions clear. She had claimed she was 'offering support', but the truth was that she was sending her capes against Leviathan whether the defending capes wanted it or not, and was using the threat of force to stop the defenders from interfering. What was her goal? A new weapon she wanted to test against the Endbringer? Some objective in Brockton Bay she wanted to defend?

Now that puzzle was interesting. The battle lines had been simple: the Endbringer was here to destroy the city, the defenders were here to protect it. A natural disaster, really, not a human conflict. But now Weaver's Society had entered the fight and was pursuing a hidden goal of its own. That added a human element to the battle, a mystery to be solved. It looked like he would get a chance to gather information on villains after all - and not just local criminals, but villains who were ranked in the highest class of global threats.

Hah. A second S-class threat had just entered the city, and Jack couldn't help but smile.

Legend was conferring with the other members of the Triumvirate, Eidolon and Alexandria. Alexandria spoke to Weaver in a hard tone of command. "You'll agree to prioritize defending the city over making another attempt to kill an Endbringer. No nuclear weapons."

"Yes. We won't use WMDs without your approval."

"You understand what will happen if you break a truce here. We'll put you on highest priority for termination by the full forces of the Protectorate, regardless of the collateral damage. Taking hostages won't help you here. We won't stop until you're hunted down and killed."

The insect face shifted into a caricature of a wry smile. "Of course."

Armsmaster interrupted the discussion. "We're running out of time. Approx. four minutes thirty seconds."

Legend looked to Eidolon and Alexandria again, some current of understanding passing between them. Then he turned back to Weaver. "...Fine. I can only hope we'll be satisfied with the outcome."

Legend addressed the assembled heroes. "It seems we'll be fighting with the aid of Weaver's Society under a de facto truce. Do not attack any foreign capes you encounter, even if you are provoked. We have to treat the Endbringer as the primary threat. You are under no obligation to cooperate with the Society or follow any orders they may give. Use your armband. If any one of them threatens harm to you or your fellows, report it immediately. When the truce with the Society is dissolved, either during the battle or afterward, we will inform you immediately and recommend actions to take at that time."

There was more movement on the beach. Jack looked out the window and saw Weaver's Society deploying their capes.

The wall on the beach was thirty feet tall now and still growing, thickening. The waves from the storm were growing as well. Every few seconds a massive wave hit the wall and sent a spray of water over the top.

A section of the wall distorted and changed shape, turning into a twenty five foot tall doorway with
a gate like a portcullis. The gate opened and a procession of capes emerged. Twenty capes wearing power armor with wings, followed by a score of ten foot tall mechanical suits carrying tinkertech rifles. Were there people inside the suits, or were they controlled by some form of artificial intelligence like Dragon? Several of Dragon's suits turned and stared at the Society's suits wordlessly.

The capes and mechanical suits were followed by a shambling monstrosity, at least twenty feet tall and twice as long. Jack had never seen a cape so grotesquely mutated by his power, assuming it was a cape and not a Tinker or Master's creation. It had a long trifurcated tail and more than a dozen eyes, arms, and legs. Despite its bulk its streamlined shape seemed designed to move in the water, with fins on its back and a number of arms that tapered off into flippers.

A woman's voice echoed through the room, cheerful and with the tone of a radio announcer. "Hello Brockton Bay! This is DJ Screamer, and I'll be your on-again off-again not-getting-killed-by-an-Endbringer guide this evening. We've got enough Thinkers to track a raindrop in a hurricane, so when we say move, you'd better move. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to lend my voice to our star performer..."

A bright light illuminated the boat graveyard on the north side of the bay. A series of bright white flashes pulsed along the ground of the graveyard, seeming to freeze the rain around them in place. Then a lone figure rose into the air above the graveyard and spread its arms. A deep sound pulsed through the air, a subsonic rumble that grew louder and louder until it became a bone-shaking roar. Four of the boats shattered and lifted into the air, a hundred tons of scrap metal turned into a towering pillar of whirling shards of glass.

A round of exclamations and curses swept through the assembled capes. "Well fuck. They have the Shatterbird." said a cape near Jack, the woman with the tinkertech rifle strapped to her back.

Shatterbird was a mass murderer known for using her power to imbue kinetic force into all of the silicon materials in a city at once - shattering glass, tearing apart electronics, turning sandy beaches into deathtraps - killing hundreds of people in a single attack. Apparently the Society had not only recruited her, but they had found another cape who could transmute large amounts of metal into glass in a matter of seconds. Their combined powers had a good chance at hindering Leviathan's advance, but the hidden message was clear: if the defending capes broke their makeshift truce with the Society, those two powers alone would let the Society tear the city apart piece by piece.

Legend was ignoring the Society's deployment, shouting orders to the defending capes to use their armbands to divide into groups based on their powers.

Jack checked his armband and saw a screen asking him to choose a group. He selected 'Long range attackers (> 5 blocks)'. The screen changed to minimap of the lobby, with a green check mark indicating that he was already in the part of the lobby where his group would gather to be teleported out.

The first group of capes was teleported to the battlefield, disappearing in a clap of displaced air.

The close-combat capes, tough enough to go to blows with Leviathan.

The storm outside was so thick that the windows were rattling with the sheets of water crashing against them. Jack put on his rain poncho, adjusted his knives and Armsmaster's tinker sword so that he could easily reach them.

The second group of capes was teleported out - capes with forcefields and other barriers to stop Leviathan and his waves. They would be needed as soon as Leviathan broke through the wall that Weaver's Society had constructed around the bay.
Jack searched for Panacea in the crowd. There, engrossed in an intense exchange with Glory Girl and Brandish. After a moment Brandish embraced both of them in a hug, then waved them goodbye. Panacea hurried across the room to stand next to Jack, Glory Girl following her like a shadow.

"You're coming with us, Glory Girl?" said Jack. "Ah. You're Panacea's bodyguard against the Society."

Glory Girl nodded, her mouth a tight line. "Yeah. We'd have to be morons to trust an S-class gang of murderers to honor a truce."

A buzzing voice came from above. "We won't kill you, Panacea."

Panacea paled. On the ceiling directly above her head was a cluster of a hundred flies, crawling black bodies rearranging themselves into the rough shape of a face.

"We know about the virus you made for the PRT," continued Weaver. "Impressive, but all it will accomplish is destroying a few ecosystems. It won't hurt me."

Panacea wilted under the villain's gaze.

Glory Girl snarled, her aura ratcheting up to maximum intensity and making her stand out from the crowd like a shining star. "Stay away from her, understand? I won't let you lay a hand on my sister!"

"We'll follow the truce." said Weaver, the face gaining a hint of a smile. "And I don't have hands."

The cluster of flies broke up and dispersed across the ceiling.

Jack found himself at a loss for words. Weaver must be using her insects to listen to everything in the room. Which meant that he, right at this moment, had the leader of an S-class criminal society as a conversation partner.

It was a golden opportunity, but what could he say? He didn't have the insight to give him leverage, to come from an unexpected angle.

>> Tracking with a time delay. Ten flies for each person around the campfire. Flies into pant cuffs, back pockets, backpacks, sleeping bags, tearing off each other's legs and wings so they won't crawl out of their designated positions when they get out of control range...

<<

The flies were dispersing in a curiously methodical way, as if seeking capes to follow, seeking vantage points to listen in to conversations. Jack realized with a start that Weaver must be tracking the defending capes with insects planted on their bodies. He quickly inspected his clothing for insects but couldn't find any unwanted passengers.

In fact, now that he thought of it, Weaver had probably been planning to join the fight ever since the PRT detected Leviathan's approach, but had purposefully waited to introduce herself until time was short and the defending capes were gathered in a single room. Then it would be a simple matter to tag them with insects while they were distracted by her dramatic entrance and truce negotiations. And she could spread insects around the room to hear the every last one of the precautions they were taking against her Society, as teams huddled for hurried planning sessions before they split up for the battle.
Jack looked for Shadow Stalker and Parian in the crowd. He found them just in time to see them teleport to the battlefield with the third group of capes - those who could hurt or obstruct Leviathan but who were too fragile to survive taking a hit.

According to the armband, his group would be next. Everyone seemed to be there, except for...ah. Mouse Protector was leading Good Girl by the hand, the girl's Momdad following behind them. She made a beeline for Panacea, an uncharacteristically grim expression on her face.

"Panacea, I must request that you-Panacea! Are you listening?"

Panacea was staring at the dancing flies on the ceiling, still shell-shocked by her encounter with the villain. She managed to tear her eyes away. "Uh. Yes?"

Mouse Protector spoke quickly, without any pretense of melodrama. "Good Girl tells me you can't heal her parents. That's a shame, we'd all been holding out hope. Now I don't know what else happened between you two while I was away, but Good Girl thinks she did you some grave offense. I've convinced her to buck up and work by your side-"

Good Girl nodded, keeping her gaze trained on the floor. Not meeting Panacea's eyes.

"-but you had better take good care of her, understand? She's eleven years old, she's never been in a fight. I've tagged her and I'll be teleporting in to check on her during the fight. I expect to see her healing the wounded, not drowning in an ocean of tears. Capisce?"

"I'll...try."

Mouse Protector returned to her usual grin and clapped a hand on Panacea's shoulder. "My deepest thanks, noble hero! May the goddess of remedy smile on your brave efforts today."

One of the mass teleporters approached the group. Strider, from Los Angeles, called out instructions in a voice like a train conductor. "Teleporting out long-range attackers, medical capes, support capes, in twenty seconds!"

"Be good, Good Girl!" said Mouse Protector. She made one hand into a fist and pumped it in the air.

Good Girl managed a small smile, jumped up and bumped Mouse Protector's fist with her own. "I always am!"

Legend appeared in the air above the group in a blur of blue and white. "Long-range attackers, I'll join you soon. I'll be surveying the lines of battle to make sure the Society plays by the rules. Until then, do the best you can to prepare a coordinated attack."

Mouse Protector kept her fist in the air and pumped it toward Legend. "Be good, Legend!"

"What?" he said. "Er, right. Sure."

Strider clapped his hands. Jack felt a brief and intense reverse-pressure as the air around his body was sucked away, then found himself back in the cool night air, on the roof of a skyscraper. He staggered, managed to keep his footing in spite of the wind and heavy rain. The roof was lit by a track of small lamps running around the roof's edge. A searchlight was aimed at the shoreline, a dozen blocks away.

"Medical and support capes, gather around me for transport the rest of the way to the hospital!"
called out Strider. "The rest of you-

Four gunshots in quick succession. Guns, here? She peeked around the corner. The guards were on the floor, each one with a single gunshot wound to the forehead. Standing over them were men and women in black bodysuits. Intruders. The red alert the guards had been shouting about?

She readied her remaining ammunition. Four ball bearings, made from iron she had painstakingly leeched from the nutrient slop the guards fed her.

One of the intruders stepped forward and raised his hands in an accommodating gesture, his size marking him as little more than a child. He spoke Japanese with a cheerful lack of expertise.

<Hi! We're on your side. You're out already, huh?>

Another earthquake hit, a bigger one this time. She fell to the floor. The intruders kept their balance, moving eerily in time with the quakes to stay on their feet.

<Guess they slipped up.> The boy continued. <Thought they'd be less panicked by sea monsters, here. Wanna help let out the others?>

"We're not alone," said Jack.

There were three capes on the other side of the roof, wearing the Society's armor. One was near a freight elevator, helping a collection of mechanical drones unload stacks of five foot-long wooden spikes. When the cape touched the spikes they took on a silvery metal sheen. A second cape, almost two heads taller than the others, leaned against an enormous belt-fed gun that looked like it used the spikes as bullets. The third cape had bulkier armor resembling a spacesuit and was touching her hands to an array of shimmering patches of air, arranged in a cylinder stretching thirty feet in front of the gun's barrel and passing over the edge of the rooftop.

The spacesuited one turned and spoke rapidly in an Asian language. The tall one grunted, spoke in a deep woman's voice. "She says not to mind us. And that you have good taste in rooftops."

Jack felt the capes around him shift in place, preparing to attack or defend. Strider was hesitating to teleport out the medical and support capes - if he did, he would be leaving the long-range capes alone on the rooftop with the Society members.

The tall one continued translating. "We will not attack you. You can use the elevator when we are done bringing supplies. Three minutes. Do not bring metal near the railgun."

The Asian cape returned to her work, drawing a glowing orb from her belt and tossing it into the cylinder of shimmering air - an array of electromagnetic fields? A streak of light tracked the orb's path as it shot into the night sky, taking less than a second to pass over the horizon beyond the bay.

Strider cleared his throat, spoke to the defending capes. "Legend will be coming soon to assist. Anyone who wants to go to the hospital and not this rooftop, stay by me. Leaving in five...four...three...two...one..."

With a clap of displaced air, Jack was left behind with the other ranged attackers. He didn't need any special preparation to use his power so he stood back and watched the others ready their weapons, setting up tinkertech rifles and sending mechanical drones flying out to the shoreline.
The Society capes were finishing their preparations as well. The Asian one waved to the others and put her hands out to her sides, conjuring two vertical columns of shimmering air stretching into the night sky. She accelerated upward and passed out of sight.

"Where is she going?" said Jack.

The tall one glanced at him. "To the big gun."

Jack folded his arms and watched the bay, waiting for the attack to begin. He had always put a great deal of effort into choosing his fights, controlling the battlefield by researching his enemy and dictating the terms of engagement. Now he was in a fight he didn't choose. Against an enemy his power was unlikely to touch. Surrounded by more than a hundred other capes, each preparing their own set of tactics and powers, none of whom he knew well enough to influence. Stranded in a battlefield outside of his control, arranged to deal him the worst possible outcome - becoming a nameless corpse lost in a sea of dead and dying capes, reduced to a mere statistic.

Jack took a deep breath, gripped the tinkertech sword at his side. An Endbringer attack wasn't a once-in-a-lifetime event. It was a natural disaster that happened two or three times a year, predictable, unremarkable. He would never forgive himself if he let a mere Endbringer attack get in his way, if he let it stop him from making his mark on the world.

He needed to calm down, focus on what was important. Watch the heroes at work. Learn about the Society, figure out what they were doing here. Lend a hand to Shadow Stalker and Parian, if he got the chance. Most of all, survive.

Something was happening at the shoreline.

The wall around the bay was forty feet tall now, weathering the strikes of massive waves that sent rivers of water over the top. The wall was still illuminated by three yellow sparks of light, but the sparks were moving now, slowly floating toward the bay and leaving trails of steam billowing in their wake.

The dozens of cannons on top of the wall swiveled in unison and lit up the night, firing lasers and volleys of explosives over the horizon. From the way their attacks were scanning over the surface of the water, they were tracking something fast. After thirty seconds he could see what they were aiming at. A rippling disturbance in the water moving toward the bay...carrying a fifty foot tall wave in its wake.

The cannons on the wall changed targets, striking at the oncoming wave to break up its momentum. As if it had been waiting for a cue, the disturbance in the water abruptly accelerated, moving from the horizon to the mouth of the bay in less than a second. It struck the wall with an earth-shaking crash that sent Jack stumbling to the ground. He regained his footing in time to see the fifty foot wave reach the shore and slam into the wall. Rivers of water spilled over the edge and flooded into the city.

When the flood of water receded, more than half of the canons had been destroyed. The remaining half were focusing their fire on something close by, just out of sight behind the wall...there.

Two massive, scaled hands gripped the top of the wall. Between them was a head with glowing green eyes staring out of four gashes in its flesh, three on the left side and one on the right. The head flicked back and forth in a rapid series of twitches, like an eye in a socket. Scanning the city, the defenses, the capes who would soon be dead or dying in its claws.

Leviathan was here.
Coil strode through the concrete corridors of his base. He cut an imposing figure. A tall man with ramrod straight posture, costumed in an all-concealing black bodysuit emblazoned with the image of a coiled serpent. His newest acquisition had arrived in poor health, likely a side-effect of her power. He had hoped to welcome her in his command center, to get her accustomed to the room that would become her new home for the foreseeable future. The infirmary would have to do.

Coil already had a number of parahuman agents, largely teenagers who were unattached to existing teams and thus easy for him to control. His pet villain team, the Undersiders, ensured the success of his critical operations by keeping the local heroes distracted with attention-grabbing heists. He controlled them with periodic cash payments and generous bonuses, a small fortune to the teenagers but a pittance to him. Their Thinker, Tattletale, was insightful enough to pose a risk to his operations if left unchecked, so he supplemented his financial control with the threat of death if she disobeyed him.

He also made use of a pair of vigilantes, Jacob Hebert and Sophia Hess a.k.a. Shadow Stalker, who attacked any and all criminal gangs they came across. Coil controlled them by the simple expedient of providing them with anonymous tips on the Merchants and the ABB, ensuring that their bloody strikes were directed at his enemies. He had learned through his power that the vigilantes would turn on him the moment they discovered he was a villain, which meant that he would have to dispose of them before long. Perhaps he would reveal their bloody deeds to the authorities, or send them on a suicidal attack against the Empire. After that, he would have to rely more heavily on his contractors. Faultline's crew of mercenaries was reliable, if expensive, and Circus was skilled at clandestine robberies and slipping surveillance devices into secure areas.

But Coil's newest acquisition was more precious than all of them put together.

Dinah Alcott, twelve years old. The media would believe she was kidnapped for political reasons, a child turned into a bargaining chip because of her family's relationship to the mayor. Not so. Coil already had more than enough leverage to put the mayor in his pocket. No, Dinah had come to his attention when his contacts in the PRT uncovered reports of the girl dropping out of school while suffering from recurring headaches and claiming to predict the future. While her parents vehemently denied that she was a parahuman, the school nurse reported that the girl gave precise probabilities for future events, including the odds of: her parents believing she was parahuman, her headaches continuing, natural disasters striking Brockton Bay, supervillains attacking her school, and - when prompted - the nurse's boyfriend breaking up with her.

Dinah was an incredible opportunity. Combining his power with hers would make him nearly unbeatable. Her power to see possible futures, and his power to pick among them. He would use her power to discover his enemies, the people with the greatest probabilities of working against him. He would discover their most likely plans of attack, then use his power to ensure that they failed; he would discover their points of weakness, then use his power to ensure that his attacks struck home.

The girl's power would be a great help in gathering minions, as well. His own power gave him a tremendous amount of wealth, but there were many whose desires could not be satisfied with money alone. His associate Accord had already notified him of one such opportunity, the villain team known as the Travelers. They had a hidden team member of immense uncontrolled power, and they would gladly do anything for him if he could promise them even a small chance of solving their problems. With the girl's power, he could give them conclusive proof that their
problem was soluble, and that the odds were highest if they worked for him.

Coil entered the infirmary and laid eyes on his new pet. Dinah was sitting on one of the beds, curled up with her head resting on her knees. Her eyes were closed and she was using one hand to massage her forehead. Doubtless she was suffering from a headache brought on by using her power to plot an escape. The girl was flanked by Coil's doctor and nurses, as well as two of his soldiers. Coil had forbidden his soldiers from carrying knives and firearms in her presence; it would be poor form to underestimate a child who could predict the future.

"Dinah Alcott."

Dinah groaned and blinked her eyes open. She stared at him with a kind of grim resignation. Not a child's usual reaction to his imposing snake-coiled figure, but that was to be expected - she had doubtless seen him in her visions, after all. Coil waited until he had her full attention before continuing.

"Dinah Alcott. I imagine you are rather confused at the moment. Allow me to make your situation clear. My name is Coil. You will be living here from now on. You will be working for me. If you do as I say and behave yourself, your accomodations will be pleasant. If you fail to cooperate, your accomodations will be rather less pleasant. You see the future, do you not? Then you should already understand that it is in your best interests to do exactly as I say. Do you understand me, pet?"

Dinah stared up at him blankly. Then she shook her head. "Zero point zero four two two repeating percent." she said.

Coil tilted his head. "Zero point zero four percent chance of what?"

"Zero point zero four two two repeating percent chance I'll be working for you after today. Sorry."

Ah. That was my signal.

I jabbed Coil in the back of the neck, paralyzing and anesthet-

<> <> <> <> <>

Coil sat at his desk, frozen in place. Seemingly lost in thought. Then he opened a window on his computer showing one of his surveillance feeds. For a moment he watched his strike team drive their captive on the last leg of their return journey to his base.

He reached out to the intercom and spoke. "Red Alert. High probability of a parahuman infiltrator at headquarters. Enact Master-Stranger protocols immediately and-"

Ah. That was my signal.

I jabbed Coil in the back of the neck, paralyzing and anesthet-

<> <> <> <> <>

Coil sat at his desk, frozen in place. Seemingly lost in thought for a long moment. He maximized the window on his computer showing the surveillance feeds from his base, enlarged the subwindows for the cameras in his own office and in the infirmary.

He opened the top left desk drawer and drew his pistol. Then he kicked away his chair, crouched under his desk, and emptied the magazine at the air behind him, filling the room with bullets,
while simultaneously activating the pistol's special attachment and raking its laser across the room.

Ah. That was my signal.

I jabbed Coil in the back of the neck, paralyzing and anesthet-

<> <> <> <> <>

Coil sat at his desk, frozen in place. Seemingly lost in thought for a long moment, stretching on interminably.

He reached out to the intercom and spoke. "Squad Alpha, a change of plans. Abandon the mission immediately. Your new mission is to return target Delta Alpha to the origin point, along with a cash payment of fifty thousand dollars to be delivered to the doorstep to compensate the residents for their trouble."

Ah. That was my signal.

I jabbed Coil in the back of the neck, paralyzing and anesthet-

<> <> <> <> <>

Coil sat at his desk, frozen in place. Seemingly lost in thought for a long moment, stretching on interminably, longer and longer and...

Ah. That was my probably my signal.

Coil cleared his throat and spoke. "Visitor. I'm open to negotiation. Whoever you are, whatever your goals. Shall we talk?"

In some ways, it's a pleasure to deal with Thinkers. I don't have to attack. I simply arrange my forces and wait until they come around to my way of thinking. Unfortunately for him, I already had a competing offer that was better than anything he could provide.

I jabbed Coil in the back of the neck, paralyzing and anesthetizing him. It was no contest, really. It was over the moment he put on his costume in the morning.

They call themselves 'capes'. As if their costumes were parts of their selves, of their own minds and bodies. It's deeply engrained in their psychology. They start the day in their home or headquarters, safe secure, hidden behind a secret identity. In that safe place they put on their costume, become the costume. The costume becomes their mental and physical armor against the hostile outside world, preparing them to face threats in all directions and traps around every corner.

This fact has two useful consequences. First, if you want to find the place where capes are most vulnerable to attack, where they are least prepared to face a threat...look no further than the place where they don their costumes.

Second, they never notice the paralytic insects in their costumes until it's too late.

It was a shame, really. Coil's goal was little different from my own. He wanted to run his city efficiently, ridding it of needless waste and crime, and allowing parahumans to take positions of power, to avoid being indentured to the normals like the parahumans of the Protectorate and the Yangban. He was doing it differently, of course - infiltrating the system from within rather than creating a parallel Society without - but the end result would be roughly the same. True, Coil was selfish. He designed his organization so that he wielded nearly absolute power, and his
subordinates could be more properly called servants than citizens. If I was honest with myself, though - or if I listened to Harbinger's thoughts on our chain of command - my own Society had been drifting in that direction for some time.

What doomed him was simply the difference in our motivations. In a choice between Coil's organization and my own, I would put my Society first. And who would make better use of Alcott's power - Coil with his modest resources and small ambitions of taking over a city, or my Society with the power to topple governments when we so chose? There was also the matter of morality. Coil's plan involved drugging Alcott into compliance, while I refused to recruit my citizens by force.

Besides, we already had a citizen named Coil.

Our mission to Brockton Bay was growing ever more complex. Harbinger had noticed anomalies in the financial markets pointing to a Thinker of some power in Brockton Bay. More intriguing, the anomalies were well-hidden and were not followed by a transfer of wealth to the conventional power blocs, the major government and criminal organizations in the city. Power, ambition, willingness to work outside the system to pursue a personal goal; all in all, an ideal candidate to become a member of our Society.

A visit to Protectorate territory came with strings attached. Dragon agreed to our standard terms - not to alert the local authorities when her surveillance programs pinged us - but she acted oddly during the negotiations. Hydra, Branch, and Telicomnicon judged that she knew more than she was letting on about our candidate and Brockton Bay.

When we identified our candidate as Thomas Calvert, a.k.a. Coil, the reason for her reluctance became clear. The man had bought his powers from Cauldron. Dissappointing. Though Cauldron didn't have him under their protection, and permitted him more independence than their usual agents, he was almost certain to owe them a few favors. That was the dealbreaker. We wouldn't accept a citizen with double loyalties. At best we would deal with him as a business associate or a contractor.

We were ready to leave the city when Dinah Alcott triggered with fantastic precognitive powers. A second chance to recruit a powerful Thinker. Left to her own devices, she would have little reason to join our Society...but Coil conveniently decided to kidnap her, drug her into compliance, and use her as the centerpiece of his plan to take over Brockton Bay. That sealed her fate. Alcott agreed to join us in exchange for protection and a few reasonable terms. A typical recruitment in many respects, rescuing a new trigger from the clutches of a local warlord.

Yet Alcott's power and motivations meant that she was anything but ordinary. During our negotiations she let slip a particularly concerning prediction about the future of our Society. A threat that we would have to give our highest priority, if we could bring ourselves to believe it...

The van with Dinah Alcott was arriving at the base. We would have to maintain the facade that Coil was alive for the time being, until we were ready to dispose of his organization. It was a simple matter - Screamer to impersonate his voice, Nyx to impersonate his appearance. Just like old times. 'Coil' ordered his soldiers to bring Dinah to his office, congratulated them on a job well done, and dismissed them.

The moment the door closed, 'Coil' stood from his chair and spoke to Dinah. "Do you believe me now, Dinah Alcott? Do you believe your visions?"

Dinah sat in her chair, staring wide-eyed at 'Coil'. "So it was all real. The, the visions, the snake-man, the bug-woman, the voices, all of it."
"Yes." said 'Coil', now in my buzzing insect-voice. "Coil is real. He kidnapped you and we saved you. As we agreed."

Nyx dispelled her illusion, drawing her poisonous gas back into her body to reveal the true state of affairs. Coil's unconscious body sat motionless in his chair, surrounded by my citizens. Nyx, red-skinned and black-eyed, sat on the edge of Coil's desk. Her bodyguard, Tranquility, was curled up in the corner like a cat, reading a paperback copy of 'Sauti ya Dhiki'. Jeopardy, our ersatz healer for the day, stood next to Coil, idly drumming his fingers against the unconscious man's forehead as and studying Dinah with a quiet intensity.

And surrounding them all, spread out on the floor, walls, and ceiling, were my insects. I drew a fraction of them together to form an avatar, a four foot tall 'face' made of bugs on one of the walls, and spoke with the buzz of insect wings.

I smiled. "It's good to see you again, Dinah. Now that you're safe from this man."

Dinah drew back in her chair, the natural reaction of a child to my insects. But her reaction was slow, muted. Likely a benefit of her power telling her that she wasn't in any danger.

"It, it was all so crazy. A snake man coming to kidnap me and and lock me in a room. A bug woman coming to save me. I'm sorry, Weaver. There was no way I could believe any of that."

"It's okay, Dinah. I don't blame you. You know the truth, now."

"It was true about my headaches, too? You can-" Dinah grimaced, her headache worsening as she gave it her full attention. "You can really cure me?"

"We can take away your headaches, yes." I said. "Jeopardy, please go ahead."

Jeopardy turned to the citizen in the corner. "Tranquility. Naweza...?"

Tranquility looked up from her book, nodded, and fixed her gaze on Coil.

Jeopardy stilled the drumming fingers of his hand and exercised his power through his hand's contact with Coil. The moment he finished using his power, Tranquility let out a deep sigh and went back to her book.

Jeopardy walked over to Dinah and put his hand on her head. Dinah looked up at him expectantly.

Jeopardy smiled, spoke in his rough German accent. "Before we start I have a question for you, Mädchen. A tidbit of trivia. Which physicist proposed the idea he termed the 'many-worlds' interpretation of quantum physics, eliminating the need for embedded observers to model a quantum mechanical system?"

"What? I don't know that." said Dinah. Her face clouded. "Besides, that's a trick question. It was proposed by Hugh Everitt but the term was coined by Bryce DeWitt. You won't-" Dinah's face slowly lit up like a dawning sun. "It worked. It's gone. You cured me! Thank you thank you!"

Dinah burst out of her chair and jumped up and down in the air, wrapping Jeopardy in a hug. Then he laughed, and the spell was broken. She quickly stepped away from him, embarrassed at her outburst of celebration.

"It's okay to celebrate." I said with a smile. "It's a shame that parahumans like you are made to suffer because of your powers."
"I won't get headaches ever again?"

"You'll still get them sometimes, but it should be rare. As I told you, Jeopardy can use his power to repair the stress that mental powers put on the brain, but his treatments come at a cost, so we can't afford to use them often. Most of the time you'll still have to use your power carefully, only a few times a day. We'll give you training to teach you to use your power safely. We'll also protect you from stalkers like this snake-man, so you don't feel pressured to overuse your power like you did today."

I paused. "That is, assuming you're still willing to accept my offer and join my Society. Now that you know your visions are real."

Dinah's face fell. After a long moment, she spoke. "I...I want to say yes."

I waited.

"I want to say yes, because you saved me. You didn't have to do that, but you did. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

"But..." Dinah hesitated. A twelve year old girl, trapped in a room with four adult parahumans who were obviously dangerous and had just saved her life. Yet she was still nerving herself to argue against me. She was probably using her power to confirm that we wouldn't hurt her, that we would give her a free choice. Even so, it was impressive.

"It's fine." I said. "I told you my rule. I won't force you to say yes."

Dinah spoke, words spilling out one after the other. "You said you wanted to save me but you want to take me away from my home just like that man did. Away from my parents, you want to make them think I'm dead. Ninety point two two three two percent chance I'll never see my parents again if I come with you. Ninety seven point zero one eight six percent chance they'll think I'm dead."

"Yes. That's the deal. Accept my offer, join our Society on your terms, and leave your old life behind. Or reject my offer, return to your family, and give us two weeks of service as payment for your rescue."

"You said you'd take care of my family."

"Yes, of course, Dinah. Your terms for joining our Society were to provide for your family and to remove 'villains' like this man from Brockton Bay. We'll certainly take care of them for you."

"Yeah. Um. When I said to get rid of the villains, I didn't think, but that means you'll...kill them."

"Some of them, yes. Some we hope to recruit to our Society. Others we'll scare off, force to leave the city or give up their life of crime. Sadly, people like this man, Coil, can't be trusted to reform. You checked it with your power, didn't you?"

Dinah tugged at one arm with the other. "Ninety eight point four repeating chance that he hurts people in the next year if you let him go and leave the city."

"Right. If you choose to join us, you'll help us get rid of people like him from everywhere we visit. You'll save the lives of hundreds of children like you."

"But I don't want to kill anyone." Dinah stared at her hands. "...and, and, and why do you want me
to leave my parents behind? Why can't I help you and stay at home? Why can't I take them with me? Why can't I just, just..."

"Dinah-"

"I don't want to go away from Mom and Dad. I can't leave them behind. They're *Mom* and *Dad*. If, if I'm never going to see them again, I need to..."

Dinah was shaking, tears on her cheeks.

"Nyx, Jeopardy, Tranquility, please leave us now. Take Coil with you. We need some privacy." I said. Left unsaid was another reason for asking them to leave; if Dinah became upset enough to intend harm to one of us, Tranquility's aura could prove troublesome. I waited for them to leave the room before continuing.

"I'm sorry, Dinah. I understand. I don't recruit my citizens with coercion. You're free to reject my offer and return to your family. It won't be a bad life. I'll help you convince your family that you have powers, so you can enter the Wards program. They'll protect you against villains like Coil who would kidnap you for your power. They'll help you use your power to save lives, to be what they call a 'hero'.

"It won't be all roses. They'll make you serve their government, their military. They'll make you use your power for economics and war. Stealing money and power from people in other countries, giving it to people in their own country. Still, it'll be a good life, at least for twenty years or so.

"But you know why I'm offering you this, don't you? Even though I don't want you to have to leave your parents?"

Dinah nodded, wiping at her tears with her sleeve.

"It's what we talked about in your room, Dinah. The prediction you made about the end of the world. The event that kills more than eighty percent of the humans and ninety eight percent of the parahumans on planet Earth, happening in sixteen to twenty five years.

"If you join me, I promise you I'll devote all of my effort to stopping the end of the world. I'll have to put my Society first, because they're my people and I've made promises to defend them, but I'll do my best to save the rest of the world as well. You know I'm telling the truth. You used your power to test my resolve.

"If you reject me and join the government, they'll try to save the world too. The question is which one of us will make better use of your power. Do you remember the questions I asked you, Dinah? Can you answer them now with your power?"

Dinah nodded again, resignation written on her face.

"What's the chance the end of the world is prevented if you reject my offer and stay with your parents? Say, chance the number of deaths is fewer than one hundred million?"

"One point zero zero one percent."

"What's the chance the end of the world is prevented if you accept my offer and stay in my Society?"

"Twelve point eight one five five percent."
"You're a good person, Dinah. I don't say that lightly, but you truly are. You want to save the world. And you're one of the rare few people who truly understands what it means to save lives. You're like my partner, Harbinger, in that way. You see the world as numbers. You see that ten million deaths is ten times worse than one million deaths, that saving ten million lives is ten times better than saving one million lives. You can make the hard decisions to keep humanity alive. You'd sacrifice a million lives in a heartbeat if you had to, if that was what it took to save the entire world.

"That's why I'm giving you this opportunity, Dinah. The opportunity to sacrifice some of the happiness of three people - you, your mom, and your dad. In exchange for an eleven percent better chance of saving billions of lives. You can see it, can't you? You're seeing those futures right now, in your mind's eye. Yourself, your family, and the rest of the human race."

"Y-yeah." said Dinah. "I see them."

I waited, letting her consider.

"I..." Dinah swallowed, looked down at her hands. "I need Mom and Dad here for this. Um, please. This is important. I said all those things before, I agreed, but I didn't think it was real." Her tears began to flow again. "Please. I'm twelve, I'm supposed to get Mom and Dad to sign things for me, to decide the important things. I'm not even allowed to have a car yet. I need to see them. I, I can't see my numbers. I see the numbers for everyone else, everything they do, but not me so I don't know what I'm going to do. I need to know, I need Mom and Dad now, please, please..."

"I'm sorry, Dinah. I understand why you want your parents here. They've guided you all your life and they only want what's best for you. You love them very much, and they love you too. And you understand them very well...so you know why this is your decision, not theirs."

"Dinah, imagine we went together to your parents right now and told them that joining me was the only way to save the world. That if you didn't join me, everyone else in the world would die. What's the chance your parents would let you join me?"

Dinah sobbed. "Three point one one two nine percent."

"As I thought. Your Mom and Dad love you. They're the best people in the world at making decisions for your everyday life. They know how to make you smile, how to help you with your homework, what to get you as a gift for your sweet sixteen. That's their job as parents, making decisions like that for you. If you were a normal girl, that's all you'd need.

"But they don't know how to save the world. They don't know that saving ten million lives is ten times better than saving one million lives, or that saving the entire world is better than saving one life. And they don't understand your power, the wisdom beyond your years that it gives you. That's why they won't accept that you're a parahuman - they only know how to raise a normal girl, so they pretend you're normal. They don't understand that their daughter already knows what it means to make a sacrifice, and that she's brave enough to sacrifice her own happiness for a good cause. You understand, don't you?"

She nodded.

"That's why it's your decision, Dinah. If you choose to stay with your parents, I'll respect your decision. You can live a good sixteen to twenty five years with them. I'll still try to save the world. I'll do the best I can, I'll ask you questions whenever I get a chance. Or you can choose to stay with me, and we'll work together to save the lives of billions of people. It's up to you. Take as much time as you need."
Dinah put her head in her hands and cried. For minutes she was still, her eyes closed, the only sounds in the room her sniffs and sobs. Using her power to peer into futures, viewing the chances of lazy Sundays in the park with her parents, weighing them against the chances of apocalypses scouring countries and continents.

After a five full minutes she raised her gaze to my insect 'face' on the wall. "I have a headache again. Worse than before."

"I can bring back Jeopardy, have him treat you again."

"No. I decided. I'll...I'll join you."

My face broke into a broad smile. "Very good. Welcome to our Society, Dinah. I won't disappoint you."

"Wait. There's something I want you to do, first."

"More terms?" I said. "Please, go ahead."

"You want me to make a sacrifice. Me and my parents. Our happiness for the world."

"Yes. We'll do what we can to help. We'll give your parents money and support for their careers. We'll find foster parents for you in our Society who will love and care for you."

"It's still going to hurt me. Mom and Dad too. A lot. I can see it."

"That's true. I'm sorry."

"So I want you to be *fair*, Weaver. I'm giving up everything to save the world, so everyone else should too."

"I'm sorry, Dinah. You'll have to explain."

"You said I should join you because I'm good. Good people like me make sacrifices to save everyone. But bad people who don't sacrifice anything get saved anyway. That's not fair. I want you to make everyone be good like me."

"You're asking me to use coercion. To force people to join my Society, or to take them as slaves. To act like *Coil*, the man who just tried to kidnap you."

"Yeah. If doing that helps us save the world, then yeah."

"Dinah, when I started my Society, I set rules. My first rule was to never recruit by force. In my personal experience, if you force people out of their old society, force them into a new group against their will - then they'll hate their life, hate the people who forced them in, hate the leaders. They'll try to kill the leaders and destroy the Society in revenge."

"You forced *me* in." said Dinah, bitterly.

"No, I gave you a-"

"You said you knew I was a good person, you knew I'd make sacrifices to save the world. When you asked me you already knew my answer! Sacrifice three lives to save billions, of course I had to do it, I didn't have a choice!" Dinah was shouting now, genuinely angry for the first time I'd seen. "So why should you give anyone else a choice? If they're good like me they'll help us save the world anyway. If they're bad then they're evil, they'll let the world burn without lifting a finger, so
"I understand, Dinah. I'm grateful for what you've done. You're making a deep sacrifice to save the world, so you want the people who you're saving to pitch in with sacrifices of their own. We can do that. We can reason with them, convince them, bring them onto our side. If we work hard and use your power, we might get as many as one in five parahumans on board with us, worldwide. But you have to understand, we'll run into problems the moment we try to force them onto our side. They'll hate us, betray us at the first opportunity."

"Please, Weaver. I gave you my parents. Please give me this much."

I considered her proposal more deeply. True, she was sacrificing her relationship with her parents, but she was asking me to sacrifice much more in return. Forcing parahumans into the Society would be close to slavery, and my current citizens would be... displeased to say the least. I occasionally forced parahumans into my service using death threats or Master powers, but only if they were our enemies and had tried to kill our citizens. Even then we didn't treat them as allies, but rather as expendable prisoners or weapons. If it improved the odds of saving the world, though...

As if responding to my thoughts, Dinah reported the odds. "Fifteen point one one one one percent chance we'll stop the end of the world if you follow my advice. Six point two three repeating percent chance if you don't."

Ominous. More than doubling our chances to save the world by breaking my rules and threatening the foundation of my Society.

"I'll...have to ask you more questions about those futures." I said. "If they lead us to save the world but destroy our Society, we might have to choose a different path."

Dinah clenched her fists. "Just promise you'll think about it."

"...Okay. I promise I'll consider it."

For a moment, Dinah stared into the distance in silence. From the faint motion of her lips and the small insects I had planted on her throat, I could tell that she was reciting numbers to herself - "Forty two point six six four nine, eighty eight point two nine nine two, ninety two point six three five three." Useless, without knowing the questions she was asking.

After a moment, she nodded. "Fine. That's good enough." Then she grimaced. "Can you bring the man to heal me again? My headache is getting really bad."

"Of course. I'll call in Jeopardy now." I said.

Again, ominous. If she was satisfied by my promise to merely consider breaking my rules, she must have predicted that my small promise was enough to make me likely to give in to temptation sometime in the future.

In a way, though, it was refreshing. We had founded the Society with global ambitions, but we had started with modest goals - survive for the next week, survive for the next year, get a counter for the Protectorate Thinkers. Then we grew to larger goals - build a permanent headquarters in a country with a friendly government, take secret control of the neighboring countries to stop their endless wars, disperse our citizens across bases in multiple countries to resist attacks by the Endbringers.

Yet there had always been a nagging feeling that we were merely building an infrastructure. A world-spanning organization that could be put to decisive use, if only we could find a worthy goal.
A goal worth gathering all of our forces together to strike at a single target with all our power, worth breaking the founding rules that made our Society a haven for parahumans, a goal that might even be worth sacrificing all of our lives and our Society itself for a chance at victory.

Now, it looked like I had found it. Saving the world from destruction? Leading my forces into battle against an enemy powerful enough to kill ninety eight percent of the parahumans on the planet in a matter of days?

I could almost look forward to it.
Bakuda was almost done wiring her sixth grenade in the series. She should have been getting faster as she went, getting into a rhythm, but instead each one took longer to complete than the last. She was getting distracted by the soft crunching sounds coming from behind her.

Lung had parked his La-Z boy in the middle of her workshop half an hour ago. He had simply come in with his men, slouched in his chair, and started loudly snacking on a packet of chips while watching her work. No reason, no explanation, intimidating by his very presence. She had no idea what he was trying to accomplish. He wasn't normally interested in her science, just in her results. Did he come to appreciate her work for once, to spend quality time with his most productive cape? Was he trying to intimidate her into working better and faster, because she was working on grenades for his favorite assassin Oni Lee? Or was she on thin ice, was today the day he would finally kill her if he picked up one more hint of dissent?

That was his standard operating procedure for instilling loyalty. Fear through *certainty* that all who opposed him would be defeated, spiked with fear through *uncertainty* about what failure or insult would provoke his displeasure.

Bakuda put away the soldering iron and turned to face her boss. "Hey, Lung, this is delicate work. Cut out the distractions so I can concen-"

She froze in place as she saw the source of the crunching sounds.

Lung was laying down on his chair, motionless, apparently fast asleep. But his chair was on *fire* and his armored scales were slowly sliding out from under his skin. A cloud of insects swarmed above Lung's face, divebombing him in strictly organized regiments. Each time they dove, a cluster of insects struck Lung's face and dissolved, leaving behind a sticky black residue that fizzed against his scales and skin and made crackling sounds as it ate through his flesh. The left side of Lung's face was a dissolved ruin.

And all around him my insects covered the entirety of the room in a blanket inches thick - floor, walls, ceiling, shelves, still and silent bodies of Lung's men, *everything* but the small patch of workbench where Bakuda had been engrossed in her work.

The fire around Lung kicked up a notch and his body and chair started to burn in earnest. The surge of fire kicked the solvent into high gear and it began to eat through his skull, slowly exposing his brain to view. I didn't have my insects retreat from the growing flames, that would give the wrong impression. Instead I kept them in place, letting them die and send the stink of burning insects into the air. A strong, unique smell Bakuda wouldn't have encountered before, good for imprinting the experience in her mind. Whenever she thought of me she'd call to mind that smell of burning insects, that hiss of dissolving flesh, and she'd remember what she saw me do today.

Bakuda finally nerved herself to move, whirling back to her workbench and going for the bombs in her left middle drawer. Or she tried to. In the moment she spent looking at Lung, I had completely covered her workbench in a carpet of my creatures, bees and hornets and scorpions with tails ready to strike, drawers locked shut with thread, a web of silk cords drawn out behind her. As she turned to face the workbench she was tangled in the web and fell to the floor. In less than a minute she was bound and immobile, eyes and mouth jammed shut in fear of the hornets on her eyelids and lips, desperately trying to raise her nostrils high enough to breathe above the rising tide of insects threatening to drown her.
"Grace Phillips."

I made my voice with all the insects in the room at once, a deep, harsh drone coming from all around her that she could feel in the buzzing wings of the insects on her body. She ceased her struggles and lay absolutely still.

"Grace Phillips. Open your eyes."

Her eyelids flickered, then jammed shut again when the hornets above buzzed angrily in response.

"Now. Look."

Her eyes shot open. I left the hornets in place for a beat, their feet resting on her exposed eyeballs for a fraction of a second before they pushed off and took flight. Bakuda would have thrashed in place if her bonds would have allowed her to move more than a centimeter.

"You know who I am. I have plans for this city and I've decided to dispose of the villains, starting with the ABB. I thought you'd like to watch, to appreciate the spectacle.

"This man, Kimura Kenta, was in my way. So I decided to give him a fitting death. He's dreaming now, locked in a state of hibernation, unable to sense anything in the world around him. He knows he's in a fight for his life, though, so his power is transforming him, covering him in scales and flames to protect him from attack.

"But do you see that black oil on his face? That's a heat-activated solvent designed by Venom, one of my chemical Tinkers. The hotter Lung burns the more he'll dissolve until there's nothing left of him but a puddle of amino acids where his head used to be. He's being consumed by his own power.

"Wong Jun-fan was in my way, too. Ah, you know him as Oni Lee the assassin, the knife expert. I've prepared him another fitting death. He's currently being ripped apart by a knife-loving associate of mine. We'll be able to fold him up and fit him in a suitcase when we're done with him.

"Now, Grace Phillips. What should I do with you?"

Bakuda trembled. I waited for a full minute in silence, drawing out the moment.

"Hmm...I won't kill you, not today. Not unless you oppose me. You're not going to oppose me, are you Grace?"

Bakuda shifted fractionally in her bonds, desperately trying to shake her head.

"Good. Now listen. I'm letting you live for the moment because I like you, Grace. I like Tinkers and you have top-of-the-line potential, potential you've been wasting making cherry bombs for a two bit thug like Lung. A master bomb maker working in a dingy basement on a dime-a-dozen drug lord's budget. I've seen your story a hundred times before and I know exactly how it ends. You'll be remembered as a speed bump for the heroes, a mere B-rank threat, your only redeeming feature being that you managed to go out with a bang.

"So I'm going to make you an offer. Join my Society and work for me. We'll give you a chance to show the world what you're really made of. You'll have the materials and equipment you need, world-class workshops better than the Toybox, collaborations with our Tinkers. Access to the notes of the Protectorate Tinkers too, thanks to our spies, even some of Dragon's techology.

"I'm not just offering you resources, Grace, I'm offering you direction, a chance to change the
world. Alone you make beautiful bombs, but join us and we'll multiply their impact. Thinkers to find the optimal targets, our Movers and Strangers to deliver them where they're needed.

"More to the point, we have confirmation from precogs of an upcoming disaster, an enemy worse than an Endbringer who has the power to wipe out eighty percent of humanity in less than a week. I intend to stop him. That means we'll give you a chance to go all out. You can make bombs that level continents and we won't mind as long as you destroy the target."

I waited for a minute to let the offer sink in.

"Understand my offer? Nod if you understand."

Bakuda nodded, head moving only a centimeter in her bonds.

"Good. If you join me you'll have to act like a member of a civilized Society. Not the gang of street thugs you've fallen in with in the ABB. If you start shit with us, rant to the other Tinkers about how you're a 'superior genius', I'll punish you. If you treat your fellow citizens as threats instead of allies - hiding your creations, making deadman's switches, attacking citizens without permission - then you're nothing to me but another enemy. I'll crawl through your eye sockets into your brain and eat your amygdala. You'll still make weapons for me but you'll be cured of your unnecessary baggage. Understood?"

Bakuda shivered.

"You have a second option. If you don't like my offer, if you don't like my Society, if you're arachnophobic, whatever, then I'm giving you an out. Leave this city, leave the East coast, and don't come back for at least a decade. I'll even buy you a plane ticket. Los Angeles, maybe, so that when you inevitably piss off the PRT and have your little blowup, the Triumvirate will be on hand to keep you from putting a pockmark in one of my favorite landmasses.

"If you take the plane ticket and leave, don't come after me on some stupid quest for revenge. I'd give you testimonials from capes who've tried that in the past, but most of them are dead and the rest aren't in any condition to speak. Understand?"

Bakuda nodded.

"Good. I'll give you...fifteen minutes to make your decision."

I began releasing her bonds and moving my insects off her body, clearing a small space around her. A symbolic gesture, giving her space to think.

As I did, the flames around Lung's body abruptly lost their intensity. Lung was finally dead, his head completely dissolved into a thick black soup that was slowly soaking into the charred remains of his chair. The rest of Lung's body lost its transformation in death, scales flaking off to reveal unmarked flesh.

"There he goes." I said. "Don't touch. The oil sticks to flesh."

Bakuda lay still on the floor, watching Lung's corpse, not moving even as my insects removed the last of her bonds. Then she coughed, rubbed her eyes, stood and stretched. She spoke, not sure where to address her words, craning her head back and forth to look at my insects.

"If I join you I'm not going to be locked up in some shitty sweatshop in Nairobi, am I?" Her voice was wavering, trying to sound brash instead of fearful, not succeeding.
"We stay under the radar and move our citizens between bases several times a year, but within those restrictions you'll have luxury and freedom. We'll provide you with a team of normals as your assistants and household staff as long as you don't abuse them."

"And you mean what you say about equipment and tech from other Tinkers? From Dragon? You're not shitting me here?" She was getting more confident.

"Yes. You saw the Egyptian Biosphere on the news, didn't you? Sphere made it in less than six months with our resources." I paused. "I don't recommend pulling a stunt like he did in the end, though, unless you want to join him in his punishment cube."

Bakuda laughed, half nervous and half-sincere. "Sucks to be him, then." She put her hands over her eyes, thought for a moment, then clapped her hands and laughed again, more sincere this time. "Ah, fuck it. Fuck yeah, count me in. About time the real movers and shakers appreciated my work. I was getting tired of slumming with these thugs."

I drew a fraction of my bugs together into a humanoid avatar. A woman's form, eight feet tall with arms opened wide.

"Good. Welcome to my Society, Bakuda."

I stretched out a 'hand' made of hundreds of bees and wasps. Bakuda hesitated for only a moment before approaching and shaking the 'hand'. Faster than most. As expected from her personality, responding to threats by diving in full speed ahead. I'd have to manage her carefully.

"We'll handle the formalities later today." I said. "I have a job for you first. Your first task as a member of my Society."

I walked my avatar to the bodies on the floor, knelt at the side of one of them.

"We'll be faking your death, making it look like the ABB was taken out by vigilantes. This woman is a good match for you. Height, body type, mix of Japanese and American ancestry. We'll dress her in your outfit, make it look like you were surprised at your workbench and killed with one of your own bombs."

Bakuda reacted at that.

"Don't fuss over your reputation. We'll build you a better one later. Now, show me what you can do. Make a bomb that'll turn this woman into a ringer good enough to fool the coroners. Keep her mostly intact, just enough mangling they'll think she's you. Burn off her face and melt her teeth, maybe. The PRT has your DNA on file so you'll also need to scramble her genetic material. Hard radiation or something more exotic. Now get started. You have two hours."

Bakuda grinned. "Putting me on a time limit? No problem, chief." She looked at the body, grinned wider. "Worked out just like I told you, didn't it 'Watanabe-san'? Your only redeeming feature was that Lung thought you looked pretty holding a gun, you're more useful as a corpse."

Bakuda leaned against her chair for a moment, eyes closed and hands folded behind her head as if she was relaxing on a beach. Then she nodded and turned to her workbench, pulling scores of components from the drawers. She worked with a renewed, manic intensity, twice as fast as she had for Lung. Good. She was excited by my offer, eager to prove her worth to her new Society.

The recruitment had gone well. Of all the worthy candidates in Brockton Bay, Bakuda was my first target because of her sheer instability. Her bomb-making and personality meant she was certain to draw the attention of the law. If I left her in the ABB there was a good chance she'd get herself
killed or captured in a matter of weeks.

Recruiting Bakuda was easy, a common case. A Tinker fixated on proving her power and intelligence, cowed by a boss who ruled through fear and intimidation. To gain her interest and keep her happy, I had to show her that I appreciated her skills, offer her a golden opportunity to exercise her skills to the fullest. To gain her respect and keep her stable, I had to put on a show of intimidation, convince her that I was far more worthy of fear than her old boss.

I would be able to keep her happy in our research facilities for a year or so. Then I would need to throw her a few breadcrumbs, give her a chance to use her bombs in a major conflict and show her power to the public. She was like Shatterbird and Crawler - leave her inactive for too long and she would get antsy. Perhaps I'd pit her against a national army, or an Endbringer if one attacked us. I'd put Bakuda with a half dozen other heavy hitters, make them work as a team. Teach her that combat is about cooperation to achieve a common goal, not egoistic competition and backstabbing like she was used to in the gangs.

It was a shame about Lung and Oni Lee. They had useful powers but they were completely unsuitable for my Society. Lung would never bow to my authority, a classic warlord mentality, and Oni Lee was too loyal to leave his side. Besides, killing Lung granted me Bakuda's loyalty, and she was far more useful to my Society. Our specialty was the fast and decisive strike, hitting our targets with pinpoint accuracy, striking from the shadows to keep our involvement a secret. Lung took time to ramp up his power, was conspicuous as a flamethrowing dragon, caused collateral damage and impeded teamwork by superheating the air around him. Whereas Bakuda could make hundreds of bombs that hit as hard as Lung and activated instantly, and she could give the bombs to other citizens to deploy them to optimal effect. Most of all, Bakuda was creative. She could make bombs with dozens of useful effects - disguising our attacks as gas leaks or conventional explosives, sterilizing outbreaks of contagious plagues, exotic attacks to pierce through defensive powers.

Besides, I was preparing for a world ending event, and Lung had already proven himself unable to stop S-class threats. I had seen it firsthand in Kyushu. Naive observers thought Lung had defeated Leviathan, driven the beast off. The truth was that Lung hadn't hindered the Endbringer's attack in the slightest. The Endbringer danced around the battlefield, play-fighting with the heroes to occupy its time while it called waves to sink the island. Lung took hours to ramp up his power before entering the battle and then spent more hours doing only superficial damage. Nothing to touch the true Endbringer, the core. At least Bakuda gave us hope that one of her exotic bombs could pierce its defenses.

This recruitment was a test of sorts. The first time I used my new precog to confirm my strategy - which parahumans to target, the right angle for the recruitment pitch, how to keep them happy once they joined my Society. So far she was passing the tests, her power giving the same answers as my experience.

Dinah Alcott was calling herself Dice now, a name that Jeopardy had suggested. It was a sensible name given her power to see probabilities, but knowing the man's sense of humor it was also a subtle joke about her black-and-white morality and her attempts to influence my decisions. 'God does not play dice with the universe, but Dice does play God'. I would have to be careful to guide her mental growth as she matured. Teach her subtlety, teach her to be aware of her limitations.

That was the most dangerous trap we would have to avoid in our preparations for the worldend event. The trap of the flawed oracle. All Thinkers fell into the trap to some degree, precogs like Dice most of all. Their powers gave them absolute confidence in their knowledge, but the truth was that every power had weak points to exploit. We had already found a number of holes in Dice's
power. Can't predict Endbringers and Scion and a handful of other entities that cast shadows on precogs. Trouble predicting how her own actions will change the numbers. Vulnerable to certain deceptions and illusions, to any scenario where what she 'sees' in the future is different from what really occurs. In short, taking her numbers at face value would be a fatal mistake.

The best way to escape the trap was to have a pool of Thinkers with an experienced strategist to direct them, to use common sense to temper their wilder hunches, to ensure that their powers cover each other's weak spots instead of interfering with each other. As soon as we left Brockton Bay I would send Dice to our think tank in India where we had a team of Thinkers and Trumps to make optimal use of her power. While we were still in Brockton Bay, though, I might be able to recruit more Thinkers as backup...
The intruder stood above the villains, her presence an odd mixture of human warmth and intimidation. She looked for all the world like a cross between a woman and a praying mantis, the sleeves and pants of her dapper business suit cut short to free the scythe-like sickles growing from her arms and legs. Her face was roughly human in its shape but had numerous additions - antennae, oversized compound eyes, and a layer of green exoskeleton meshed with her skin.

Othala and Victor looked up at the intruder from where they were glued to the floor of Othala's house, covered in layers of adhesive yellow slime. Behind them stood their guards. There was no need for common insects for this mission. Their guards were a pair of giant spiders, each four hundred pounds in weight with eight legs as thick as a human's. Their bodies were covered with a thin film of reflective material that glistened in the light, with special sacs on their abdomens for spraying the containment slime.

One of Othala's hands was left free to move, positioned so that she couldn't touch Victor to grant him strength or speed to break free of his bonds. She was using her free hand to dial numbers on her cell phone, trying to contact other members of the Empire. This was her fifth failed attempt. She was pale, shaking, getting desperane. "Nothing again. Even uncle Krieg, he's just...I...damn it, this, this is insane, I-"

Victor spoke to Othala, a confident tone in his voice. Using the skills he had leeched over the years from countless actors and swindlers, putting on a display of strength to keep up her spirits. "O, try Crusader. He said he was going to visit Purity and her group, they're strong. Night and Fog aren't easy to kill."

Othala dialed the number with her free hand. She put it on speaker mode so Victor could hear. The phone rang, four times, eight times, no answer. Then there was click as someone picked up at the other end.

"Justin!" cried Othala. "It's an emergency! It's Weaver, she's attacking the Empire, she has our identities, you have to warn-"

She was cut off a strange voice like the buzz of insect wings. "This is Weaver. Justin Schmidt is now in our custody and is being processed." The line went dead.

Othala gasped, dropped the phone as if it was a live animal that had bitten her.

"I told you. The Empire is gone." I said.

"Fuck you, Weaver." growled Victor. "You're breaking the code, coming after us in our homes. Worse than the lowest street scum."

"The 'capes' who came after me never cared about any code. I have no reason to return the courtesy." The insect-woman tilted her head. "For what it's worth, I'm truly sorry for you and the other capes of your Empire. It's not personal, it's business. My client is providing me with unique and quite valuable services in exchange for my assistance in purging villains from Brockton Bay. I'm sure you understand."

Victor glanced at the spiders behind him, then back at the insect-woman. He managed to keep his voice level despite his predicament. "You're not going to kill us, then. If you wanted to kill us you'd have already done it."
"Yes. I've been working to curb some of my client's worst excesses. I've convinced my client to spare a select few, worthy villains, to grant them exile rather than death. You two are among the chosen few. I'll escort you from the city and you'll promise to never return within a hundred miles of Brockton Bay. You'll obey these terms of exile, won't you?"

Othala swallowed. "Yes. God, yes, just-

"Why us?" said Victor.

"Vic, no. Just say yes and get us out of here...

"No, O, this is important. There's a reason she's keeping us alive. She wants something from us. That means we have leverage, we can work out a deal. Trust me, O. We'll get through this together, we'll survive and come out stronger." He turned to the insect-woman. "I'm right, aren't I? Why us?"

"Very good." I said. "We do have one more order of business. I've promised my client to exile you from the city. I suppose my client expects me to knock you unconscious and dump you in a ditch in Nevada with a few black widow bites to remind you not to return. You'd have to start on your own from scratch, resorting to petty villainy to make ends meet. Not a comfortable life, I imagine.

"You deserve better than that. I've followed your careers and I'm impressed by your skills. I believe you're destined for great things. You were elite soldiers of the Empire, and frankly, the Empire dramatically undervalued your abilities. In fact, you're the only two members of the Empire who I consider worthy of fighting by my side.

"So I'm making you an offer. Othala, Victor. Come work for me and become citizens of my Society. You'll have all the perks of your villain lifestyle multiplied several times over. Money, status, territory, allies who respect you for your abilities. I won't ask you to fight on the front lines - I have plenty of citizens with brute force power for that. Your powers are best when used with finesse. I'll help you use your powers to their greatest effect and give you appropriate rewards.

"Victor, I'll provide you with world-class experts in any skill you can name. I'll allow you to copy them with your power, as long as you ensure that their skills will eventually recover from your power's leeching effect. I have a long list of applications for your skills, all of which are far more lucrative than the drug-running operations you've done for the Empire. I'll pay you three hundred dollars an hour to do computer hacking, targeting the Toybox and industrial companies employing rogue Tinkers. I'll pay you a similar wage to be a combat instructor for my new recruits, for parahumans who think they're strong because of their powers and don't know how to handle a rifle."

"Othala, your healing skills have been criminally undervalued by the Empire. You're being cheated by anyone who pays you less than a million dollars a year. I'll offer you two million to start, for healing my citizens and civilians in my territory who have been wounded in battle or sickened by illness. I'll arrange for you to work together with Victor. With my help he'll become the greatest surgeon in the world, and he'll use his skills to prep your patients to maximize the effects of your regeneration. My Thinkers say we can more than double the efficiency of your healing. I'll also give you even greater compensation if you're willing to participate in combat operations, such as granting invulnerability and super speed to safeguard my citizens while they deploy tinkertech bombs.

"I don't recruit by force, so I won't punish you if you refuse my offer. I'll simply follow my client's instructions and exile you from the city. You'll fall asleep and wake up in another state in a few weeks time, once we're left Brockton Bay and we don't need to be concerned about you spreading
word of our presence. But let's hope it doesn't come to that.

"Take a moment to imagine the future I'm offering you. You can leave behind the gang wars and the squabbles over territory. You can start a new life together in the lap of luxury. It's a beautiful future, isn't it? That's my offer. Think it over. I'll give you thirty minutes to decide."

There was a long pause before anyone spoke.

Finally Victor shook his head in disbelief. "You're insane if you think we'll even consider working for you. It doesn't matter what you offer. You broke the code, killed our friends, killed the Empire, killed Kaiser. The man was a visionary, he was like a father to me. I swear I won't let you get away with killing him."

"That's understandable. But that was business, there's no reason to bear a grudge. You understand. You were a lone operator for years, you took on contracts for all comers. I'm sure you met people who could have been your friends if your client hadn't marked them as targets. It's the same thing here for you and me. But this time I've gone an extra mile and convinced my client to spare your lives, then gone another extra mile and offered you a cushy job. I'd like to think that's proof enough that I mean the best for you and that my offer is sincere."

"Then show me your sincerity and tell me who your client is so I can get revenge on them."

"No. I'm a professional. You wouldn't join an organization that gave away information about their clients."

"Fuck you!"

"You say that, but you understand what I'm offering. You didn't join the Empire because of ideology, Victor. You did it because you wanted status and power and the Empire made the best offer. Now the Empire is gone, and I'm making you a better offer. Work for me and you'll be a member of the most powerful parahuman organization in the world, with status and wealth beyond anything you could have ever gotten in Brockton Bay."

Victor was silent. Considering my words. He would be the easiest to convince. If he was the only one I had to convince, I was almost certain I would succeed.

"You're a warlord." he said at length. "I've seen the PRT briefings. You've killed armies, cities filled with civilians. That's not us. We're not cold-blooded murders, we have morals. We don't kill the genetically pure unless they fight the Empire."

"The stories you've heard about me are PRT propaganda. You've seen the proof of that already - they say I kidnap parahumans, but you've seen that I don't recruit by force. The PRT calls me a warlord, but my goal has never been war. My goal is to create a Society where parahumans can live in peace and use their powers for mutual benefit. We only fight wars to quell unrest in nearby countries that threatens to destabilize our territory."

"No. Doesn't matter what you say. What matters is your reputation." said Victor. "There's a kill order on your 'Society' that gives cash rewards for killing your 'citizens'. If we join you we're putting ourselves in the sights of every cape in the world. I...maybe I could do it, but I wouldn't put Othala through that."

"As I said, I won't send you to the front lines unless you request it. You'll be safer in the heart of our territory than you were as a gang member in the streets of Brockton Bay, and you and Othala will live in luxury instead of a little place in the suburbs."
Victor spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "That's...your offer sounds tempting, but you're an enemy trying
to tempt us. You can't expect us to trust you. We need to see proof, talk to your 'citizens' and see
your territory before even considering."

Othala shook her head violently. "No Vic. Don't listen to her. You're falling into her trap. She...she
took everything from us. She killed Kaiser, she killed Krieg, she..." Othala paused, pulled herself
together. "She killed them, then she throws money at us and expects us to forget our friends, our
family, to be her buddies and work for her. That's an insult. She's another one of the vultures who
thinks money is everything and has no idea what true loyalty means, who thinks I'm a soulless tool
to be bought and sold for the right price."

Othala turned to address the insect-woman. "I don't care what you offer. I don't care if you exile us
or kill us or anything else. We won't ever forget the Empire and we won't betray them."

Victor made a small sound in his throat. He had been starting to think that he might accept my
offer. Now he was torn between cheering for Othala's idealistic words and wanting to hold her back
in fear that she would ruin their chances for a deal. This was the problem our Thinkers had warned
me about. Othala's loyalty, her insistence on seeing her team as her family. If I wanted to recruit
her I would need to nip this line of thought in the bud...

"The Empire is gone, Othala. There's no Empire left to betray. I won't ask you to forget your past,
but from this moment forward you and Victor are on your own until you join me or some other
group, and I'm offering you the best deal you'll find. And no, I'm not simply throwing money at
you. I'm simply offering to pay you a fair wage for your powers, which you'll be hard pressed to
find elsewhere in the world. But that's not even the most important part of what I'm offering you.
My citizens aren't loyal to me for money alone."

"I'll give you security. I'll give you status as part of the ruling elite. I'll give you allies who respect
you and help you use your powers to the fullest. I'll even help you start a family. Where would you
rather raise your children? In the states, on the run from the law and surviving by joining a petty
street gang? Or as a citizen of my Society, with a stable job in our hospitals and the weight of my
organization to support you?"

Othala spoke in a sharp tone, disgust dripping from her voice. "You're asking me to betray my
ideals, the Empire's ideals. You want me to live with you in Africa. To heal the apes you live with
there, to treat them as if they were people. To...to raise my family in that hellhole. You're trying to
trick us, pretending that's the only way we can have a good life, but that's not true. You took..." she
stopped, sobbed. She turned to Victor. "She took my uncle away from me, she took Krieg, but he's
still here helping us right now. We'll go to Krieg's friends in the Gesellschaft. They'll let us join
their team, give us a place in Germany in a civilized country. Better than anything this bug bitch
can give us."

I had known she would play this card. It was natural for Empire capes to scurry to the Gesellschaft
to preserve their outdated Nazi ideology.

"No, Othala. You're trying to convince yourself that I'm evil for having blacks in my Society, but
you know that Kaiser and the Gesellschaft never believed in their racist screeds. Their racism was
merely a tool to recruit soldiers and keep them in line. The truth is that my territory is as 'civilized'
as anywhere you'll find in the states, with material wealth to match."

"And you should already know that the Gesellschaft is the last place you should look for a
civilized society, for a place to raise a family. Yes, they'll give you a place on their team and a nice
home to live in. Then when your children grow up they'll force them into their power granting
program, trying to give them trigger events starting at age 8. Do you really want your kids to go
through that? Do you think your kids will still love you afterward? You must have asked Night and Fog what it was like, what the Gesellschaft made their 'loved' ones do to them to give them their powers. As one of my citizens you'll never have to worry about my Society doing such despicable tortures to your children. We pride ourselves on being a safe place for parahumans to raise families, and we never force trigger."

"No! Shut up, shut up!" shouted Othala. She continued in a low, intense voice. "I know exactly what you're trying to pull. Everyone does it. Everyone wants me for my power, every team wants to make me join. Even the fucking feds would probably give me a pardon just to get me on their side. They want healing, they want someone to boost their capes with more powers. But they only want to use me. They don't care about me, they only care about my power. They don't love me, they only love my power. Understand? You think you're doing me a favor but you're not any different from the rest of the vultures who think I'm a power in a box.

"What's important in life are friends and family. Krieg loved me, Kaiser respected me, the capes in the Empire fought by my side. Even if they're a memory, I won't betray them for anything."

It was a shame. If Othala wanted material goods or social status then I could make her a better offer than any organization in the world. But she was fixated on the past rather than the future, on the memories of her old team. The only solution was to break her memories, to show her that they weren't as rosy as they seemed.

I contacted my consultant for the mission who had breaking speeches as her specialty. Our new Thinker, Tattletale, who had been listening in through a microphone in the insect-woman's pocket. After a moment I spoke to Othala again...

"Othala, You're right that family is important. That's why I'm offering you a chance to start over with Victor, to start a family of your own and live in luxury. But you're lying to yourself when you say the Empire was your family. You didn't join them because of family - not family love, at least."

Othala stiffened. "If that's what you think, then you don't know the first thing about me."

Victor spoke up. "Right, O. You don't have to listen to this. Weaver doesn't have a right to tell you who you love."

"I've followed your careers." I said. "You never wanted to get into the cape business, did you Olivia? Your parents didn't have powers and they didn't buy into your uncle's ideology. You were studying to become a psychiatrist. You had your whole life planned out ahead of you.

"Then you got powers and Krieg forced himself into your life, greedy at the chance to recruit a new cape to his Empire. He took over your life, isolated you, pressured you to join his gang, and he succeeded. He made you break away from your parents, made you leave your true family behind and pretend the Empire was your new one.

"You still know the truth, deep inside. The Empire was never your family. They were a gang, they were using you for your power. Paying you a pittance for your skills worth a fortune, turning you into a glorified foot soldier, forcing you to risk your life in close quarters fights over piddling drug shipments. You already lost your right eye to their stupidity. How long will it be before you lose your left? You don't owe them anything, Othala. You deserve far more than what they gave you."

Othala shouted, growing more angry by the second. "Fuck you. You don't know anything. You're a heeb whose struck it rich and thinks everything's about money. Get it through your skull or whatever you bugs have. Krieg showed me that I don't have to sit on my ass and get rich as an M.D., that I can use my power to fight for the greater cause, to change the world for the better.
They don't need to pay me because it's for a good cause. I'm fine with risking my life because it's for a good cause. So no, I'm not going to join your 'Society' of capes whose idea of changing the world is sitting on their asses in 'peaceful' Africa, hiring packs of apes to take over the government from other apes!"

"You're lying to yourself, Othala. You don't fight for Krieg or the Empire anymore, you haven't for months. The truth is that you fight for Victor's sake. You fell hard for him and now you're in love. Your greatest fear is that he won't come back home at night, so you stay by his side to support him. Well, listen up! If you truly love Victor, if you truly support him, you'll do what's best for him. You'll let him decide for himself which organization suits his talents. We can teleport you to our base, introduce-"

"You heeb, don't you bring Vic into this!" shouted Othala.

"I..." Victor cleared his throat. "I won't do anything if you're dead set against it, O. We'll get through this together, do what's best for us and come out stronger." He turned to the insect-woman. "You're trying to psych us out with dirty tricks, but it won't work. We love each other. She wants what's best for me, and I want what's best for her."

Othala looked at Victor, nodded fiercely. "Right, Vic. Thanks. We'll work for the Gesellschaft, or at a hospital, or hell, I'll even work for the feds. At least I'll be in a civilized country, not trying to learn Swahili to speak with the apes on the shit side of Africa."

Victor nodded, spoke the insect-woman. "No deal. You'll have to be satisfied with exiling us from the city." He glanced at the spiders behind him, took a deep breath, managed to hold his voice steady. "I hope this isn't the part where your Society shows its true colors and breaks its deal by killing us after all. If you're going to take out your anger on one of us, do it on me."

... Well, that was it. Recruitment failed. It had been a longshot in the first place, but it was still disappointing. And ick, ending with a fake knight-in-shining-armor gesture by Victor. Trying to bait us into hurting him because Othala could just regenerate his injuries.

I sighed and spoke to my minions. "We're done here. Take them down."

The insect-woman didn't move. She fiddled with her scythes, fidgeted, shook her head. One of the spiders quirked its head at the insect-woman curiously and took a step forward.

Tch. Rookies. If you're going to impersonate Weaver, you need to do it right. "Fine. We'll use the fallback takedown, then. Regent, place your mirror."

The spider behind Othala crawled onto the ceiling, positioning itself so the reflective film on its body caught the faint light filtering through the window from the streetlamps outside. Our agents in the house across the street now had a clear line of sight into the room. Or they would have, if they weren't occupied having tea. I called the women to their window and spoke. "Dreamer, you can have them. One hour, as promised."

The captives went limp, eyes fluttering shut.

I spoke to the spiders. "Prepare the captives for transport." The spider on the ceiling hopped down and sprayed a fine white mist out of its mouth, dissolving the slime around the captives. The insect-woman stood and watched, still fiddling with her hands. The second spider approached the insect-woman and used its mandibles to inspect her hands.
Then the spider spoke. "You're doing it wrong, Regent. You didn't hook up the sphincters to the pressure jets. You're only getting a dribble of anesthetic gas, not a good flow." The spider had a human voice. Genesis, the woman controlling the projection of a spider.

The insect-woman frowned. "It's not my fault. I got the blueprints right but your clones are still resisting me." A man's voice, Regent. The man controlling the clone of Genesis that was controlling the projection of an insect-woman. And doing a poor job of it.

Tch. We had recruited Genesis and her team with a promise to find a cure for their charity case, Noelle Meinhardt. A girl with the uncontrolled power to make clones of anything she touched, with the slight drawback that the clones were homicidally insane. Regent was supposed to be one of our best solutions to that problem: he could use his power to control the clones like puppets. The clones hated it, of course, but we had an easy solution for that, too.

"Tsk, tsk, Regent." I chided. "Weaver ate half their brains. The clones don't hate you anymore. They don't have any emotions left."

The insect-woman shook her head. "Not going to say you're wrong, Screamer, but they're getting worse. They were fine an hour ago. Now my bug woman and my spider are becoming a pain. They keep trying to nom on the Nazis."

I cackled. "So you're telling me the clones grew new emotion centers in their brains purely for the purpose of spiting you. Deliciously evil. I almost feel sorry for you, Regent. But not really."

"Fucking evil clones and their fucking evil willpower." muttered the insect-woman and a spider in unison.

"Next time ask Weaver to eat everything but their coronas, give them total lobectomies." I said. "Hell, it's Genesis we're talking about here. Scoop out ninety five percent of her brain and there won't be any difference."

The other spider coughed.

"Right. That only goes for the evil Genesis clones, of course, not the original Genesis we all know and love. How silly of me. Now, prepare for extraction."

The spiders collapsed into billowing smoke. Two new forms began to take shape, the rough outlines of human beings with tall, broad statures. Human-shaped containment suits, each large enough to hold a captive inside without attracting attention from passers-by.

I reached out with my power to tell Weaver the news. I found one of her communications nodes in a sewer near the edge of my range, a cluster of flies, crickets, and cockroaches.

"To no one's surprise, Othala is an obstinate Nazi thug. Taking her and Victor into custody now." I spoke to the bugs.

'Acknowledged. All the Empire capes are accounted for. Killed by vigilantes or taken by us.' they replied with a delicate dance.

It was almost telepathy. Weaver called it a hive mind, I called it a symphony. Using our powers to build a high-bandwidth communications channel, where the words we spoke were only one of many layers of information we exchanged. As I spoke I moved my sound source through the air, hopping from insect to insect, telling her the locations of the allies and enemies in my range. I modulated the intensity and frequencies in my voice to send further layers of information, noting their powers, their psychological state, whether they could call in reinforcements. Weaver did the
same, skittering her bugs in an elaborate dance that told me everything I needed to know about the targets she surveyed.

"What a waste. Bull-headed woman, she was never going to turn her life around in a single night. I'm better than this. I could have flipped her with a few weeks-"

'I know. Suck it up. The cost of doing business in Protectorate territory.'

Tch. We couldn't risk them spreading the word that we were in town, so I was stuck with only the briefest of recruitment sessions. I hated it. Brute force conversion, shattering their ties to their comrades with a torrent of uncomfortable truths, appealing to their primal needs with the subtlety of a battering ram. Where was the creativity? Where was the artistry?

I was certain I could have converted them with a proper psy-ops campaign. Following the candidates 24/7, listening to their muttered thoughts as they considered the offer, speaking to them every day to give them nudges in just the right direction. If they were being obstinate I would take it up a notch and whisper in their ears in their own voice - as they deliberated, as they dreamed, even as they shared intimate moments with their lovers - until they couldn't tell the difference between their own thoughts and the ones I planted. Yes, that tactic could be quite convincing.

Weaver told me not to use the whispers, of course - she insisted that our recruitment attempts had to be on the straight and narrow. No coercion, no mental tricks, no lies and half-truths. Weaver's typical hypocrisy. She had absolutely no compunctions about sending in Thinkers like Tattletale to ferret out the candidate's deepest secrets, yet somehow whispering a few words in their ears at night was absolutely verboten. Still, I respected her enough to go along with her rules...mostly...that she knew about. Well, it would be criminal to deny myself a little bit of fun all the time, right?

About the only positive result here was getting Genesis and Regent trained up in the fine art of impersonating our fearless leader. A valuable skill in our Society.

After all, we didn't make Weaver our leader simply because of her power and her strategic mind. It was also for her reputation, her mystique, the sheer level of intimidation our Society achieved by having a leader who the world believed to be immortal. The leaders of parahuman organizations attracted assassination attempts like bees to honey, but our Society no longer had that problem. After the first score of failures, assassination attempts on Weaver became vanishingly rare; and the remaining attempts were focused on bug-killing techniques, like the PRT's recent trick with their healer's bioengineered plague, which were doomed to fail. Our enemies believed that it was impossible to eliminate us, that even if they somehow killed the entire Society Weaver would come back for vengeance.

Now that Weaver's reputation was established, we had dozens of tricks to use her reputation to its fullest. The simplest was to equip our teams with ways to mimic Weaver's presence, letting them sow panic in enemy ranks and escape from danger in a pinch. That was a trick we had been using even before we founded the Society: I could toss a pheromone grenade to attract insects and then throw my voice to their location, Nyx could conjure an illusion of an insect swarm around herself and use a voice-distorting box to mimic Weaver's buzzing speech. When we sent out many teams at once with the trick, we could even mislead our enemies about Weaver's range. In Guyana we once made the defending forces shit their pants when they saw 'Weaver' appear at three locations at once, tens of miles apart. They left the battle thinking Weaver's power reached halfway across their country!

Genesis and Regent would let us pull off an even more delicious gambit. We would stage a few flashy confrontations where they created monster-sized insects to speak in Weaver's voice and
rampage against our enemies. The defenders would get paranoid waste their time preparing countermeasures for an army of giant insects that would never arrive. Then we'd start bringing in new species of giant insects in every battle and they'd get really paranoid, convinced that we'd finally managed to recruit an insect biotinker. Add a few illusions to make them see an insect army and they would surrender on the spot.

Ah, good. The two were nearly ready to collect the captives. I spoke to our support team in the house across the street. "Tattletale, get ready to leave in five."

"Got it." said Tattletale. "Hey, about our favorite Nazis over there-"

"It's not your fault. They were a longshot."

"Right-o, boss." I could hear the relief in her voice, her clumsy attempt to disguise it with artificial cheer. Then a series of tapping sounds in front of her as she typed at a keyboard. A classic infovore, that girl, glued to her laptop with comical intensity. We had recruited her with little more than the promise to show her how the world really worked, show her the secrets she would never find out as a small-time criminal. Her reaction when she got to our files on Cauldron and Prophecy 009 was absolutely delicious - the video footage I'd taken of her would be excellent blackmail material, I could probably sell it to Regent for a tidy sum.

Tattletale was studiously ignoring the two women sitting next to her, which was probably wise of her. Dreamer and her wife were loudly sympathizing with Tattletale for her failure to sway Othala, her 'tragically subpar' imagination, her 'impressively boring' power, and her inadequacy as a human being in general. The pair meant well, as far as anyone could tell, but they were total flakes with only a tenuous connection to reality at the best of times. Besides, listening to their chatter would mean hearing about the minutiae of the latest application of Dreamer's power, which didn't really bear thinking about. I tried to tune them out.

"Poor Tattle." said Dreamer. "She doesn't know what she's missing. Her power merely lets her see what is. Far more interesting are the many things that could be. That poor girl, denied all those endless untold universes filled with wonders and delights."

"Wonders and delights?" said her wife, Setsu. "You're in a rare mood today."

"Why, yes. When I look at those two Imperial children I see a romantic scene from a musical, the sounds of an orchestra swelling in the background. Yes! A vampire and a fairy godmother, hand in hand, dashing through an endless field of sunflowers! Very scenic."

"The vampire is chasing the fairy?"

"No, no, a romantic scene. The vampire and the fairy are lovers, the sweet things."

"Then why are they dashing? If I was alone with you in a beautiful sunflower field, my dear Iolanta Zoryinichna..."

"My, my, you're a sweet thing too, Setsu!" said Dreamer. "You're right, I never understood why romantic leads spend so much time dashing through meadows. I suppose I ought to put something else in the field to give those two children an incentive to dash about. A monster, perhaps?"

"Ah, that's more sensible. How big is the field, then? If it's too small they'll bump into the edge before their hour is up, and the monster will get them for sure. Not very
sporting. If it's too large they won't have time to explore it all."

"It's an endless field of sunflowers, I said. There is no end."

"Come on. Everything has an end."

"It's an imaginary field, Setsu, it doesn't have to end."

"Even imagination has to end, someday. Whether it takes an hour or three hundred years."

"Well, fine, let me check. It's..." Dreamer paused. "...hmm, 9302885 kilometers wide. Plenty of space for the children to dash about as much as they like."

"...honestly, however you look at it, that's a waste. Nine million kilometers? Humans run 40 kilometers an hour at most, and that's at a dead sprint. They'll see less than 0.001% of your sunflower field."

"No, no, vampires are fast! And the fairy is granting him super speed, and he's carrying her in his arms! Romantically escaping the monster."

"Okay, lets say they're going 200 kilometers an hour. It'll still take them more than 2.65 years to reach the edge. They'll never get the full tour, not in an hour's time."

"Um. Maybe if the monster is really really nasty they'll be motivated enough to make it."

"You're hopeless, honestly."

"Well!" huffed Dreamer. "They look plenty motivated to me! What would you have me do?"

"Ah, I thought you'd never ask! There's a simple principle in ballistics, you see, such that human projectiles can survive being accelerated at arbitrary speeds without being torn apart, provided that all of their molecules are accelerated simultaneously, for instance by-"

"That's all rather fiddly, isn't it? It doesn't fit a romantic scene."

"Inertial dampers are very romantic, believe me. You just need to apply them properly."

It would only take a few more days to finish our work in Brockton Bay, cleaning up the drug dealers calling themselves Merchants and the independent villains. We'd stay on for a few weeks afterwards, using Brockton Bay as a temporary base while we made a few more recruitment attempts on high-priority candidates in the northeastern Americas. The negotiations to extend our stay in Protectorate territory hadn't been pretty, but it would be well worth it if Dinah Alcott's prophecies had any truth to them.

I let out a sigh, taking care not to broadcast it to my minions. I was getting antsy. A rising tension that had been growing ever since I first overheard the Dinah's mutterings about the end of the world.

We were gearing up for a war. The first step was collecting the parahumans we had monitored at a distance, the ones whose powers gave them the potential to be global-level players with our
Society's support. Noelle Meinhardt was the first. There would be more. If they were willing to cooperate, we'd convince them to join us; if not, we'd take steps to neutralize the threat. It would only take a few parahumans with Noelle's level of power to give us an overwhelming edge over any other force in the world. I would be a key player here, managing our new allies and keeping them in line.

The plan was all very straightforward, but...it was Weaver and Harbinger's style. Too neat and clean, too orderly for my tastes. Plans carefully laid out with fallbacks and countermeasures for the possible points of failure. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was all an elaborate deception. The last time we had given up on holding territory and consolidated our forces, devoted ourselves to wholesale accumulation of parahuman powers, we had succeeded for years. Weaver had been convinced that we were on the lip of a breakthrough, that we would solve the world's problems and usher in a golden age. I had almost managed to believe it myself. And then...well. It didn't bring back good memories.

We knew better, now. We wouldn't make the mistake of putting all our eggs in one basket. It was still dangerous. With our level of power, losing control of even one basket was more than enough to ruin our day. All it would take was a-

An alert pinged on my infolink. Highest priority.

...ah.

Well.

Speak of the devil.
"That's what I want us to do. You'll think within the box to find the best path, I'll expand it to hold new worlds we never dreamed of. Stick with me and I promise we'll create an amazing new world."

I stood on the top floor of Coil's base of operations, looking our over the skyline of Brockton Bay. It was nostalgic. The architecture, the people, the culture...it was like taking a step back in time. I had grown up in the states, long ago, and every time I returned for a visit it brought back memories. Mostly bad ones. Nightmares for me, or nightmares I inflicted on others. The good memories were of hopes and dreams, promises made to escape the nightmares and create a beautiful future.

Had we fulfilled our promise to each other? We had stayed strong, stayed together, created a Society for those like ourselves. Taken territory and put a stop to petty local wars, built ourselves into a world power, taken on all comers and won.

Changed the world for the better....well. It was a work in progress. Too often we had to devote all of our effort to our own territory simply to survive the day. Only during rare moments of peace did we have time for our grander projects. And every time we acted at the global scale it meant a fight with the established order. Sending my citizens into cape fights to risk their lives.

We had to take it one step at a time. With properly laid plans each step would build on the last. Each step would be a little longer, a little faster, a little easier. Acceleration.

Our visit to Brockton Bay was a larger step than most. New citizens with strong powers for foresight, analysis, and attack. And most of all, the girl in the high-security vault twenty stories below my feet. Left to her own devices she was a disaster waiting to happen, an S-class threat. With the support and resources of our Society, she had the potential to kick our acceleration into high gear.

It was time to give her the good news. I stirred a fraction of my swarm to life and sent them through the ventilation system into the basement vault. I took care to have my insects crawl on the ceiling, as far away from the vault's resident as possible. The slightest contact with her skin would be enough for them to activate her power and create a malevolent clone. Not dangerous in itself, if it was only a few of my insects, but I was trying to make a good impression. It wouldn't do to give her a blunt reminder of her pitiable condition.

Noelle Meinhardt was one of the biggest parahumans I had ever seen, nearly as large as Crawler. Above the waist she had the head, arms, and torso of a seventeen year old girl, all in their normal sizes and proportions. She was wearing a plain white tee shirt and a red knitted sweater. Below the waist, though, her body stretched into an elephant-sized mass of flesh, bristling with eyes, mouths, bestial limbs, and tentacles.

We had spared no expense in making her underground living chamber as comfortable as possible. The lights had tinted bulbs to simulate the sun's wavelengths on a 24-hour cycle, to keep her on a standard circadian rhythm. We had arranged a pile of mattresses into a makeshift bed so that she could lie down comfortably when she slept. A small fleet of Hydra's maintenance robots handled the room's upkeep and took care of her hygiene. No bathroom, of course - she didn't excrete - but when she arrived at our facility it had been months since her last bath. She was too large to bathe herself, and humans would be at risk of activating her power on skin contact.

At the moment she was taking advantage of the amenities we had built into her room. Noelle was
playing a computer game, using the deluxe monitor and keyboard we had mounted on the wall at an easy height for her to reach. Nearby, the wall was broken up by a transparent window that let her see into the adjoining room where her teammates could come to visit her.

Her playing partner was her teammate Trickster. Her boyfriend, before she became like this. He was wearing his old costume, a black suit with a top hat. The other Travellers were out on the mission against the Empire Eighty Eight, or being trained to use power armor by my citizens.

"Got you, Francis!" Noelle clapped her hands. "That's three to zilch, my favor."

"Yeah, laugh it up." said Trickster, with a good-natured grimace. "The damn AI has no idea how to pull off a coordinated attack. If we were playing with real people I would've won that time."

"You have to work around the AI. Learn how it thinks and trick it into doing what you want. Or play a tank instead of a support caster."

Trickster chuckled. "No way. Trusting the AI for my support would be suicide. I think you just want to extend your lead."

"Who, me?" said Noelle. Feigning innocence, bringing a hand up to her face to cover her smile.

I began to draw together my swarm to form an avatar, but stopped at a movement in a corner of the vault. Ah. It was her hourly feeding time. Best not to interrupt.

A small door opened in the wall, disgorging a mechanical cart carrying a roast pig. My insects detected that the pig was cooked with spices and drizzled in savory sauces, the work of the team of chefs we had assigned to her. Their efforts weren't strictly necessary - in fact, her body preferred the meat raw - but maintaining a semblance of normality helped her keep her mental equilibrium.

Noelle's smile faltered. She glanced at the pig and licked her lips. Then she set her jaw and turned back to her teammate, refusing to give the pig her attention.

"Francis, do you want to play, um-"

A single long tentacle stretched out of her flank and clumsily pulled at the pig.

"-the Dockyards next? The maps we're playing, I have an advantage-"

The tentacle lost its grip, then reached out and pulled again. With each attempt it dragged the pig a few feet closer to her body, and its motions grew more vigorous, more frantic.

"-with my playing style. They're closed-off, um, defensively oriented-"

The tentacle finally pulled the pig close enough for her other limbs to assist. Two of her rear paws lashed out, ripping the pig apart with their claws in an instant. A thicket of smaller tentacles whipped out and dragged the chunks of meat into her body. Some of the tentacles drew the meat into the bestial mouths on her flanks, while others simply pressed it against her flesh, where the meat was quickly absorbed.

"-and that makes it hard for you to, um." Noelle licked her lips, swallowed. A line of drool tricked down from the corner of her mouth. The drool made it an inch down her chin before it was reabsorbed into her body. "To run interference."

Trickster nodded, managed a weak smile. "A map where I have a chance of beating you? I'm game." He had kept his eyes fixed on Noelle's, without giving the spectacle a single glance.
Impressive.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your fun and games." I said, with the buzz of insect wings. I drew together a cloud of insects to shape an avatar, a four foot tall feminine face on the wall of her room. "Noelle. How are you doing today?"

"Weaver. Hi. I'm, um. Pretty good. Better than yesterday."

"A good night's sleep?" A meaninglesspleasantly. I had twenty four hour surveillance on my base. I knew when she was sleeping, knew when she was awake.

"Yeah."

"I have good news for you, Noelle. Our first mission with your clones was a success. Regent kept two Genesis clones under his control for hours with little difficulty. Took down the Nazis and gift-wrapped them for good measure."

"Yeah? That's good." She chewed at her lip. Trying to hide her discomfort. The clones were a touchy issue with her, but we were working on that.

"I have to say, I didn't expect it to work." said Trickster. He lit a cigarette, took a puff. "Using evil clones to take out evil Nazis. It's kind of ironic."

"It's fitting, yes. We'll do better next time. Regent should be able to control four clones at once if they're sufficiently docile. As it is, the clones started fighting him at the end:-"

"They got out of control? Did they-" said Noelle.

"No. They just gave Regent a headache with their futile attempts to resist him." I paused. "Don't worry, Noelle. Even if they got loose, our fail-safes would take care of them. We're experts at this, and you've seen with your own eyes that we don't leave anything to chance."

Noelle frowned. She didn't seem very convinced.

"When Regent gets back let's do a new round of experimentation. I have some ideas on the brain areas your power is tapping into to make the clones aggressive. The testing should only take a few hours. Less, if we can spare a few questions for Dice. Okay, Noelle?"

Noelle shared a look with Trickster, then slowly nodded. "Yeah. Okay. I hope it goes better than your last, um. Experiments. With Dinah." Her eyes flicked involuntarily to the far corner of the vault. The anesthetic nets we used to catch the leftovers of our experiments. Rations for my insects, now. Noelle didn't like to eat her clones, but there was no point in letting the flesh go to waste.

"Right. The Dice clones weren't compatible with Jeopardy and Regent, but those two powers were only the first of a long list of alternatives. We still have a good chance to find a way to use Dice's power without limits. That level of precog will be a major step closer to finding you a cure and a portal back to Earth Aleph."

Trickster exhaled smoke. "Yeah. And a major step closer to you ruling the world."

"Yes, if that was my goal. You wouldn't begrudge me that, would you?" When he didn't answer, I continued. "You've seen what a mess the current rulers have made of it. Frankly, Earth Bet is a toxic asset. They should be grateful I'm willing to take it off their hands free of charge."

Noelle gave a bitter laugh, and Trickster smirked. But his eyes were serious. "I can't help but be a
little concerned. We're in this to help Noelle, not world domination."

"I'm disappointed in you, Trickster. You were eager for our help, and now we've had our first success. This isn't the time to be changing your tune."

"Yeah. I know. It's my fault, Weaver. I'll own up to it. I honestly thought you were after our services as the Travellers. I didn't think you were serious about the clones." He paused, studied my avatar before continuing. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, Weaver, but you understand why your plans for Noelle don't exactly inspire our confidence."

"Ah. You're worried that I'll betray you."

"It has to be awfully tempting. String us along with false promises and you'll have an endless supply of clones."

"Not a concern. Dice has guaranteed that we'll honor our agreement. Besides, we have no need to keep your services indefinitely. We can make all the clones we need before administering the cure. A few thousand clones should be more than enough."

"A few thousand." Trickster shook his head, looked up at his girlfriend. "You sure you're okay with this, Noelle?"

Noelle wrung her hands, then nodded. "If that's what it takes."

"Three clones were bad enough. If they lose control-"

"You'll be back on Earth Aleph. Not your problem." I said.

"Yeah. Maybe." Trickster sucked on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke. "An army of a thousand homicidal parahumans. We've seen that once before, haven't we. Madison, Wisconsin."

"The Simurgh."

"Right. I have to consider the possibility that your plans are playing into her hands."

"We've been over this, Trickster. You know our Society has a very personal interest in finding counters to the Simurgh. I showed you our Thinkers and protocols to minimize her influence. You agreed to our terms."

"I did. Like I said, I'm thinking that was my fault. I believed you when you said you wanted to 'change the world for the better'. Somehow I didn't realize that a 'better world' involves using my girlfriend as a factory to make an army of killer clones."

"You're treading on thin ice. I've proven my sincerity."

"I believe you're sincere, Weaver. I'm saying that the way you're playing this is looking awfully close to a Simurgh plot. Instead of keeping Noelle's power under control, you're creating a situation where one false move will set loose thousands of homicidal clones. You're playing with fire here and we're the ones who'll get burned-"

"Stop it, Krouse!" shouted Noelle. Her cry was deep, inhuman, coming more from the bestial mouths on her flanks than from her human face.

Trickster shut up. Finally.

Noelle closed her eyes, took a moment to compose herself before continuing. "Stop the second-
guessing, Francis. We went over this together, discussed it to death, and we agreed to take this chance. We promised. We can't turn back now."

"I remember." Trickster sighed. "I just worry about you, Noelle."

"I know. That doesn't give you an excuse to put us on edge and piss off the woman in charge." Noelle turned to my avatar. "Weaver, I'm sorry. You're helping me, helping us, when no one else will. And even...even if you can't cure me, you're still better than anyone else."

Trickster pursed his lips. Noelle was talking about our fail-safes. We knew that Noelle's hunger for flesh was getting stronger with each passing day. Months ago she had tried to put a stop to it by starving herself, refusing to eat for a week. It hadn't turned out well. She went berserk from hunger and ate forty people in a night. We were researching countermeasures, parahumans with abilities for power nullification and emotion manipulation who could lessen her hunger. But if all else failed and her hunger drove her permanently mad, Bakuda's bombs installed in the walls of her vault had a better than 90% chance of killing her before she caused a disaster.

"You're welcome, Noelle. I don't mind criticism, and you two are under a great deal of stress." I took on a sterner tone. "However. We have an agreement. I'll fulfill my end. I expect you to fulfill yours. Understand, Trickster?"

Trickster let out a deep sigh. No smoke, this time. His cigarette had run out. "Yeah. I get it." He looked up. "Can I be there for your experiments? I want to support Noelle. My power is good for it. Teleport the clones into your nets."

"Fine. I'll let you know when it's time." I shifted the face of my avatar, gave Noelle a wink. "I'll leave you to finish shutting out Trickster. Get one in for me, will you?"

Noelle managed a smile. "No problem."

I drew my swarm back into the ventilation system, making sure not to leave any behind in the vault.

It was exhausting, the constant dance keep my agents in line. With my citizens it was easy. They pledged lifelong loyalty to my Society, pledged to share in our interests and goals. But the Travellers refused to make a lifelong commitment to my Society. They wanted to return to their homeworld, Earth Aleph. That meant their goals were different from my own. And even within their little group they were rife with fractures, disputes and personal grudges. Sadly typical of parahuman factions. They were like packs of particularly vindictive children. When we got back to our main facility in Kenya, I'd have to delegate a team of handlers to take up the job of nannying them.

It could be worse. I could be keeping a pair of white supremacists in line. According to Screamer's report, Othala and Victor wouldn't be joining us.

It was a shame, really. If the two had been born on our territory they would have been perfect candidates to join our Society. Victor's motivation to perfect himself, Othala's deep need to belong to a greater cause, their love and loyalty to each other. The problem, as was all too often the case, was that another organization got to them first. So Victor's quest for rank put him in debt to Kaiser the Neo-Nazi and Othala's loyal support went to her uncle Krieg and his absurd goal of racial purity.

I had given the order to try the recruitment anyway, regardless of the odds. We had nothing to lose and much to gain. The clincher was Othala's ability to grant regeneration. A rare power, slow in its
effects but as close to true healing as they came.

Healing was one of our highest priorities. Even an organization as large as ours had only a handful of healers and most of them came with severe limitations. Citizens who only healed wounds inflicted in their presence, Tinkers who pushed the limits of their specialties to make prosthetic limbs or drugs to kill pathogens. Then there were the last resorts, the healing powers with few limitations but heavy costs. Detox, a man whose healing power was potent but dangerously addictive. Paragon, who bestowed high-speed regeneration to others with the restriction that the regenerated body parts were copies of her own. She and the people whose brains she had healed lived together in a wing of our base in Kenya, getting antsy when they went a month without spreading their 'perfection' to others. Lab Rat, the biotinker who specialized in temporary transformations. He was getting better at imbuing long-lasting effects; some of his patients now came out of the procedure with roughly the same number of limbs they started with. And if all else failed, well...there was always Dreamer.

I found myself thinking of ways to use Othala's power even without her permission. The kind of plans I promised Dice I would consider - forcing a 'bad' person to serve a 'good' cause. I had done it many times before, to capes who attacked us and were more useful as prisoners than corpses. Capes with passive effects like auras were simply confined in a cell, or brought onto the battlefield encased in a tinkertech battlesuit under our control. Capes with active powers were harder to handle - some combination of psychosurgery, drugs, and Master/Stranger powers to make them docile and turn their loyalties. Othala would be easy enough. There was no risk of rebellion because her power couldn't be turned against her patients. We could use the same procedure Coil had been planning for Dice, in fact. Put her in a cell, use drugs to coax her to heal on demand, and...

...but no. Othala and Victor hadn't attacked us. They hadn't done anything to us. Hell, they barely knew we existed except as an amorphous threat somewhere in Africa. It was us who had attacked them, without any provocation beyond my promise to Dice to purge her hometown of villains. Yes, they were Neo-Nazis who considered 70% of our citizens racial enemies. That was one of the reasons we had simply exterminated the Empire instead of bribing them to leave the city. But I had seen worse in my travels, farworse. This wasn't nearly enough to make me break my rules.

We would honor our promise to Othala and Victor, exile them from the city instead of killing them outright. They would simply go to sleep today and wake up after a few weeks, when our operations in the city were safely completed and we didn't need to worry about them spreading word of our presence. We would deposit them in an apartment in San Diego, with a month's rent and a small cash payment as compensation for their time. A sharply worded note, warning them not to return, and light surveillance-

An alert appeared on my infolink. A warning from our threat tracker, highest priority.
notable events:

44 days ago: crystal replication tinker - khas uruzgah, ag
42 days ago: protectorate thinker alert (false alarm) - rancagua, cl
26 days ago: five blasphemies - bergamo, it
16 days ago: prophecy009, new prophet (#3) - brockton bay, us
15 days ago: recruit: dice (prophet) - brockton bay, us
5 days ago: recruit: noelle meinhartd (threat) - brockton bay, us
4 days ago: leviathan potential - brisbane, au. max 25%
3 days ago: behemoth potential - sydney, au. max 15%

right now: leviathan potential - northeast us/ca, cur 20% (society?)

Fuck.

An attack by Leviathan. Here, in the vicinity of Brockton Bay, odds growing by the minute.

I was so stupid. I should have been expecting it, preparing for it ever since I heard Dice's prophecy. The Endbringers attacked points of strength in the world, places where humanity was poised to make a leap forward and end their pointless wars. We had seen it in their attacks on our Society, in what they did to Richter, Manton, Igwe, and Sphere.

And we were seeing it now. Leviathan coming to attack us, within weeks of my decision to go all out in accumulating power to save the world.

I considered my options. The option the public believed in, the option the 'heroes' took, was to call in their forces from around the world and fight the Endbringer to the death. Hit the Endbringer hard enough, fast enough, that it would be forced to flee the battlefield before it destroyed its target. The heroes were inspired by their successful defenses, the 'good days' when the damage was merely massive rather than catastrophic. New York. Madrid. The first attack on Lyon.

But I knew it was a lie. I knew the Endbringers better than most, had known them since the very beginning. I had fought Endbringers to the point of death, seen their naked core, seen what they really were, as much as it could be understood with human eyes. And I knew that it was all a game. That if the Endbringers truly wanted to hit their targets then nothing anyone had ever done to them would be enough to stop them. They would simply ignore the damage to their decorative layers of flesh, wade through parahuman armies and reality-warping powers and nuclear blasts until they found and destroyed what they had sought. The only thing that truly stopped them was Scion. And he was unreliable, inscrutable, had never once tried to end them.

I didn't believe they were truly unstoppable. I still held out hope for a solution, a magic bullet, some obscure power or combination that would deal the Endbringers a deathblow. After every attack we learned from our experience. Prepared new weapons, new power combinations, new strategies to test in the next attack. Searching for something to end the threat once and for all.

And that was the problem with the 'heroes', and the 'villains' as well. They didn't fight to win, to end the threat. Instead they fought not to lose. To defend the target, to defend it to the death as if each battle was their last. The heroes took the most promising new parahumans and threw them
into the front lines, where most of them died in minutes due to inexperience or lack of cooperation or sheer destructiveness of the Endbringer. With every battle the heroes should have been gaining strength, accumulating a core group of parahumans and strategies that worked in the past, gaining members and improving their coordination with each battle. Instead they were losing strength, sending their best hopes to die before they were truly born, only the elite few like the Triumvirate surviving to fight in every battle.

No. The harsh lesson we had learned was that the Endbringer's target, the geographic target at least, was a sacrifice. Don't try to defend it, don't risk losing your strength. Instead treat it as a trade: one target destroyed in exchange for information. Deploy the citizens with the best new strategies and attacks and test them. See what hinders the Endbringer, see what hurts its shell, see if we finally have the magic bullet to hurt its core. And as soon as we're done testing, run. Let the Endbringer tear apart its geographic target as much as it likes, as long as you keep its human targets alive to fight another day. We could afford to lose scores of battles as long as we kept accumulating strength, kept testing strategies, so that when we finally found a way to kill them we would have the power to make it stick.

Besides, my Society existed for the sake of its citizens above all else. That was how I kept their loyalty. It was the only common cause that united our people, estranged as we were from our native societies, with only each other to rely on. If I had to choose between the lives of my citizens, versus a patch of pretty landscape or a populated city, I had to protect my citizens every time.

That meant our first priority was always to secure our means of escape. To have a way out when we exhausted our best attacks, when the Endbringer pulled out a new trick and a mess of our battle plans. Our standard procedure was to be ready to evacuate all the critical assets from a base within 15 minutes of the Endbringer alert. Anything we couldn't evacuate we had to be willing to write off as a loss. Not as bad a restriction as it seemed at first glance - with the right tinkertech and parahuman powers, nearly any amount of material wealth or technology could be rebuilt in weeks or months.

Now, in the face of Leviathan's approach to Brockton Bay, we would be best served by making a discreet escape from the city. Revealing ourselves on US soil would create a terrible mess in the best of times, let alone during an Endbringer attack when the Protectorate was out in force and on a hair trigger. Best to simply evacuate our citizens to Kenya with long-range teleportation; we had at least thirty minutes before Leviathan arrived, enough time to open one of Chunnel's portals.

That only left the matter of settling our commitments in Brockton Bay. Our commitment to Dice, to take care of her parents and purge the city of villains. Her parents would be heading to the Endbringer shelters, but those weren't trustworthy. I would send a citizen to escort them out of the city and move them at least thirty miles inland. If the city survived, we would come back afterward to fulfill our promise and clean up the rest of the villains.

Our commitment to Tattletale, to take care of her old teammates. I had technically satisfied her terms in full. In my identity as 'Coil' I had bribed Bitch to leave the city and given her the deed to a farm in the countryside where she could hopefully live in peace. And I had helped Grue with his family problems and bribed him to retire from villainy. But Tattletale would be upset if Grue died in the attack. I would make sure he and his sister got out of town.

Our commitment to the Travelers, to keep Noelle hidden and safe. Ah. Now there was a problem. Noelle was a special case given her massive size and uncontrolled power, and our disaster plans hadn't yet been modified to take her into account. Could we evacuate Noelle? We didn't have much time...
leviathan potential - brockton bay, us. cur 35% eta 30-90 min (society)

sources: (full and partial access)
think tanks - society, protectorate, suits, ...
atmospheric sensors - society, us, ca, mx, cu, do, ...
oceanographic sensors - society, us, ca, mx, cu, do, ...
orbital sensors - society, us, ca, mx, ru, cn, ...
...
log: leviathan potential - brockton bay, us (society)
update: 20%, eta 30-120 min, northeast us/ca
update: 25%, eta 30-120 min, northeast us/ca
update: 30%, eta 30-90 min, brockton bay/boston/bangor
update: 35%, eta 35-80 min, brockton bay/boston

hydra requesting permission to pool data with dragon (guild/cauldron)

status check
integrity check...
stability check...
replication check...
rampancy check...
subversion check...
miscellaneous check...
fuckoffsimurgh check...
forwarding checks to parent for approval...
...approval by hydra.v1125.7ab8b8e9ba7d14cf
forwarding checks to admins for approval...
...approval 1/3 granted by telicomnicon
...approval 2/3 granted by dobrynja
...
...approval 3/3 granted by gp

contacting dragon...
request approved by dragon (guild/cauldron)
transferring data...
loading sources (obfuscated)...
updating....

update: 60%, eta 40-55 min, brockton bay
public warning imminent

...less than an hour. Yes, it would be a tricky business. As much as we depended on our ability to escape the Endbringers, our tools to escape were painfully few. Most important were powers for global-range transportation, and they were vanishingly rare, even rarer than healers. Our best had been killed by the Simurgh and the replacements we found in the intervening years were poorly suited to a special case like Noelle. I considered our options.

Chunnel, a British woman who created space-warping tunnels. A prisoner, not a citizen - she had been one of the 'heroes' who fought against us, who used her power to box us in while her allies killed us. Unfortunately, the emergency hack job we had done on her to gain her loyalty had robbed
her of her mental flexibility. Among her many limitations, her tunnels were far too small to fit Noelle.

Heavenly Fist, a martial artist who literally punched people into the stratosphere. He could teleport his targets to any patch of sky in the world, but his aim was poor, typically off by fifty miles or more. Fine for citizens in flight suits and brutes like Crawler who didn't mind the fall. Not so fine for Noelle, who would go berserk with pain from the impact and cause a disaster if she landed in the wrong place.

That left my original plan for bringing Noelle home - call in one of our tinker-modified cargo planes and fly her to our base in Kenya. But the plane would take more than an hour to reach Brockton Bay, it would arrive in the middle of the attack. Even if we protected it from the Endbringer we would have trouble sneaking it out of the city, since we would be surrounded by a hundred capes in fight-or-flight mode. Being spotted would be a disaster - if the Protectorate picked a fight with us with Noelle in the middle, it could go very wrong.

There were other options, longshots that brought complications. We could negotiate with the PRT, hope they would let us evacuate Noelle peacefully instead of attacking on sight. We could theoretically betray the Travelers, kill them to ensure that Noelle was contained and make our escape, but I wasn't willing to break my rules. We could use short range transportation to get Noelle out of town and hide thirty miles from the battle until our cargo plane arrived: we might simply put Noelle in a truck and hope we made it through the press of traffic heading out of town; or we could float her truck in the air while hiding it with Stranger powers; or we could tunnel underground; or...

...no. Those plans all had a fatal flaw. Leviathan knew we were here, he was tracking us with whatever exotic senses his kind used to find their prey. If we ran from the city for mere tens of miles, Leviathan would follow and force us to fight on a much less favorable battleground.

If we had to fight Leviathan, it was best to do it in the city. We had an established base of operations, buildings to serve as cover against his lightning-quick attacks, and the certainty that a hundred 'heroes' would throw themselves in his path. I could convince the heroes to let us join in the defense, enforcing a temporary alliance by playing on their fear of getting into a three-way fight.

Yes, fighting alongside the 'heroes' would give us several layers of security. Ideally we and the heroes would hit Leviathan hard enough to 'drive him off'. But even if we couldn't stop him, the fight would buy us time for our cargo ship to arrive; and by convincing the heroes to be our temporary allies, we would be able evacuate Noelle without provoking them to attack our cargo ship. As a final layer of insurance I would keep Heavenly Fist in reserve, ready to evacuate Noelle in an emergency by punching her into the Nubian Desert and hoping for the best.

A warning flashed on my infolink. A message from Harbinger, three words. "Fight or flee?"

I opened a voice channel. "He's coming for Noelle. We fight, unless you can think of a way to evacuate her."

Harbinger's response was immediate. "We'll make her compact. She regenerates from a core of flesh less than five cubic feet in volume. We can cut out her core and fit her through the portal."

"Creative." I smiled, despite everything. "But she'll be berserk from the pain and she'll come out next to Chunnel. One Chunnel clone with the wrong variant power and we'll have a globetrotting Noelle. Is our facility ready for secure transport of a global-class threat?"
“With forty minutes of prep time...not with certainty.” He paused. Through my bugs I heard Dice begin speaking to the empty air in her room. Reeling to a voice on her infolink, muttering numbers under her breath. "The think tank says we have better than even odds. Dice says 28% chance of rampant clones, 12% chance of Noelle escaping the facility."

As I expected. "Good, but not good enough. I won't let an Endbringer on Protectorate territory hurt our citizens at home. Best to contain the damage." I took a breath, slowly let it out. "We're fighting."

The slightest of pauses. "...I see. I'll give the order."

A rematch of our battle two years ago in Monrovia. We would have the help of 'heroes' this time, but we wouldn't be able to use nuclear weapons as freely on PRT soil. It didn't matter. We had a new set of tricks to try.

The Endbringer was picking a fight with us because our goals were noble, because I had committed us to accumulating power to save the world. It made me wish that we could go all-out for once, a test of our power. We would have no chance against the worldend event if we couldn't kill a 'mere' Endbringer. But it was far too early for desperate measures. We had sixteen years to prepare for the event.

We had another reason to hold back, as well: as soon as it became public that we were summoning the Society's forces to Brockton Bay, our enemies throughout the world could strike, and no truces would bind them. I would have to leave some of my best agents in the field. We would be missing powers, synergies, new synergies with our newest citizens. Number Line and his team would have enhanced Dice and Tattletale's abilities, perhaps even provided some degree of counter for Dice's blindness to Endbringers. Escherichia would have expanded our range and precision for tracking the heroes and Leviathan's waves; even combined, myself, Screamer, and Harbinger made a poor substitute. But those two citizens were occupied administering our bases in India and Kenya, protecting our Society against its enemies.

Was it odd that my first thought in a time of crisis, halfway across the world from home, had been to wish for the company of my children? Objectively, I knew we were going to see them again. We weren't going to die today, I refused to permit it. If worst came to worst we would retreat using Chunnel's portal and meet up in Kenya. Tell stories about the battle, figure out what went right and wrong, listen to the kids complain about being left out of the adventure. But there was still some instinct inside me that wanted to hold them close, stand back-to-back with my allies and face the world to protect them, like we had done too many times during the bad years before our Society was strong enough to stand on its own.

I was getting too old for this. Waiting sixteen to twenty five years for the end of the world? Hah. If I was going to help humanity survive the apocalypse, it had better come soon.

The alarm klaxons went off on all the floors of our base. I was already starting my preparations. Calling on the citizens who would join us in battle, readying my swarms to deal with the Protectorate forces, to track them if they became our allies and to kill them if they turned against us.

But I also had a point of honor to resolve.

I stirred a fraction of my swarm in the basement and constructed a new avatar. More detailed than before. A three-dimensional face, six feet tall, expressive with a stern countenance.

"Trickster." I said. "Prepare for battle. Leviathan is coming, ETA forty plus minutes."
It took a few seconds for him to process my words, for the weight of the situation to hit home. He shook his head in disbelief. "Fuck. Oh fucking hell no. Not again."

"Get your armor on and bring the test dummies and practice weights up to the roof. You'll be under Harbinger's command, teleporting citizens out of danger."

"You want us to fight? I thought you said-" He stopped, whipped his head around to Noelle. "What about-"

I continued speaking. "Noelle, we think the Endbringer is coming for you. The bastards know it's their last chance to fuck with you before you're safe in my territory. We can't evacuate you in time, so we're going to stand and fight."

"Oh. Oh no. Oh God." Noelle went pale. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders, seemed to shrink into herself. Then she looked up, eyes wide. "You're going to fight an Endbringer for me?"

"Yes. Not just me. All of us, our Society. We'll hold off Leviathan until your transport arrives. With luck we'll be able to evacuate you within an hour of the attack. Until then, try to keep a clear head. We may need you to move in a hurry, and we can't risk you touching any of our citizens or the defending capes. Can you do that?"

Noelle chewed at her lip, then nodded. "Okay. I'll be ready. And thank you. Thank you for protecting me."

"Of course. You aren't my citizens, but we have an agreement for protection."

"I thought, um. If this happened, we thought you'd give me to the Endbringer. Or I would volunteer. Let it kill me so you can escape."

"Noelle! Don't say that!" said Trickster in horror.

Ah. That was what I was waiting for. I shifted my avatar's face into a scowl, and as I spoke I called more insects into the room, moving them in agitation until the walls writhed as though they were alive.

"Yes. Don't say that. I told you Travellers many times. We have an agreement and I'll fulfill my end of the bargain. Even if it means I have to send my Society into battle against Leviathan." I paused, let them take in the weight of my words. "I keep my promises. Don't doubt my word again. Understood?"

Noelle's haunted expression became a hair brighter, a hair more hopeful. She set her jaw. "Yes. I won't."

"Good. Trickster, go. Harbinger will give you your orders."

Trickster stared at my avatar for a moment, mouth slightly ajar. Then he recovered, straightened up, and tipped his cap. "Yeah. I got it, boss. Sorry for doubting you. I should know better than anyone that a promise is a promise."

My lips were touched by the ghost of a smile. Instilling true loyalty in my citizens was hard enough. A parahuman from outside my Society acknowledging that I'm a woman of my word? That was a rare event even among my agents. I'd count this one as a victory.

"Do me proud, then. Now get going. It's time to fight an Endbringer."
"Attention everyone! Listen up! High chance of incoming Endbringer attack by Leviathan, thirty to ninety minutes. Return to base immediately."

What.

Leviathan. I had always known that it could happen someday, I'd even seen the projections. The water under the city, he'd grab it with his power, bring the skyscrapers crashing down and tear Brockton Bay apart from its foundations, and the stupid heroes had built their base in the water of the bay, and I was going to have to-

The sounds around me faded out and Screamer's calm voice came from the empty air, as if she was sitting by my side. "No need to panic, rookie, you'll give yourself a heart attack. Take a deep breath and relax. We've done this a million times before, it's all a routine. Just get in the van asap. You need to get back to base before the sirens go off and the streets are jammed."

Screamer's calm words brought me back to reality. I followed her advice and took a deep breath. Tried to relax.

> Frequency spectrum of Screamer's voice; tone of voice modified by power.
Modified tone, hyperbole 'million times before'; calm tone is a facade covering for hypervigilance, anxiety, fear.

Well, fuck it.

I grabbed my infolink and laptop and booked it to the garage. Our drivers had managed to keep their heads, thankfully. Coil's men, some of the few that the Society had retained as employees after taking over their organization. They were opening the garage door and getting the vans ready to go. Two vans, one for my group, one for Regent's.

Across the street, the front door of Othala's house slammed open. A man and a woman dashed out and ran for our garage, jumping in the back of Regent's van. Then the man and woman dissolved, disgorging the limp, dreaming forms of Othala and Victor. Regent set the captives on the floor of the van, leaving Genesis to watch over them. Next to them were the two Genesis clones, bound in restraints and with implanted with Bakuda's failsafes to ensure that they didn't escape Regent's control.

I climbed into my own van, taking the passenger seat next to the driver. Dreamer and her wife Setsu were already in the back, Setsu managing to squeeze herself into a shape that left enough room for Dreamer to sit in the corner. I glanced through the open doorway into the house we had borrowed for the mission. The owners of the house were where we left them in the living room. A family of four, lying limp and boneless on their couch.

"Hey Dreamer. Time to wake them up." I said.

"Oh my, but I already have." said Dreamer with a gentle smile. "Those poor butterflies who dreamed they were men. They awoke from their delusion and returned to pollinating the flowers."

I blinked. "You...but...what. No, look, you said you wouldn't leave them-"

"Have a little trust, Tattletale. They'll be fine." said Setsu. "Now let's go, we have bigger things to worry about."
At least one of the nut cases was sane enough to be all business during an Endbringer attack. I turned to our driver and nodded. "Hit it."

As we sped through the streets, I opened my laptop. There was a bold warning on the screen from the threat tracker:

```
hydra.v1123.9b4c7dc1dd9d01b1
purpose: global threat monitor
restriction level 1
oversight level 9

global threats:
prophecy009
endbringers
cauldron
organizations: yangban, protectorate, thanda, ...
powered beings: scion, eidolon, sleeper, ...
nuclear powers: usa, russia, china, ...
... 

warning
leviathan potential - brockton bay, us. cur 35% eta 30-90 min (society)
```

I had grilled Weaver on her Endbringer policies during my recruitment so I knew exactly what was coming. Weaver's highest priority was protecting her citizens. She would be preparing a means of escape to pull us out of Brockton Bay. With their long-range teleporter they could simply open a portal in the base that went to her main headquarters in Africa.

If this was an attack on Society territory we would hold the escape plans in reserve while we evacuated civilians and prepared to fight the Endbringer, calling in the equipment for her next round of weapons tests. But Weaver wouldn't risk a public incident on Protectorate territory. Evacuation would take priority. Which was...good, I supposed. I was awfully attached to my life and I'd hate to see it end at the hands of a giant unkillable city-crushing lizard. Throwing myself in its way would be suicidal.

But...I wasn't sure I wanted to leave. When I was with the Undersiders, we agreed that we'd defend the city in the event of an Endbringer attack. It was our duty to the people of the city, who supported us by letting us rob their casinos and banks. It was common decency, to save people from disaster.

And, damn it, there was no shame in admitting it. It was my chance to shine. I had seen footage of Endbringer fights, the secret films in the PRT records. The one thing above all the defenders lacked was organization, information. They had Dragon's early warning and armband systems, slowly improving over the years, but the defenders were still disorganized, a haphazard mix of local capes and foreign defenders. I could give them direction. If my power worked on Leviathan then I could tell them things, things that no one else knew, and they'd be hanging on my words, taking my advice and changing their tactics at my command. Hell, I knew it was crazy, but I couldn't shake the idea that my power would tell me his secret weakness, tell the heroes you just had to hit the Leviathan in a special spot with a certain power combo and he'd be toast.

Yeah, when I joined the Society I 'left my old society behind', but maybe there was still a way I could make a difference, use my power on the Endbringer and dish the info. I could stay in the base, watch the battle with surveillance gear, then duck out through the portal at the first sign of
trouble. Practically free info, minimal risk, she'd have to agree, right? Maybe we could even feed the info to the heroes, with Screamer or anonymous messages through Dragon. The Society must have a way to do it, they were filled with experts on secret missions and psy-ops.

I could check. Look up the records of old Endbringer fights and see if they fed info to the defenders. I navigated through the threat monitor's interface...

```plaintext
global threat encounters (society) (filter: default)

1993. ciudad bolivar, venezuela. behemoth. (first appearance)
1996. cologne, germany. behemoth.
1997. saransk, mordovia. sleeper. (redacted)
1999. kyushu, japan. leviathan.
2003. el obeid, sudan. ash beast.
2004. el obeid, sudan. simurgh. (society given s-class rating)
2004. new dehli, india. rakshasa.
2007. hyderabad, india. behemoth.
2008. gebel elba, egypt. sphere.
2009. monrovia, liberia. leviathan.
2009. lac ntomba, congo. lake of flesh.
```

An event caught my eye. A redacted record? Weaver had promised me full access to Society records. Insisted on it even, said it was pointless to keep secrets from a high-level Thinker and we should save ourselves the trouble of a years-long game of cat and mouse. Hell, I had even seen the files with Sleeper's profile, the sparse description of what was known about his powers. Why was she covering up the encounter?

>` Sleeper, global threat, sparse information. Data on global threats is high priority; data was redacted despite benefit to Society, data was redacted to protect Society, release of data would threaten Society. Data threatens Society; data is about Society citizens, secrets held by citizens, secrets revealed by their encounter with Sleeper, secrets revealed by-

I cut off my power. There were a million secrets buried in the Society's records, it would take me months to get them all. Can't let myself get distracted, can't waste my power now, with an Endbringer on the way. Got to focus on Leviathan.

There, that was something new. Two Leviathan attacks? I knew the Society had fought Leviathan before, two years ago in Liberia. Another event the PRT used to justify their S-class rating. But Kyushu? I hadn't seen anything about that before, not even in the PRT records. I opened the summary.


Leviathan attacks Kyushu. Most of the Society is in nearby Honshu. The Society is split by an internal disagreement. Leadership decides not to join the fight, noting the lack of abilities to impede Endbringers or damage their cores, and the official stance of the Protectorate to eject the Society from Endbringer battles. A faction rejects leadership's decision, citing the potential destruction if Leviathan is not stopped. Thirteen citizens leave to join the fight, including three recent Japanese recruits.

Leviathan successfully engages the defending capes in battle for hours, pretending to be contained while using the time to call waves to sink Kyushu. Nine and a half million civilians killed, three million rendered homeless.
Notable Society casualties (full list): Doshaburi, Kladivo, Kandza, Skimball, Kindano Kekkai (survived, left society amicably), Issei Shageki (survived, sought revenge on Society for not joining battle, executed), Upakovka (survived, sought revenge on Society for not joining battle, executed).

Note: Fracturing the Society may have been one of Leviathan's secondary objectives for the attack. To prevent repeat incidents, the Society decision making process has been restructured to ensure that citizens are on board with strategies for Endbringer encounters. Rare exceptions may be granted to citizens to defend their homelands from attack, as necessary for morale. -h

See files for further analysis:

Consequences of attack (sociopolitical, parahuman/triggers, ...)

Updated information about endbringer (physiology, psychology, new abilities revealed, list of parahuman powers used on endbringer and their effects)

Updated anti-endbringer strategies (escape, defense, attack, victory)

Ah. That explained why Weaver had grilled me about Endbringer attacks during recruitment, why she made me promise to abide by her decisions. A group of Society members split off and charged into an Endbringer fight without a plan for victory, and got themselves killed because of it. Not a promising sign.

The note said that I might be able to convince Weaver to let me stay to 'defend my homeland'. But it wouldn't be easy, not with the bad outcomes she would remember from the past. And I was a new member of the Society, one she had gone the extra mile for by giving me full access to her systems. I wasn't in a good position to be making demands. But still, I might be able to convince her, if I-

Screamer broadcast a message, as a new warning appeared on my screen flashing red.

"Attention everyone, listen up! We're going to fight Leviathan. That's right, we're fighting the scaly bastard again. We've got high value assets in the city we can't evacuate in time, so our objective is defending our base. Return to base immediately." A pause. "And those of you whose heart rates just spiked - yes, if you're hearing this, that's you - don't panic. We'll have an escape portal in case things go sour. We'll get you up to speed on the plan asap."

...Oh hell. I got my wish. What the hell was going on? A 'high value asset' worth getting into a fight with Leviathan?

> Assets can't be evacuated; can't pass through portals. Standards say to keep high value assets ready to evacuate; non-standard assets, new assets, recent recruits. Recent recruits, can't pass through portals; Noelle.

The monster girl. Of course. It wasn't just a matter of preserving an asset. If Noelle got loose in the middle of an Endbringer attack, surrounded by the world's most powerful heroes...damn Dice's prophecies, that could be the end of the world right there.

A piercing wail came through the air from a dozen places at once in the city. The air raid sirens. The PRT had finally sounded the alarm. Somehow, it was the sirens that made the reality strike home. This was it, this was real. I was going to fight an Endbringer.
I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. Then I went back to my laptop, went back to the records. If I was going to go up against Leviathan, I had to prepare, and that meant loading up on information. The more info I knew ahead of time the more clues my power would have to work from, starting up the snowball of information I needed to understand Leviathan's secrets. And the most important information of all about the Endbringer was how we fought him.

The Society leadership had refused to fight Leviathan in Kyushu, in 1999. But they had charged into battle a decade later in Liberia. They must have gained power, gained experience, came up with a plan they thought could truly hurt the Endbringer, maybe even kill him. I had gotten a broad outline of the incident from the news, but I knew by now that anything the PRT said about the Society was as likely to be propaganda as truth. I had to see the reality, the Society's battle plans against Leviathan in action.

The van was arriving in the base now, parking in the garage. Everyone else piled out of the vans, but I stayed where I was. The information I needed was right here. Sitting in the passenger seat of the van, surrounded by the noise and bustle of preparations for Leviathan's incoming attack, I sat and watched the fruits of those preparations, a video of the Society's last full-force attack against an Endbringer, their attempt to wipe him from the face of the Earth.

As I watched the video, I felt a growing horror in my gut. I had seen video from Endbringer fights before, but this...That's what the Endbringers really are? That's what's going to attack us, what we're going to try to defend against? And...that's what it takes to defeat them?

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Society vs. Leviathan, Monrovia, Libeira, 2009-06-10
Video Created by Telicomnicon, 2009-06-19

The video wasn't a clip of footage from a camera. It was a mishmash of jump-cuts between footage from a hundred cameras positioned around the city and worn on the helmets of Society members, interspersed with animated 3D reconstructions of scenes from the battle. Scenes had relevant details pointed out with colored arrows scrawled on the video, attached to text boxes with descriptions of the highlighted minutiae, and the video changed frequently between normal speed and slow-motion to illustrate points of interest. The modeling and annotations of events were clearly high quality, as if they were done by a professional film editor with an exceptional degree of 3D awareness, but the whole affair gave the impression of an excitable child creating a video with home movie software for the first time, wanting desperately to cram as much content as possible into the video to show everything at once. As if it was created by someone whose mentality was half a computer's and half a child's.

A series of datagraphics outlined the Society's plans for the attack. One showed the projected casualties if the 'capes' were left to their own devices: one to three hundred thousand deaths, nearly complete destruction of the city. Below was a list of Society plans, each with different predicted casualty rates and odds of success. One plan was highlighted, the one the Society had chosen for the battle as the most favorable of the lot. The second best casualty rate for civilians, the best casualty rate for Society citizens, and the best chance of defeating the Endbringer.

The video began with a top-down view of the city, Monrovia. The Society's threat monitor program had given them 12 minutes warning, just enough time to put the anti-Leviathan plan into effect. One part of the plan was evacuating civilians. The Society set air raid sirens blaring and set up transport stations in the parts of the city with the highest population density, with Movers and tinkertech vehicles evacuating people from the city. More than one third of the population was...
successfully evacuated before the start of the attack. The Society also evacuated the local capes, driving them out of the city by force when necessary to clear the field for their attack plan.

Leviathan would arrive soon. The sky was dark with clouds, the air was dense with rain, the shore was engulfed by wave after wave, each successive wave growing larger and penetrating deeper into the city.

The Society's defense consisted of only twelve citizens. Ten of the citizens were flying the air above the city in a loosely concentrated formation. Not a real defense - they were the bait. The other two citizens stood next to each other in bulky flight suits on the roof of a building a mile inland, a woman and a man who the video labeled Escherichia and Number Line. A split screen view showed that Escherichia's fine hand movements were being used to remotely control a tinker tech device that was rocketing back and forth along the shoreline, a thickly armored hovering sphere six feet in diameter. The sphere was labeled 'bomb delivery 1'. One of the flying capes directed an energy beam at a manhole in the streets, opening up a wide hole into the sewer system. Escherichia directed the hovering sphere into the hole and began navigating the sewer tunnels under the city.

One minute later, a massive wave crashed through the city streets. As the wave receded it revealed Leviathan in the center of the city. He was five blocks away from the flying citizens, racing toward them at high speed.

Then several things happened very quickly. The video slowed down to show them:

All of the Society's Movers evacuated the city.

The flying citizens opened fire with powers and tinkertech, not at Leviathan but at the water in a wide area around him. The receding wave, the thick rain falling through the air, the water echo he created with his body. The water boiled instantly, turned to a fine mist, and was pushed away from Leviathan by waves of air pressure and telekinetic force.

Leviathan ran toward the flying citizens, the lack of water around him momentarily reducing him to a fraction of his normal speed and removing his ability to turn on a dime. He crouched, preparing to leap into their midst and tear them apart.

Escherichia twitched her hand. A pair of teleportation effects engaged, one enveloping the group of flying citizens, another enveloping Escherichia and Number Line, moving all of them into a bunker four miles outside the city limits.

One hundred milliseconds later, the bomb in the underground sewers exploded directly underneath Leviathan. It unleashed a thirty kiloton nuclear explosion shaped to aim it's blast straight upward. Even so the bomb still destroyed half of the city, killing thirty thousand people in the initial blast and forty thousand more in the collapsed rubble, aftershocks, and radiation.

Leviathan was flung miles into the air, almost straight upward but with an arc directing him out to sea. There were sheaves of flesh hanging off the frame of his body, and a few small patches on his legs and chest were stripped all the way to most durable part of his flesh. None of the wounds were deep enough to expose his core. That level of attack wasn't nearly enough to kill an Endbringer.

But they weren't aiming to kill.

Leviathan, or at least his outer flesh, was still vulnerable to physics. Hit by such a sudden shock, he was moving upward so quickly that most of his water echo trailed far beneath him. The only water touching him was the small part of his echo directly contacting his body and the drops of water in
the surrounding rain. All of this meant that he had little midair maneuverability, that he was forced to fly in a largely predetermined trajectory through the air.

Miles inland, there was more activity from the Society. Harbinger stood watching the air, using a tinkertech visor and a remote control to guide a collection of surface-to-air missiles. Three missiles were already in the air, and two more were on the ground ready to be launched on command. The first missile was aimed to intercept Leviathan shortly before he reached the peak of his trajectory, prepared to explode just below him. The second missile was aimed at a point miles higher in the air, the predicted location where Leviathan would appear seconds after being propelled upward by the explosion from first missile. A point above the clouds, a point where Leviathan would no longer have access to rainwater in the air to control his trajectory. Then the third, fourth, and fifth missiles would hit Leviathan one by one with increasingly large nuclear blasts, accelerating him up and up until he was propelled out of the Earth's gravity well and into the depths of space.

If they couldn't kill the Endbringer, they would banish him from the Earth.

The first missile drew closer to Leviathan, ready to strike the critical blow. Leviathan was twisting in the air, body tucked into a tight ball and spinning from the force of the initial explosion. Harbinger used his enhanced perception to guide the missile into place, aiming to detonate the missile two hundred and fifty feet below and and front of the Endbringer, out of range of its lashing tail and water whips. There was less than one second left before impact. At the speed the missile was traveling, there would be a window of less than ten milliseconds in which Harbinger would have to detonate the missile to have the proper effect. Not a major obstacle. He timed his signal perfectly.

The bomb failed to detonate.

Leviathan had untucked his body from the ball and flicked his tail downward, sending a water whip directly in the path of the bomb. The Endbringer had used all the resources at his disposal to extend his reach - the release of rotational energy from his spin, the water he had been drawing from the rain to match his trajectory in the air, the water from his own echo, the added leverage from placing his tail precisely in the path of his water echo to maximize surface area, and something else for just a few hundred milliseconds, some form of high-precision water manipulation around his body that he had never before revealed. His combined efforts gave his water whip the range to exceed Harbinger's predictions, hissing through the air on a course toward the missile and striking two hundred milliseconds before it was going to detonate. The water whip hit the missile with enough force to tear off most of its casing and damage its internal systems. The trigger signal came to the bomb on time, but the bomb was pushed out of its flight path and too damaged to detonate.

Leviathan reached the peak of his arc through the air and began to fall. In a matter of minutes he would land in the ocean. But he couldn't be allowed to land. The moment he touched the water he would regain his maximum speed, cover the miles to shore in seconds, and appear in the middle of the ruined city as if he had never been knocked away.

If Leviathan wasn't dealt more damage before he landed, he would return and finish the job he started.

The second and third missiles were now useless, aimed far too high to be redirected toward Leviathan. Harbinger deactivated them and launched the fourth missile, aiming to intersect Leviathan's trajectory before he landed. The missile would intercept Leviathan miles offshore, two hundred feet above the waves. A risky prospect. If Leviathan did touch the waves he could avoid the blast entirely, disappearing miles beneath the surface of the water in an instant.
Long seconds were spent waiting, preparing for impact. Harbinger maneuvered the missile toward Leviathan's destination, adjusting for the Endbringer's aerial maneuvers. Inland, Society Movers evacuated their citizens fifteen miles from the coastline, and then did the same for the local capes and as many civilians as they could find. Leviathan fell through the air upside down, one arm outstretched toward the ocean below, using his hydrokinesis to create a construct of water at the point where he would land. A frothing miles-wide lump of water rising hundreds of feet above the ocean's surface, growing taller with each second. Every foot of height would allow Leviathan to reach the safety of the ocean a few milliseconds sooner. Leviathan's other arm was gesturing to the horizon, gathering a massive wave to strike the city. The oncoming wall of water was timed to reach his water construct at the precise moment he was about to land, momentarily raising the water level by a hundred feet and bringing him that much closer to safety.

Impact. Harbinger detonated the missile a full one thousand feet from the Endbringer, not taking any chances this time. The missile detonated when the Endbringer was a mere one hundred feet above his water construct, milliseconds before he would have reached safety under the waves. This was the fourth missile in the series, the one meant to be detonated in low-Earth orbit. A three megaton bomb.

Leviathan was hammered into a nearly horizontal trajectory, sent flying more than thirty miles through the air away from the coastline. The flesh on the front side of his body was almost entirely burned off, leaving only the tough inner layer of flesh and scattered patches of his black core exposed to the light. After nearly a minute of flight he landed in the ocean and disappeared beneath the waves.

The explosion above the ocean's surface created a series of massive concentric waves radiating from the blast site. The first, largest wave from the blast was greater than anything the Endbringer had created during the battle, and it was perfectly reinforced by the massive wave the Endbringer had been calling, as if the Endbringer had planned it to happen. The wave was far narrower than the Endbringer's waves and lost much of its height as it spread out in the ocean, but it was still hundreds of feet tall by the time it reached the city. It destroyed buildings, flooded ruins, drowned survivors, applied pressure to underground crevices created by the first bomb to collapse many of the city blocks that were still standing. The first wave was followed by a series of eight more waves, each smaller than the last. Forty five thousand killed, many more injured.

Minutes later, the last of the waves died down. Then there was a disturbance in the water, thirty miles out to sea. Leviathan's head surfaced above the waves and scanned the horizon, back and forth, to all appearances surveying the city from afar. It should have been impossible. He was too far out at sea, beyond the curve of the horizon. His head had been stripped of its outer flesh and eyes, reduced to a charred black outline of inner flesh and core. Still, he gave every indication that he was inspecting the city, swiveling his head as if to scan the coastline and appreciate the full extent of the devastation. Devastation caused without the Endbringer giving the city so much as a scratch, devastation caused entirely by the Society's hands. One hundred and fifteen thousand deaths, the city almost completely destroyed. Within the range of casualties predicted for the attack, slightly on the low side.

After a long moment the Endbringer's head twitched down, then up. A single nod, as if satisfied with the Society's work in his stead.

Leviathan disappeared beneath the waves.
Prophecy 009:

An unidentified, precog-resistant event that is prophecied to occur in 2027 or later with high probability, killing most humans on Earth in a matter of days.

Global threat, highest priority.

Outlook for the Society is poor: the parahuman death rate is predicted to exceed 98%.

Information is scant: precogs who can provide useful information about events that far in the future, and who are not entirely blocked by the precog-resistant nature of the event, are vanishingly rare. The great majority of information comes from three cases.

Case 1. Deathclock.

Monaco, 1996. Harbinger is contacted by a local precog, Deathclock. He claims to see numbers floating above peoples' heads that tell him when people will die, precise to the millisecond. His only known limitations are that his own actions can change the numbers, and that he has a time limit - the numbers are too blurry to read if someone dies after 2027.

Deathclock claims to have a system to use his power to make 'infallible' plans. He captures criminals he considers 'blights on society', keeps them prisoner in his basement, and carries a remote control in his pocket that he can use to gas them to death with the press of a button. Each morning he writes down his plan for the next 24 hours, then resolves 'I'll follow this plan, and gas the prisoners at the first sign of trouble'. If the prisoners' death dates instantly change to a time within the next 24 hours, it means that his plan will lead to trouble and needs to be rewritten. He repeats the process until he has a plan that is guaranteed to avoid trouble.

He approaches us for help taking a vacation; his power only works with line of sight, so he lived in Monaco his entire life so he could keep an eye on his prisoners. In exchange for his services as a precog, we rent him a citizen whose power lets him use his system from anywhere in the world.

Deathclock returns from his vacation manic and highly disturbed. He reports that his power doesn't have a time limit at 2027, because he can see death dates as late as 2050. Instead, an unknown entity is blurring the numbers for more than eighty percent of the people who live past 2027, including every single person he had ever seen in Monaco. He is convinced that 2027 is a global extinction event that wipes out the human race without ending their lives - an act of God, rapturing the righteous to Heaven and sending sinners to Hell.

Deathclock claims that the numbers for his Society contact Harbinger are repeatedly blurring and unblurring as he speaks, suggesting that the Society is involved in the extinction event. Deathclock
leaves the city and has never been seen again, by the Society or by any other organization whose records we have searched. Presumably he is using his power to escape attention.

Case 2. Mpanavotra.

Madagascar, 2006. We come into conflict with a precog warlord in Madagascar, Mpanavotra. His power is to detect whether people in his presence are going to die within the next two days. If they are, his power feeds him a continuous stream of visions of imaginary futures, in which he imagines his mind taking over the bodies of those people exactly two minutes before they are scheduled to die. He uses his power to be a general for his troops, detecting when they will be in danger and using the imaginary futures to figure out what actions his men need to take to save themselves.

During our operation against him, Mpanavotra has a second trigger event and goes mad. He reports that he is constantly perceiving hundreds of copies of his mind inserted into random people worldwide on the verge of their deaths, without any limit on how far in the future the deaths occur. Most distressingly, he reports that almost all of his copies are being killed at the same time by an event that is immune to his precognition. The details of the event are blocked from his perception, leaving the hundreds of copies of his mind trapped in a dreamlike state, feeling only an overwhelming sense of terror from desperately struggling against an inevitable force that kills them over and over again, everywhere in the world.

Mpanavotra is sent into a medically-induced coma and held in containment, in the hopes of one day being able to treat him and recover information about the world ending event.

Case 3. Dice.

Brockton Bay, USA, 2011. We recruit a precog, Dice, who is the first to predict the world ending event without going mad from the revelation. She can't see the event itself but she can see around it to tell us how our actions will affect the outcome. This gives us our first chance to prepare: to find a way to limit the damage, to improve our chances of survival.

Dice reports the following information: the event occurs sometime between 2027 and 2036...
I stood on the sixteenth floor of the Fortress Construction building, staring at the shoreline. I had a perfect view. The floor was designed for meetings between the company's executives and wealthy businessmen and high-ranking government officials. The windows of the rooms stretched from floor to ceiling, going almost all the way around the four sides of the building. It made a statement to the rich and powerful - giving them a perfect view of the city they owned, the city that Fortress Construction promised to protect with its reinforced construction materials and Endbringer shelters.

But the city wasn't a fortress. All of this could be destroyed in an instant.

The bay was almost invisible in the thick rain, atmosphere more water than air. The light was provided by the city streetlights, by the dozens of flying drones from Dragon and the Society. And by three bright yellow sparks of light hovering over the bay, the artificial suns made by Sundancer and the clones under Regent's control. Ready to dive down and burn the Endbringer when he rose from the water of the bay.

I had always thought that the Endbringers were forces of nature, that teams of a hundred heroes and villains had thrown everything they had at them and it hadn't been enough to kill them. I had just learned that was wrong. Endbringers weren't forces of nature - nothing in nature was that powerful. It was as if they were completely unnatural beings, outsiders, created for the purpose of destruction by some fantastical alien intelligence and placed on Earth to give them a playground. They weren't parahuman. They weren't human, they had never been human.

That was the one new thing my power had told me, when I used it on the video of the Society’s fight against Leviathan in Liberia. The video had been surprisingly unproductive for my power. The entire conflict lasted less than three minutes, and most of that time Leviathan was airborne after being tossed into the air by a point-blank nuke. When I turned my power on full blast, it told me details about the toughness of layers of the Endbringer's skin, about the Endbringer's regeneration rate, about the way that his movement speed depended on the amount of water touching his body.

But those were all pieces of trivia, barely useful. Yes, my power let me make snap deductions that would take anyone else hours or years of effort, but the Society had teams of Thinkers who had spent years poring over all recorded information about the Endbringers. They already knew all of the minutiae about the Endbringer's outer body, it's layers of flesh. What they needed was information about the Endbringer's true self, its core. Weak points to harm it, ways to contain it, its psychology to predict its attacks. But I hadn't been able to get anything about that from three minutes of video.

That was the problem. I wanted to make a difference. I had joined the Society to get a chance to use my power to the full, to test myself against the best thinkers in the world. To ferret out their secrets, to use my power to find out what none of them could.

But I wasn't sure it had been a good idea to join the Society, after all. They already had entire teams of Thinkers, poring over the same data I would use to make my deductions. And it wasn't just about getting a chance to shine, about getting new info. It was about the goals, what they were using that info for.

Those crazy bastards. Detonating a nuclear weapon in the middle of a city where they knew it would kill tens of thousands of people, just to have a chance of pulling off a crazy plan to get rid of
an Endbringer. Yes, *theoretically* it was a plan to minimize casualties, the best end result. But I wasn't a killer. I had never killed, never *wanted* to kill. If I was honest with myself, I knew I could do it. If worst came to worst and my teammates were mortal in danger, I would shoot an enemy to save a friend. Hell, I had almost had to do it once, during the bank job we pulled. But that was all theoretical. Now I had seen what the Society could do, *did* do, when they thought it was necessary to save lives, to destroy enemies like the Endbringers.

I was really working hard to make myself think I could do the same. I was past the point of no return. I was in the midst of another battle between the Society and an Endbringer, where thousands of civilians were likely to die even in the best case.

I was covered in Society regalia. I wore an outfit made of spider-silk, lightweight and bulletproof. On my head I wore my infolink, a visor that gave me a feed of information from the Society's network. It told me the locations of the Society members and gave me an augmented reality view with data from the Society's surveillance drones, letting me see through walls to anything the drones could see.

I used my infolink to look through the rainstorm, getting a clear view of the Society forces at the front lines, stationed just behind Labyrinth's wall around the bay. Twenty citizens in power armor, plus twenty mechs with tinkertech weapons. Crawler's massive bulk lumbering along the shoreline. Shatterbird hovering in the air in the distance, above a pile of a hundred tons of shattered glass.

And directing them all was the man standing next to me, studying his forces with an expression of complete calm, as though he fought Endbringers every day. Harbinger, the tactician and commander for the mission. I had looked him up in the PRT records long ago, when I first got access to them through Coil. The PRT knew he was a founder of the Society but they didn't know much about his power, guessing that it was a form of limited precog that let him defeat his enemies with inhuman efficiency, dodging attacks by millimeters and landing every blow on weak points. The Society records told me that his ability was far more versatile. A perception power, the ability to perceive the world as numbers and process it with the insight of a mathematician. He used his ability to make the Society millions of dollars on the stock market, to see weak points in a country's economy, and when needed, to snipe enemies from a mile away with ricocheted bullets. I had come out of our first meeting with a mild case of Thinker jealousy; I had hoped that I could get the Society to give me a cushy position manipulating the stock market, but he already had it on lockdown.

Today Harbinger was using his power to coordinate the Society's citizens in battle. He stood in front of the window, giving him a nearly panoramic view of the city. Along the bottom of the window ran two rows of computer screens, each screen showing a view from the camera of one of the citizens' suits or one of the surveillance drones floating in the air, giving him a flow of information from everywhere on the battlefield. And he was shirtless, his entire upper body completely covered in bugs doing a delicate dance, informing him of everything Weaver saw of the battlefield with her power. Harbinger was occasionally speaking orders into a small microphone next to his mouth, but more often moving his body like an orchestra conductor, using sweeping gestures and delicate finger movements to send a code that Weaver's insects understood.

Behind him on a group of couches were the citizens who used long-range powers to support the front-line. I took a moment to survey the group, the citizens I would be working with during the battle.

Foremost among them was Weaver, the *real* Weaver, the human body she had hidden from the world for more than twenty years. When Weaver agreed to give me access to her secrets, she had
revealed her true nature to me in an overly...dramatic way. I had to admit it was funny, after the fact, but damn Screamer and her habit of taking videos of embarrassing moments for rookies. Apparently Screamer wasn't satisfied with having the power to spy on everyone all the time, she had to take the extra step of getting video evidence for blackmail material. I was going to have to bribe Screamer to get a copy of that video. And then bribe her some more to get her video of Regent being defeated by his mustache-twirling evil clone.

Weaver looked...different from what I would have expected, somehow. A tall, middle-aged woman with gray streaks in her dark, curly hair. I wouldn't have expected her to be in such good physical shape. She was so obsessive about using her power at a distance that the world thought she didn't even have a physical body, but she took good care of herself and looked like she could run a marathon. None of that was visible now, of course. She wore a generic Society outfit, a lightweight, bulletproof all-concealing costume made of spider silk created with her power. No distinction between herself and any other 'citizen', probably to help her blend in better with the rest of them when on missions.

Whenever I was in her control radius my power made me acutely aware of the insects planted in small niches in my costume, in my hair, even the barely detectable ones on my skin, and the fact that a good number of them could bite to inflict mind-blasting pain or paralysis at Weaver's command. Weaver said the venomous bugs were there to defend me against assassins, letting her quickly disable anyone who attacked me. But the secondary message was clear: if I rebelled against her, disobeyed her orders, she could neutralize me at the speed of thought.

Weaver did the same surveillance routine with everyone, of course, but especially rookies who hadn't earned her trust, and especially rookies like me who were fast-tracked to get full access to Society records. Weaver had given me the full access in the end, under the condition that I stayed under supervision of experienced Society members 24/7, and that I became her personal shadow in particular. And to enforce that rule, she had...well...she had put insect larvae in my gut that would chew me to death from the inside out if I spent more than four consecutive hours outside of her control radius.

Regent had called me crazy to accept that deal, but in the grand scheme of things it was really a small price to pay for access to her information. Really. And I wasn't just saying that because I was a Thinker. After all, I cast my lot in with the Society, so I was already trusting them with my life. If I couldn't trust their leader Weaver, of all people, who could I trust? And staying by Weaver's side was exactly what I wanted. The Society had promised me that they would keep me out of combat, that they would use their surveillance technology to give me the benefits of information from the front lines without having to risk my neck to get it. So shouldn't I be happy to stay in the presence of the Society's leaders, who have the greatest protection of all and the most juicy secrets to discover? Right.

Next to Weaver sat Screamer, wearing an identical outfit. She was giving commands to the Society forces and coordinating with the defending capes, using her sense of hearing to detect everyone's positions from their breathing and heartbeats. My reading of Society tactics told me that it was very unusual for Weaver and Screamer to sit next to each other like this. Their powers were suited for very similar roles, wide-scale surveillance and broadcasting commands to their forces, so there would be no point in having their ranges overlap.

For Endbringer battles, though, the Society brought in a support cape who was tailor-made to solve that problem. A tall, gangly Ugandan known as Tatu, Swahili for 'Tangle'. She was an example of a common thread I had discovered in the Society - dangerous, fucked up powers that the Society had turned into useful ones.
Tatu perceived people as having two bodies: one representing the person's 'physical self', and a second body overlaid on top of it representing the person's 'mental self', their mental image of their own body. With a touch, Tatu could stretch and distort her victim's 'mental self' into arbitrary shapes. Moving her victim's 'mental arm' away from his real arm made his arm go limp; his mind became unable to recognize his arm as his own. Moving her victim's entire 'mental self' outside of his body gave him an out of body experience, making him believe he was floating in the air, detached from his body in a state of sensory deprivation. The victim would be paralyzed for hours until his mental self slowly returned to its original state. Tatu had gotten her name because of her particularly sadistic use of her power - stretching her victims' mental selves into thin tubes, millimeters thick and four miles long, and then curling the tubes around themselves like a massive ball of string. The victims whose minds she turned into 'balls of string' sometimes went insane, taking weeks to untangle themselves and return to their original bodies.

Weaver had recruited Tatu after seeing hints that her power had a secondary effect, a Trump ability to manipulate powers. Apparently powers that extended for a specified range outside of the user's body, like Weaver's and Screamer's, were anchored to their 'mental selves', not their physical bodies. Tatu could warp their areas of influence - stretching Screamer's sphere of influence into a miles-long tube to spy on faraway enemies, or turning Weaver into a 'circle of string' around a city to plant bugs on everyone who crossed the city limits.

For this battle Tatu had turned Weaver and Screamer into living 'trees'. Roots stretching through our base to supervise our preparations, their 'mental heads' still intact so they could speak with their physical bodies. Branches reaching into the city to supervise the battlefield. A thick main branch that would track Leviathan's position to direct the defending forces, plus dozens of spindly side-branches that were slowly sweeping back and forth, scanning the rest of the city, as if they were blowing in a gentle wind. Tatu had used her power on Labyrinth as well, stretching the girl into a long tube along the coastline to let her build her great wall, protecting the city from Leviathan's waves.

Far behind us in the back of the room was another citizen with a fucked up power turned useful, a man who had given me a disturbing 'gift' when I joined the Society. Derrida, an Algerian man wearing an elaborate tinkertech visor, who sat on a stool in the center of a giant pool of nutrient broth. In his heyday as an independent villain he had been as feared for his power as King had been in the United States, turning his victims into an unwilling army under his control. Each day his power generated a 'fracture' that he stored within his body and could implant into other people with a touch, leaving an odd marking on their skin like a small patch of shattered glass. Once he marked a victim, it was over for them. Any time they displeased him he could activate his power to extend the fracture over their entire body, instantly 'deconstructing' them by painfully ripping them to shreds.

Weaver had recruited Derrida after noticing a wrinkle in his power that the public believed was simply a terrifying side effect: when Derrida activated his power to kill a victim, any dead organic matter in his presence turned into copies of the victim's body parts - dead insects turning into slivers of skin and organs, dead rats turning into chunks of the victim's face. Weaver had cornered him and forced him to admit the truth - his power was actually a form of teleportation, attempting to call his victims to his side by deconstructing their bodies and then reconstructing them from nearby organic material. He complained that he had been forced into villainy by the destructive nature of his power, and Weaver offered him a chance to get a fresh start, using his power for protection instead of destruction.

I itched the back of my neck where Derrida had placed his fracture on my skin. His 'gift' to me as a new citizen. It ought to be reassuring. It meant he could save my life, pull me out of danger at a moment's notice. But if I was honest with myself, I couldn't say I was looking forward to being
painfully torn to shreds and replaced by a duplicate.

Beside the Society leaders were their personal bodyguards. Tranquility, oblivious to the commotion around her, was curled up on the couch and reading a book, "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats". Weaver had met the girl on her first visit to Kenya, finding her starving to death in the corpse-strewn streets of an abandoned village. Tranquility had triggered when her father was burned to death by his fellow villagers for being a 'witch', granting her an aura that extended fifteen feet around her body that automatically magnified and reflected all harmful intent directed at the people inside. She tried to rescue her dying father, and the villagers who tried to restrain her found themselves uncontrollably tearing at their own flesh. The villagers then made a series of increasingly desperate attempts to kill her, ending with half the village dead by suicide and the other half fleeing into the night. Now Tranquility protected the Society leaders in exchange for their help rescuing 'witches' from persecution.

Standing next to her was Galvanate, an infamous mob enforcer from the US who was rescued from a date with the Birdcage by Weaver's agent Madcap. He could bestow up to five people at a time with long-lasting invincibility and an electric touch. He used his power to make the Society leaders invulnerable to physical harm. He himself wore a bulky suit of flight-capable power armor, as a concession to the fact that he couldn't bestow invincibility to himself. It sucked to think about, but if Leviathan broke through our defenses and our escape routes failed, it would be his job to grab the Society leaders and fly them out of danger while the rest of us were left to fend for ourselves. If I was lucky, my power would warn me ahead of time and I could grab on to the leg of his flight suit to join them for the ride. If I was unlucky...

...well. I would have to hope for the best. Hope that the Society I had joined would live up to their reputation and repel the Endbringer. And the time to see it was now.

Leviathan was here.

My infolink told me before I could see it with my eyes. A disturbance on the horizon, sensors detecting a fast-moving mass under the water followed by a massive disturbance in the ocean surface. Leviathan leading a fifty foot wave toward the city, tall enough to send a deluge of water over the top of Labyrinth's wall.

> Waves fifty feet tall. Difference in wave height, Monrovia vs. Brockton Bay; initial waves calibrated to breach city walls, can sense height of city walls. Irregular senses: senses landscape while underwater miles away from city. Irregular senses, wave built up in advance; at minimum senses landscape while under 0.94 miles of water 6.45 miles from city.

I grinned. Grinned for the first time in the fight, now that I had something to be pleased about. That was something new, new info about the Endbringer's senses. As my power fed me the info I muttered into the microphone on my infolink, reporting it to the Society's think tank in India. The Society wanted to know everything, to get all the details, to store for their records and to feed the powers of other Thinkers. The Society leaders wouldn't listen to my info directly, they were too occupied directing their forces, but the think tank would screen it and give them the info they would help in the battle.

It was a tad unsatisfying compared to the arrangement I had with the Undersiders, where I screened my deductions and I decided what info to dish to Grue and the others. That had made me feel like I was the one directing the team. Even though I wasn't the official leader, the Undersiders had relied on my info to decide where to go, what to do. I could imagine I was a pilot in the cockpit. With the Society I was just a cog in Weaver's machine, powerful and efficient though it was.
The cannons on Labyrinth's wall swiveled and opened fire on Leviathan, a barrage of lasers and solid projectiles. They wouldn't do any real damage. They were a weapons test - gauging how well Leviathan's hydrokinesis deflected attacks while he was submerged in water. The common wisdom was that Leviathan was impossible to harm while he hibernated in the depths of the ocean between attacks, but the Society hoped to find a weakness, however slim the chance. If he could be harmed in hibernation then he could be attacked without worrying about collateral damage, giving a chance to unleash really high-powered weapons like Bakuda's bombs or hundred megaton warheads.

After a few seconds of attacks, Leviathan accelerated so fast that his avatar on the infolink seemed to teleport, moving from the horizon to the shoreline in an instant and ramming the coastline underwater with gigantic force. The ground shook under my feet, even here halfway across the city. The geographic sensors said that Leviathan had dealt a blow to the foundations of the city. He would have opened a path for ocean water to flow into the aquifer under the city, if it hadn't been for the reinforcements the Society placed under Labyrinth's wall.

Seconds later, Leviathan's wave arrived, sending rivers of water streaming over the wall. They would have engulfed the Society forces if they hadn't been standing on the roofs of buildings far back from the shoreline. Then the wave receded, revealing a pair of massive, reptilian hands gripping the top of the wall.

Leviathan's head peered over the top of the wall, twitching back and forth like an eye in its socket, his four glowing green eyes surveying the city. The city he would pull down from its foundations, the capes he would crush in a torrent of water and tear apart with his claws. For a moment I stared, all the defending capes stared, the reality of the situation hitting home.

Then there was a flurry of action, taking place in a matter of seconds. The infolink responded to my focus, zooming on Leviathan's face to see the attacks. A series of slashes cutting into Leviathan's eyes, scratching barely half an inch deep through his flesh. Laser attacks from the Society's mechs, from their citizens on the front lines, from Legend far in the distance. Then a guided missile from one of the Society mechs tipped with one of Bakuda's bombs, a high-powered explosive that detonated in Leviathan's face. It knocked Leviathan back into the ocean and destroyed a chunk of Labyrinth's wall, reducing it to rubble.

I swallowed, realized that I had been staring in awe without thinking to use my power. I forced myself to focus. What was Leviathan thinking? When he scanned the city, what did he see? Was he looking for his target? Looking for Noelle, for us?

> Irregular senses. Eyes fixed in orbits; needs to move entire head to shift field of view. Locations of head during twitches, position data from infolink; eyes not aimed at Society members, defending capes, city landmarks, stress points in city foundations, Endbringer shelters, hospitals, schools-

My power was getting off track. I cut it off, started again.

> Locations of head during twitches, position data from infolink; field of view not aimed at likely targets. View not aimed at targets, scanning head movements after eyes burned off in Monrovia attack; eyes not needed for vision, flesh of head not needed for vision, flesh of head not needed for sensing. Flesh not used to sense; flesh is decorative, head is decorative, head is non-vital.

Useful information, but the Society had already discovered the same about Behemoth. Their going theory was that stripping an Endbringer to its core wouldn't impede it at all, that if anything it would free the Endbringer from the restriction of carting around a vessel of decorative flesh.
Leviathan was back. He rocketed out of the ocean if he had been shot into the air from a cannon, flying through the breach in the wall left by Bakuda's bomb and landing two blocks into the midst of the city. Or he would have, if the Society's sensors hadn't detected him moving underwater an instant before his leap.

Leviathan was intercepted in midair by a flurry of projectiles from the Society's forces. One volley came from the front-line citizens and mechs, a refined version of the first attack the Society had used in Monrovia. Attacks that heated the air around Leviathan, boiling the water around him into vapor, plus pressure waves and telekinesis to push the vapor away from him so that he couldn't use it to assist his movement. As the attack began a reflective orb flickered into existence, hovering in the air between the citizens and Leviathan. The power of Crane the Harmonious, the leader of the front-line forces, redirecting their attacks to hit the Endbringer and the surrounding water for maximal effect.

A second volley came from one of the rooftops in the city close to our base. A continuous stream of high-velocity metal slugs hitting hard enough to cut short the Endbringer's leap and force him out of the air. It was Coil's railgun emplacement - Coil the Society cape, that is, not my old boss. Coil to make the railgun, Midas to create the giant metal spears it used as bullets, and Quarrel to use her space-warping power to ensure the bullets hit their targets. The metal bullets were twisting in the air to strike a dozen points on Leviathan's body, trying to keep him off balance, trying to push him to a specific point on the ground near the coastline.

It was our trap. We had built a wall with a weak point to attract Leviathan's attention, followed up by a bomb in the same place that breached the wall. All to goad Leviathan to enter the city at just the right spot.

Leviathan landed and stood, moving sluggishly under pressure of the railgun attack. His head jerked toward Crane's forces and he waved a claw-tipped hand in their direction. The mass of water that had entered the city condensed into a surge, a wave rushing toward the buildings where the citizens were standing-

> Leviathan's head not used to sense, but head jerks toward opponents as if sensing them; deception, making capes believe he uses his head to sense, believe he has regular senses, believe targeting his head would be effective. Decorative flesh, body has humanoid shape, deception; does not need humanoid shape to function, deception to suggest resemblance to humans, deception to suggest resemblance to organic beings.

Crane's citizens activated powers to lift their group into the air, floating away from the collapsing buildings and landing on sturdier ones further away from the shoreline. They kept up their attack as they moved, Crane's orb ensuring that their attacks struck home.

Leviathan gestured with his claws and began pulling more water toward himself - the water that had come over the wall in the first wave, the water from his echo, the water from the next tidal wave that was spilling over the wall behind him. He strode toward Crane's group, gathering water faster than their attacks could dissipate it and gaining momentum with each step.

A massive, sleek shape shot through the waterlogged city streets at lightning speed and barreled into the Endbringer, pushing him back a dozen feet. Crawler. The Society's regenerator whose body responded to damage by evolving new defenses, who had turned himself into a twenty five foot tall monstrosity with help from the Society's attentions. His body was studded with thick armor plating, extra sensory organs and limbs, and fins for moving in the water.

Leviathan staggered, then regained his balance and tore into Crawler's body with his claws.
Crawler made a loud barking sound, somewhere between a cry of pain and a laugh of joy, and clung on to Leviathan all the more tightly. For thirty long seconds they grappled, Crawler ignoring the continued attacks by Crane and Coil's groups that grazed him as they struck Leviathan, ignoring the pressure of Leviathan's water echo crashing against his body, ignoring the larger and larger chunks being torn out of his body faster than he could regenerate, all for the sake of pushing Leviathan another few feet further along the shoreline.

Finally Leviathan tore off enough of Crawler's limbs to dislodge his grip. Leviathan grasped Crawler in his claws, spun in place, and heaved Crawler away like a discus thrower, sending him crashing into a storefront two blocks away. Leviathan turned to face Crane's team again, now with enough water gathered around himself that he was almost fully protected against their water-boiling attacks.

Then the trap sprung.

Four massive, spike-studded, crystalline plates shot out of the ground, one on each side of Leviathan, propelled by giant pistons stretching a hundred feet into the ground. The crystal plates weren't large enough to form a box to contain Leviathan entirely; that would be doomed to fail, as the Endbringer's water echo would fill the box until it burst. Instead the plates pressed against the four sides of Leviathan's lower body, their spikes digging into the outer layer of his flesh to anchor them in place in his legs and lower torso, with enough space between the plates that Leviathan's water echo flowed harmlessly between them onto the ground. An impossible construction, built by Labyrinth's power and hidden underground until the trap was sprung.

Leviathan managed to crouch despite the pressure of the plates, prepared to leap to escape his confinement. Then the second part of the trap came from above. Shatterbird arrived in the air above Leviathan and sent a storm of tons of glass crashing down on his body.

The attacks from above and below both began to reshape themselves to contain the Endbringer. The glass shaped itself into a solid block around Leviathan's upper body, leveraging its force at key points to try to contain his thrashing arms, leaving channels open in the block of glass to minimize the disruption as Leviathan's water echo flowed away from his body. The crystal plates wavered and distorted, changing shape to push Leviathan's legs out from under him and deny him the ability to make another leap. More crystals appeared from the ground, bands attempting to grip Leviathan's lashing tail and hold it in place.

For the moment, Leviathan was trapped.

The Society forces didn't hesitate. Crane's forces broke out a new set of powers, this time focused on sheer damage, their most powerful attacks. Crane's orb focused their fire at a single point on the center of his torso, to ensure that the attacks didn't disrupt Shatterbird's glass or Labyrinth's plates. The mechs deployed missiles tipped with Bakuda's bombs, exotic weapons meant to deal damage by warping space and ripping apart matter, not risking conventional concussive blasts that might knock Leviathan loose from the trap.

> Irregular biology, no vulnerable organs: body divided into layers, extending down to hyperdurable core body, each layer down is slightly more than twice as durable as previous. Exterior skin is hard as aluminum alloy, but flexible, lets him move. 0.5% in toward core of head, trunk, neck, tissues are hard as steel. 1% toward core of main body/head, tissues strong as tungsten. 1.5% toward core of main body/head, tissues strong as boron. 2%- I cut myself off. Too slow, not enough to help in the battle. I could hear Grue's voice in my head, "Something we can use!". I focused again, this time on his movements, the way he defended
himself against attack-

"Hey, why'd you stop? You're getting great stuff, there." A young man's voice coming from my infolink, identified as Number Line. One of the Society members from the think tank.

"It's too slow. At this rate I'll take five minutes before I get info on the core." I said.

The man laughed. "So humble, Tattletale. Five minutes for info on the core is an excellent trade. We're not trying to kill the rat bastard today. I'm not going to tell a rookie Thinker how to think, but I'd love it if you kept going."

Ah. Right. I was still thinking like a cape. Still thinking of how to stop the Endbringers, instead of how to end them. The PRT would have cast my information aside, but the Society saw my true value. I grinned. "Right-o, boss. I'll give it a try."

He laughed again. "I'm not your boss, but whatever. Good luck."

I returned my focus to the battlefield. Sundancer and Regent's yellow suns floated down from above, each nearly fifteen feet across, rain boiling into steam in a wide area around them. The suns moved to intersect Leviathan's outer layer and his flesh began charring, melting away. The next layer was revealed, and began to melt in turn, more slowly than the last.

> Irregular biology, layers extending down to hyperdurable core body. 1.5% toward core of main body/head, tissues strong as boron. 2% toward core of main body/head, tissues as strong as carbon nanotubes. 2.5% toward core, tissues as strong as-

I was getting a headache. I had been using my power all day, searching through Society records, then for the Othala recruitment, and now almost non-stop ever since the Endbringer alert. I forced myself to keep going.

For minutes Leviathan struggled with his bonds, trying to free himself as increasingly large chunks were torn out of his torso by the Society's attacks. Leviathan was slowly gaining ground, seeming to vibrate in place as he made small, blurry-fast movements back and forth within his bonds that wreathed him in a weak ghost of his usual water echo. Larger and larger tidal waves spilled over the wall three times a minute, adding to the water bathing his lower body, where the Society couldn't use full-strength attacks to dissipate the water for fear of damaging Labyrinth's bonds. His movement speed was slowly increasing with each passing moment.

"Attention everyone!" came Screamer's voice. "Coil's almost done aiming her big gun. T minus 30 seconds to fire at Leviathan! Get ready to back off, 400 meters at least!"

I had been waiting for this. Coil's orbital railgun, the first new weapon the Society was testing in the battle. This was where Weaver wanted me to use my power most of all, to see whether the attack provoked the Endbringer to reveal subtle new powers or defenses.

"After this shot, don't move in to attack. We made a deal with the capes, we're giving them a turn next. Stay back and don't get in their way."

It was a shame that Weaver couldn't coordinate better with the capes, that they had to take turns instead of working together. It made sense, though. They fought with entirely different methods. Weaver's Society used elaborate, well-trained attack plans, often combining ten powers at once, to deal a decisive blow. The capes, at least the Protectorate capes, typically relied on sheer force of numbers and improvisation, using only a rough organization of their forces into brutes, blasters, movers, and so on. The furthest they went toward practiced strategies were tricks that the team
captains learned from hard experience fighting by each others' sides.

Besides, working together meant trusting each other with their lives, and that trust didn't exist between the Society and the PRT. The PRT didn't have access to the secrets I knew, they didn't know why Weaver was defending the city. For all they know it was all a ploy to stab the heroes in the back. With any luck, this attack would convince them that Weaver wanted to destroy the Endbringer, not nuke the city.

"T minus 20 seconds."

Something was wrong. Leviathan's struggles were getting more vigorous, his arms lashing about with less and less interference from Shatterbird's glass. The block of glass began to disintegrate. Leviathan gripped the crystal plates with his claws and began to tear into them, freeing more of his lower body with each passing second. Shatterbird's power was giving out?

"T minus 10 seconds."

Leviathan was vibrating back and forth so fast he was a blur, snapping the crystal spikes that had given the plates a grip on his body, breaking free of his bonds. The Society capes and mechs were backing away from the incoming orbital attack but maintained their fire on Leviathan, switching to concussive weapons to try to hold Leviathan in place.

Shatterbird flew closer to Leviathan and regained some of her control over her glass, then quickly lost it again. She drew closer still, struggling to draw her block of glass back together. Was Leviathan doing this, disrupting her glass somehow?

> Shatterbird. Macrosilicakinesis, control over glass transmitted through subsonic sound. Impaired control; broad-class power disruption or specific disruption targeting glass or subsonics. Spatiotemporal pattern of disruption; disruption source was initially Leviathan, source spread to emanate from surrounding area; disruption transmitted through water. Leviathan's vibration in place to batter restraints, precise hydrokinesis revealed in Monrovia battle; application of macrohydrokinesis to shift masses of water by small distances instead of large ones. Application to vibrate water, disrupt vibration of water, disrupt sound vibrations transmitted through rainwater covering Shatterbird's glass.

Fucking hell. Endbringers could do that? I gave up on my muttered reports into the microphone and shouted, calling out to the Society leaders around me. "He's vibrating the water around him, subsonics to block Shatterbird! He can cancel her out all the way if he wants to!"

"T minus five, four..."

Leviathan pushed off the ground and made a short hop upward, snapping the last of the crystal spikes holding him in place and escaping Labyrinth's bonds. He crouched on top of the ruined crystal plates and then made a second leap, pushing off with a lash of his tail to give him extra height. A great bound away from the trap, and toward a point in the air directly beneath Shatterbird. His disruptive effect on Shatterbird's power multiplied in an instant and she dropped out of the sky, falling directly into the path of Leviathan's claws.

Leviathan never reached her. Crawler charged and leaped into the air to meet him, using four of his toughest limbs to grab Leviathan's legs and pull him down out of the air. Crawler struggled to push Leviathan back toward the Society's trap-

But Leviathan's water echo continued in its path through the air, striking Shatterbird with a force
greater than a freight train. Shatterbird was ripped apart, her blood staining the water echo dark red, and-

"...zero."

A vast column of the rainstorm above Leviathan blurred for a moment and an colossal crack rang through the air, ten times louder than a thunderstorm, painfully deafening. I collapsed to the floor, covering my ears. Stupid, so stupid. So focused on Leviathan I didn't remember to protect my ears. Screamer was probably dampening it and it was still unbearable.

As I fell to the floor something hit me, the floor dropped out from under me. An earthquake, shaking the foundations of our base even though it was built like an Endbringer shelter. Fuck, did we break the-

> Quake duration, impact site near shoreline; local damage to continental slope, little damage to foundations of city. Landmass will lose a chunk one eighth of a mile wide, collapsing into ocean.

I let out a sigh of relief. This attack was the first on the list because it was only safe to use at the shoreline, not in the middle of the city where it would break its foundations. But I wouldn't have put it past the Endbringer to use it to his advantage somehow, find some trick to amplify the damage.

I staggered to my feet. Around me the other Society members were recovering from the shock. Harbinger hadn't even flinched, moving his body to compensate for the quake as if it wasn't there. Weaver had fallen to the floor face first, unable to move her body to brace herself because of Tatu's modifications to her mental image. Tatu was lifting her back onto the couch. The others were more or less intact. Tch, Tranquility hadn't even looked up from her book.

I went to the window, to turn my power on the aftermath of the attack. The shot had made a massive crater in the ground near the shoreline, slowly filling in with water from the rain and the waves. The Endbringer was nowhere to be seen.

I grinned. That was more like it. I still had lingering doubts about joining the Society, about their ruthlessness, about whether I fit in. But seeing this? I was proud to be a part of a team that pulled this off against an Endbringer. We had lost one of our best members, but-

I was interrupted by a loud gasp behind me. A gasp from Derrida's tub of nutrient broth, a woman's voice thick with emotion.

Derrida had saved Shatterbird, deconstructed her an instant before her death and reconstructed her from raw materials. Shatterbird was sitting in the tub, naked and soaked in raw biomass, face a twisted mask of frustration and rage. She clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and-

A dragonfly zipped into Shatterbird's mouth and cut off her scream before it began. She gasped, sputtered, and finally ejected the insect, coughing violently. Derrida tapped a hand against her back, adding a new 'fracture' to replace the one he had expended to teleport her. He offered her a hand to help her get to her feet, but she refused it and climbed out of the tub on her own.

Weaver moved for the first time in the battle, turning her head to look at Shatterbird. "Shatterbird. Excellent work. You and Labyrinth locked down Leviathan for five minutes, one of the best performances on record against an Endbringer. They'll be showing that one on the news tomorrow. Now, would you do us a favor and not kill us all with your cry of joy over joining the greats?"
Shatterbird glared at her. "I am going back out there." she said, a challenge in her voice.

"Of course. You're a great asset." said Weaver. "The next time we fight Leviathan we'll bring tinkertech to counter that little trick of his, so you can lock him down on your own." She paused. "Until that day comes, be patient. It would be a shame if you foolishly threw your life away by squandering your range advantage and flying into close quarters with an Endbringer."

Shatterbird reacted - a small flinch, an intake of breath. "Yes. Naturally. Where are my spare-" She stopped talking, probably getting instructions from Screamer. She nodded and stalked off to the elevator without another word.

I turned back to the battlefield. There was movement at the impact site, a pitifully mangled mat of muscle and bone crawling out of the crater. It was Crawler, nearly all of his flesh gone. He had made sure the attack would hit the Endbringer by sacrificing himself, pulling the Endbringer into the blast zone even though had to know that he would be hit by the attack. From what I had seen in his psych profile, he had probably tried to move himself directly into the path of the attack to take it head on. He was lucky he hadn't succeeded. He had only been grazed by the shot, had merely been reduced to a paste instead of completely destroyed. It would take him at least a full minute to replenish his lost mass even with his regeneration speed. Crawler flexed his half-restored muscles, flopped himself over the edge of the crater, and slowly dragged himself away towards the city.

Where was Leviathan?

> Power of railgun, size of impact crater; shot hit landscape more than Leviathan, not enough damage to strip to core. Shot grazed Leviathan; embedded him in the wall of the crater.

The largest wave yet came in from the ocean, seventy feet tall. A deluge of water poured over Labyrinth's walls. Flooding the crater, rushing through the city streets, tearing apart the last remaining buildings near the shoreline.

When the wave dispersed, Leviathan stood five blocks into the city. The railgun shot had hit his tail and the spot where his tail joined to his back, stripping them of all but their two most durable inner layers of flesh. The parts of his torso where the Society forces had concentrated their attacks were almost as badly off. But his outer layers of flesh were slowly regenerating, new layers growing to replace the old.

The capes moved to intercept him - it was their turn to fight. Flying brutes and blasters swarmed around him from all directions, readying their attacks. Leviathan ignored them, strolling through the streets at an almost casual pace...directly on course for our base. The twitching movements of his head stilled for a frozen moment, and he looked directly at our command center on the sixteenth floor.

> Leviathan's head not used to sense, decorative flesh to suggest resemblance to humans; decorative flesh to imitate human gestures; wants us to know he's coming for us.

The first of the Protectorate heroes started their attack. Legend and Eidolon, sending white-hot laser beams into the exposed inner flesh of Leviathan's torso, momentarily doing enough damage to counter his regeneration.

Leviathan lowered his head and charged.
Leviathan charged at the capes as a wave surged through the streets alongside him, accelerating his movements. The capes hit him with a full force barrage - lasers, fireballs, tinkertech weapons - barely managing to slow his advance.

Before Leviathan had moved more than block, Alexandria flew out of an alley at high speed aiming at his side. At the same time Legend's lasers twisted in the air to strike at the Endbringer's joints and ankles, and Eidolon clenched a fist and drew the surface of the street behind him into a giant hand to grasp Leviathan's tail. A practiced maneuver by the Triumvirate, combining their efforts to trip up the Endbringer and knock him off balance.

Leviathan reacted instantly to the attack, stumbling under pressure from Legend's lasers but twisting his tail out of Eidolon's grasp and using it to slap Alexandria out of the air and into the side of a building. Alexandria tried to wrap his tail in her hands, get a grip to throw him or lift him into the air, but he slithered his tail away from her and whipped it into the air, creating a water echo heading towards a group of flying capes at high speed. Two of the local heroes, Shielder and Lady Photon, created barriers to deflect the brunt of the water echo while other capes retaliated with ranged attacks. Leviathan sunk his claws into the side of a nearby building, climbing to get height to strike at the flyers, but Eidolon's hands grew from the ground and the walls of the building to obstruct him, their grip getting stronger as Eidolon's new power grew with time.

> Hyrokinesis. Accelerated movement when in contact with water, acceleration enhanced for inner layers of tissue. 5% toward core of main body/head, acceleration enhanced by 33%. 10% toward core of main body/head, acceleration enhanced by 66%.

I rubbed my forehead. My headache was getting worse. There was a solution for that, I knew, but I wasn't eager to use-

Weaver's voice came buzzing from the insects clinging to my costume. "Tattletale, get a recharge. Check on L. Our next attack in five."

Oh. Of course she knew I was feeling the side effects of my power. She was tracking my words and movements with minute precision. I suppressed my misgivings and forced myself to smile. "Right you are, boss." I said.

I made my way to the back of the room, where Jeopardy had set up a station for recharging citizens like me whose powers came with mental backlash. He sat on a couch next to Dice, both of them watching the progress of the battle on their infolinks. Dice was saying numbers out loud every thirty seconds or so, in response to prompts from the Society's leaders sent to her earbuds. Jeopardy occasionally reached out to mutter something in her ear and gently touch her forehead, using his power to cure the headaches her power was causing her.

The fuel for his power was stacked beside the couch. The captured capes of the Empire, limp and still. Purity, Krieg, Night, Fog, Crusader, Alabaster. Othala and Victor were there too, set aside with a note that they were off limits, spared the fate of the rest of the Empire because of Weaver's promise to exile them from the city.

Jeopardy saw me coming and raised a hand. "One moment." he said. He stood and walked to the elevators. A door opened and let out a group of citizens, Shatterbird and Nyx among them, who passed by without a word to go to Weaver's side. Another elevator opened to reveal three
waterlogged citizens from the battlefield...no.

One citizen, Regent, cutting a ridiculous figure in his bulky Society power armor, helmet held by his side. Normally the only people with the expertise to operate Tinker devices were the Tinkers who designed them, but the Society made a point of making their armor easy to use for new recruits. The armor even had a low-level AI to take over if the operator was unconscious...or simply too lazy to bother operating the armor on their own. Tailor-made for Regent, really. Behind him were two women wearing all-concealing spider silk costumes, standing with Regent's characteristic slouch. Two clones of Sundancer under Regent's control, wearing Bakuda's failsafe collars around their necks.


Regent blinked, then chuckled. "Oh, I know that one. Amaranth, right? Because you sucked out the brains of that undying Nazi over there, the albino."

"Ah. Well. Yes. Very good." said Jeopardy. He frowned. "Then, do you know the-"

"You don't need to do your quiz-show schtick." said Regent. "I'm kind of in a hurry here."

"You should respect your elders, young man. But I will forgive your trespass." said Jeopardy. He touched Regent's forehead for a moment, then strode stiffly back to his seat.

"You need his healing, Regent?" I said.

"Keeping control of these psychos is giving me backlash." said Regent. He ran an armored hand through his hair. "Man, I didn't join up for this. I was supposed to sit back and take it easy. Now I spend all my time hustling around. Kidnapping villains, cloning Nazis, fighting Endbringers."

I grinned. "Come on, Regent. You wanted to be a big-time cape, now you got your wish. Live the dream!"

A swarm of dragonflies condensed next to Regent's head and buzzed in Weaver's voice. "Regent, Genesis is waiting. Go."

"Right, coming." said Regent. He went back in the elevator, a flicker of emotion passing over his face. Suppressing a habit. If he was in the Undersiders he would have snarked at his leader for giving him orders so sharply, but he thought better of sassing a sentient swarm of insects. Of course, I knew that Weaver was a human being and that didn't make me any more likely to risk it.

Jeopardy beckoned to me, then reached to his side and touched the limp form of Alabaster. I stepped closer and he touched my forehead. "A question for you, Frau Tattletale." he said. "What flower, thought to have exceptional beauty, is the symbol of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and of Moriyama City in Japan?"

I smirked. "That's easy, no need for my power. An Eastern flower even a Nazi would know about, a guy whose power is like rebirth, reincarnation - it has to be the lotus."

"You Undersiders are too cultured." said Jeopardy. "I cannot take satisfaction in seeing my power at work." My headache disappeared and I felt a strange ripple pass through my mind, a brief sensation of a hundred places and names and facts on the tip of my tongue. Knowledge from Alabaster, knowledge he had permanently lost at Jeopardy's touch. He wouldn't be regaining it. Alabaster's defensive power restored his body to perfect condition, kept it pristine, but did nothing
to protect his mind.

It felt dirty, healing the damage my power did to my mind by stealing mental health from others. Then again...they were Nazis. And it was a much more useful application of Jeopardy's power than what he had been doing when Weaver found him in 1995. The German police had caught him using his power to give his school quiz team success in competitions, permanently draining knowledge from his team's opponents in order to get a temporary boost for himself and his teammates. Weaver had broken him out of jail so that he could join her Society, one of the first citizens she had recruited whose power let her put condemned prisoners to better use than simple execution. He did healing and interrogations, and in a pinch he could reduce an enemy cape to a mindless shell in less than fifteen seconds of physical contact.

I went to the next couch in the back of the room, one that was surrounded by a pile of luggage, suitcases and travel trunks. Labyrinth sat in the middle. The Shaker 12, the Society's best asset against city-wide threats like Leviathan, when she was used in combination with other citizens powers.

Labyrinth was being touched by Tatu, having her 'mental self' reshaped. Tatu had used her power on Labyrinth before the battle to shift her to the front lines, reshaping her mind into a miles-long tube along the coastline to form her wall against the waves, with the end of her tube coiled around the patch of ground where she built her trap for Leviathan. Now that the trap wasn't needed, Tatu was moving that coil of Labyrinth's mind to our base, so that she could shore up our walls to protect us if Leviathan reached us. Tatu finished her work and patted Labyrinth fondly on the head, like a favorite pet.

Tatu returned to her station with Weaver and Screamer, brushing my side as she went. I felt my pinky fingers twitch oddly for a moment, twisting backward at an impossible angle before returning to their normal position. Tch. Tatu claimed her power activated 'automatically' when she touched people, but the truth was that she just liked to remind people that she could subject them to horrible tortures if they offended her. Not that she would, because Weaver would stop her. She just wanted to make it clear that the option was theoretically on the table. Irritating, but I couldn't hold it against her. It was the Striker version of my own habit as a Thinker, showing off my power by putting a constant grin on my face to make people think I held all the cards in my hands.

Labyrinth hadn't responded to Tatu's touch. She was in a trance, eyes wide open and staring blankly ahead, sitting in Dreamer's lap. Dreamer was gently combing Labyrinth's long blonde hair and whispering in her right ear, while Weaver's insects buzzed around her left. I moved closer to hear what they were saying.

"No, not a solid wall. Too much danger from a breach, if water gets in it would be trapped inside and flood us. Make openings on all floors to drain the water, reinforce the framework to keep its strength."

That was Weaver.

"Oh, a trellis! Clever girl. Now then, what shall we sample next? Tea from the court of Emperor Shennong? Or perhaps Gyokuro handmade by Eguchi Shigejyuro? The latter goes better with biscuits, I think, but if you'd prefer something nostalgic-"

And that was Dreamer. A flake who claimed to be a 'tourist' rather than a citizen of the Society, her power sent people's bodies into a state of hibernation while sending their minds into bizarre dream worlds, which she could control to a...questionable degree. She was guiding Labyrinth through an elaborate dreamscape, keeping the girl lucid enough to follow Weaver's orders while still dissociated enough from the world to use her reality-warping power at maximum strength.
Weaver only allowed them to combine their powers during emergencies, to minimize Labyrinth's exposure to the side-effect of Dreamer's power. I studied Labyrinth—

> Skin temperature raised one degree on face, hands; dream self exposed to bright sunlight on a summer day. Fractional movement of lips; dream self drinking a beverage, served hot, savoring the taste; tea and biscuits. Microscopic changes in body, alterations to lips, skin, eyes, blood vessels, fingernails. Fingernails: nails damaged by compulsive nail-biting are being healed to resemble the intact nails of her dream self. Level of dissociation, estimated progress of dream; fingernails will heal fully within 12.3 minutes, form sharp edge in 32.3 minutes, micromolecular edge in 72.3 minutes, claws integrated with bone in 462.3 minutes, full-body exoskeleton in 2782.3 minutes, sentience in—

Good. For the next hour or two the only changes leaking from the dream world into Labyrinth's physical body would be relatively innocuous. According to my infolink, Labyrinth's previous exposures were responsible for her elfin ears, sharpened incisors, and appetitie for methanol.

Dreamer noticed me watching and tilted her head. "Tattle dear, have you come to join us for tea?"

Absolutely not. "Nope. I'm just here to check on Labyrinth. Take good care of her, okay?"

"Of course I will! What kind of a monster do you take me for!" She pouted. "Certainly not the type to refuse a polite invitation to tea time. Come now, you can barely see the child from here, only this pitiable shadow before your eyes, but if you join us you'll see she's quite an elegant lady at heart."

"Sorry, I'll pass. Boss' orders, you know." I started back toward my post at the window, then hesitated. It couldn't hurt to ask...

"Hey, have you tried your power on Endbringers? Any luck?"

Dreamer sighed. "The brothers and sister refuse to take a moment's rest, no matter how politely I offer. You mustn't believe their pretense of hibernation. Those poor children are workaholics, the lot of them."

A heavy hand rested on my shoulder. "Leave her be. She has important work to do. You have important work of your own, don't you? Watching a superweapon?"

I turned to face the speaker, and was barely able to suppress my wince. It was Dreamer's wife, Setsu. A normal human with more than a decade of exposure to the woman's dreamscapes, her appearance and powers were what one would expect from half a dozen Case 53s mashed together. My power informed me that she was in a more serious mood than usual, three of her brains active while only the fourth was dreaming. Two of her hands were fiddling with the latch of a suitcase, part of the pile of luggage that the pair of 'tourists' carried with them in their travels with the Society.

> Tone; mild threat. Hands on suitcase latch; associates making threats with opening suitcase. Contents unknown. Age of suitcase, lack of wear on latch; suitcase has not been opened for ten years. Dreamer's power induces hibernation state where dreaming subjects survive without food, water, or air; dreaming subjects would survive being locked in a suitcase indefinitely, transformation limited by available space, confined space likely to favor extreme transformations—

I stared at the pile of luggage. Setsu smiled with one of her more human mouths.

"Right, right." I said. "Bakuda's bombs are next. We'll see if we can blast the lizard back into the ocean." I turned to leave.
"Give it your all, Tattle dear!" called Dreamer after me.

I ignored her and returned to my spot in front of the window. As I searched for Leviathan, Screamer's voice echoed through the room:

"Attention Society! Attention capes! Our next attack on Leviathan starts in two minutes. We're bringing in a surprise guest star to lead our attack, so please remain calm. Don't panic!"

A guest star? I called the information up on my infolink. Yes, according to the plan the next attack was simply a deployment of Bakuda's more exotic bombs. Unless one of the Society leaders changed our attack plans at the last minute...

Leviathan had only advanced a few blocks toward our base, getting sidetracked by the constant attacks from the defending capes. They were fighting Leviathan in close quarters now, sending in capes covered in stone armor, glowing auras, tinkertech suits, anyone who could survive a hit from the Endbringer. The close quarters attacks were staggering him, not dealing damage to his flesh but unbalancing him enough that the ranged attackers could hit him full force.

Leviathan caught the stone armored cape in his claw. She broke off the outer layers of her armor to escape his grip, like a lizard shedding its tail, but Leviathan caught her again and began to squeeze, crushing her to death inside her armor. The aura-cloaked cape rushed in to try to rescue her, only to be struck by a lazy backhand and sent tumbling into the wall of a building a block away, then hammered through the wall by a water echo from a swipe of Leviathan's tail. A mouse-costumed woman rippled into existence next to the downed cape and lifted him in her arms, carrying him out the other side of the building.

New capes immediately joined in to keep up the pressure on Leviathan, Alexandria darting from the sky on one side, a twenty foot tall Dragon suit spitting blue flame on the other. A wave of water crashed through the city streets, still fifteen feet tall despite the efforts of Eidolon and Labyrinth keeping the ocean at bay. The wave pushed against the Dragon suit, knocking it off balance in mid-stride. The suit recovered its balance in a second, but it was enough for Leviathan to take advantage. He skated on the wave and was in front of the suit in a flash, grappling its leg and flipping it on its head, then tearing chunks of metal off the suit with his claws.

The Dragon suit began to glow. Leviathan tensed to heave the suit into the air. Alexandria hammered Leviathan from above, keeping him in range as the suit self-destructed in a ball of blue flame, melting off the layer of outer flesh that Leviathan had regenerated during their battle. Leviathan was knocked back on his haunches but used his tail to right himself in an instant, and a new set of capes moved in to fight, brutes with area-effect attacks backed up by forcefield generators.

Suddenly the capes halted their attacks and moved as one, fleeing the scene. Legend redirected his lasers to something hidden behind a building several blocks away, then stopped and flew halfway across the city to regroup with the rest of the Triumvirate. What was scaring the capes away? Something scaring them more than Leviathan?

I heard it before I saw it. A faint, fluctuating tone, music inside my head whose notes just barely escaped my grasp. A song getting louder and louder, splitting into two parallel songs at once, then three, then four...and then the source floated into sight from behind a building, three blocks away from Leviathan.

The Simurgh.

Her fifteen foot tall form hovered in the air, rainwater streaming down in rivulets on the surface of
her body and through her long, white hair. She arched her back and stretched her dozens of wings, wingspan wide enough that they raked against the sides of the buildings on both sides of the street. Where they touched, the buildings shook and windows shattered, sending a telekinetic storm of debris into the air-

> Telekinesis restricted to levitation of self, glass from windows; Shatterbird's power, glass replica of Simurgh. Altered appearance; illusion, Nyx. Audible sound, apparent source inside head; Screamer's replica of Simurgh's scream.

I laughed in disbelief. What the fuck, Weaver. He's an Endbringer. You're trying to tug at his heartstrings? His sibling affection?

An avatar appeared on my infolink, labeled 'Delivery 1 - Shatterbird, Nyx'. It was followed by three more avatars, three more replicas of the Simurgh, each built with a different combination of powers. They floated in the air toward Leviathan, boxing him in from all sides.

Leviathan didn't show any reaction to the presence of his 'sisters', except as more enemies to be destroyed. He ignored the closest replica, the one directly in front of him, and took a single step toward Shatterbird's. His step turned into a lightning fast attack as he used hydrokinesis to skim along the surface of the waterlogged street, crashing into the glass replica and tearing at it with his claws. Nyx's illusion around the replica dissipated, turning into a massive cloud of poisonous gas. Shatterbird tried to restrain Leviathan, re-forming the glass of the replica and the glass from the buildings into a solid block around Leviathan's upper body, a repeat of her tactic in the trap.

Leviathan didn't bother disrupting Shatterbird's glass this time. He moved outside the forming block of glass so fast he seemed to teleport, then grabbed the block with his claws and used it as a base to vault upwards into the air. He whipped his tail, sending a water echo at an empty patch of air a block and a half away. A cloud of gas dissipated, revealing Nyx and Shatterbird, slapped out of the air by the impact and tumbling to the streets below.

> Nyx and Shatterbird alive; protected by Galvanate's power.

Leviathan landed on a mountain of crushed glass, the remains of the replica he destroyed. A second replica dissipated, the one he had ignored, revealing that it had been purely an illusion. The remaining two replicas accelerated toward Leviathan in a pincer attack, one coming from the front, one from the back.

Leviathan took a step toward the replica in front of him, then tumbled to the ground as a pair of explosions bloomed underneath him, knocking his legs out from under him. Bakuda's explosives, buried in the midst of Shatterbird's glass. Leviathan regained his feet in an instant but the replicas were already on him. The replicas tore apart easily under his claws, bodies puncturing and leaking the buoyant gas they used to float in the air. Constructs created by Genesis and Regent, each replica made from a pair of Genesis projections glued onto each other to achieve the size to mimic the Simurgh.

> Irregular senses. Ignored Nyx illusions; does not rely on reflected light to sense objects, does not rely on vision. Ignored gaseous illusions, attacked gas-filled projections from Genesis and Regent; senses thin solid shell around projections. Senses surface of projections. Has hydrokinesis, has senses to assist hydrokinesis; senses rainwater on surface of projections, senses moisture.

The Genesis projections tore apart, but they didn't dissolve. The thin organic shells of their bodies adhered to Leviathan, revealing that their insides were studded with dozens of metal spheres. More of Bakuda's bombs, now glued to the entire surface of Leviathan's body. Leviathan spread out his
arms and spun his body in a circle, creating a water echo to clear the debris from his body, and-

The bombs detonated in unison, surrounding Leviathan and the full city block around him in a cloud of dozens of exotic effects. Explosions, zones of intense heat, intense cold, warped space, warped time. Great chunks of the buildings around him were turned to dust, turned to glass, turned to oozing black tar. A wave of water rushed into the midst of the destruction, doing nothing to clear the area and instead adding to the chaos as the water interacted with the bombs' effects - turning to steam, solidifying into crystal, condensing into flying sparks of light spewing green fire.

For a long minute the destruction continued. It was strangely beautiful, a full city block turned into a display of exotic physical effects, like blossoming flowers of all shapes and colors. Knowing her ego, Bakuda was probably having a Tinkergasm at seeing her work in action. Some of her bomb effects would last for years, even decades. If we saved the city the blast site would become a tourist attraction, a monument to her power as a Tinker.

The ground began to rumble, the water on the city streets being pulled with gentle but inexorable force to a single point at the edge of the ongoing destruction. The pavement of the street cracked and collapsed, then burst open as Leviathan climbed from underground, giving a glimpse of sewers flooded with water from the ocean. He was bleeding black ichor from dozens of wounds all over his body. His face and eyes were ruined, and he was walking with an limp to compensate for the mangled flesh on one of his feet. But nearly all of the damage was limited to his outer layers of flesh. Only his torso and tail, where the Society and capes had been focusing their attacks throughout the battle, now had a few scattered patches stripped down to the toughest few layers of flesh.

Damn it, even Bakuda's bombs didn't hurt the bastard? Yeah, she hadn't been able to build any of her really high-powered designs, that had to wait until she moved to the Society's workshops in Kenya. But she couldn't have used those anyway, since we were defending the city, and those were a longshot anyway. The Endbringers had always resisted pure force. The Society's Thinkers thought exotic effects were a better bet, hoping to find some obscure power to penetrate their defenses, hoping that Bakuda's manic creativity with munitions would do the job...

> Leviathan escaped underground rather than wade through bomb effects; detected bomb effects that would deal severe damage or impede movement. Tail movements upon exit from sewer deviated from standard left-right sweeping pattern by 4 meters; tail impeded by obstacle at edge of blast site. Tail impeded, sphere of raindrops frozen in midair; zone of frozen time. Pattern of tail movement; partial vulnerability to time freezing effect. Outer flesh weakly resistant, inner flesh resistant, core immune.

I smiled, a genuine smile for a moment before it returned to my customary grin. Finally. My power was telling us something new, something useful. Not a way to kill the Endbringer, not even to hurt him, but a way to stop him in his tracks. To trap Leviathan again, maybe even for minutes, while the Society and defending capes unloaded with another full strength attack.

I ran a search on our inventory. We had used most of Bakuda's arsenal in the attack but we still had two of her 'time bombs' left. The problem would be holding Leviathan still long enough for his vulnerable outer layers to get caught in the effect. From what I had seen, the zones of frozen time took almost thirty seconds to reach full strength. Who had the power to keep Leviathan in range of the bombs for that long? I called up a list of the parahumans on the scene. Society citizens, sponsored teams, independent teams, visiting Protectorate, visiting Wards, local Protectorate, local Wards...ah. There. A power tailor-made for the job...

My grin widened. For the first time since I joined the Society I felt like a true member, a true
As Weaver called us. Using my power to find out secrets no one in the Society knew, making plans, dishing the info to guide our forces. They were crazy bastards, yeah, working at the global scale with power combinations to control the economy, doing what it took to beat scary motherfuckers like the Endbringers. And now, I knew that I could be one of them, that I could do it too.

I spoke into the microphone of my infolink, telling my plans to the Society think tank so they could put them into action. Halfway through, I was interrupted by a piercing sound behind me.


Dice had curled up into herself, arms wrapped around her body, rocking back and forth. Jeopardy was sitting next to her, arm around her in a half-hug, trying to comfort her. A swarm of insects hovered around Dice on the couch, but when Weaver spoke to her it wasn't with her bugs, it was with her human voice.

"Dice. What's wrong? Please, tell us what happened."

Dice stared at Weaver, eyes wide. "The Endbringer, it. It did something. It's doing something. Now, here, in this city. I can't see what the Endbringer does but it just did something, it's all going wrong."

"What's going wrong? Your predictions?"

"The end of the world." said Dice. "It's changing the numbers. I...I gave up everything for this and now its all going wrong and-"

"Calm yourself, Madchen." said Jeopardy. "We will do our best to face what you foretell, no matter the numbers. What has changed? The chance? The time?"

Dice looked at us, face haunted.

"All the times. All the years. There aren't supposed to be early endings, less than one in ten thousand chance, but now, it's not...it's not just sixteen years anymore. One point zero one eight one percent chance it happens within two years. Six point two five six percent chance it happens within five years. Thirteen point three four four two percent chance it happens within ten years. The Endbringer, he's doing something to make the end of the world come sooner, sooner and sooner, the numbers keep growing and I can't see-"
Deluge 4.1

Jack Slash stood on the rooftop, watching the fantastic scene. Capes everywhere, the greatest heroes and villains in the world, all working together in a fight for their lives. Attacks and retreats, triumphs and tragedies, practiced maneuvers and desperate improvisations.

And he was a spectator.

He had attacked the Endbringer the instant it appeared. Used his strongest weapon, Armstrong's tinkertech blade. Had swung with optimal force to sink it into Leviathan's flesh. Had aimed for the eyes, the one place on Leviathan's body that had the appearance of a weak point, if an Endbringer truly had any weak points. And he had felt it when his blow struck home, the faint feedback he received from his power that let him feel what his blade did to his target.

And it had done nothing. The blade bit mere inches into the Endbringer's hide, the beast didn't even react.

It was a small comfort that the other long-range capes on the rooftop had the same dilemma. The woman who controlled a floating will-o'-the-wisp and the man with mechanical drones had directed their minions in attacks against the Endbringer, but they barely made a mark on its flesh. They had now settled into a support role, using their minions to illuminate the battlefield and tracking the Endbringer to ensure that he couldn't use his speed to slip away from the defending capes. The woman who brought a five foot long tinkertech gun had shot half a dozen high-powered rounds at Leviathan, halting his advance on the heroes for mere seconds, and then had to stop to recharge her gun.

Jack looked at the Society capes on the rooftop. Their railgun attack had been stronger, had at least punched through the outer layer of Leviathan's hide. And most of all, they had made a difference. Their blows had had a tactical purpose, pushing the Endbringer into a trap. Setting up Leviathan so that their allies could hit him with a massive orbital gun of some kind, then a field of physics-breaking weapons. The Society had used the same strategy he emphasized to his team. Capes working together, pooling even seemingly weak powers to accomplish a great goal that would make even the most powerful take notice.

But now their role in the fight seemed over. The Society capes had used up nearly three quarters of their ammunition in a few minutes of sustained fire, and were conserving the rest. Occasionally, apparently at a command from communication systems, they sent a flurry of shots to the Endbringer's joints to put him off balance for key seconds while others attacked. They could afford to wait because the shimmering zones that generated the electromagnetic field for their railgun seemed stable, not fading with time. In fact, the two shimmering columns that their cape had used to ascend into the sky were still in place and showed no signs of disappearing. If they saved the city would those columns of electromagnetic interference become permanent additions to the landscape? If the Society made a big enough contribution to saving the city, perhaps they would become tourist attractions.

...But it didn't matter. Comparing himself with other capes was beside the point. He had known all along that his power wouldn't hurt an Endbringer. Precious few powers were more than a momentary inconvenience to the beasts.

Jack spoke into his armband. "Chances of Scion showing up?"

A mechanical voice replied.
> Scion last sighted assisting in flood relief in the Philippines. Estimated Scion intervention is fifty three minutes from the present time, plus or minus thirty minutes.

As expected. Scion's movements were too random to predict with any degree of certainty. Parahumans couldn't count on salvation from the closest thing they had to a God. The best they could do was pray.

The only thing that remained for him was to support his teammates. Help them get out of the battle alive. Help them make a difference and gain reputation.

Admittedly, it would be convenient if Shadow Stalker and Parian failed to make a difference in the battle. Every success they achieved that they could call entirely their own, every hint of friendship they built with the heroes who fought by their side in the battle, was a reason they would have to leave his side strike out on their own. That outcome was an especially high risk for Parian, who had only worked with him for a single night.

But it wasn't worth it to take measures against them, to try to cause them to fail. It wasn't worth it to risk their lives. An Endbringer battle was dangerous enough, and he wouldn't be able to control the outcome of his interventions with any precision. Besides, he was fairly confident in his ability to keep Shadow Stalker and Parian as his allies. Given that, he would much prefer his allies to have friends and connections in high places.

In the distance Jack caught sight of Parian in action on the front lines. Two of Parian's creations were fighting Leviathan. A gorilla and a six-legged bull, each half the size of the Endbringer, hitting it hard enough to shake the ground. Impressive. She must have raided the department stores downtown to get the cloth. Parian herself - ah. She had taken his suggestions to heart. As a Master class cape, it would have been natural for her to simply hide out of sight. But against an enemy as mobile as Leviathan it was only a matter of time before he found her, and she would be blindsided and taken down in an instant.

Instead, Parian had encased herself in a third creation, an octopus that danced around the edge of the battle. When Leviathan engaged her other creations, she sent out tentacles to protect them by breaking up his water echoes. When Leviathan tried to engage her, she gripped the adjacent buildings and flipped herself over a roof or pulled herself around a corner, out of harm's way. She was dodging remarkably well, surviving for more than a minute - ah. That was why. From the way her creations moved together as one to protect a crossbow-wielding cape on a nearby roof, Parian must have stretched hundreds of fine threads around the battleground, using her telekinesis to feel when attacks were coming her way. It was the only way she could coordinate her creations, with her constantly-moving point of view and low visibility in the darkness and rain.

The cape with the crossbow fired a shot that pierced into the ruined flesh of Leviathan's face. Leviathan staggered and fell on his back, and Parian's creations pressed the offensive. A mistake. Leviathan used his tail to push himself upright in an instant and propel himself forward to meet the charge. He met the charging six-legged bull head on and buried a claw in its gut. After a moment of struggle there was an explosive sound and the bull began deflating. The gorilla attacked Leviathan from behind, but he ignored it. Instead he reached out, grabbed one of the octopus' tentacles, and pulled. Parian was yanked into a collision course with Leviathan, as he drew his other arm back for a swipe-

Jack slashed twice with his sword, severing the tentacle from half a mile away. Freed from Leviathan's grip, Parian used her other tentacles to scrabble at the windows of nearby buildings. She managed to stop herself ten feet short of his oncoming claw swipe - but not short of the water echo that followed it. The torrent of water hit her head on, at the precise spot where she was hidden
inside her costume. She was knocked back in a tangle of tentacled limbs and cloth. All of her creations deflated.

His armband chirped.

> Parian down, EC-5.

Down...but not dead. Good. Her performance was excellent, occupying the Endbringer's attention for longer than most of the professional heroes. If she survived, she would be well on her way to achieving renown. Hmm. Next time she would need to make the tentacles more easily detachable, like a lizard's tail. That would open up new possibilities as well. Perhaps she could put bombs in the limbs. Entangle the enemy, trigger the bombs, then detach the limbs and retreat out of the blast radius.

Where was Shadow Stalker?

Jack recognized a group of her fellow Brockton Bay Wards in the distance, standing atop a building two blocks away from Leviathan. They were standing in a practiced formation. Aegis was hovering in the air, keeping an eye on Leviathan and carrying Clockblocker in his arms. Behind them stood Vista, creating some kind of space-warping effect in a tube between their position and the street below. Ah. They were planning to fly Clockblocker into Leviathan's path, to test whether his time-freezing power would halt an Endbringer. A courageous plan. Aegis was durable, but if Clockblocker's power failed then even a casual brush from Leviathan would kill him on the spot.

Jack watched them carefully. It was a perfect opportunity to see how the local Wards acted under pressure. If he joined the Wards after this fight they would be his constant companions. He needed to know what made them tick.

>> Missy wrung her hands beneath the table, but she didn't say anything out loud. Carlos was complaining again about having to do patrols with the adults. Yeah, he thought he could handle the responsibility of being the leader on patrol. He probably could. He was a good hero, a good guy. But it was dangerous. You never know when you might go up against a real monster, when you'll suddenly wish you had good backup to help you come out alive-

<<

The Wards were coordinating, working as a team with a group of the local Protectorate. On the street below them were Triumph, Velocity, and Challenger, acting as the bait for their trap. None of them were as fast as Leviathan, but Velocity and Challenger had enough speed to have a good chance of escaping, and Triumph's limited precog for sounds would give them a few seconds of warning in advance of Leviathan's charge. On the rooftop across from them was Battery, standing motionless to charge up her power, ready to intervene in an emergency. With her power fully charged she would be fast and strong enough to knock the Endbringer to the ground, and the second charge from her tinkertech backpack would let her escape Leviathan's counterattack and pull her allies out of trouble.

Triumph and Challenger began blasting Leviathan with their projectiles, trying to draw his attention. Leviathan ignored them, instead finishing the job of stomping a particularly resilient brute to death, then sending a wave to bowl over the brute's teammates.


Leviathan finally turned to the Brockton Bay capes and charged, feet skimming over the water on the street, lashing his tail back and forth to smash the walls of the buildings he passed as he went.
When Leviathan was two seconds away from the trap, Triumph, Challenger, and Velocity ran and ducked down a side street, baiting Leviathan to follow them and turn his side to Clockblocker's ambush. Leviathan turned to follow them, flicking out his tail into the side of a building to get purchase to turn more quickly.

As soon as Leviathan turned, Aegis flew into Vista's zone of warped space and appeared at the other end of the warped 'tube', flying to place Clockblocker in position to touch Leviathan's water echo. So Clockblocker thought he could freeze the beast simply by touching the water he left behind?

>> Harsh Mistress gave Starfall a sharp look. "No, we do not go for the takedown. Not yet. You need every advantage you can get. Watch and learn." The robbers were rushing out of the bank. They didn't have powers, true, but guns were the great equalizer. The robbers ran for their getaway car, only to be faced a pair of 'police officers' - actually Sham's illusions. The robbers changed directions, tried to escape through an alley. They were easy pickings now, too focused on the 'police' behind them to be ready for an attack from above. "See? Now we attack."

<<

He never had a chance. At the same moment Clockblocker reached out to touch the echo, a pair of flying artillery capes sent projectiles raining down on Leviathan's side. The Endbringer crouched, turned on a dime, and ran toward a building on the opposite side of the street, to use to vault himself into the air to attack the flyers. Seemingly as an afterthought he flicked his tail towards the capes he had been chasing, sending a water whip their way at high speed. The momentary pause in the Endbringer's movements as he turned broke up his water echo. Clockblocker froze the part of the echo he was touching, embedding himself and Aegis inside an immovable wall of water, but the time-stopping effect didn't reach Leviathan's body.

Battery moved into action, releasing a charge to jump down from the rooftop and use her bare hands to break up the water whip aimed at her teammates. She climbed the side of the time-frozen mass of water and tried to help Aegis and Clockblocker extricate themselves. Vista assisted from her position on the roof, warping space around them to help them escape, but without much success. When that failed, Battery tapped the side of her helmet. Calling for help from a teleporter?

Leviathan had climbed to the top of his building and was crouching, preparing a leap to take down the flying artillery capes. Without even looking, a casual flick of his tail behind his back sent a whip of water directly toward Battery and her Wards. Battery hesitated, then spent her the second charge from her backpack to break up the water whip and leap through a nearby building's third story window. She was out of the line of fire for now and had a chance to recharge, but Aegis and Clockblocker were left trapped, defenseless until the water unfroze from time.

Hopefully they would survive. If Jack joined the Wards, he would want people like them as his allies. Their plan had been courageous and would have worked perfectly, if it hadn't been for their lack of coordination with the flying artillery from another city. Though that was a major flaw. They should have foreseen the possibility of interference by outsiders - that was one of the reasons why Jack preferred to work with a close-knit team of people he understood. Since outsider interference was inevitable in an Endbringer fight, they should have told Dragon or one of the high-ranking capes in advance to help them coordinate.

Hmm. Shadow Stalker wasn't with the other Wards. Not surprising, given her opinions of her teammates. But in that case, where was she?

>> Shadow Stalker was doing her best to ignore Vista. The kid was prancing around
the common area, so goddamn happy that Gallant had given her the time of day. It was pitiful, sickening to watch. She itched to confront the kid, give her a dose of reality. You're a little kid with a crush who doesn't know anything about love. He doesn't love you, he'll never love you, deal with it and move on.

But Shadow Stalker held herself back. She thought of herself as a predator, yes. She was strong, and Vista was definitely weak, so the kid should be grateful to get her frank assessment of exactly what was wrong with her. It would be doing her a favor. But above all else she was a survivor, and she had to admit that Jake was right that her own good standing in the Wards was more important to her than setting things straight with a thirteen year old kid. She would hold back for now, but when she got power and status like Piggot she'd make damn sure they listened to her-

<< Ah, there. Shadow Stalker was jumping from rooftop to rooftop, keeping pace with the battle but always staying several blocks away from the thick of the fighting. Sensible. She couldn't retreat, not given her agreement with the PRT, but they couldn't blame her for staying back from the front lines. She had tried to attack Leviathan with Kid Win's tinkertech grenade launcher during the first engagement and found that her shots had barely any effect on the Endbringer. She would be more valuable for search and rescue.

Except-hmm. It seemed that the Society had other ideas. A trio of the Society's flying suits landed on the rooftop next to Shadow Stalker. The one in the center gestured with a metal device, offering Shadow Stalker a tinkertech gun. Shadow Stalker backed away, and the one in the center offered the gun again, this time conjuring a reflective orb in the air above their heads. The same orb that Jack had seen at the start of the battle, focusing ranged attacks on Leviathan's flanks. This must be the leader of the Society's front-line forces.

>> These new kids were a handful. It had been so much easier when she could raise her own children, to make sure she got them when they were young enough to instill them with proper values. How to follow a proper chain of command, for one. And how to use your powers in combination with your siblings. Not like this kid, so selfish she wouldn't help her siblings unless you put a gun to her head-

<< After a minute of debate, Shadow Stalker stepped forward and took the gun. The leader stepped forward, wrapped its arms around Shadow Stalker's waist, and lifted off. The three suits flew her straight for Leviathan.

The Endbringer was in the middle of a street, trading blows with Alexandria and a second cape with similar powers. One of the three Society flying suits broke off from their formation and began firing spears of light, hot enough to melt the edges of Leviathan's wounds. Leviathan turned and swiped with a claw, sending a water echo that slapped the suit out of the air. The remaining two suits used the distraction to accelerate, carrying Shadow Stalker within ten feet of the Endbringer. The Society cape's glass orb appeared in the air and Shadow Stalker fired her weapon. The shadowy bolt struck home, burying itself deep inside Leviathan, at the small of his back.

Leviathan jolted in place, reacted. He braced himself on the ground and then leaped three times his height into the air, sending a barrage of swiping claws and water echoes to strike down everyone around him. The Alexandria package capes dodged wildly and flew for cover, most of them being struck by water and knocked out of the air.

The Society suit carrying Shadow Stalker evaded a blade of water and accelerated again, heading
for the place where the trajectory of Leviathan's leap would bring him back to the ground - trying to take another shot? The remaining Society suit followed and protected them, deflecting a torrent of water with a field of glowing barriers, then blocking one of Leviathan's clawed feet with its own body, letting itself be pounded into the ground.

As Leviathan fell, the glass orb appeared again and Shadow Stalker fired her second shot, this time burying itself in Leviathan's chest just under his neck. Leviathan landed an instant later and struck. The Society suit didn't have time to dodge, and didn't try. Instead the suit flung Shadow Stalker directly into the glass facade of the nearest building, trusting her to shift into shadow form to pass through the glass. The suit absorbed Leviathan's blow head on. Leviathan crushed the suit in a one-handed grip and crumpled it into scrap metal.

Leviathan let the crushed ruins of the suit fall to the ground and faced the Alexandria package capes once more. But something was wrong - for the first time in the battle, he was slow. Where the two bolts had struck him his water echo was distorted, spheres of space where rainwater flowed sluggishly.

The time bombs again. They had used Shadow Stalker's power to embed the bombs in Leviathan's flesh so that he couldn't escape their time-slowing effect. Leviathan leaped to the top of the nearest building and lashed out with his claws and tail at the flying heroes, as if he was trying to catch heroes to pull into the time fields. When that failed he began tearing at his chest and back with his claws, trying to pull out the bombs before their time fields froze entirely. In a matter of seconds he did nearly as much damage to himself as the capes had managed during the entire battle. But he wouldn't make it - his layers of armor were too tough, his claws too worn down and blunted from the attacks of a dozen capes. And while his flesh resisted the time-slowing effect, his water echo had no such protection. Rivers of time-slowed water resisted his claws like thick molasses.

Leviathan finally gave up on pulling out the bombs. He let himself tip backwards off the building, falling to the ground. The time fields slowed his descent until he finally halted in midair, suspended horizontally twenty feet above the ground, face up toward the sky.

Leviathan was fixed in place, trapped. Held by two fields of frozen time.

For a moment the defending capes seemed to be frozen as well. Leviathan looked at the capes in the air above him, then tilted his head. As if wondering what they were so excited about. He put his hands behind his head, crossed his legs, and lounged in midair. Water began to flow from his body, turning from a drip to a waterfall in seconds. A water echo even though he wasn't moving, spilling water into the city streets below him.

The capes came to life, striking the Endbringer with a dozen ranged attacks, hitting him while he was vulnerable. Jack drew his sword and slashed, more for the sake of appearances than for any hope of dealing real damage. Leviathan flailed his limbs, deflecting the worst of the combined assault with bursts of water but still being hit more often than not.

The ground began to shake. The patch of city street below Leviathan abruptly sank a foot. Then it continued to sink and crumble, opening up a deep pit beneath him. The pit slowly began to expand, filled by the rain, by the ocean water rushing in through the sewers, by the continuous torrent of water spilling from his flanks, creating an expanding lake around his floating body...

Jack realized that Leviathan had been acting with a purpose, a strategy.

For years, Endbringer battles had always been fought with the premise that they were practically invulnerable. Killing them was impossible. The best the defenders could hope for was to drive them off. So the heroes had hit Leviathan with the Triumvirate's strongest attacks, the Society had
hit him with some kind of orbital gun and a shower of physics-breaking effects. On any other day
he might have left the city once his inner layers were exposed, might have been satisfied with the
destruction he caused and escaped to come back another day.

Not today. Leviathan had changed the rules of the game. He was trapped in the bubbles of frozen
time, couldn't be made to retreat. He would continue drawing water into the city, from the rainfall,
from the waves, from his echo, until the city was a flooded crater. And all the while he would let
the capes attack him with all their strength, watch them lose hope as they revealed nothing but
layers of tougher and tougher flesh, before he ripped the time fields out of his body and escaped at
his leisure.

Leviathan had given them a challenge. They wouldn't drive him off today. Their only hope was to
end him, and do it soon. Or the city of Brockton Bay would be wiped off the map...
Jack lifted his sword and slashed, aiming at the deepest wounds in Leviathan's flanks. No effect, no
give in his target whatsoever. It seemed that Armsmaster's blades could only scratch the outer
layers of an Endbringer, couldn't hit anything vital.

It was the outcome he had feared. His power was strong against most other capes - he had range,
accuracy, the power to strike at weak points. But in this battle he was powerless, while his allies
had all served with distinction. Parian held the Endbringer at bay for more than a full minute.
Shadow Stalker combined her powers with the Society's capes to trap the Endbringer, actually
imprisoning the beast. Whereas he merely stood on rooftops a mile away from the action, adding a
few inconsequential nicks in the beast's armor.

He would have to handle this carefully. Even if Leviathan was defeated and Brockton Bay
survived, he could lose the respect of his allies.

>> Colin's fellow Wards were hanging back, stalling for time until Hero arrived. He
knew that waiting for backup was the most tactically sound decision. But this was his
chance. To show that his months of work were worth it, to show that he was a world-
class Tinker in his own right. He held up his new weapon, his halberd, and leveled it
at the villains...

<<

Odd. Despite the weakness of his weapons, Armsmaster hadn't retreated. He was holding two
halberds, one in each hand. He used one to shoot a grappling hook into a nearby building and
propel himself into the air, passing close by the Endbringer. He twisted his body in the air to dodge
a claw swipe, then slashed with his second halberd, a strange gray haze forming around the blade.
The haze bit deep into Leviathan's claw, severing two of the Endbringer's fingertips and decorating
Armsmaster's suit with a spray of ichor. As Armsmaster landed he was already in motion, shooting
out the grappling hook to make another pass.

Of course. Of course Armsmaster wouldn't give his best technology to a rookie cape. It should
have been obvious from the beginning. It was shameful that he didn't realize it until the damning
evidence was right in front of his eyes.

Jack spoke into his armband. "Need transport to ground level, near the front lines. Moderate
priority."

Armsmaster was doing as much damage as the rest of the capes combined, his halberd tearing
through Leviathan's flesh like it wasn't there. But his time was running out. The nearby buildings
shook and fell, leaving fewer and fewer hand-holds for his grappling hooks. The city streets
continued to sink and crumble around Leviathan as he spilled a continuous torrent of water into the
expanding pit around his body.

A hero in bird-themed costume landed by Jack's side and extended a hand. "You need a lift?" she
said.

"Yes, heading for Armsmaster. There." said Jack.

Jack took the hero's hand and abruptly found himself flying through the air. The flight came with a
strange feeling of intangibility. Smooth movement without any feeling of resistance from gravity or
from the air around them. As the hero set him down, Jack stumbled. The ground was shaking,
Armsmaster had given up his attack, without any solid surfaces near Leviathan for him to use as an anchor for his grappling hooks. He stood stock still, well away from the expanding pit, glaring at Leviathan. As if he could damage the beast through will alone.

"Armsmaster!" called Jack, jogging toward the hero, shouting to be heard over the din of rushing water and cape attacks. "I'll use my power to project the edge of your halberd! We can get back from the water, cut him up from a mile away!"

Armsmaster glanced at him, then turned back to the Endbringer. Dismissing him. "Won't work. Get out of sector EC-5 and fall back."

"Let me give it a shot! Anything's worth a try at this point. If we let Leviathan stay there he'll flood-"

Armsmaster shook his head, still facing Leviathan. "My halberd doesn't cut with a blade. It's a disintegration effect from nanothorns growing around the tip. They aren't even in contact with the halberd, they're held in place with an electromagnetic field. Your power won't work, and if it did you'd disintegrate your hand trying to touch the thorns. Get out of the sector and fall back now, that's an order."

>> Armsmaster put a harsh tone in his voice. "Don't try a stunt like that again. You're durable but you're not immortal."

"Yes, sir." said Aegis. The boy's expression was appropriate for his chastisement, but Armsmaster's prototype sensors were detecting a discrepancy between his tone and his unconscious microexpressions. The boy was probably harboring resentment about his judgements. Armsmaster didn't blame him. Aegis had taken a calculated risk with a chance of high rewards. The same kind of risk he would have taken in his place.

But Armsmaster had already had a long and successful career. All there was left to strive for was greater glory, for a position alongside the highest-ranked heroes like Myrrdin and Chevalier, or even the Triumvirate. If he took a calculated risk in pursuit of that glory, if he lost his life, then he had no regrets.

The incentives were the opposite for letting Aegis make the same decision. If Aegis succeeded, the Ward would get all the glory. But if Aegis failed, Armsmaster would take all the blame for letting his Ward die in action. No, it wasn't worth the-

"Nanothorns? That's badass! Let me give you a hand. You've got a weapon that can cut an Endbringer and you're going to let this little lake get in the way of showing what you can do? So what if."

A wave crashed through the streets. Jack raced to the side of the street, clung to the side of a building to avoid being bowled over. Armsmaster stood still, unmoved, letting the wave wash over his power armor.

Jack slogged through the water back to his side, kept shouting to be heard. "So what if I lose a hand? It's my choice, it's an Endbringer attack, no one's going to blame us for taking desperate measures! We're all here because we're willing to give our lives for the city! Giving up a hand is a small price to pay!"
Besides, they had world-class healers as backup, and they would be predisposed to help anyone who sacrificed their own well being for a chance to cut Leviathan. Losing a hand would be temporary but gaining reputation would be forever. The only question was whether he could make himself do it. Make himself face the pain, push through it for a chance of success.

It didn't matter. Armsmaster ignored him.

"If I waited for more evidence, it would have taken me another week of surveillance," said Armsmaster. "Those dealers trafficked a fifth of the drugs in the city, and one citizen dies every day from drug-related causes. By arresting them when I did, I saved an innocent life."

"Alleged dealers, Armsmaster. I believe you, but your evidence won't hold up in court" said Hero.

Armsmaster began to protest, but Hero raised a hand. "Listen, Armsmaster, I'm not questioning your skill, it's how you apply it. You know it pains me to say it, but we can't just be heroes in our own hearts. We have to look the part for the public. We have to reassure them that heroes aren't vigilantes, that we'll work within the system to uphold the laws."

Armsmaster bristled. Pointless, inefficient rules. They told him to save lives, then they told him to limit himself and let innocents die. He understood why the rules were there, he knew the game he was supposed to play, but he would never buy into it, not in his heart-

Jack let out a hiss of frustration. He slogged four steps to the side and sat on a piece of waterlogged debris. He shook his head and spoke to himself, but loudly, as though daring the other capes to overhear. "Damn. I thought he was a straight shooter. Turns out he wants the glory for himself, cares more about looking like a hero than being one."

Armsmaster spun around as though he had been slapped.

He stared at Jack for a long moment. "You want to use your power on my halberd. You'll suffer severe injury, a very high risk of permanent disability. You're still willing?"

Jack smiled. "Yes, if it helps you carve Leviathan a new one." He turned to look at the expanding pit under the Endbringer, now large enough to be called a lake. "I'm a hero. I'm not going to let him do this to Brockton Bay, not on my watch."

Armsmaster nodded. "Not on mine, either."

The ground shook and the edge of the pit surged, extending by a hundred feet, reaching within a block and a half of their position. Another wave came rushing at them, bigger than the last.

Armsmaster stowed his nanotech blade and gripped Jack's waist. He pointed his second halberd toward the top of a nearby building, shot out his grappling hook, and reeled it in, lifting them into the air and onto the rooftop. Armsmaster was skilled - the maneuver must have taken hours of practice, learning to adjust the centers of balance of both himself and a passenger as they flew through the air, so that they didn't flip upside down or smash themselves on the edge of the roof.

 Jack jogged to the edge of the rooftop and studied Leviathan with renewed intensity. His target. The Endbringer floated above his expanding lake, surrounded by driving rain and tidal waves,
thrashing his limbs to defend himself. He was illuminated by attacks from dozens of capes, the water around him being continuously dispersed by lasers and telekinesis and a giant yellow sun.

Armsmaster raised his nanotech halberd and aimed it at Leviathan's head. Jack reached out to the gray haze surrounding the tip, willing himself to focus on his power. It's just a knife like any other. One big knife made of a million nanoknives. Touch it and project. Project. Project. He felt a flicker of contact. Yes, that way, proj-aaah!

Jack gasped in pain, barely managed to stop himself from crying out loud. He stared at his hand. The tip of his index finger was simply gone, flesh and bone disintegrated into a fine mist of atoms.

Armsmaster moved to withdraw the blade. Jack spoke quickly. "No, I felt it. It was working." He took a deep breath. "I'm trying again."

Jack forced himself to uncurl his maimed finger and stretch it out again to touch the gray haze. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Nothing, nothing...there. Pain bloomed into his awareness as the tissue of his index finger was disintegrated. But at that precise moment he felt it, too. The faint sense his power conveyed to him. He rejected the pain and focused on that faint sense of contact, embraced it, projected it-aaah!

A ripple of pain spread from his index finger to cover the entire surface of his hands and face. He opened his eyes, blinked, felt more pain on the back of his eyelids. His index finger was gone now to the first knuckle. The rest of his hand was bloody, a fine red mist rising from its surface. Armsmaster's face was marred with bloody patches covering his skin, and a gray mist rose from his armor.

"You can't control it?" shouted Armsmaster.

Ah. His power had worked, projected the edges of the nanothorns. But at the nanometer scale the thorns must be constantly in motion, pointing in all directions at once. He had cut into every surface around him. If he hadn't closed his eyes, if Armsmaster wasn't wearing a visor, they would probably be blind.

"My first time with nanothorns!" Jack shouted. "I've got it now. Trying again!" He forced his trembling hand back into the gray haze, this time leading with his pinky finger. He made himself keep his eyes open, focusing on the enemy in front of him as he inched his hand forward. Wait for it, wait for the pain. Wait for the thousands of blades, millions of blades. Embrace them, project them, but only the ones cutting that way, cutting at the Endbringer. Wait for it...there.

Pain, that faint sense of contact - and Leviathan's neck was wreathed in gray mist. He felt a thousand, a million, uncountable points of contact as the thorns bit into the Endbringer's flesh. The Endbringer immediately moved his right arm to block the attack, only for more mist to erupt from the arm, cutting through layers of his hide in seconds.

Then the mist abruptly stopped. It took a moment for Jack to realize what had happened. He was in tears with pain, his pinky finger was gone down to the second knuckle, but that wasn't why he had stopped his attack.

He had only broken contact with the nanothorns because he was laughing. He couldn't help it. He had done it. After all his reluctance, his absolute certainty that fighting an Endbringer would be a fool's errand, he had hurt the Endbringer after all.

It was absurd. He had always had what he considered modest, practical goals. He wanted to build a team, to clean his city of villains so that the people could live in peace. And he had wanted to do it
in the way that would send the strongest message, so strong it would stop new capes from becoming villains, that it would even make villains in other cities retire in fear. Destroying all the villains in the city one by one, in the night, so that no one knew what was happening.

Then, once all the villains were gone, he would reveal what he had done. Reveal that he had killed the villains, brought peace to the city - but not reveal how he had done it, not even reveal who he was. Not even a cape name. Simple names like 'Jack Slash' were good, yes. Better not to distract the public with a fancy name, better to focus their attention on the person and the reputation behind it. But for what he wanted to achieve, no name at all was even more potent. Like the truly dreaded capes who were only rumored to exist, like the bogeymen, or the source of the Case-53s. The capes with the confidence to go about their business without letting anyone know they existed, making themselves known only by their actions, their effects on the world.

So he would leave an anonymous note to the authorities, to the news channels, telling them it was open season on villains, using the cleansing of Brockton Bay as proof. Destroy the villains in his own city, strike at the villains in nearby cities, leave a calling card, until mere rumors of his presence in a city were enough to scare the villains away. Yes, let the villains fear what they couldn't see, the idea that an avenger will come in the darkness to destroy them. Every time a villain disappeared from the public view, the public would think he was the one who did it. Until his personal presence and reputation spread beyond his physical body to become a thing of myth and rumor, an urban legend. Perhaps even inspire aspiring heroes in other cities to take up the cause, although he would have to take measures if they didn't live up to his reputation.

But he had never thought he would be a global player. He didn't have the power for it. He wasn't like Legend, someone who could simply fly anywhere in the world at a moment's notice, with offensive power that let him pierce through almost all defenses, with defensive power that let him survive almost any blow.

And to be honest, he liked his life. He had family, friends, teammates. Yes, he wanted a team, but not just for business. To be companions. To have people who understood him, who he could share his secrets with and whose secrets he knew in return. He was willing to risk his life to spread his message, but that wasn't all there was to his life. After spending a night on his quest, he wanted something to come back to when he was done. And the true global players, the greatest heroes and the worst villains and monsters, were ones who didn't have a home. The Triumvirate, who had cities they defended but spent more time away from home than not. Dragon, the AI who administered the Birdcage, was everywhere in the world at once. The Endbringers, attacking humanity everywhere in the world without distinction. Weaver's Society had been sighted in so many countries over the years that they seemed almost nomadic, trailing destruction in their wake.

Now he realized he had been short-sighted. These heroes weren't his team, they weren't his companions, he couldn't control the message they sent with their actions. But he still had a choice. He could choose to go it alone, with his team. Or he could choose to work together with the heroes, to advance their goals and have a small influence on their goals in turn. And here and now, working with the heroes multiplied his power. Strong enough to hurt an Endbringer, strong enough to make a difference in the world. Become a global player, whose actions reverberated to the minds of millions.

Armsmaster was looking back and forth between him and Leviathan. Searching for something to say. Encouragement? An apology? Orders to continue?

Jack laughed. "Come on, Armsmaster." he said, "Let's get that motherfucker."

For the first time in the fight, Armsmaster showed the beginnings of a smile. "Right. I'm giving
you painkillers now, standard issue." Jack felt a prick on his arm. "Use your fingers first, then the palm of your hand. Don't use the back of your hand, that's where the blood vessels are."

Jack laughed yet again. Armsmaster was so pragmatic about it, so matter of fact. As if he pulled off self-mutilating power combinations every day. A hero after his own heart. He reached out for the gray haze of thorns with his damaged right hand, what was left of his pinky finger, and began to cut the Endbringer in earnest. Armsmaster directed the blade, moving slowly so as not to disrupt Jack's point of contact.

First at Leviathan's neck. If he was anything like a living beast, if he had a weak point, it would be there. Decapitate the bastard.

Jack touched his finger to the thorns. A spike of pain, and Leviathan's neck spouted gray mist. Layers of his hide atomizing in an instant. Then the mist stopped spouting. Jack's finger was gone, consumed.

Jack gulped, moved to his next finger. His ring finger, this time. He moved his hand toward the thorns, but his finger twitched away. Some primitive reflex, some part of his brain had learned that the thorns were mutilating him and refused to approach them. He blinked back tears of pain. It hurt too much, he couldn't set the pain aside. And it wasn't just the pain, it was the feeling of loss, mutilation. There was supposed to be something there, attached to his hand, something his, but now there was nothing.

He tried to focus on the loss as a good thing. Each spike of pain, each missing finger was a slice taken out of the Endbringer. He'd get healing anyway, afterward. Regenerate the parts of himself he expended, back better than before.

Damn. That girl with the combat tentacles had had the right idea after all. If he made it out of this alive, he'd have to take her up on her offer.

Armsmaster held the halberd steady with one arm, put his other arm around Jack's shoulder. "You can do it. You're doing very well so far. Just one last push."

Jack nearly laughed. It distracted him from the pain, for a moment. Armsmaster's stiff body language, flat voice, choice of words, like an utterly clueless husband trying to encourage his wife to give birth. Jack preferred it that way, really. If his ally was a smooth talker, he would have had cause to wonder if he was being manipulated, deceived into action. But Armsmaster was so bad at encouragement that Jack could be certain that the true motivation for his actions, his message, was his own.

Jack pushed his ring finger into the thorns, agonizingly slowly, suffering pain in exchange for making the best use of his limited flesh. More gray mist billowed and he felt the points of contact tear through the Endbringer's flesh. The thorns were meeting a weak resistance now, reaching a deeper layer near the center of the neck where the spine would be. The resistance grew, and he closed his eyes and screamed as he slowly inched the rest of his finger into the thorns, making the final push to decapitate the beast.

Then...the contacts stopped. They weren't- they weren't cutting all the way.

The inner flesh was too strong. A barrier.

Leviathan twitched his head to stare directly at him, not impeded in the least by his neck being reduced to less than half its original width. As if he was mocking him, mocking the idea that a mere sacrifice of a few fingers would be enough to beat an Endbringer.
Jack swallowed, clenched his remaining fist. His own attack wasn't enough, but-

>> Fletchette twirled a dart between her fingers. Clockblocker stood at the other end of the testing room next to a single sheet of paper hanging in midair, frozen in time by his power. "So it begins," he said. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the inviolatest of them all?" Fletchette chuckled, overdoing her laugh a bit in an attempt to hide her nerves. She charged her dart with her power. Time to see if her power really pierced everything-

<<

A metal bolt shot through the air and buried itself in Leviathan's neck.

His own attack wasn't enough, but that didn't matter. That was the point of having a team. He never cared who dealt the final blow, what mattered was the message. The message here was clear. The Endbringers can be cut.

Jack turned to find the source of the attack. The crossbow woman in a skintight suit, standing on a rooftop a block away. Standing next to her were a group of Society capes. Two flying back and forth between the roof and the ground, collecting metal debris from the streets. Another holding out a chunk of metal, the rim from the wheel of a car, aiming it at Leviathan. The crossbow woman touched the rim and stepped back. The rim accelerated so fast that it seemed to teleport, only a faint blur in the air before it embedded itself deep within the Endbringer's neck.

"Who is that?" said Jack.

"Fletchette, New York Wards." said Armsmsater. "Enhanced accuracy and timing, applies an effect to her weapons that makes them pierce barriers and fuse with the target. Her first time testing her power on an Endbringer."

One of the Society capes flew to the rooftop carrying an entire car and held it steady, aiming at Leviathan's neck. Fletchette touched the front of the car, stepped back. The projectile-launching cape touched the car and it shot forward. This time the projectile had a strange trajectory, flipping over in the air and moving diagonally downwards to smash against the wall of a nearby building. The car tore apart as different parts of the car pierced, fused, and bounced off the wall.

Armsmaster grunted. Irritated by their incompetence. "Her effect makes her weapons immune to physical laws. Works best with metal projectiles, elongated, made of a uniform material. Too complex and her effect interferes with their flight."

Why weren't they using the railgun from the roof, then? Out of ammunition?

Fletchette resumed her attacks with smaller chunks of metal, still far bigger than her standard crossbow bolts. Hit Leviathan's neck two times, three times, four times, until his head was hanging by a thread.

Alexandria dove from the sky and struck Leviathan's head with a resounding crack. His head ripped off of his body, fell into the lake below.

Leviathan had been decapitated.

"Hell yes!" shouted Armsmaster.

Jack laughed. They did it. They actually killed-

The ground shook harder, and the lake continued to expand. Another wave rushed through the
streets, larger than before, toppling a score of the smaller buildings.

No. Of course decapitating an Endbringer wasn't enough to kill it.

>> Behemoth rose from the flaming wreckage of the city. Stupid. The Russians should have known nukes wouldn't kill him. They didn't even try to put up a barrier to contain the blast, the fallout would be worse than Cologne.

Armsmaster turned to his team and sent the order for them to retreat. His suit could take it, he was sure, but there was no point risking his team's lives for the sake of defending the ruins-
<<

Jack took a deep breath to steady himself, turned to Armsmaster. "We keep going, then. We cut faster, she hits harder. Let's take his tail next. Stop the whips."

Armsmaster studied him for a moment, then nodded. "Good man." he said. He raised his halberd, aimed at the base of Leviathan's tail. "Ready?"

Jack raised his right hand, only two fingers remaining. He had forgotten about the pain but it returned the instant he focused on them. He forced himself to confront the pain, study his hand with all his senses. His influence on the battle was now measured in the amount of his body he was willing to disintegrate. He tried to remember what he had learned about human anatomy, in his self-imposed training for using his power.

He braced himself for the pain, stretched out his middle finger, and touched the thorns.

Fifty seconds and his middle finger, the cost to cut away the flesh around the base of the tail. Five shots from Fletchette, and the tail fell into the lake, lifeless.

One minute twenty seconds, his thumb, and part of his palm, to cut away the flesh around the top of the right leg. Nine shots from Fletchette this time until it was hanging by a thread, and a tug of war by Alexandria and a flying Society cape to tear it off.

The building he was standing on began to collapse. Armsmaster grabbed his waist and grappled them to the roof of another building, then another, until he found one sturdy enough for them to launch another attack. Jack resumed his attack.

Nearly three minutes and the rest of his right palm to take out Leviathan's right arm. Leviathan flailed his arm madly, blocking the projected nanothorns with his claws and lower arm and their water echoes, until Jack had to cut away the flesh from nearly the entire arm to clear a space for Fletchette to do her work. This time the arm was pulled off in a collaboration between Alexandria and the Society's massive monster, which swam in Leviathan's lake, resisting the Endbringer's hydrokinetic defenses, and leaped up to tug at the limb from below.

The lake around Leviathan was still growing, the waves still getting higher with each passing second, despite the Society's wall around the city and Eidolon's efforts at repelling the waves. Even outside of the lake, more buildings collapsed with each passing minute.

Still, they were winning. Hurting the Endbringer, tearing it apart.

Armsmaster pulled medical supplies from his suit, wrapped gauze and bandages around the ruins of Jack's right hand. He raised the halberd again, and looked to Jack.

Jack closed his eyes, took a minute to compose himself. The pain had come back in full strength
with the pressure of the bandages on his hand. He tried to block it out. He failed. Then he gave up trying to block out the pain, resolved to work through the pain regardless. That was...slightly better.

Another shot from Fletchette, this time at the Endbringer's chest. The Endbringer's innermost layers of flesh had been holding out against continuous attacks from the capes, against laser beams and explosives and giant yellow suns. Fletchette's shot pierced through all of the cape attacks, pierced through the flesh, and buried itself deeply inside the Endbringer's torso.

The Endbringer reacted. His struggles so far had been measured attempts to deflect blows, but now they became more intense, panicked. The rainstorm intensified, seemed to double in strength for a moment, then slackened. The rainfall turning from a deluge to a light rain in an instant.

A weak spot. Almost there.

Jack wrapped his left arm around the halberd, reached out for the thorns with his left hand, aiming at Leviathan's remaining arm and leg. You won't be able to crawl away from this. You're done for.

Jack staggered and lost his grip on the halberd. Armsmaster had shifted position. He was speaking to someone through his visor. "Dragon? What-

Fletchette sent another shot into the Endbringer's chest.

Jack never saw it hit. Something slammed into him, knocked him to the rooftop, and the world went white.

...

...

Jack opened his eyes. He caught a glimpse of flashing lights in a dark void. Then immediately closed his eyes again to shield them from the rain. He was laying on his back, half-submerged in water, looking up at the sky.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, using his good hand. Still on the rooftop. An area around where he had stood was scorched, as if a bomb had gone off. There were deep rumbles of sound coming from all around him, flashes of light in the air, repeating over and over. Armsmaster stood next to him, configuring a collapsible metal rod, some form of tinkertech he had pulled from his suit and planted into the rooftop.

"What happened? Is Leviathan...?"

Armsmaster didn't pause in his work. "Still there. You were only out for fifty seconds. My suit is insulated, I was able to shield you from the worst of it."

Jack tried to stand, failed. His entire body felt weak, like his brain was trying to reconnect to his muscles. He tried again, shakily got to his feet, looked around him. Another rumble from the sky, another flash of light.

It was a lightning storm. Lightning strikes, once every few seconds.

"He..." Jack coughed. "...he can make lightning?"

"Hydrokinesis to move water between the layers of the clouds, accelerating the buildup of electric charge. He can direct it. The first bolts-" A crack of thunder, another lightning strike. ",at
Fletchette, at us, at the capes boiling the water, at the building I assume the Society is using as a base." He made a final adjustment, tapped the metal rod. "Made this in case we fought electric villains. Now we're protected from at least five bolts at that strength."

Jack went to the side of the roof. Just over the edge he saw the bodies of two heroes floating in the water of the streets, still and silent. Electrocuted by a lightning strike. Probably the strike hadn't even hit near them, had been conducted through the water.

Leviathan was easy to see. The city was dark, the electric grid cut out. The flying drones that had been lighting up the battlefield taken out by the lightning strikes. The Endbringer was an island of light in the darkness, spilling a waterfall into the lake around him, illuminated by a handful of powers concentrating on his form. The Will-o-the-Wisp cape's light, a spotlight from the Society's tower, Legend's lasers focused into a pinprick of intense heat.

The stumps of Leviathan's head and other limbs weren't regenerating. The Endbringer knew. Discarding the trapped parts of his body would only help him pull his inner body out of layers and escape. Only his torso was recovering, as if the regeneration he had previously used for his whole body was being focused into a single place, fast enough to keep pace with the attacks of the capes who were still standing. The water pit he had made in the city was still growing by the second.

Another lightning strike, this time hitting the Society's base.

The Endbringer had been holding this weapon in reserve. It was obvious, now. Leviathan controlled massive amounts of water. He called tidal waves from the ocean and he manipulated them, directed them to the precise targets he chose. He called storm clouds in the sky...why wouldn't he be able to manipulate the clouds as he chose? Clouds were nothing more than a mass of water vapor. He had much less control over vapor than liquid water, but even a faint nudge on a large enough scale...

Leviathan could have unleashed this weapon at any time in his rampages throughout the world, multiplied the damage he did to the defenders. But he had saved it as a trump card. His message was clear. That the heroes wouldn't win, that the Endbringers held all the cards in their hands. New powers to massacre the unprepared defenders in an instant whenever they chose.

But today they had forced Leviathan's hand, forced him to reveal his trump card. Now that they knew what they were facing, they had ways to stop the lightning. Armsmaster already had the tools, other Tinkers and defensive capes would as well. And Leviathan was still trapped. As long as they could hurt him...

"The crossbow cape? Fletchette?" said Jack.

"Third degree burns, instant death. They're trying to resuscitate her at the hospital."

Jack coughed, nodded. "We keep going, then. Flense the bastard."

Armsmaster gave a thin smile. "Right."

Armsmaster aimed his halberd at Leviathan, at the shoulder of his remaining arm. Jack leaned on him for support, reached out with his intact hand, and touched the thorns.
Deluge 4.3

Jack wrapped his arm around the halberd, trusting Armsmaster to hold him steady. He inched his left pinky finger toward the gray blur of nanothorns around the tip. Closer, closer...

A wave of pain as his fingertip disintegrated into a fine red mist. He forced the pain aside to seize on the moment of contact with uncountable blades, to project them at his target across the city. Biting deeply into the flesh at the base of Leviathan's left arm, disintegrating layers of tissue and wreathing the Endbringer's upper body in gray smoke.

Jack was getting better at using the nanothorns. The gray blur wasn't like a single knife, it was like a collection of knives, millions upon millions pointing in all directions at once. With a focused exertion of his power Jack could select which direction he wanted them to project, hitting targets far from where the halberd was pointing. Armsmaster had picked up on Jack's growing skill. He had stopped moving the halberd to aim at their targets and instead held the weapon steady and motionless, making it easier for Jack to calibrate his touches to expend the bare minimum of flesh.

A roar of thunder above them and the world went white in a blinding flash of light. Jack tensed and waited for his vision to return, holding still to avoid brushing his hand against the thorns while he was blind. After thirty seconds he could see again. The tinkertech rod Armsmaster had planted in the rooftop was glowing with white light.

Leviathan had sent a lightning bolt to come down directly on their heads.

Jack smiled, despite the pain. It was proof that they were hurting Leviathan, that the Endbringer considered them worthy of his retaliation. Jack leaned forward and resumed his work.

Forty seconds and the rest of his pinky finger, the cost he paid to cut off all the flesh he could around the base of Leviathan's left arm, leaving only the inner layers intact. It didn't have any noticeable effect on Leviathan's ability to use his arm for defense. He still swiped his claws in the air, sending water echoes to block projectiles and pummel flying capes who came too close.

Without Fletchette they couldn't finish the job. Jack gulped, forced himself to continue. He couldn't kill the Endbringer but he could hit him hard, make him hurt. Clear a path for someone else to make the finishing blow.

One and a half minutes, his ring and middle fingers, to take off all the flesh he could from Leviathan's left arm. His hand was shaking. He stopped, took a moment to pull himself together. The blood loss must be getting to him. All had to do was push his finger forward a fraction of an inch but he was feeling faint, panting, his limbs heavy with fatigue.

Another lightning bolt on top of them, twice as powerful as the last. Armsmaster's device glowed brighter than before but held firm. Armsmaster had said his device could absorb five bolts, but they were getting stronger.

One minute and his last two fingers to strip off the flesh around the base of Leviathan's remaining leg, to take chunks out of the rest of the leg's flesh, to, to...

Jack closed his eyes and dropped his arm to his side, let out the scream he had been holding in. Pain, frustration, rage.

He gasped for breath, looked up at Armsmaster. "I can't...can't go on." he said. "Pain's too much. Can't...hold myself together."
Armsmaster nodded and lowered his halberd. He put his arm around Jack's waist and helped him down to a sitting position on the roof.

"Painkiller's wearing off, I think." said Jack. "Do you have-"

"Only the one." said Armsmaster. "I kept it for emergencies. I've put in a request for medical assistance." He took out his own small medical kit and began bandaging Jack's left hand, leaning over him as he worked to shield him from the rain.

Jack had expended his self control. He couldn't stop himself from yelping as Armsmaster wrapped bandages around the stumps of his fingers. It didn't matter. A few whimpers wouldn't tarnish the hero's opinion of him, not after what they had just done together.

Armsmaster finished his work and stood. "We've done all we can for now. I can evacuate you, or we can stay here as reserves. To repeat our attack if he regenerates what we took away."

The ground was still shaking and the lake around the Endbringer was still expanding, but the lightning storm seemed to be calming. It had been minutes since Leviathan's last strike against them, since his his last strike against anyone-

The Society's building was engulfed in a massive flash of light. A storm of lightning, an electric charge that had accumulated for minutes until it grew to a titanic size. The crystal covering around the Society's building split and cracked. Chunks of crystal rained down from the sides of the building, fading out of existence as they fell and hit the water below.

And the water around the Society's base was raging, with torrents of water gathering from the city streets to smash against the walls in thirty foot tall waves. The building was holding up for the time being, protected by the remaining crystal around its walls and some kind of field around its ground floors. Waves near the building moved sluggishly, losing their momentum as they approached. When the waves approached the walls they began freezing, solidifying to form a protective layer of ice. But the Society couldn't hold out forever. Leviathan was hitting the building with bigger and bigger waves, waves big enough to crack and shatter the ice, impossible waves that climbed halfway up the sides of the building under the influence of the Endbringer's hydrokinesis.

Jack sagged. Leviathan had changed his priorities. A lightning strike even half of that strength would have pierced through Armsmaster's defense and killed him in an instant. Waves that strong would have collapsed the building beneath their feet and crushed him in the rubble. But Leviathan wasn't attacking him anymore. The Endbringer no longer considered him a threat.

He had made every sacrifice to hurt Leviathan and it hadn't been enough.

That was...that was fine. Perfect. He didn't want to be the target of an Endbringer's fury. He had accomplished far more tonight than he had dreamed. He had hurt Leviathan, done as much damage as his allies, had done more critical damage than any one of the heroes but Fletchette. He had gotten reputation far above and beyond his expectations, even gained a battle-forged bond with the leader of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. There was absolutely nothing more that he could have expected to win.

And he had made sacrifices for those accomplishments. He was a wreck, mutilated, in so much pain he could barely stand. It was time to escape, to leave the battlefield and recover, to make sure he survived to enjoy the fruits of his labor another day.

But...if he left the battle, he would be reduced to a spectator again.
For just a few minutes he had felt the greatest thrill of his life, the certainty that a hundred powerful capes had their eyes on him, watching his deeds in awe as he held their lives and fates in his hands. Now the capes and the Endbringer were still fighting for the fate of Brockton Bay. Flying capes swarming around the Endbringer, dodging lightning bolts and hitting his trapped body with a dozen high-powered attacks. He wanted to join them.

Armsmaster glanced at him, then turned back to Leviathan. Waiting for his answer.

"Any chance we'll get backup? More heroes? Scion?"

Armsmaster muttered a command into his visor, then shook his head. "No more heroes. Scion's heading for an earthquake in Iceland. The wrong direction."

Jack took a deep breath, winced as his wounds rubbed against his bandages. He had sacrificed too much of himself, he was barely holding himself together. He couldn't go on like this. He would have to ask for evac-

>> An unbalanced roster for this mission, three citizens with self-sacrificing powers. If they got into a tight spot they could run out of juice. Best to keep a healer in reserve-

<<

He would have to look harder, find a way to get back his influence on the battlefield.

Two women descended from above, holding each others' hands, apparently flying under their own power. Society capes? They wore loose-fitting civilian clothes with bulky tinkertech collars around their necks. Their bodies were strikingly deformed, their faces twisted caricatures of humanity. One had a mouth that was sealed shut and a nose that was little more than a flap of flesh. The other was slightly better off, had enough of a mouth that she could speak.

"Got you healing." rasped the woman.

>> Out of one nightmare and into another. The thing in the sunflower field had caught up to them, had caught Victor, so she ran and ran and ran back to the woman they had found sleeping in the field, the woman in the red dress, and begged her for help and woman woke up and looked at her with bright red eyes and smiled and laughed and then all she could feel was the pain of the flowers growing out of her skin and veins and eyes and the sun shining on her petals and her roots stretching into the soil for sustenance-

Then she woke up on the cold floor of the vault, covered in vomit from Mother. Her power was different now. Fewer powers, more control. Flight she could reverse into hypergravity, healing she could reverse into decay. Beside her on the floor was her twisted, evil twin. Limp, sleeping, still trapped in the dream. She gasped, crawled on her hands and knees, stretched out a hand to her twin. Just a touch and she could put her out of her misery-

Her hand struck a barrier. A forcefield. Then her hand seized, fingers twisting painfully. Tears sprang into her eyes, not at the pain but at the betrayal. She rolled onto her back, looked up at Mother. Plead. "Why are You doing this to me? Aren't...aren't we family?"

Mother didn't meet her eyes, looked away. The demon in a Society costume replied in her place. "The boss says we need healers on site for this fight. That's why." Cold, emotionless. He gestured and she lost control of her body again, her back arching,
limbs flailing.

This was Hell. Mother had forsaken her. But she had her Purpose. They wanted to control her just like the rest of the leeches, but one day they would slip up for an instant and she would be ready, she would make every single demon in this Hell suffer the torment they deserved, crush them, make their bones rot, rip them apart, kill them all one by one, every single one until nothing was left in the world but-


"Hey, you asked for healing." rasped the woman. "You're not looking so hot here."

"No! Send someone else."

Armsmaster glanced at the women, then back to Jack. "You're panicking. You were holding up well until now. Very well, even, excellent. Let them help you." He turned to the women. "If you hurt him, or if your power has negative consequences you're not telling us, I'll make sure your society suffers the consequences."

The woman gave him a curious look. "Really? What will you do, kill Weaver?"

"Yes, if it needs doing." said Armsmaster. "I keep my promises. I'll find a way."

The woman chuckled, a sound like an old car engine trying to start. "Pretty badass, Armsmaster. Can we get on with it now?"

Jack tried to push himself away as the two women approached, but with his arms the way they were he couldn't resist them. At their touch the pain faded away and he felt his arms regenerating, new flesh forming and knitting together. As they worked the women plucked off his bandages to give his fingers room to regrow. He shivered and forced himself to tolerate their touch. He had seen deformed capes before but there was something wrong with those ones.

Jack tried to distract himself from the procedure, stared over the edge of the rooftop at Leviathan. They had done as much as they could, more than anyone had ever done before. Froze him in place, ripped off his skin, his limbs, his head. And it still wasn't enough. Nearly a third of the city had collapsed into Leviathan's lake. If they couldn't find another power to hit his inner layers, whatever vital organs they were protecting, then he would finish the job and sink the city entirely.

A strange thought. What would he do if his city was gone? His school was gone, and everything else around it for blocks. Parts of downtown, parts of the shopping district. At least Dad would be safe, he had enough warning to leave the city instead of trusting himself to the shelters. Jack had told him to go all the way to Boston just to be sure. But his allies, the team he had built to carry out his plan...did Shadow Stalker and Parian survive the waves, survive the lightning?

Jack cut off his train of thought. There was no point focusing on his old plans now that they were ruined. He had to focus on the Endbringer in front of him, on making him pay for this affront. Even in the worst case, even if his city and his people were lost...even then, there was still hope for victory of a sort. If the time fields didn't disappear, if the Endbringer's body was too strong for him to rip himself apart to escape, then he'd be stuck here until the end of time. Leviathan would destroy Brockton Bay but the city would become his coffin.

But that was in the worst case. There had to be some way-

>> There were strangers standing over her, staring at her with concern in their eyes.
They were wearing costumes, masks, as if they were at a party. One of them was closer than the others. A girl without a mask, leaning over and touching her face with blood-flecked hands. She tried to look at the girl, tried to ask her what was going on, but found she couldn't move her eyes-

/// detected SUBJECT command failure, compensating, engage control frame, send command: retarget SUBJECT vision sensors {reset extraocular muscles, stim right lateral rectus 25%, stim right superior rectus 45%, stim... }, engage vision interpreter, crossreference to SELF data store -interrupt!!- identified entity SISTER moving lips, engage audition interpreter, receive command "Can you understand me? Try talking. Say hello, Fletchette.", interpreted, acknowledged, bringing SUBJECT data store online for 5 sec (data store status check: 16% intact, 20% restored, 15% fragmented, 49% lost; 927 sec online remaining before require shutdown and switch to maintenance mode), send command: link SUBJECT data store to vocal output {reset cranial nerves 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, stim nerve 5 bundle 1/100 15%, bundle 2/100 8%, bundle... } ///

No, they weren't strangers. She knew them. They were heroes. That one was Alexandria. And the girl had said Fletchette. That's my name, she realized. The girl is talking to me. She tried to respond.

"Hrrrrn." she managed.

The heroes reacted to that, whether with pleasure or dismay or she couldn't tell. She blinked and shrank back onto the bed, trying to figure out what the strangers wanted with her. Maybe she ruined their party, got drunk and made a scene. But she thought there was more to it. She didn't think she was old enough to drink, for one. And there was something she was supposed to be doing. Something important. She willed herself to give it another try.

/// detected SUBJECT command failure, compensating, engage control frame, send command: link SELF data store to vocal output- ///

"H-, h-, hello F-, Flill, Fletchette." her mouth said. The corner of her mouth twitched. A half smile. Her body felt strange, alien, but it was working. She tried again, willed herself to speak. "I-, I. I can go-"

Jack caught sight of a disturbance on a nearby rooftop. It was Alexandria, landing on the roof with Fletchette cradled in her arms. Fletchette was swaying, disoriented, right arm dangling and limp. Her costume had been burned away, and she was covered only in a loose hospital gown and a generic mask to preserve her modesty. Her skin was mottled with red and black.

Next to her were a half dozen capes who came to support her attacks. Shielder putting up a forcefield, Vista warping the roof around them into a barrier to block lightning strikes. Three Society capes were there too, one of the deformed women was by Fletchette's side, touching her shoulder. The other two were capes in flight suits, one aiming a six foot long tinkertech slug-thrower at Leviathan, the other pressing Fletchette's limp hands onto the bolt in the gun's chamber.

Disoriented though she might have been, Fletchette's power was still working at full force. Her first shot flew true and sank into the base of Leviathan's remaining arm, at the thinnest point where Jack had carved away the outer layers of flesh.
The response was immediate. A bolt of lightning from the sky, directly on top of her. The bolt hit the barriers of the supporting capes and was repelled.

Four more shots from Fletchette and Leviathan's arm was hanging by a thread. Alexandria set Fletchette down on the rooftop, entrusting her to one of the support capes, and flew to Leviathan. She hit his arm at full force. It tore off his body and fell into the water below.

Another bolt of lightning, a charge that had been accumulating during their attacks, five times stronger than the last one. Vista's barrier shattered and the forcefields flickered, but they held. Fletchette aimed her next bolt at the base of Leviathan's leg, expanding the gouge Jack had carved.

The capes flying above Leviathan were making progress against the inner flesh of his torso, now. The Triumvirate, Myrrdin. Society capes in flight suits, some carrying others in their arms. All of them were cutting loose with their strongest attacks, close-range powers that they couldn't use when the Endbringer was mobile, when he had limbs to defend himself. Jack recognized the Society cape with a mirror orb who he thought had been crushed helping Sophia land her attacks. The mirror orb was focusing the cape attacks on a single point to overwhelm the Endbringer's regeneration.

Another lightning strike, branching tendrils of lightning reaching out to hit the flying capes. But most of the lightning bolts were diverted harmlessly. Absorbed by a flying woman carrying a lantern, or channeled into a pair of Society suits flying high above the others and trailing metal cables into the water below to ground them. The rest of the bolts were deflected by a large forcefield covering all of the capes. Jack recognized Bastion, one of the best Protectorate shielders, held in Legend's arms. A stream of projectiles began to launch from a window of the Society's base and rise into the sky. Something to disrupt the electrical charges Leviathan was building in the clouds?

More than a third of the city was destroyed now. The rest of the city was flooded, the water on the streets nearly ten feet deep, weaker buildings collapsing. But Leviathan was losing.

Another lightning strike at Fletchette, deflected. More shots of hers embedded themselves in Leviathan's leg. Alexandria and a Society cape gripped the leg and pulled it off with their combined efforts.

Leviathan was reduced to a torso suspended by two time fields, protected only by the toughest, inner layer of his flesh. With their concentrated fire, the capes managed to tear off a small patch of the last layer of flesh, revealing a black, inner core.

The storm began to calm. The capes stopped attacking the flesh, wary of letting the core escape its confinement, and focused their efforts on the small patch of the core they had exposed. Fletchette shot a bolt into Leviathan's torso, biting deep into the core. Then another, then another.

Leviathan's power was growing weaker, fainter. The rainstorm was reduced to a light drizzle. Another shot from Fletchette, this time piercing all the way through Leviathan's torso and coming out the other side.

The water in the city went still. The waves from the ocean were reduced to mere ripples in the water. There hadn't been any lightning strikes for more than a minute. The storm above the city began to disperse. The light of a full moon filtered through the clouds, giving the landscape a calm, pale glow. A soothing light, a return to normalcy.

Two more shots, two more pieces chipped out of the Endbringer.
A woman's voice came from the air around him. The Society's broadcaster.

Screaming.
Deluge 4.4

Jack watched Fletchette's shot blur through the air and take another bite out of Leviathan's core. One step closer to victory.

The moonlit scene was somehow peaceful and serene, even picturesque. As if the Endbringer's death was meant to be immortalized as a painting hung in an art gallery. Leviathan's struggles had grown faint, his power over the water in the city fading, his thunderstorm going quiet and dispersing. Above the Endbringer were a dozen Protectorate heroes and as many Society villains, focusing their combined assault on a patch of his exposed core. Most of their attacks were silent, like Legend's lasers, or came with only a quiet crackle like a fireplace, like Myrrdin's summoned energy bursts and the green concentric ripples Eidolon was directing at the core. The only disturbances were the whine and percussion of tinkertech weapons, fired by Dauntless and by a group of the flight-suited Society capes.

Against that background of serenity, the broadcaster's screamed words were nearly deafening.

"RUN! GET AWAY FROM LEVIATH-

A sharp crack and a roar of rushing water. The capes around Leviathan disappeared.


What?

The capes were simply gone. The Society's flight suits dropped out of the sky. A lone spark of blue light sputtered, flickered, and died. Only Alexandria and Eidolon were still in the air, unbalanced and lurching as though they were drunk.

And the air around Leviathan was sprinkled with clouds of red mist, slowly expanding like blooming flowers.

"Stay away from Leviathan, two hundred feet!" called the broadcaster. "High-powered hydrokinesis, instant death!"

Hydrokinesis without Manton limitations.

Leviathan's power, taken to its extreme. Trading his miles-wide range for high precision control, tearing the capes apart with the water inside their bodies. Bypassing armor, forcefields, spatial warping, every form of defense short of sheer invulnerability.

Ten of the greatest heroes, slaughtered in an instant.

Alexandria and Eidolon tried to retreat but their path was blocked by a massive wall of water rising from the lake. They changed directions and were engulfed by a cloud of red mist and flesh. The shattered fragments of their dead allies pressed against their bodies, held them in place, forced blood down their throats to suffocate them. After nearly a minute of struggle there was a burst of light and the biomass around them disappeared, banished. Eidolon held a gasping Alexandria in his arms. He flew them away from Leviathan at high speed, using a second burst of light to banish a wall of water that rose to intercept them, then a third to banish a grasping tentacle created from the water spilling from Leviathan's body.
The instant the heroes left his range, the water around Leviathan *shifted*, rearranged. The water formed massive barriers, walls around his body, growing with each passing moment with new water drawn from his core. Smaller knots of water broke off from the walls to float around his body at the edge of the fields of frozen time. The knots of water began to vibrate, to spin like buzzsaws, cutting away the flesh that tethered his core to the fields. Using his reconfigured power to break his bonds and escape.

Jack stared at the scene of the massacre. He had misread the Endbringers, misread their message. He had thought the Endbringers wanted to destroy the world, or perhaps to dominate it. That they considered humanity a worthy opponent and held back their tricks as a strategic decision, keeping their best weapons secret until they could be deployed to the most devastating effect. He had thought their message, at those times, was meant to crush humanity's morale. To convince humanity that the Endbringers held all the cards, that they would punish any resistance with a new set of unfair and deadly powers.

No. That was all wrong. This power was simply too strong. Humanity had *never* been a difficult enemy for Leviathan. His layers of decorative flesh, his reactions to wounds as though the capes posed any danger to him, his apparent mistake of letting himself get trapped in the time fields...it was all a deception. He was playing with them. He had been playing with them all along, ever since he rose from the sea in Oslo. At any time he chose he could have killed all the defenders arrayed against him in a matter of minutes. No, not even that. If Leviathan truly wanted to destroy humanity he would never have faced the defenders at all. He would have simply stayed underwater where he was invulnerable to harm, rested peacefully on the seabed while he called waves to crush cities and sink islands.

But he *didn't* want to destroy humanity, didn't want to dominate them. He wanted to *play* with them. He wanted them to think they had a chance, to send their heroes against him, to pull out all the stops and make every sacrifice. To despair when they failed and rejoice when they succeeded, to celebrate when they saw him pretend to stagger in pain and limp away from a half-ruined city.

Jack clenched his fist, his left hand's fingers regrown now by the deformed women's attentions. Life wasn't a game. He...he couldn't deny the attraction. The hunt, cornering his prey, outmaneuvering them and deceiving them at every turn, it made his blood pump and gave him a thrill that nothing else could match. He lived for that thrill of battle, whether with weapons or with words. But that was because of the *stakes*, because of the prizes he would gain if he won, because he would lose everything if he lost. Because he fought for a cause that *mattered*, to make a difference in the world, to see the shock on the faces of his audience as his message rippled through their minds. What the Endbringers were doing was...so useless, pointless. Burning ants to death with a magnifying glass, cutting up stray cats and dogs like a garden variety psychopath.

And now that he understood their game, he looked again at Leviathan's new power, and...he understood it. *Recognized* it.

The heroes had always known the Endbringers were abominations, incomprehensible, *alien*, but they had thought they understood the broad outlines of their powers and roles. Behemoth, dynakinesis, the hero-killer. Leviathan, hydrokinesis, the city-killer. Simurgh, mental powers, the terror weapon. But that had all been a lie, another deception. Any single power honed to maximum strength and precision could be used in *any* role to maximum effect. Were their roles part of the game for them? Did they travel from one world to the next, negotiating each time for the parts they wanted to play?

For a moment Jack had a vision of an alternate world, one where the Endbringers had chosen different roles. Leviathan the hero-killer, rising from the waves. A localized kill aura as powerful
Behemoth's, a regenerating shield of water giving him even greater durability, slowly and inexorably swimming toward his target as his crushing walls of water sundered buildings, civilians, and heroes alike. Behemoth the city-killer, rising from the earth. Holding out against the heroes with his claws and brute durability, shaping his aura to stretch for ten miles around his body, filling the landscape with a low dose of heat and radiation that accumulated with each passing minute until it became an uninhabitable wasteland. The Simurgh playing a different game, pretending to be a pure telekinetic. Staging a performance, dodging the defenders with a delicate dance in the sky while reaching out to people in her range, choosing randomly from civilians and heroes alike, slowly ripping them apart limb by limb. Sixty people in the first minute and rising at an ever-increasing rate until she was driven away, the survivors calculated to go mad with grief, to deal more devastation in her wake.

The Endbringers were too strong. They were never meant to be beaten. It wasn't part of their design. This fight-

>> The villain was a Master/Stranger, control of living illusions. The perfect counter to her power. Shots that don't miss were useless against a target she couldn't see. But she wouldn't let- //// data corrupt, compensating, approximate from SELF data store: "Don't give up! You can bring them back, you have to. I'm raising your nerve growth factor." /// -slid down the wall, using her power to control her descent by adjusting the friction on her costume, and readied her darts-<<

But this fight wasn't over.

Fletchette fired another shot. It pierced through the wall of water around Leviathan and bit deep in his core.

Leviathan had played his final trump card, a single blow that killed ten of the greatest heroes and as many capes from the Society. But he was still trapped as long as he was tethered to the time fields, as long as his own hyperdurable flesh held out against the cutting force of his water. And every minute he was trapped he would be vulnerable. His shields of water did nothing to protect him from Fletchette, and now that he had traded his range for control he couldn't take her out of commission, couldn't use his waves and lightning to attack her from across the city.

Leviathan reacted to her shot all the same. All of the water in Leviathan's range instantly condensed into a massive sphere centered on his core. The bottom third of the sphere warped to form a pedestal to support the mass of water above it, the base of the pedestal resting on the surface of the lake below. A reflex, an instinctual defense. Pointless against Fletchette. She sent another bolt directly into Leviathan's core, piercing through the sphere of water as if it wasn't there.

Tendrils of water rippled into being around the sphere, a network of veins stretching over its surface. The veins converged at a single point on the sphere, a whirlpool, that faced the building where Fletchette stood. The sphere became a massive eyeball, four hundred feet wide, directing its pupil in a baleful gaze at the cape who dared to strike his core.

The pupil, the whirlpool, began to grow. The vortex of water spun faster and faster until it was a blur.

Jack's eyes widened. "Armsmaster!" he shouted. He shook off the deformed women who were healing him and tried to pick up the halberd with his healed hand. Armsmaster caught his meaning and lifted the halberd. Jack reached for the nanothorns with his right hand, the one whose fingers were only half-healed, and-
The whirlpool spat out a thin jet of water, no more than an inch wide. It moved so quickly it was impossible to track its movement from source to target, it simply appeared in the intervening space like a laser beam. Not aimed at Fletchette, not where its force would be blunted by her shields. Aimed just below her, at the roof of the building under her feet.

Jack had seen videos of industrial machines that used water jets for precision cutting. A thin stream of water at high enough pressure could cut through thick slabs of metal like a hot knife through butter. He had laughed, had thought it was a joke - the best cutting blade in the world was one he couldn't use with his power.

Now Leviathan was using the same weapon on a massive scale. Of course. The hero-killer needed a ranged weapon to attack heroes from afar. Like Behemoth's lightning, his fire and pressure waves and radiation.

Leviathan's beam of water raked across the building just under the edge of the roof, cutting through everything it touched with ease. The surface of the roof sank and collapsed, making the capes lose their footing and fall into the path of the beam, cutting their legs out from under them. The forcefields and space-warping barriers disappeared. The beam swiveled to focus on Fletchette. The force of the impact knocked her onto her back and sent her skidding across the rooftop, but she wasn't harmed. Rendered invulnerable by a defensive power of her support capes.

The beam cut out. The whirlpool on the surface of the sphere collapsed. The attack seemed to have a time limit, three seconds.


But a second whirlpool had already formed beside the collapsing remains of the first. The new whirlpool spun up and prepared to fire.

Jack pressed one of his half-grown fingers into the thorns, let out a short scream as he realized that the healing must have cleared the painkillers from his system. He forced himself to continue, to project the blades into the air in front of Fletchette's building, in position to block Leviathan's next attack. But his target was as thin as a laser, an inch-wide beam hundreds of feet away. He missed his target.

The beam raked across the support capes on the roof, cutting flesh and piercing armor, slicing the Society's deformed woman in two at the waist.

> Shielder deceased, EC-6.

With its last instant of activity the beam swerved toward Fletchette. It ran diagonally across her body, cutting a deep gouge into one of her legs, but the beam deflected off the material of her hospital gown and expended itself on the rooftop beside her. Still alive. Her invulnerability had expired but she was using her power defensively somehow, giving her clothing the same physics-immunities as her attacks. Without her all-concealing costume, though, she wouldn't survive another shot.

"Don't aim for the jet, aim for the whirlpool! Stop it before it forms!" shouted Armsmaster.

Jack gasped, moved his next half-grown finger into the thorns. He projected the blades at Leviathan's sphere, into the center of the forming whirlpool. Where his blades struck the water churned, lost its cohesion, turned to mist.

The whirlpool disappeared. Three seconds later, a new vortex began forming at another spot on the
sphere. Jack moved his finger another eighth of an inch into the thorns, turned the new vortex into vapor. As soon as it dispersed a third was already forming to replace it.

His fingers weren't regenerating anymore. The deformed women had taken flight, moving to defend Fletchette. In the corner of his vision Jack saw Alexandria and a group of other capes flying to the same destination.

Good. Jack would expend himself to buy time for Fletchette to take a few more shots. Then Alexandria would take over, putting her invulnerable body in the way of Leviathan's attack, hopefully giving Fletchette the time to finish off the beast. Jack returned his attention to Leviathan, touched his finger to the thorns. He projected the blades, disrupting the forming whirlpool-

No.

Jack stared, transfixed by the sight. The sphere of water around Leviathan didn't have a single whirlpool, anymore.

It had a hundred.

A hundred whirlpools taking shape, each smaller than the original but aimed in all directions, at targets everywhere in the city. The whirlpools increased their speed, faster and faster, then twisted and-

-and he was flying through the air, a roaring sound echoing in his ears. Jack landed with a jolt, stumbled, was steadied by Armsmaster's grip around his waist. Armsmaster had predicted the shot and used his grappling hook to pull them out of the way, taking them to the roof of another building.


Leviathan had massacred the defenders in a single strike.

On the surface of his sphere of water, another hundred whirlpools slowly began to form. This would be the end. The new beams had been weaker than the original, hadn't changed course to follow their targets, but they were still strong enough to pierce through buildings and strike to maim and kill.

Armsmaster tightened his grip on Jack's waist, readied his grappling hook.

>> Armsmaster took one last look at the flooding streets of Seattle. He didn't want to leave. Legend was still there, his Breaker ability letting him recover from Levathan's blows once again. He didn't have that luxury. His power armor wasn't strong enough to let him survive a single a solid hit, and his monomolecular blades had only cut through the two outer layers of the Endbringer's body. He would need to go back to the bench. He could already see designs in his mind for sharper weapons, tougher armor, maybe even a combat prediction system to help him land his attacks and dodge the Endbringer's.

But that was for another day. As much as he hated to admit it, he couldn't contribute to this battle. His first priority was to survive, to come back stronger-

<<

Jack stared at Leviathan's hundred whirlpools. He swallowed. "We can't survive like this. We can't
keep running, can't dodge forever. We can stop him."

Armsmaster didn't take his eyes off Leviathan. "We can't stop a hundred of those jets."

"A spread shot, like the first time I tried. Each thorn is another knife. Slash in all directions."

Armsmaster hesitated, then nodded. "If you miss, we won't get a second chance."

Jack took a deep breath and pressed the remains of his finger into the thorns. He fought through the pain to concentrate on a hundred trajectories at once. Project. Project. Not just here, but here and here and here and here-

He felt the points of contact spring to life. Projecting his millions of blades outward, forward, in all trajectories pointing in the direction of his enemy.

A faint puff of mist rose from everything in his view, everything he saw for miles. The surface of the sphere, the buildings, the water in the streets and the lake, the Society's wall along the bay, the water of the bay itself.

He had disturbed Leviathan's whirlpools, but he had spread his attack too thin. Not enough to stop them, only enough to delay the attack for a few seconds.

The whirlpools reached their maximum speed and fired their attack. Armsmaster grabbed Jack's waist and dove to the side, a leap assisted by his power armor that moved them ten feet in a heartbeat. They collapsed in a heap in the rooftop.

But Leviathan hadn't been aiming for them. He had been aiming at the Society. His water jets raked over the Society's building in a hundred different angles and trajectories. The beams took two seconds to shatter the layers of ice and crystal around the building, then spent their third second slicing through the walls and floors. The building remained standing but its defenses had been crushed. New defenses were forming, layers of crystal and a new barrier made of glass, but they were less than a third of their old density. Leviathan was readying another volley of his jets, ready to fire in seconds.

A blur pierced through Leviathan's sphere of water and hit his core. Fletchette was shooting again from a new location, somewhere behind him in the sky. She was probably being protected by Alexandria, she would be safe-

>> Alexandria tore the door off its hinges and cast it aside, careful not to hit her subordinate following behind. Ah, this was it. A room filled with Tinker equipment in the basement of the university. A computer monitor showed the face of the villain who was responsible, here to mock them from her hidden base of operations.

"Enerva. And you brought Alexandria with you, that's cute. You're just in time to see the fireworks." said String Theory.

The villain was treating her a mere sidekick. Good. She was underestimating her. "Wrong. We still have five minutes before your F-driver goes off. More than enough time to defuse it."

String Theory smirked. "There's no rule saying I can only have one weapon."

A countdown timer on the monitor hit zero. A green light on the walls began to glow and a blue field flickered into being around the core of the Tinker equipment. A trap. An explosive weapon, probably continuous explosions to blanket the area until the F-
driver went off, plus a forcefield to protect the weapon in the meantime. She would survive, of course, but she needed Enerva and her Tinker equipment to defuse the F-driver.

Alexandria spun in place, grabbed her subordinate, and flew away from the incoming explosion. "I'll shield you. You need to fit yourself in my shadow, now. Curl yourself in a ball, hold your equipment between your body and mine. It'll be a close thing."

Enerva scrambled to obey-

...but even Alexandria would have trouble protecting Fletchette from a full-force attack from Leviathan's beams. A glancing blow would be enough to incapacitate Fletchette or the tinker gun she needed to make her shots. Jack chanced a look in the air behind him to find them, to fix their position in his mind. He had two targets to defend, now. Himself and Fletchette. He could try to defend more targets, the Society building or other parts of the city, but he was still learning to spread his attacks. If he tried to defend too much, spread himself too thin again, it would be a fatal mistake.

He returned his attention on the whirlpools forming on the sphere. They were laid out in a pattern, nearby vortexes aimed at nearby targets. A roughly even split between ones aimed at Fletchette, himself, and other targets in the city. He stretched his arm along the halberd, inched the half-regrown index finger of his right hand toward the blur of thorns. Project. Project and focus the millions of contacts here where the whirlpools were staring directly at him like gun barrels and here where they gazed into the sky at his allies-

Two great patches of mist rose from the sphere, nearly half of the whirlpools disrupted, losing their momentum, fragmenting apart. The other half fired. A crack as the fifty beams of water hit targets throughout the city, a cacophony as buildings cracked and fell apart under the pressure. He hadn't been able to defend himself entirely. Two buildings near Jack collapsed to the ground, two fewer buildings for Armsmaster to grapple to if they needed to escape. The greatest commotion came from the direction of the Society base, the sounds of crystal and glass shattering, but with Leviathan's attention split between three targets it hadn't been enough to destroy their base entirely.


Fuck. Leviathan had hit the hospital. At that range his beams would be much weaker, not enough to pierce walls outright, but hitting the building in the right spots could collapse the roof of the emergency room, kill the patients, bury the healers inside.

Jack's let out an involuntary whimper as the pain from his mangled hand reasserted itself in his awareness. He needed the healers alive. Healers down...not dead but they could be injured, buried alive in a flooding room, it could be just a matter of time. He'd have to hope for the best. Glory Girl was with them, she'd find a way to save them. As long as they weren't hit by any more of Leviathan's beams. Another target he had to protect.

Fletchette sank another shot into Leviathan's core. Then another. Leviathan was preparing his next round of beams. He couldn't stop all of them. He would have to choose-

>>> An impossible beast. A devil from beneath the Earth. Invulnerable to all but his best attacks. Wading through the rest as if they were only minor inconveniences. And so destructive he couldn't focus on ending the threat, he had to spend precious time limiting the damage. The fires the beast started would set off the oil fields in minutes.
One of the local capes was spraying adhesive gel from his hands to smother the flames, but it wasn't nearly enough. He would have to take a minute of his time to assist. He discarded his gravity wells and felt a new power take its place, some form of aerokinesis-

<<

Jack felt a gust of wind on his back, carrying the faint echoes of a man's voice in the air.

Jack spoke to Armsmaster. His voice came out rough, distorted, in bursts between gasps of air. The pain he was trying to ignore was still affecting his body. "We have, backup? Tell him I'll, take low if he, takes high."

He felt Armsmaster shift behind him, speak into his visor.

Fletchette fired a shot. The whirlpools accelerated an instant later, as if in reply. Jack pushed his half-grown right thumb into the thorns, the last finger of his right hand, and used the sacrifice to spread his blades across the entire lower half of the sphere, turning the churning surface of the water into vapor. On the top of the sphere dozens of pockmarks appeared in the water. Lances of air penetrating the surface of the sphere, disrupting the whirlpools before they could fire.

The whirlpools broke apart, disintegrated. They had stopped them all, this time.

Jack managed a smile. Even now that Leviathan had become a hero-killer, massacred the heroes and the villains, he and his allies could still lock him down, stop his attacks, buy time to end him forever.

He glanced behind him and saw Alexandria, holding Fletchette in one arm and the tinkertech gun in the other, aiming it at Leviathan. She was using one of the intact buildings for cover, keeping Fletchette out of Leviathan's direct line of fire. Eidolon was by their side, hands outstretched and gesturing toward the Endbringer, directing his air-manipulation power like a conductor. In front of them was an octagonal violet forcefield, Eidolon's last line of defense if he couldn't stop Leviathan's beams.

A voice came from the air around him. The Society's broadcaster, sending an indiscriminate message to anyone on the battlefield who was still alive.

"Attention everyone! Bringing reloads for our railgun emplacement by jet, two minutes. Fletchette, whoever's transporting you, get to that spot."

Jack's smile widened. About time. Almost there.

A shot from Fletchette into the sphere of water, and Leviathan began to form his next attack. A new pattern, a hundred whirlpools clustered in neat rows near the top of the sphere, some of them even pointing straight up. What was he aiming at? Jack wouldn't be able to reach the ones on the top, they were out of his field of view. He would have to trust his backup to handle them. He focused his attention on the ones he could hit. He moved the meat of his right palm into the thorns, felt the contacts with the blades as they turned his palm to a red mist, projected the blades at the-

"It's a trick!" shouted Armsmaster. "Whirlpools below, the water on the lake, they're the real attack!"

Fuck. Jack tore his eyes from his target and glanced down. Crude whirlpools were forming in the water on the lake below Leviathan, around the base of the pedestal that supported the sphere of water. They were about to fire, angled to slip under Eidolon's forcefield and strike Fletchette,
angled to cut through the base of Jack's building and collapse it under his feet. He redirected his blades to the lake, a wide-angled attack, dissipating the whirlpools seconds before they fired.

Eidolon was left to handle the whirlpools on the sphere on his own. He seemed to realize what was happening at the same time as Jack and adjusted his approach. Eidolon managed to extend his aerokinesis to disperse more than two thirds of the whirlpools on Leviathan's sphere, left alone the decoys pointing to the sky, left alone the ones aimed directly at his group and trusting his forcefield to protect them. It wasn't enough. More than twenty beams speared into the city.


Fletchette sank two more shots into the core. The Society's broadcaster kept up her message.

"Fletchette, we'll send Quarrel to assist. Our Thinkers say your sustained fire will be able to kill the rest of the the core in just- oh shit!"

A wet ripping sound from Leviathan. And movement, his first movement since he had been trapped in the time fields. Something writhing in the center of his sphere.

Leviathan's black core rose up into the sphere of water, freed from its bonds of flesh.

His flesh still hung suspended between the two time fields, left behind like an empty cocoon. There was a single long slit in the top. The opening the core had used to escape.

The core hovered in the center of its sphere of water, then spun in place like a gyroscope. A third of the core's mass abruptly split off its main body, forming a cloud of fragments that drifted in the sphere for a moment before being ejected at high velocity. The core was grooming itself, ridding itself of the fragments that Fletchette had damaged.

They...they had only done that much, only taken out a third of the core? They would have to do that again two times over?

Fletchette fired a shot at the core, so fast it was a blur. But the core dodged, shifting inside its sphere to pull itself out of the bolt's path. A moment later the water shifted, sphere and its supporting pedestal snapping into place centered on the core's new location.

Armsmaster swore. "Her power gives her enhanced accuracy. She's not supposed to miss."

Of course. Each one of Fletchette's shots into the Endbringer's shell had opened a hole, an empty space, and that gave the core room to maneuver. Had the core been moving inside its shell, dodging her shots the whole time? How many of her bolts had even touched their target?

The core was fast. Not quite the hypersonic speeds Leviathan reached in the open ocean. A tradeoff with its reconfigured power, giving up speed for brute force to become a hero-killer. It didn't matter. It was still more than enough to dodge any bolts Fletchette could fire, enough to accelerate instantly from rest to a hundred miles an hour or more.

That had always been Leviathan's greatest strength. Speed, mobility. It was what let him evade attacks and leave crushing water echoes in his wake, kill a dozen capes in the span of seconds, move halfway across a city in an instant as though he was teleporting. The only reason they had damaged him at all in Brockton Bay was that they had managed to deny him his speed, capturing him in the Society's traps and time fields. Now he had his greatest weapon once again.

Leviathan, encased in his shell of water, began his advance...
Leviathan's true self, his black inner core, floated a hundred and fifty feet in the air at the center of his sphere of water. A network of tendrils writhed across the surface of the sphere, across the pedestal below that supported it, drawing together to form a hundred whirlpools aimed at targets throughout the city.

Jack let his ruined right hand drop by his side, stretched his newly healed left hand onto Armsmaster's halberd, and pressed the tip of his pinky finger into the gray blur of the nanothorns. He hissed in pain and forced himself to concentrate on his points of contact with the blades, on projecting them at his targets. He was getting better at using his power on the thorns. Each microscopic piece of his body gave him thousands of points of contact with the thorns for the brief moment before it was torn apart. Pressing his flesh into the thorns more quickly meant more points of contact, more blades to send at his enemy.

Two seconds and his finger disintegrated down to the first knuckle. The cost for him to project a wide-angled attack, disrupting the forming whirlpools on the lower half of the sphere. The whirlpools on the upper half survived intact and accelerated their spins, then were dispersed by Eidolon's aerokinesis, each whirlpool pierced with a lance of solid air. They had stopped Leviathan's first volley.

Leviathan was moving now, pulling his sphere of water along with him, moving the length of a city block in seconds. He was on a path to pass directly between Jack and Fletchette. Jack saw his plan. Once Leviathan got between them they wouldn't be able to combine their forces to block his attacks. He would be able to aim all his whirlpools at a single target. Fletchette would have good odds of surviving the first volley, protected by Alexandria and Eidolon, but if Leviathan sent his full arsenal at him...

Fletchette shot a bolt *through* a building this time, attacking Leviathan while staying out of his line of sight. The Endbringer dodged anyway, dancing to the side within his sphere of water and then returning to its position at the center. Was it sensing her attacks somehow? Sensing the disturbance in the water when her bolts pierced his sphere, instantly moving aside before they hit?

Leviathan abruptly dropped into the lake and disappeared from view.

What?

"Shit. He'll be faster underwater." said Armsmaster. He stowed his nanothorn halberd and moved to the edge of the roof, scanned the surface of the water. Leviathan's lake in the center of the city, the flooded streets around it.

"He was-" Jack bit back a hiss. His voice was coming out wrong, tight with pain. "He was already in water. The sphere."

"No. He's fast in the water, inside the sphere, but his hydrokinesis is slow. Carrying the sphere with him slowed him down, he was going sixty miles an hour at most. And it takes him seconds to make those jets."

"Still fast. Enough to tear us apart."

"Right." said Armsmaster.

A moment of silence. They stood side by side, looking out at what was left of their flooded city,
still and calm under the moonlight.

Jack coughed. "Not attacking. He retreated, then. We drove him off."

Armsmaster scanned the water again, then looked over the edge of the roof. "No."

Jack had only a second to react. Armsmaster barreled into him at high speed, grabbing him by the waist with one arm while using the other to unsling his standard halberd and shoot out his grappling hook. Jack forced himself not to flinch, forced his mangled hands away from his body so they weren't damaged further by the impact, and the next moment he was flying through the air.

A roar erupted from behind him. The building they had been standing on had collapsed in an instant, its first ten stories engulfed by a living mass of water that struck at weak points and tore apart foundations.

Still in flight, Armsmaster retracted his grappling hook and fired it again, changing their course in midair to aim for a twelve story apartment building. As they flipped up onto the rooftop, the first building they had been grappling to was torn apart by a storm of Leviathan's water jets.

Jack gasped for breath. He had the wind knocked out of him. Armsmaster held him by the waist for a long moment, keeping watch for Leviathan. Then he let go.

"Not coming after us?" said Jack.

Armsmaster shook his head. "He was passing by. We weren't his target."

Jack staggered to the edge of the rooftop to see. Leviathan was in the flooded streets halfway across the city, having traveled a mile and a half in seconds. He was forming a new sphere of water atop a new supporting pedestal, more slowly this time without a vast lake to draw from.

The Society broadcaster was still speaking, trying to coordinate a last-ditch attack. "What? The railgun's at the Medhall building, head west and look for the shimmering—FUCK!"

Leviathan was attacking the Society, using his newfound mobility to truly engage their base for the first time in the battle.

Jack stared. Of course. He was so stupid, he should have known. He was starting to understand the Endbringers, to see them as true opponents instead of forces of nature, but he had forgotten the most important part of their strategy. They wanted heroes to fight them, they wanted to stage a grand battle, so they always needed a target, something to force the heroes to give a spirited defense, some rich resource or great advance of humanity they aimed to destroy. The oil fields that Behemoth burned when he first arose under Ciudad Bolivar, the newly formed European league of parahumans that Leviathan destroyed when he sank Oslo, the century of peace and concentrated economic power that the Simurgh turned to terror in Lausanne.

And now he realized that Leviathan had been moving in a nearly straight line throughout the battle, distracted by cape attacks and targets of opportunity but always drawing nearer to the Society building, always sending waves and lightning and water jets to attack them even when he paid for it by diverting resources from his close quarters battles. The Society had been doing something here in his city, a secret project that the heroes didn't know about, that he hadn't heard a whisper about despite all of his research. A secret project that Leviathan had discovered with his unnatural senses, a project that he saw as a great boon to humanity or a threat to his game of endless war. A target for termination worthy of his personal attention.

Now there was nothing left to stand in his way. Leviathan had moved himself into a position close
to the Society building where he could target them with a full battery of water jets, while keeping Jack and Eidolon behind him, facing the back of his sphere of water, unable to see or disrupt the whirlpools forming on the other side.

Jack couldn't stop him. He could probably focus his blades and project them through Leviathan's four hundred foot sphere in a narrow area, turning a small cylinder of water into vapor, but that would only disrupt a fraction of the hundred whirlpools that must be forming on the other side. Fletchette's group was trying to stop the Endbringer with little success. Eidolon was gesturing with his hands, trying to do something with his aerokinesis. Fletchette fired twice at Leviathan's core and he dodged both shots with ease.

Effects flickered into being around the Society building as the villains tried to defend themselves. Their barriers of ice and crystal and glass were supplemented with forcefields, with a wall of flame, with a fusillade of bombs detonating in front of the building to create zones of shimmering heat and warped space.

It wasn't enough. A hundred beams of water raked across the Society building, this time at much closer range than before. Half of the beams were deflected by the defenses but the other half struck home, knocking out forcefields, shattering barriers, and gouging deep into the foundations of the building. The middle of the building crumbled. The top floors sank by twenty feet and began to tilt precipitously.

The broadcaster's voice, desperate now. "We still have a shot! Hold out for one minute, we're going to try to trap-"

Her voice cut off as the roof above the top floors caved in.

Leviathan continued toward the Society base at a steady clip, his sphere of water engulfing buildings as he passed, shaking their foundations until they crumbled into the flooded streets. He unleashed another barrage of beams at the Society's base, sending half of the beams into a small area inside the collapsed top floors of the building, the other half deep into the building's basement. Striking at specific targets, at capes he considered a threat. Great chunks of the building crumbled to the ground.

Armsmaster was shouting, using his visor to communicate the the other heroes. "We need evac immediately, highest priority! We have a weapon and power proven highly effective against Endbringers. Send Strider if you-right. Jetstream? Skimmer?"

Jack swallowed. That was it, then. His time in the limelight was over. The only goal that remained was survival.

Evacuation wouldn't be easy. The city was flooded with ten feet of water. It was impossible for anyone but a Mover or a champion swimmer to leave. Teleporters could do it, but apparently their best had died in the battle.

Fuck. It would be humiliating to die due to such a poor use of resources. Yes, teleporters were powerful in battle. Jack had gained a special appreciation for that during his fight with Oni Lee. Even with the element of surprise, with his well-laid plans, with him and Sophia working together like a well-oiled machine, it had been a near thing. And yes, he wasn't averse to risking precious resources or even his own life to get a chance to deal a critical blow to his enemies. That was exactly the plan he had used to take out the leaders of the Empire. But that approach only worked when you took a calculated risk. When you understood your opponents, when you researched their powers and personalities, when you could make plans where the level of risk was clear and it could be weighed against the reward. That was why he had had such success in his campaign to wipe out
the villains in his hometown, why he was so reluctant to move to a new city with opposition he only knew from Parahumans Online entries.

Now that he had seen an Endbringer face to face, seen how the Protectorate and the Society fought him, he realized that even the most powerful capes in the world barely understood the Endbringers at all. Yes, he had seen that they weren't invincible. The Endbringers could be hurt, defeated, and even killed. They had pressed Leviathan hard enough to make him reveal trump card after trump card to survive. But the fact that the Endbringers had trump cards meant that it was impossible to plan a decisive engagement to end the threat. His own attack with Armsmaster had seemed to deal critical damage, until it revealed an inner layer of flesh that still resisted them. What they needed was the ability to try out attacks like this and then retreat, regroup, survive. Come back next time with an even better nanosword.

And he wanted to come back next time. He had gained Armsmaster's trust. The Tinker would make him a new blade, one he could use without having to mutilate himself, maybe even one inspired by Fletchette's power that could hurt the Endbringer's core. Or they would find a healer to give him regeneration and painkillers to let him use the thorns as a matter of course.

Yes. He would come back stronger with a new message for the enemies who had taken his city away from him. A message about the true nature of power, the same message he had sent to the leaders of the Empire, now magnified a thousandfold. The Endbringers thought they were playing a game. That humans were nothing more than insects to be burned under the magnifying glass. Wrong. He would live to see them panic and squirm when he and his allies ripped them apart piece by piece, when they realized in their last moments that even forces of nature could be killed by the gnats they chose as prey.

Armsmaster was still speaking into his visor, searching for a way to evacuate. "Dovetail? Aegis?" He looked to Fletchette's group. "Alexandria? Eidolon?"

Eidolon was still protecting Fletchette with his violet octagonal forcefield, but he was no longer gesturing his hands to use aerokinesis. Instead his hands were raised in the air, supporting a hazy bubble slowly coming into place around him and Fletchette. A means of escape.

Alexandria flew through the air in a blur and landed at his side. "Eidolon will evacuate you. Stand by me and I'll carry you."

Armsmaster went to Alexandria's side without a word, let her wrap one of her arms around the waist of his power armor. He looked at Jack. "Good job, Jack Slash. We hit that bastard hard today. We'll hit harder next time."

Jack stepped forward. He had fought one of the scariest monsters in the world, the most powerful supervillains who were worse than a natural disaster, and he had done as much damage as the greatest of all heroes. He wanted to hold on to that feeling.

All he needed to do was survive-

>> Harbinger was sweating now. It almost made him smile. Ekwensu was the first opponent in years who had made him sweat in a long-range firefight. He would have appreciated the novelty if he wasn't an inch from death.

A maser beam, hot enough to make the trees it hit burst into flame. Harbinger dodged by five feet, a necessary margin to avoid the heat of its passage. Ten seconds later, a storm of obsidian swords materialized in the air around him. He picked out the four swords that were a danger, turned them aside with precise taps on the flat of their
blades with the butt of his sniper rifle. Ten seconds later a mutant ice-breathing tiger flickered into existence in mid-pounce. He rolled out of its way, opted to neutralize it by kicking dust in its eyes, freeing up his hands to take a shot at his target. A clean shot. One point four miles. One ricochet off a wall, a second ricochet off a cobblestone on the street, striking Ekwensu in the heart. Death in less than a minute. Not fast enough. The ten seconds were up. Ekwensu's power restored his body to pristine condition and granted him a new form of attack. Harbinger jumped into a tree to avoid foot-long poisoned caltrops spearing from the ground under his feet.

Ekwensu's attacks were always powerful but their true danger was their unpredictability. Harbinger's own perceptual power was strongest when he had time to collect data on his targets, to get a feel for their numbers, for the margins of error, until he became able to dodge their attacks by mere millimeters if that was what it took to approach and land a fatal blow. That was impossible against Ekwensu, whose faint tracings of mathematical notation disconcertingly reset every ten seconds as he drew new powers from his endless bag of tricks.

But over the years he had learned that the numbers weren't everything. And so he saw it. Not something the numbers told him directly but a pattern he saw through his own skill at reading them. A commonality between the equations. He charted the range of his target's powers, the probabilities of the many futures he might face, the paths to futures where his opponent would be vulnerable. He saw it now. A path to neutralize his opponent with high probability, albeit with some degree of...unavoidable self-sacrifice.

I have you.

<<

All he needed to do was hold out for one more minute, find a way to hold on to that feeling for one moment longer before he was forced into retreat.

Jack stopped, spoke to the heroes. "The Society said they have a plan. I saw their railgun, their cape who made all the bullets hit. We can still kill him if Fletchette uses her power."

Armsmaster glanced to the Society building.

Leviathan had reached the ruins of the Society building and enveloped them in his sphere of water. The water was vibrating, breaking the remains of the building into fragments, breaking the fragments into shards, breaking the shards into dust.

Armsmaster turned back to Jack. "They're dead, or retreated. Your courage does you credit, but it's time for us to go."

Alexandria reached out to Jack, but he backed away.

"They said they have a plan!" shouted Jack. He gestured with his left hand, the one that still had fingers left, that wasn't a throbbing mass of pain. "Just wait for one more minute! You ever see his core before? This is the best chance you've ever had to kill one of these motherfuckers!"

"We don't have time for this discussion." said Alexandria. She moved forward in a blur and grabbed Jack by the elbow. An inescapable grip.

>> Can't move the crosshair, wait for it-

<<
A flash of light, then an earsplitting roar.

A massive explosion erupted from the ruins of the Society base, shattering the two city blocks around it, ripping apart Leviathan's sphere of water and sending him flying half a mile in the air.

Leviathan spun wildly in the air for long seconds, trailing his water echo behind him as he fell toward the lake he had carved in the center of the city. His flight trajectory sent him directly over ground zero of the battle. Over the cast-off cocoon of his inner flesh that still lay suspended in the air above the lake, still trapped by the two fields of frozen time.

A great dark blur struck from the sky, a deafening crack.

Jack stared. Leviathan was gone.

The cast-off shell of the Endbringer's flesh was swinging in the air, like a hammock stretched between the time fields. The shell was bulging with something trapped inside. On top, blocking the slit the Endbringer had cut in the shell to escape, was an enormous red-hot slug of metal, crumpled and half-melted.

The orbital gun.

The Society must have retargeted their gun during the battle to aim at Leviathan's prison. They hadn't been able to fire it then, the Endbringer had been surrounded by capes, but they had used the shot now to strike the Endbringer out of the air, to seal him once again inside his cast-off shell.

For a moment, everything was still.

Fletchette was the first to recover, single-minded in her determination to attack. She sent a shot through the shell of flesh to strike at the Endbringer inside. The shell writhed, the prisoner inside reacting.

A trickle of water began to flow from the hole Fletchette's shot made in the flesh. Leviathan's echo, creating new water inside his prison. He began to reform his sphere from the water of the lake.

No. If he surrounded himself in water he would escape again, much faster this time around. The Endbringer's flesh was much worse for wear after the first engagement, and the exit to the trap was blocked off by mere metal.

"Armsmaster! The thorns!" shouted Jack.

Jack turned to Alexandria, tugged at the arm she was gripping. "I can stop him, I can keep him inside! Go for the railgun!"

Alexandria looked to Armsmaster. Armsmaster nodded and unslung his halberd. "Right. We'll keep up our attack, keep him on the defensive."

Alexandria let go without a word and flew to Fletchette.

This was it. The chance he had wished for. To show the beast who took his city away from him that he wasn't a toy to be played with, that even Endbringers could be brought to an end.

Jack wrapped his arm around the halberd and took aim at his prey.
Jack aimed at his target. He found a tug of war. Leviathan was forming his sphere of water, and the sphere was studded with whirlpools ready to fire. But the sphere was being distorted, chunks of it repeatedly dispersing and reforming, and the whirlpools were being disrupted. One of Eidolon's powers, a new form of aerokinesis. Enough to slow down the Endbringer but not enough to stop him.

Jack pushed the remains of his left pinky finger into the thorns. His heard himself let out a scream of pain, but it didn't matter. He let his body deal with the pain. What captured his attention now was the sheer scale of the fight. The greatest of heroes had acknowledged him as their equal, had deferred to his judgement, had trusted him to succeed against their greatest enemy. For a moment he felt as if he had left his material body behind him and become an entity that lived purely in the conflict that surrounded him, replaced his breath and pulse and brain with attack and defense and plans for victory.

Jack sent his millions of blades in a wide-angled attack around Leviathan, taking care not to hit the plug of metal that sealed him in his shell. The water within fifty feet of the Endbringer turned to vapor, surrounding him in a dense cloud of mist.

The mist moved like it was alive, reforming into tendrils that flowed in the air above the Endbringer and recondensed into water around the metal plug that sealed him in his prison, vibrating, trying to dislodge it. Then the water and vapor abruptly dispersed, blown out of the Endbringer's range by a gust of air. Eidolon's power.

Jack coughed, moved on to his ring finger. Him to turn the water to mist, Eidolon to disperse it. Their combined efforts could suppress the Endbringer until Fletchette got to her weapon, until the Society's reinforcements came with new ammunition.

Four seconds later his ring finger was a cloud of red mist. He moved on to his middle finger. They couldn't keep this up for long. Every second Jack turned the water near Leviathan to mist, but in the next second new water rushed in from the lake around him to take its place, the water's movement accelerated to be nearly instantaneous by the Endbringer's hydrokinesis.

They couldn't fight the sea, but they could still-

>> Her last traveling trunk wouldn't fit through the door. It wouldn't budge, it was stuck...floating in the air. Aww, cute. Hyakujugo finally learned to fly!
<<

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dot floating in the sky, silhouetted against the moon. Capes from the Society base, teleported miles into the air-

>> She remembered the halls of Jötunheimr, teatime with Lady Skaði, her elegant crystal tea set. She called it to her now as Venom's experiment began. The Tinker's new chemical formed and immediately dissolved the mixing vat, dissolved the containment case, dissolved the forcefield, and finally dripped down to collect safely in her crystal teacup below-
<<

They couldn't destroy the sea, but they could still contain it.
A disturbance appeared in the water, a great circle ringing Leviathan. Chunks of white crystal slowly took form and rose above the surface of the water. The Society's defensive power, now being used to create a trap. A vast bowl around the Endbringer to hold the sea at bay, to keep the water from coming inside his radius of control.

The water in Leviathan's radius churned and tendrils writhed across the surface. A hundred whirlpools formed aiming at Jack and Eidolon. More vortexes formed underwater to crack and shatter the crystal before it finished forming the bowl.

No. This was their chance to contain him, to trap him for good.

Jack plunged his entire hand into the thorns, first his middle finger, then the next, then the next, then the meat of his palm, a relentless wide-angled attack to vaporize water across the Endbringer's entire control radius. Attack. Attack. Empty the bowl until the last dregs of the Endbringer's water were turned to mist. Leave it it trapped in its prison with only its echo for sustenance.

A great cloud of mist rose around the Endbringer, the aftermath of Jack's attack. The mist began to condense around the core, thick enough that it resisted Eidolon's aerokinesis for seconds. As the last of the mist was finally dispersed, Jack saw the fruit of his efforts...

A good start, but not enough. The bowl was holding back the sea, was reducing the flow of water to less than a tenth of what it had been before, but all the same, water was rushing back inside. Over the unfinished edges of its lip, through a hundred hairline fractures and three great gouges that Leviathan's underwater vortexes had torn in the bottom of the bowl, through the holes in the Endbringer's prison where his echo was pouring out. Leviathan was forming the water into buzzsaws to cut through his prison of flesh, into grasping tentacles to grapple the slug of metal above him, into vortexes to break the bowl apart, into whirlpools to attack the capes above.

Jack's allies were still fighting. The bowl was slowly repairing itself. Eidolon was pushing water out of the bowl with his aerokinesis and keeping water away from the core with a new power, some kind of hypergravity field. But they were being overwhelmed. They could only hold out for another minute-

>> Fuck that. Behemoth was here, less than a thousand kilometers away in Hyderabad, practically next door. Mom and Dad were coming halfway across the world to personally honor their treaty and join the fight, and they seriously expected him to follow orders and sit tight and listen over the coms as they threw themselves into the meat grinder?
<<

-and one minute might be enough. Jack caught sight of a spark of light on the horizon moving at high speed over the bay. A massive aircraft, the Society's reinforcements, ammunition for Fletchette to deal the deathblow.

Something moved above Leviathan.

The metal slug that sealed him in his prison was shifting, tilting in place. Leviathan was breaking free.

A hundred holes opened in the sides of the slug and spouted tendrils of water. Channels that Leviathan had carved into the metal with water from his echo, water he had created inside his prison. The tendrils grappled the slug, exerting force from all angles and directions.

The slug wobbled, then lifted up out of the shell of flesh and fell to the side. Leviathan's core shot
up into the air like a bullet, surrounded by sphere of water five feet thick.

Eidolon's forcefield flickered into existence above Leviathan, a violet octagon blocking his path. Leviathan rebounded off the forcefield and began to fall, using his water to control his descent, gliding away from the bowl and moving toward the water of the lake. Eidolon shifted his hypergravity field onto Leviathan. It disrupted Leviathan's fine control over the water around him, slowed down his glide through the air, but had no effect on the core. Eidolon switched approaches and simply slammed his forcefield straight down, dispersing Leviathan's water and pressing him back into his prison of cast off flesh.

Leviathan wouldn't stay trapped for long. Water was still rushing into the bowl through the cracks and gouges in its walls, and as the water entered Leviathan's range it formed dozens of whirlpools ready to attack. Eidolon gestured and used aerokinesis to disperse the whirlpools.

Seconds later, twice as many whirlpools formed. Eidolon disrupted the ones aimed at him, at Jack, and at another target that must have been Fletchette. The rest of the whirlpools spun up and fired, shooting twelve beams of water into the city. A building collapsed by Jack's side, the last one that would have been close enough for Armsmaster to grapple to in an emergency. The Society's jet, the spark in the sky, spun wildly and went out of control. Their last chance of victory had been shot-

>> "Keep driving. I'll boost you. Just think of it as a controlled descent-"
<<

Their last chance of victory was still alive as long as the Society capes survived. He needed to focus, to make sure his allies kept Leviathan locked down long enough for Fletchette to begin her counterattack.

The water around Leviathan rippled, forming another set of whirlpools. Twice again as many as last time, too many for Eidolon to handle with his aerokinesis. The violet forcefield that was trapping the Endbringer flickered, as Eidolon prepared to return it to his side to defend himself-

>> Eidolon's homing mass-annihilation bursts pummeled the Simurgh, striking home where the attacks of a dozen other heroes failed. He knew he could do better than this. He had a matter-distortion power that would amplify the bursts tenfold, and he was nearly certain it would answer his call. But to get that power he would have to give up the intangibility that protected him from the Simurgh's telekinesis, or the electromagnetic interference field that was disabling the minions of the Master 8 cyborg Tinker the Simurgh had driven mad.

He could do it...but he would have to trust the other heroes to protect him, even ask them to protect him. To admit his weakness to the world. And that was a line he could never allow himself to cross.

He wasn't a vain man. He didn't want to be praised or worshipped. He didn't want to be the great one, the most powerful hero in the world short of Scion. But that didn't change the fact that he was the strongest hero, and everyone knew it. To see him begging for help would be a fatal blow to morale. And if the heroes he trusted failed to protect him, if he lost his life, humanity would lose its best chance of killing the Endbringers-
<<

"I've got this!" Jack shouted. "All powerful hero, trust the rest of us to protect you for once in your fucking life! Nail the fucker down and make it his coffin!"
An act of desperation, not even a coherent argument. He couldn't do any better, he barely knew the man. But he didn't need to convince him. He just needed to make him hesitate, stay the course, buy a few seconds of time. Eidolon's forcefield held the Endbringer in his prison for a moment longer.

Jack swallowed, then gave evidence to back up his words. He stretched his left arm along the halberd and fed his body to the thorns. The back of his hand, then his wrist, then the flesh and bone of his arm, using the contact to vaporize the water around the Endbringer again and again and again.

There was a piercing sound in his ears. Someone screaming. His own screams, maybe. His left arm was gone halfway up to the elbow, leaking blood. He reached out with the remains of his right arm. He would last another thirty seconds at most. Had to make it count.

A faint clap of displaced air behind him. One of the Society's reinforcements. A young man spoke with an odd tone in his voice, a forced cheer that didn't fit the situation. "Railgun's coming! Got power boosts for you here, perception and healing."

As Jack moved his right arm toward the gray blur of the thorns, his vision began to cloud with fine dust, motes floating in the air. No, not dust. The dust was moving, motes condensing to form lines, lines arranging to form patterns, thin tracery overlaying everything in his vision. The lines traced out paths of motion. Precise trajectories in three dimensional space, showing him how every piece of every object had moved, was moving, would move in the next instant of time. The ripples on the surface of the water, the slow destruction and regrowth of the Society's crystal bowl, the distortions of those trajectories as they were altered by Eidolon's aerokinesis and hypergravity field. Jack had thought Eidolon's powers came with fine control, but his new vision revealed that they were crude, coarse, their apparent precision coming purely from Eidolon's skill as their wielder.

And above all else Jack saw the tens of thousands of trajectories of the water in Leviathan's range, as the Endbringer used the water to form attacks and defenses, tendrils and buzzsaws and whirlpools and vortexes. Leviathan's movements were precise, measured, striking at weak points, directed to a hundred goals at once without a moment of wasted effort.

Leviathan must see the world like this, he realized. But now he would meet the Endbringer on his own terms.

Jack touched his right hand to the nanothorns and a brilliant flood of lines poured forth. The points of contact he had sensed through his power, now visible before his eyes with crystal clarity. He directed the lines toward the Endbringer's water, splitting them into groups to hit the most important targets. Sending his blades to vaporize the whirlpools, the vortexes, the buzzsaws cutting Leviathan out of his flesh. His strikes were efficient now, paying only a fraction of the cost in flesh to achieve double the effect.

A new set lines appeared in his vision, forming another layer on top of the first. Threads connecting pairs of objects. Showing how their movements were coupled, how attacks against one weak point could serve a double purpose and destabilize another. Jack struck at vortexes so as to make the resulting bursts of vapor destabilize whirlpools, struck at whirlpools so as to place their vapor in the path of Eidolon's wind gusts.

A third layer of lines appeared, then a fourth, then a fifth, then a cascade of layers upon layers that warped and merged with each other to form words in a flowing script. Symbols in a language he didn't recognize, one with the taste of numbers, of mathematical notation. Equations governing the motion of hundreds of elements at once. Jack spent a sliver of flesh to project his blades in fifty two pencil-thin beams, striking eleven whirlpools in the precise places and at the precise times to destabilize them and turn them into calm ripples of water.
"Healing next. You'll be a bit of a monster but you don't look like you'll mind."

Jack felt someone behind him slice off the back of his rain poncho, jacket, and shirt, exposing his back to the air. Then something pricked his neck, and his flesh *writhe*d. His new perception told him that his flesh was moving in impossible vectors, transforming. His back dissolved into a great mass of tendrils that practically *leaped* out to latch onto a package the man held behind him, biting deeply into the thick chunk of biomass and greedily drinking it in to make it his own. A disorienting *twist* in his gut and he blacked out.

Jack opened his eyes. The scene was the same. He had been out for less than three seconds. And the pain was gone. Not merely treated but entirely *removed*, as if his neural connections for sensing pain had been dissolved, recycled, put to another purpose. He opened his eyes, *more* of his pairs of eyes, and his surroundings snapped into focus in hyper resolution. A heightened sense of depth that would have been disorienting without his new perceptions. He flexed his hands, saw that he *had* hands again, great dark paws that were halfway between an ape's fists and the claws of an insect. Two hands in front, more hands on the arms sprouting from his back like a spider's legs.

He turned to the capes behind him. Two Society capes in flight suits, Armsmaster staring at him with alarm. He tried to speak and found his mouth slipping over the words, voice a buzzing drone. "I-, I-, w-what did y-you, w-what am-

Armsmaster put a hand on Jack's shoulder and turned him around. Forced him to look at Leviathan. "Focus! Get rid of the water, hurry!"

Jack hissed in frustration, a sound like a cicada's cry. Stupid, he had let himself get distracted. He had more important things to worry about. In the time he had blacked out the bowl around Leviathan had filled nearly a third of the way with water, fifty three whirlpools forming on the surface, twenty two vortexes underwater opening more cracks in the bowl with each passing second. He read the equations blooming around the mass of water, around Leviathan's hundred simultaneous maneuvers, and touched a claw to the thorns.

At the cost of a mere sliver of flesh Jack sent narrow beams of nanothorns to cut apart Leviathan's constructs, sending them just deep enough to pierce the whirlpools and vortexes without chipping the crystal surface of the bowl. He felt his new body react to the damage, flesh immediately knitting to staunch the blood loss and seal the ragged edge of the wound.

More water constructs immediately formed in place of the ones he dispersed. Ah. Leviathan's ability to build constructs grew superlinearly with the amount of water around him. More water gave his constructs redundancy and resistance to attack. Best to use brute force to get a clean slate.

Jack spent five inches of his arm to turn Leviathan's entire supply of water into mist, doing it by sending a single wide beam sweeping in a counterclockwise pattern over the water that neatly sent the resulting vapor into the path of Eidolon's aerokinetic wind, dispersing it immediately. Now that the bowl was cleared he could focus on the flow of new water coming in through gouges and hairline cracks in the sides of the bowl, high-pressure streams of water spouting into the air and coming alive as they entered Leviathan's radius of control. Eidolon stretched his hypergravity field to overlap the bottom of the bowl, robbing the waterspouts of their force, and Jack projected his blades in beams precisely targeted to turn the spouts to mist.

For one minute and thirty seconds Jack held the water at bay, spending only the flesh of a single arm to project his thorns. With each second he and Eidolon suppressed Leviathan's attacks the Society's bowl repaired more of its gouges and cracks, gradually reducing the oncoming rush of water to a mere river, then to a trickle.
The young man's voice came from behind him. "Railgun's almost ready. Buy us a minute, I need to boost our Vishpala. Hope you don't die. Use your arms, you've got eight of them." He spoke to someone beside him. "Port us."

A clap of air and two layers of his new perception faded away, the notation and the threads disappearing. All that was left was the first layer of perception, the faint lines tracing out each object's paths of motion. The Society cape's perception-boosting power must fade with distance.

Jack smiled anyway, a movement that twisted his new mouth into an unfamiliar shape. Almost there.

He was less efficient now, had to pay more dearly for each second of suppressing Leviathan. Twenty seconds at the cost of another arm. Another twenty seconds at the cost of another. And then-

His perception warned him an instant before it happened, the motion paths around Leviathan's prison shifting in unison.

With a wet ripping sound, a slit opened in the bottom of the cast-off shell of flesh. Leviathan had used the water he created in his prison to cut himself an exit.

Leviathan's core fell free.

With each foot Leviathan's core fell through the air, his radius of control shifted to overlap another foot of water in the lake underneath the great crystal bowl. The bowl immediately began to crack and buckle. Leviathan sent high-pressure waves into cracks and fissures, formed vortexes chipping away at the crystal surface, exerted immense upward force across the entire bottom of the bowl to lift it upward by inches, bringing that much more of the lake under his control. The trickle of water coming in through the cracks became a river.

Jack spent four inches of a claw to vaporise the water Leviathan brought with him when he fell free from his prison, to vaporize the first pulse of water rushing into the bowl.

Eidolon shifted his forcefield under Leviathan to arrest his fall, then lifted the forcefield straight up to carry Leviathan into the air, away from the lake. Leviathan's core gushed water and used it to maneuver, sending himself skidding toward the edge of the forcefield. Jack vaporized the new water immediately and Eidolon grappled the Endbringer with aerokinesis. Their combined efforts delayed the Endbringer for three seconds before he shot over the edge of the forcefield and resumed his fall. Eidolon's forcefield flickered and reappeared under Leviathan again, buying another three seconds before the Endbringer overcame the obstacle.

The lines in Jack's vision abruptly disappeared. Jack was back to his original senses now, or the modified senses of his insect form. He would need to burn through his flesh faster now, inches every second to suppress Leviathan's water echo and the water rushing into the bowl. But he smiled, because it meant-

>> "In my range there are three two two six motor vehicles. In my range there are six five moving motor vehicles. The moving vehicles are ten trucks and six marked police cars and two unmarked police cars and."

He closed his eyes, tried to block her out. Her quiet, emotionless voice reporting the numbers. It was her game. One of the games Mom taught her to keep her sane, to keep her power under control. After five days hidden in a basement, it was getting old.
"There are five five seven hospital patients, in my range. Four eight with tuberculosis. Four five are alive. Three are dead. The alive ones taste bad. The dead ones taste very bad. Not nutritious. They were sick for a long time."

"I don't care whether some schmucks with tuberculosis are alive or not," he said. "I care about Mom and Dad. I care about you. You have to face the facts."

"They are alive."

"They didn't make it out in time. You saw it. They're gone."

"No. They are alive. They will come back. They will always come back." She managed her best imitation of a smile. "Trust your big sister. I have superpowers."

"Work on your flexibility." he said. Make it sound like a lesson, and she would listen. "A what if. What if they don't come back."

She frowned. "That won't happen."

"If they don't come back," he said. "Then we find the one who killed them, and we make sure he doesn't come back either. Got it?"

Her frown deepend. "That won't-"

-it meant the Society cape was giving his full attention to Fletchette. Ready to fire.

Leviathan pushed himself over the the edge of the forcefield again, then gushed water behind him to vault off of the bottom of the forcefield and send himself flying at high speed down to the bowl below. As Leviathan flew downward he gained more control over the water underneath the bowl. The surface of the bowl cracked in a hundred places, and Leviathan drew water through the cracks to form a pool of water five feet deep, to pull tendrils of water into the air toward his body.

It was Leviathan's last chance to escape before Fletchette began her attack. If Leviathan touched the tendrils he could escape in seconds, pulling himself down into the pool and then using the water there to accelerate himself out of the bowl, sink himself in the water of the lake.

No. Not a chance. Not when they were so close to victory.

Jack pushed his fifth arm into the thorns and turned all of the water into the bowl to vapor. Leviathan landed on the bare crystal surface of the bowl, tried to draw new water to himself through the cracks.

A gray blur flew from above and impaled Leviathan. Fletchette's first attack. A five foot spear of metal that pierced through his core and halfway into the crystal below, fusing him to the crystal to hold him in place.

Leviathan immediately broke free. The piece of crystal that the spear had touched had vanished. Fletchette's spears couldn't fuse with the crystal, their physics-breaking effects disrupting whatever power was sustaining the crystal's existence.

But more spears were already in flight, embedding themselves into the crystal around Leviathan with simple physical force. A dozen spears surrounded Leviathan, the bars of a prison.

Leviathan gushed water, propelled himself upward, above the bars. Eidolon's forcefield flickered
into existence above him, forming a ceiling, trapping him inside. Jack's blades and Eidolon's aerokinesis dispersed Leviathan's water echo an instant after it formed, dispersed the new water he was drawing into the bowl.

More gray blurs came from above, now attacking Leviathan in earnest. Fletchette's shots were being enhanced by the Society capes. Perceptual enhancement to choose the targets, space-warping to make them strike home. Her shots twisted in impossible trajectories to strike Leviathan through the bars, each shot embedding the full length of a spear into his body, chewing vast chunks out of his core with each passing second.

Leviathan was desperate now, moving inside its prison in a blur, using his brief instants of contact with his water echo to maneuver and evade. He was managing to evade nearly half of Fletchette's shots despite their space-warping trajectories, but the other half struck home.

Leviathan changed tactics, used his control over the water below the bowl to push the water down and away to all sides. The bowl instantly sank fifty feet into the lake. The lip of the bowl was now far below the lake's surface. Water poured in from all sides.

Jack practically threw his sixth arm into the thorns, using the brief contact to vaporize the tons of water rushing in toward Leviathan. Three more seconds, six more bites taken out of his core.

"Almost there! Come on!" Armsmaster's voice behind him.

His seventh arm. His core was reduced to less than a third of its original size.

His eighth arm, his last. His core was less than a sixth of its original size, practically a sliver.

Jack leaned back against Armsmaster, hopped, kicked out to push one of his legs into the thorns. He slipped and fell. Couldn't make it.

Water flooded into the bowl and touched the last fragment of Leviathan's core.

Leviathan moved so fast he seemed to teleport. One jump out of the prison of metal spears, his body so small now that he could slip between the bars. One jump around Eidolon's forcefield that moved to obstruct him. A third jump, using the water around him to launch himself out of the bowl so fast that he shot into the air, moving toward the bay at lightning speed. Already drawing water from the lake towards himself, a score of outstretched tentacles, any one of them giving him a path to instantly slip beneath the waves.

The stream of spears followed Leviathan, twisting in the air to pierce him from all directions. Eidolon lashed out with all three of his powers, using hypergravity and aerokinesis to push Leviathan's water away from him, flickering his forcefield underneath Leviathan to lift him in the air, to pull him away from the lake. Buying another two seconds for the spears to do their work. A black blur flew alongside the spears. Alexandria, leaving her position by Fletchette to join the fight.

A vast mass of water flowed from the lake and rose toward Leviathan, overwhelming Eidolon's powers. The surface of the lake rippled and turned to crystal, interrupting the flow. Armsmaster lowered his halberd and Jack kicked, feeding the thorns the lower half of his right leg, using the moment of contact to turn Leviathan's mass of water into a great cloud of mist.

Another spear pierced Leviathan and his core split in two. Water gushed from the split and propelled the two halves in opposite directions, tumbling off opposite sides of Eidolon's forcefield. Eidolon shifted his forcefield to catch one, Alexandria caught the other. They lifted their fragments
of Leviathan into the sky, pulling them away from the lake, away from any water they could control.

The fragment of Leviathan held by Eidolon's forcefield spewed water, pushed itself over the edge of the forcefield and down toward the lake. A stream of Fletchette's spears struck the fragment as it fell, pierced it over and over and over again until nothing remained.

Alexandria was struggling with the last sliver of Leviathan. It was spitting a high-pressure stream of water into her nose and mouth, suffocating her, using hydrokinesis to pull her down from the sky. Jack kicked his left foot into the thorns and sent his blades to disperse the water, trusting Alexandria's invulnerability to protect her. The water turned to mist. Alexandria's costume was atomized but she was unharmed.

Leviathan flared with a bright blue light. A new power. A last, desperate defense.

Alexandria threw the last piece of Leviathan three hundred feet in the air. Seconds later it was pierced by a dozen spears from all angles.

Leviathan exploded into a shower of sparks, filling the air throughout the bay with thousands of dancing blue motes of light.

The stream of spears kept up its pressure, each spear's trajectory swerving to hit hundreds of sparks. Catching them before they touched the water, canceling whatever effect they were meant to create.

But it didn't matter.

The sparks slowly lost their glow. Lights winking out, one by one. Then they all went dark.

All that was left was the pale glow of the moonlight.

Leviathan was dead.

...

There was a long moment of silence before anyone reacted.

Jack panted for breath. He rolled onto his side, managed to raise himself up to a sitting position with the stubs of his arms. He was shaking. Not from exhaustion, not from blood loss or any other physical wound. He was shaking from the overwhelming tension that had grown within him during the last, desperate thirty minutes of battle. Always on the edge of victory, always on the edge of defeat, until they lived and breathed their endless series of attacks, counterattacks, tactics, counter tactics. Exactly what the Endbringer wanted, exactly the game he wanted to play with the humans he thought were mere insects he could crush at will. Until today, when the Endbringer was finally ended by an insect's sting.

And then...his tension was gone, and there wasn't anything else he could do.

Jack laughed and laughed and laughed.

His voice sounded wrong, like an insect's buzz. An effect of the transformation that gave him a second wind. It didn't matter. They won.

"Yes! Hell yes!" shouted Armsgater. "That's what you get, you son of a bitch! We fucking killed you! You're dead! You're gone! You're dust!"
Jack redoubled his laughter. Uncharacteristic emotion from the man. And he managed to be so inarticulate in his celebration that it was comical. The end of an Endbringer was the greatest victory humanity had ever achieved. If you were going to eulogize the occasion with words, you had better pick good ones. But Armsmaster didn't know how to gloat properly. He hadn't had any practice. He had probably lived his life as a stoic, an ascetic, convincing himself that he prized utility and efficiency above all. Now, faced with the greatest victory any hero could hope to achieve, he had no idea how to react and his true self shone through his facade.

It was perfect, really. If your message is big enough, important enough, then you can make people act in ways they never imagined. And the message he and his allies had sent today was the greatest message of all. The message the people of the world had been denied for decades, the message they still desperately longed for, hoped for, wanted to believe with all their hearts.

*A world where the heroes can win.*

Jack watched Armsmaster's impromptu dance of joy and grinned. Maybe there was something to being a hero in the system, after all.

There was movement in the lake, under the spot where Leviathan had died. The crystal that had formed above the lake was being replaced by a floating island. The island's surface was thick with a fantastical forest, trees bearing fruit in strange shapes and sizes that glowed in all colors of the rainbow. And at the center of the island was a great slab of stone, rising forty feet into the air. It was...

Jack laughed once again. A tombstone. A grave for the Endbringer. At least some of the Society capes knew proper symbolism. As he watched, words etched themselves into the slab.


Maybe there was something to being a certain class of villain, as well. If it meant having single-minded determination to defeat the true abominations like the Endbringers, spending decades learning about their abilities if that was what it took to mastermind plans to trap and kill them for good.

Jack looked for Fletchette, the keystone of their victory. He found her atop the Medhall building in front of the shimmering air of the railgun, supported in Alexandria's arms. Half a dozen capes in Society armor stood nearby, occupied with varying degrees of celebration. A nearby roof held the crashed wreck of the Society's massive tinkertech jet, shot down by Leviathan's water beams during the battle.

Above them in the air, Eidolon floated alone. Staring at the coastline, at the place where Leviathan was killed. The strongest hero, contemplating the first true victory against his greatest enemies.

>> "They're calling the beast Behemoth." said Eidolon. "A creature created by God, so fearsome that only God himself can defeat it. And I...I'm strong, but I never claimed to be God. What if it comes back? I was close, I was dealing real damage near the end, but my power didn't give me what I needed. Use your power, Contessa. Tell me what I need to do to kill the beast."

"My power doesn't give me answers concerning you, Eidolon. You know this."

"Then model the scenario: victory against the beast. Tell me how *anyone* would do it."

Contessa studied him for a long minute. Not only modeling the scenario he requested,
he knew. Modeling him, using her power to decide what to tell him to get the reaction she wanted. An unavoidable consequence of her power. At length she spoke.

"Eidolon, you're our best hope. We can't afford to lose you. You know this Behemoth is not our true enemy. Until we can make more parahumans with powers like yours, we'll need to ask you to preserve yourself when fighting them."

"You can't see a path to victory, then? Or the path is uncertain, so-" He stopped, caught the hidden meaning in her words. "Them? Plural? There's more than one?"

"I know very little about them. I had hoped they wouldn't appear. Now that one has made an appearance, I will tell you what I can."

He felt his heart sink. Cauldron was hiding critical information from him once again, information that cost lives. "You knew a beast like that might come and you didn't tell us?"

"My power doesn't give me answers concerning them. That's why we need you to be cautious. I can't see whether they can be defeated, or whether they have measures in place in case of defeat-"

No. Wait. That wasn't why Eidolon was staring.

There was a faint blue glow in the air above the bay. A thousand blue ripples, slowly expanding, one where each of Leviathan's blue sparks had winked out and died. Within each ripple was a window, and within each window was a small, shining yellow light. A view of a foreign sun seen from deep beneath the ocean, its light refracted by miles of seawater.

The ripples were expanding now, faster and faster, joining together to create a single window stretching from horizon to horizon, stretching from sea level to far above the clouds.

Then the window shimmered. The window became a door. The water on the other side began to flow...

A final act of spite.

In his dying moments, Leviathan had opened a doorway to his well. To the well he drew from to create his water echoes, deep enough to pour out water equal to the size of his nine ton body for every moment of the fifteen years he had been on Earth.

A solid wall of water, miles long, miles wide, and miles high, rushed into Brockton Bay.

Jack had time to make a faint sound in his throat, to hear Armsmaster swearing and shouting something into his visor.

Then the wall of water reached him, and everything went black.

...
When he woke, it was light again.
Jacob Hebert opened his eyes.

He was laying on a bed, in a room with sterile white walls. Cold white fluorescent lights. White-painted shelves filled with strange equipment. Heavy, humid air, no windows to give a breeze. A laboratory, or a hospital.

He blinked. Or tried to blink. His eyelids refused to move. His vision was strange, blurred, with something like double vision. Only more than double. Every object seemed to have a hundred semitransparent duplicates hovering overlaid on top of it.

He shook his head, tried to blink again and focus. A shape came to his side. A woman?

"Hi! Welcome back, Jack Slash!" she said. "How do you feel?"

He shook his head again, tried to speak. "Bzztzzz."

She giggled. "Feel like a bug, huh. No wonder. Their transformation didn't wear off all the way. Whoever made that drug knew a lot more about spider bodies than human bodies. That's what saved your life, though."

Jack tried to speak again. Slowly this time, trying to move his unfamiliar mouthparts. "You...you're gzzzzzt. You're G-good. G-good G-girl."

"Right! Great! You remember!" said Good Girl. "I was afraid the concussion and the semi-detransformation scrambled your brain, but you were stable so we let you sleep it off for 48 hours while we handled the critical cases. Triage, you know. We're in a hospital in New York, if you're curious. Now that you're up we'll get you healed right back to normal. Semi-quasi-normal."

Jack tried to reach up to feel his face, found he didn't have any arms to do it with. Still gone, then. His vision was getting better now, he could almost make out her face.

"Did w-we. W-we wonzzzzt? He'szzzzst dead?"

Good Girl beamed. "Yes! You did it! You defeated the evil Leviathan forever!"

Jack let himself relax, let his head fall back on his pillow. He let out a deep sigh.

Good Girl put her hand on Jack's shoulder. "You're one of the greatest superheroes ever, now. Everyone's talking about your video. You used Armsmaster's nanothorns to cut up Leviathan's body and his water." She leaned forward and looked him in the eyes. "My power told me exactly how much it was hurting you. That was pain level ten out of ten on the NRS-11 scale. Less than ten percent of people could've even stayed conscious, did you know that? I mean, there's no way I could've kept going, not without my implants. But you still sacrificed your own body again and again to beat Leviathan. That's the mark of a true hero! You're so amazing, Jack Slash!"

Jack laughed, a sound half-human and half an insect's buzz. He was a true hero. It was official now.

He had meant to remain a mystery. A force of nature that stalked the night, whose heroic nature could only be guessed at from its choice of victims. An oubilette that swallowed up villains without leaving a trace behind.
Instead he had become the very epitome of a flashy public hero, making a self-sacrificing gesture to defeat a wicked foe. Ah, Armsmaster must have had a video camera installed in his power armor. The man **would**, probably to record his performance in battle and obsessively check it for flaws. Armsmaster would have released the video to show off his contribution to the fight. Maybe to show off his 'mentoring' of a rookie cape, too, to show how they combined their powers to defeat Leviathan.

The reason didn't matter, though. Jack had sent his message through his actions, and he didn't need a video with clever editing to show it off. His message would shine through.

*A world where the heroes can win.*

---

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

You are currently logged in, CapeJunkie112358

You are viewing:
* Message board navigator.
* Top 12 topics.

You have zero infractions and zero warnings.

Boards > Threats > S-Class Threats

- Stickied Topic: The Endbringers, Thread XXXIV
- Stickied Topic: Society Discussion, Thread XXVI
- Stickied Topic: Nilbog, Thread XI

- Topic: ENDBRINGER DOWN!
- Topic: Deathflood
- Topic: Weaver's Video
- Topic: The Girl Who Killed An Endbringer
- Topic: At what cost victory? In memoriam
- Topic: Leviathan is dead.
- Topic: Protectorate and Society - possible alliance?
- Topic: Next up: destroying Behemoth and Simurgh in ten easy steps
- Topic: Heroes of Brockton Bay

You are now viewing Topic: Heroes of Brockton Bay

* Thread OP is displayed.
* Ten posts per page.

- **Topic: Heroes of Brockton Bay**

  In: Boards > Threats > S-Class Threats

  **GlasgowGrin** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (Brockton Bay Refugee)

  Posted on May 17, 2011:

  We've all seen the video. We know the key players who ended the Endbringer. The Protectorate heroes, Eidolon and Alexandria serving with special distinction. The Society finally putting their anti-Endbringer superweapons to good use. The newcomer hero Fletchette, the only cape to damage the Endbringer's central core.

  That's all good, but what about the local capes? **Panacea** helped heal Fletchette after she was hit by lightning. **Shielder** and **Vista** protected Fletchette from Leviathan's lightning storm. **Shadow**
Stalker used the Society's time-distortion weapon to freeze Leviathan in place to make him a sitting duck for the other capes. Armsmaster brought out a new halberd that skinned Leviathan like a grape and turned his massive waves into harmless gusts of water vapor. Jack Slash, a total unknown until today, disintegrated his own body, piece by piece to cut Leviathan with the halberd from a mile away, then did it again after the Society's 'healer' turned him into a monster (link, not for the faint of heart). A local boy who showed his colors as a true hero, through and through!

Yes, Leviathan's fatal mistake was attacking our hometown of Brockton Bay! Amidst the tragedies we've suffered, let's take a minute to give our appreciation to our local heroes who turned the tide of battle!

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- **The_Easy_Winner**
  Jack Slash is a total badass. The dude was screaming in pain and couldn't stand on his own and he just gets his other arm ready to do it all again. Crazy badass mother****er.

- **Yael Schmitz (Cape Parent)**
  My heart leapt into my throat when I watched that video. Jack Slash, Armsmaster, and the other defenders of Brockton Bay made so many sacrifices and gave everything they had. They deserved to beat Leviathan. Deserving it had never been enough before, but on May 15 they proved it can be done. May 15 will forever be V-L day, the day the human spirit won against the abominations and made the world safer for all of us.

  I'm worried about my kids, though. Todd and Tara (not their real names) are begging to see the video. I want them to see it because its a great example of heroism and they need to see it to give them hope that we can win this war. If they have to fight an Endbringer someday they need to know they can win. But its so gruesome. People being torn apart - even the leaders of the Protectorate! Tara has action figures of half the downed capes! People tearing themselves apart - its heroic but I don't want my kids imitating that! They're not even old enough to see R-rated movies. Is there a censored version for kids?

- **Orestia_Wright (Brockton Bay Refugee)**
  @Lord Wilhelm III: Yeah, Armsmaster and Jack were great. But Shadow Stalker? I get it, she wanted to hurt the Endbringer, but she should have KNOWN she was being the patsy for a crazy society plan. Trap LEVIATHAN inside our city? That's a guaranteed LOSS on any other day. He'll use his waves to destroy our city in half an hour. Hell, he DID destroy our city in half an hour! ****, society says they wont use WMDs against our city and then they turn around and trap an ENDBRINGER inside? Endbringers ARE ****ing WMDs! We lost EVERYTHING. Are they going to chip in to our DRA Section 5.13 compensation fund now? Hell no. The only reason why you aren't calling for Shadow Stalker and society's heads on a platter is their ridiculously insane luck in killing the Endbringer.

- **Lord Wilhelm III**
  @Orestia_Wright: I understand that you're undergoing a great deal of frustration and loss and I don't want to overrule your experience as a former Brockton Bay resident. Nevertheless you have to admit that Shadow Stalker was instrumental in our victory. Without her ability to phase the Society's weapons into Leviathan's body the capes would never have been able to deal a tenth of the damage they did and reveal his true powers and weaknesses. Can't we set hypothetical scenarios aside and agree that her actions turned out for the best? Yes, the fallout of our victory was immense for Brockton Bay, Boston, Providence, New York, et cetera., but most will agree that this one very bad day will be worth it for the the countless bad days the rest of the world will be
Now for a more important topic: shipping! Jack Slash and Shadow Stalker. The two young Brockton Bay locals who dealt major blows to Leviathan. We can infer from their apparent ages that they go to school together. They could be high school sweethearts! If not, then killing an Endbringer makes for an excellent first date. Fertile ground for a blossoming romance!

That's assuming they survived, of course. Damnation, why is the PRT dragging their feet on the list of survivors and deceased? I don't want to get invested in the ship and then find out next week that one of them died in the Deathflood.

- **Atrocity Avenger** (Veteran Member)
  @GlasgowGrin and everyone else: What about the villains? You left out the most important local cape, Bakuda. The cape who made the time bombs that trapped Leviathan! Her bombs were specifically noted in the Society's video as one of their citizen's contributions so I can only conclude that you failed to list her out of irrational hatred or willful ignorance. Admit it! A cape from your hometown chose the Society over your precious PRT and she was the most important for our victory!

Bakuda's not the only one. Those glowing yellow suns at the start of the fight looked like a power I saw in a cell phone video of a villain team in Maine. The Wanderers? I think the cape's name was Solardancer? Sounds like Weaver recruited an entire team of villains right out from under the noses of the PRT!

There are like a kazillion other powers on the Society's video they didn't label. Who else do you think are local recruits? Anyone want to make a list?

- **Besigue**
  @Orestia_Wright, Lord Wilhelm III: Yup, freezing Leviathan was a risky plan but it worked out for the best. Really sorry about your city, Orestia, but the rest of us are sleeping well tonight knowing Leviathan is dead and gone.

  @Atrocity Avenger: The time freezing bombs were probably Bakuda's BUT what makes you think Bakuda is a 'citizen' of theirs as they claim? The Society used her bombs but she never made an appearance herself. Hell, the PRT’s coroner verified her death weeks ago. The Society probably confiscated her bombs from the PRT evidence lockers while everyone was distracted by Leviathan.

If Bakuda was alive do you think Weaver would give 'citizenship' to a ticking time bomb like her? No way. There's a reason her gang of murderers survived all these years. They don't recruit nutcases like her, they ENSLAVE them. Weaver probably locked Bakuda in a sweatshop in Nairobi with bugs in her intestines to kill her if she tries to escape. They give her one sip of water every time she makes a bomb. Or they're using mind control. Hell, did you see what their crazy biotinker machine did to Jack Slash? Turned him into a goddamn spider! Weaver probably turned Bakuda into a spider woman and made her part of her swarm. Creepy as hell.

- **CapeJunkie112358** (Veteran Member)
  @Yael Schmitz: The Society made a less hardcore version of their video for young adults ([link](#)). It's what they're showing on the news.

  @Lord Wilhelm III: Agree 110%. Jack Slash x Shadow Stalker OTP. I love badass battle couples. 8-]

  @Atrocity Avenger: Right on. The Society has lots of killers but they're pointing their killers in the
right direction. They pulled off a big win-win that's good for everyone. Got heavy hitting mother****ers like Shatterbird and Bakuda to stop killing people (win) and kill Endbringers instead (big win).

Correction on the yellow sparks tho. You're thinking of Sundancer from the Travelers but the PRT public info and eyewitness accounts say she only makes one sun at a time. The Society had three sparks. Doubtful it's her. Looks more like Sparklamp's power to me.

Other Society powers? Their wall was ***ing amazing, they stopped Leviathan's waves by walling off the bay in five minutes! The only cape in the public database who can do it is Ziggurat (aka Tông Líng Tǎ)...but that would mean the Society made an alliance with the Yangban? Oh s***!

@Orestia_Wright: Sucks for you Brocktonites but look at the big picture. Leviathan killed tens of millions of people. Now your kids will grow up without that threat hanging over their heads, all thanks to the Protectorate and the Society. Don't disrespect the capes who risked their lives to save you by blaming them for the giant ****ing sea monster flooding your city as his last **** you to humanity. The capes aren't the ones who flooded your city, the giant ****ing sea monster did it!

@Besigue: Yeah, if you believe the PRT docs, but the scholarly consensus says Weaver's telling the truth about only recruiting volunteers. Think about it. Bakuda makes bombs. If she woke up from mind control for ten seconds she could press a button and blow up their whole ****ing country. Highly doubtful she's a prisoner. Nah, Bakuda's in Nigeria somewhere having a Tinkergasm while her boss fondles her great big bombs.

- Implaceable_Mime (Veteran Member)
@Atrocity Avenger, CapeJunkie112358: Your apologetics for an S-class threat are disgusting. Today is a dark day for the world. You think it was a victory because an S-class threat was defeated? This will merely embolden the worse S-class threat while giving your spineless American politicians another excuse to allow them free reign to practice their depravity.

Every time the Endbringers fought the Society, who did more damage? Who killed more people? Remember what they did to us in Cologne. Remember El Obeid. The Society is merely another tool of the Endbringers to bring the end of the world, and the battle of Brockton Bay went exactly as they planned.

- LizardStyx (Suspended)
My big brother Lizard killed by a few piddling mortals on the East coast of that pathetic landmass called America? Beware, capes of Brockton Bay. I will show your Panaceas a thousand ills they cannot cure. I will unshield your Shielders, cover your Vistas with smog, stalk your Shadows, disarm your Armsmasters, and slash every last one of your Jackals. My retribution will be swift, for I am a hot-blooded chef of vengeance, cooking a dish best served cold.

User was infracted for this post; posts threatening heroes are not permitted. - Fafniring_About (moderator)

- Atrocity Avenger (Veteran Member)
@CapeJunkie112358: Right! Listen to this guy, he tells it how it is. And oops, you're right about Sundancer and the Travelers. Unless the Society has a power-duplicating cape? The Yangban's Zero? The Society and Yangban working together...scary!

@Besigue: That's PRT propaganda! I'm sorry to disprove your beliefs with the facts but there is NO hard evidence that the Society coerces their recruits. There are more than twenty firsthand reports from capes who Weaver tried to recruit and they all say she gave them a free choice (except for the capes who the PRT is forcing to lie about Weaver as part of their propaganda). Yeah, lots of
guys say Weaver kidnapped their girlfriends or their kids or their parents but I always ask, where's the proof? If she did kidnap them then she was probably rescuing them from families who abused them!

@Implaceable_Mime: There's so much wrong with what you just said that I don't know where to start! I'm not going to get into this again with you. Guys, don't listen to him! Just don't.

@LizardStyx: Jokes glorifying Leviathan? That's disgusting! Get out of here!

"Now let's get you healed up! First I need to, to-" Good Girl broke off her speech with a loud yawn.

Jack's eyesight was almost back to normal. Good Girl looked exhausted, dark bags under her eyes. Had she been healing survivors for two days straight without sleeping?

Her chipper attitude was a front. An elaborate front, though. Jack considered himself a student of facial expressions and Good Girl's smile seemed entirely genuine. Was that one of the modifications she made to her body, a mechanism to let her present an upbeat front to the world despite her own feelings and exhaustion?

"Oops, excuse me. Just a bit tired. So many patients, so little patience! That's what the boss says. Now, first I need to ask if you want to go back to normal. Are you sure you want to look human again, Jack? If you want to stay as a spider I can work with that too! I'll fix up your eyes and your arms, I'll even give you eight arms again instead of just the four."

Jack made a small sound in his throat. "T-thankzz but n-no thankzzzzt."

Good Girl's smile flickered. "Thought so. Well I had to ask. Medical ethics, you know! You consented to the transformation so you have to consent again for the detransformation."

>> "No, no, I can fix it!" said Good Girl. "See, Squirrelinator, your problem is that your power gives you more flexibility than strength. You do your acrobatics to dodge the bad guys, that's good, but if you get hit while you're all twisted up, then your body is in a bad shape for channeling the force and you get another bunch of broken bones. Don't worry, though, I'll fix you right up! I'll just replace your bones with superstrong metal alloy, then add a few chemical treatments to make sure all the tendons attach properly and make them compatible with your immune system."

"Uh. Replace my bones with metal? Wouldn't that hurt?"

"It's totally painless, I'll just put you in a nerve block for the surgery. Of course the alloy won't be as lightweight as bone so I'll have to replace all your muscles with stronger ones to compensate. You're always in the gym so I bet you'll love being a buff bodybuilder type hero, right? With the muscles that strong you'll accumulate wear and tear faster than normal so I'll need to give you a healing factor too. No big deal, I can probably just sprinkle a few thousand colonies of stem cells into your deep tissues and reprogram them for regeneration. Oooh, and if you're going to be a regenerator I may as well go all out and give you retractable swiss army knives for emergencies.

"Just imagine it. The villains catch you and tie you up and they think they've won, and then you stab your claws out through the skin of your hands, 'sniktsplorch!', and you cut the ropes, and then you say something cool like 'I have come here to chew
bubblegum and open up a can of whoop ass...', and then you swap out your claws for your next swiss army tool, 'sniktsplorch!', and you say '...and I've got all the can openers I need!'. And then you beat up the villains in an awesome fight scene! Uh, Squirrelinator? Squirs? Hey Squirs? Where are you going-

Ah. That reminded him.

"W-wait." said Jack. He swallowed. He was getting better at speaking with his transformed mouth. "Y-you offered Panacea a t-transformation t-to extend her reach. Can y-you do something like t-that for me? Work with Armsmaster t-to help me use his w-weapons?"

Good Girl's smile froze. "Um. You want me to use my power on you? You want me to change your body?"

"Y-yes. Don't want to disint-t-tegrate my arms next t-time. Y-you can do it, can't y-you?"

"Um. Are you sure? No one ever wants that. Director Lee says its not okay to change minors without permission from their parents and the boss and the medical board and the PRT. I used to try asking people anyway because I wanted to help them but no one ever liked my really good ideas so I stopped asking but I wrote everything down in my notebook just in-"

"Y-yes. I'm sure," said Jack. He leaned toward Good Girl and tried to move his mouth into a smile. "Y-you're a hero and y-you're a genius. Y-you raised t-the dead to beat Leviathan. Y-you can help us beat the next one too. I t-trust y-you."

Jack tried to give her a wink. He couldn't control his eyelids, but he was fairly certain her power would tell her the gesture he was trying to make.

"Wow. I, um-" Good Girl took a deep breath. Then she beamed, her face lighting up and her broad smile growing even wider. "Wow! Great, great! That's great. You, you have no idea how much that means to me. I promise to do my best! Only the very best augmentations for one of the greatest heroes ever! We need to, um, ask permission from lots of people...and do lots of testing...and paperwork...but, um...but we can do it if we try! I know we can. Yeah, we beat Leviathan so we can beat a bunch of stupid paperwork no problem!"

"Work with Armsmaster." said Jack. "He knows t-the system. He'll fast t-track everything y-you invent t-together."

Good Girl blinked and stared into the distance for a moment. Then her smile returned full force. "Wow, good idea, you're so smart Jack! I can't believe I didn't think of that." She giggled. "I was even telling Armsmaster all about my ideas yesterday and I didn't ever think about-"

Jack's neck was getting tired. He coughed and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"-oh. Right! We'll do the basic healing first, extras later. The arms and legs are one thing but undoing the bug part is tricky. I mean really undoing it, not just papering over it with another transformation. Let me get Panacea for this. She's better at the fiddly detail work-"
The news overlooked a big story coming out of the Leviathan fight: a Ward named Good Girl used her biotinker powers to bring dead heroes back to life again! That's how we finally finally finally killed the great beast! Good Girl brought Fletchette back to life to kill Leviathan!

This is a major game-changer for the material and spiritual worlds! What do you think of this brave new world where life after death is possible?

(Showing page 19 of 67)

- Glace (Unverified Cape) (Rogue)
  Woah! Amazing! I hope Good Girl keeps coming to Endbringer fights. Dragon needs to update her armbands to add a new message: 'Down', 'Deceased', and 'Deceased, BRB', ha ha! I totally want to meet Good Girl now and trade some tech! Too bad she works for the white hats. Guess I'll have to seduce her to the dark side, ha ha!
  ~Proud Member of the Church of Doctor Genelia Ray, Cubic and Wisest Human~

- Earthgrip (Verified Cape) (Protectorate)
  @Glace: I never got the point of those stupid armband announcements. I want useful info to help me and my team. What do I get? An unending stream of death shoved in my ear. "Down, Deceased, Down, Deceased". Look, that's useless and just plain depressing! It's as if Dragon is trying to destroy our morale.

- Doctor_Genelia_Ray
  For decades man had yearned to know what exists after death or whether death exists at all as a physical or psychophysical quantity strictly definable from rules a priori established by secular or non-secular thought regardless of the spiritual enlightenment they never found in life and now seek in death if such a thing can be defined under their mental rubric of acceptability subject to a contraint matrix rotating through time in an infinite dimensional hypercube interlocking with the minds of God and Satan and anti-God and anti-Satan that annihilate according to the rules of mass-energy transfer when proximity threatens to realize the Divine Consciousness into the life-giving breath of the Lord.
  ~Hyperpope for Life of the Church of Doctor Genelia Ray, Cubic and Wisest Human~

- I. Z. Razumovska
  @Doctor_Genelia_Ray: Exactly! I couldn't have said it better myself.

Those misguided capes would do well to remember that absolutely nothing drains the drama out of a story faster than an afterlife with a revolving door. Resurrection used sparingly adds spice and zest to a dish, but repeated resurrection is a serpent's apple. Each bite of the fruit is temptingly sweet, breathing new life into a character who reached her natural end. Yet take enough bites and the story is reduced to a hard, bitter core. An unchanging cast of characters, the author's favored pets, trapped in each other's company for eternity and going mad from cabin fever. Pah. A naive beginner's folly. The dead should have the grace to exit stage left and join the audience for a spell, returning to the stage only when they have something new to offer.

- CapeJunkie112358 (Veteran Member)
  @Glace: I did a back of the envelope calculation. Good Girl took 8+ minutes per revive. Amazing but still not fast enough to keep up with an Endbringer. Solution: cryo-freeze the dead capes so Good Girl can revive all of them later. Think your tech can do it? I bet the PRT would pay through the *** for that power combo. For more details see my PM and my thread Next up: destroying Behemoth and Simurgh in ten easy steps.
I'm betting the weak point of Good Girl's revival tech is the brain. Brain cells die fast without oxygen. Does anyone know if her revived capes have brain damage? If anyone has talked in person with Good Girl or her revived capes, PM me.

@I. Z. Razumovska: WTF. Have a heart. Capes are people, their lives aren't toys for your amusement.

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- **Topic: PRT Interview with Fletchette (Official Thread)**
  - In: **Boards > Parahuman Response Team > PRT Press Release Discussion (Public Board)**
  - **Rebecca Costa-Brown** (Original Poster) (Verified PRT Chief Director)
  - Posted on May 17, 2011:

  My interview with our hero of the day. Fletchette, the New York Ward who killed Leviathan. (link).

  (showing page 82 of 515)

- **Dios_de_la_máquina**
  - Long-time lurker I register to say THANK YOU FLETCHETTE! So brave! I see how much it take from you, dying take a lot from anyone, you still come back and fight hard and KILLED the devil from the seas, the homing shots were ESTUPENDO, where did you learn? Divine inspiration? Agh, words words words I want to say: Thank you Fletchette! You are a true hero!

  P.S. Do not be bothered by the nutjob wing of other Catholics. Did not see heaven, so what? God knows all. He left your soul in body so you can come back to kick the devil's...

- **CapeJunkie112358** (Veteran Member)
  - Fletchette is great but did anyone else find the video suspicious? Not saying it's faked but her lines sound rehearsed, weird rehearsed, like she's just saying the syllables. Plus the weird, lost expression she gets for a second when the nurse bumps into her at 1.57. The Director has to prompt her to get her to finish her lines. Same expression at the start and end of the interview too. Is she like that all the time now? How many times did they do the interview before they got a version that looks good for the public? Hope I'm just being paranoid here. If anyone has talked to Fletchette in person since the fight, PM me.

  One thing I can't deny: Fletchette's a major hottie. Wow. On the Society video she looked like processed hamburger after the lightning strike so I wasn't expecting this! Man, Panacea does ****ing amazing work these days.

  @Dios_de_la_máquina: The Society's video says the homing effect was from one of their capes, Quarrel.

- **Lost_Luster_2001**
  - Fletchette, what you did in Brockton Bay is an inspiration to us all. You were blessed with the power to change the world and you used it to the fullest for the sake of all of us. I pledge to you, from this day forward I will do my best to follow your example in my own life.

  @CapeJunkie112358: You think she's an empty shell and THAT gets you drooling? Keep your filthy paws away from her you knuckle-dragger with dick for brains! Her body is for her to LIVE in, not a TOY for your amusement. It's because of people like you that she needs her bodyguards even though she's a HERO who everyone owes their lives. Fletchette has it bad enough with the
Society lurking in New York ready to kidnap her if she drops her guard for a minute. Now she has to worry about creepbags like you too.

- **I. Z. Razumovska**
An undead cape! She's not a vampire, though; her power is to slay monsters with stakes, not to _be_ a monster slain by stakes. Undead but not a vampire, how rare. By the process of elimination that makes her...either a loup-garou or a jiang-shi. Perhaps both! Mark my words, the surviving monsters will be stocking up on silver mirrors.

- **CapeJunkie112358 (Veteran Member)**
@Lost_Luster_2001: Calm down. I gave her a harmless _compliment_. Would you rather I say she's ugly?

You got the facts wrong about her bodyguards, too. They aren't to protect her from the Society. Think about it. The Society will want to use Fletchette to kill more Endbringers, yeah, but they don't need to kidnap her because the PRT is going to send her to every Endbringer battle anyway. Besides, didn't you see their video? The Society already has the time bombs that trapped Leviathan, plus the railgun and Quarrel's power that Fletchette needed to kill him. Plenty of leverage to get the PRT to cooperate.

@I. Z. Razumovska: You're nuts.

- **Perpetual_Peripatetic (Veteran Member)**
Kidnap the Endslayer? I wouldn't be surprised. It would be just like those Society goons. Honestly, they're nothing but trouble.

@CapeJunkie112358: Preaching your Society apologism in a Fletchette thread? You're nuts.

Panacea looked even more exhausted than Good Girl. She was out of costume, wearing white sweat pants and a white American Red Cross hoodie with big red crosses on the front and back. Had her costume been destroyed in the fight? She had her hood up to hide her head but from Jack's vantage point on the bed he could see that all her hair had been shaved off. There were three faint lines on her scalp where her skin had been stitched together - ah. The leftovers from one of Good Girl's surgeries. Panacea had been listed as deceased during the fight. She must be another one of the girl's ressurection cases, like Fletchette.

"Panacea. Good to see y-you again. Alive and w-well." said Jack.

Panacea gave Jack a long look. Then she frowned and spoke to Good Girl. "A Case-53? My power doesn't always work on them."

Good Girl's smile flickered. "No, no. This is Jack Slash, the big hero from your hometown! Remember? We talked with him before the fight. You and me and your sister."

Panacea's frown deepened. "Oh. Right. I'm remembering now. The boy from the video. The hero. The Society turned him into a spider." She spoke to Jack. "Sorry if you're someone I should know. It's a side effect of a treatment. I have my important memories but some of the little things are still sorting themselves out."

"A shame. We got to know each other quite w-well in our short t-time t-together." said Jack.

"I feel...I feel like I'm supposed to be thanking you." said Panacea. "You saved me from something
"Good, Panacea." said Good Girl. "It wasn't Leviathan, Jack wasn't in the hospital. He must have saved you from something else before the fight. Keep trying and you'll get it!"

>> It was /// data segment fragmented, attempting reconstruction /// but Victoria wouldn't back her up, she agreed with the girl, she had said it dozens of times. Nobody understood /// data segment corrupt, compensating, approximate from SELF data store- <<<

Ah. Best to cut off this line of conversation. "We can talk more easily w-when I'm healed."

"Fine by me." said Panacea. "So, Jack Slash, is it? You don't want to be a spider? You want to be human again?"

"It's okay. I already got consent." said Good Girl.

"Oh. Good." said Panacea. She touched her hand to Jack's cheek. "Oh. Not good. I hoped the insect features were just a layer on top of your human template, but your biology is insect-human hybrid all the way through. As if you had always been this way." She wrinkled her brow. "Okay. I can turn you into a normal human but your template is missing so I'm going to be making it up as I go. Do you have pictures of yourself from before you were transformed? Nude would be best. Front, back, and side views."

"Uh. No." said Jack.

"Oh, you're worried about me seeing your face. I'll keep your identity confidential. Medical ethics. Besides, you're a hero. I know all the other heroes in Brockton Bay." Panacea blinked. "Knew. Knew the heroes who were from Brockton Bay. I, I still know them. The ones who made it. The rest are still heroes of Brockton Bay. Because, because they're still there. They died there. When the big flood hit them and killed them and hit the hospital and broke the hospital and killed everyone and they all saw it coming and they knew they were going to die and they were screaming and I-"

Panacea winced and cut herself off. "I didn't want to talk about that. Sorry. That wasn't me. A side effect of a treatment. Periodically triggered free associations to reconstruct memories."

"Just for a few weeks. You only lost a little." said Good Girl. "Hey, Panacea, don't worry about the pictures, okay? I have a good memory for biology, I know what Jack looked like. A young Johnny Depp without the mustache, basically. We can get a mirror and he can guide us for the detail work."

"Johnny Depp? Really? My power isn't a toy for cosmetics-"

"No, no, it's true! Right Jack?"

Jack managed an approximation of a smile. "Yes. I get t-that all the t-time."

Panacea looked at Jack and Good Girl for a moment, then sighed. "Fine. Just remember that I'm going to be busy healing critical patients for a....for a good long while. I won't have time to fix you if you're pulling my leg and your family doesn't recognize you when I'm done."

Panacea touched his cheek and he felt his body shifting, transforming. Jack tried to memorize the sensation. To imprint it in his mind so he could recognize powers like hers when he encountered
them in future conflicts.

He couldn't do it, though. He was too distracted by her words. His family...

He had been entirely focused on the greatest battle and greatest thrill of his life. On the pain of his wounds, on defenses against Leviathan and attacks to slay him. But now he knew the outcome. He and his allies had won. They had killed Leviathan for all the world to see. He was safe, his wounds were being healed.

Now his mind returned to his priorities from his everyday life. His mission. His team. His family. That last flood...it must have been tremendous, if he was evacuated to New York instead of Boston or Providence. He had been on the front lines with a dozen flying capes, an ideal position to be evacuated, but his team elsewhere in Brockton Bay, his Dad driving on the highway, would have had to find another way...
"Okay. That should do it." said Panacea. "Your transformed body had higher density than a human body, so I used some of the mass to make your new arms and legs. You're still missing protein and fat so you'll need to eat up in the next twenty four hours to restore it. I prepped your metabolism to handle it, so doctor's orders: get to the cafeteria ASAP and eat three or four meals in one sitting. Third floor, right across from the main elevators. Protein and fat, okay? Not cereal or pasta. I can't recommend the eggplant, but the yogurt and the chicken parmesan are surprisingly edible. There's a packet of meal coupons the PRT put in with your personal effects-" Panacea pointed to a small plastic box by the bedside. "and you have enough to eat free for a week. Okay?"

Jack nodded. "Very thoughtful of you." He glanced at the box, then turned back to her and smiled. He remembered the plans he had made as he traveled to the PRT headquarters to join the fight. Plans for gathering information about the heroes and villains, for building reputation, for using those assets as leverage to gain allies after the battle. Despite the unlikely outcome of the battle, despite its the almost outlandish scale and spectacle, his original plans were still very much intact.

"Panacea, I know you're always busy with your patients, but let's keep in touch." said Jack. "We heroes of Brockton Bay went through a lot together and it would be a shame for us to drift apart so soon."

Panacea hesitated. "I...maybe. We went through a lot, but...don't you want to put it behind you?"

"Ah, it depends on your point of view." said Jack. He sat up on the edge of the bed, testing his new limbs, and leaned forward to Panacea. "You see, I've always had the belief that there's no such thing as pointless suffering or tragedy. There's always a lesson you can learn from it, something worth remembering that helps you grow stronger. I don't want to be presumptuous, to ask you to share anything you're not comfortable with sharing, but I wonder what lesson you feel you-"

Good Girl put down her mirror and poked him on the nose. Jack blinked, "Testing something?"

"Hmm. Are you sure you're okay with this, Jack?" said Good Girl. Her smile broadened. "You look pretty nice but I bet I could do better! If there's anything you want to change, let me know and I can give you a quick nose job. Or whatever else you want."

Panacea gave her a look. "Good Girl, we're supposed to be doing critical cases. We still have a backlog for New York and it's only twelve hours before they send us to Boston."

"But Panacea, he's one of the greatest heroes in the world! We need to give him our best!" said Good Girl.

"I'm sure he's a great guy, but we can't play favorites. That's part of being a hero. Top-ranked capes get first priority for restoring their health because it gets them back on the streets saving lives. They don't get priority for cosmetics to look good in a mirror. They can hire ordinary plastic surgeons for that."

"What if...what if making Jack look extra handsome saves lives? What if the big boss interviews him next, and his nose looks funny, and all the kids laugh at him, and then they grow up to be villains instead of heroes?"

Panacea sighed. "Your hero-worship is showing again, sis. I'm grateful you worked so hard to save my life, I really am, but you have to-" She cut herself off and scowled. "I'm grateful you saved me,
"Good Girl, but you have to learn to tone it down."

"Sis?" said Jack. "You're long-lost relatives? Your powers are similar but I never would have guessed."

"No. Sorry. I didn't mean to say that. That was a side effect of a treatment." said Panacea. She gave Good Girl a long look. "I'm not going to explain that one."

Good Girl's smile didn't waver, but she took one step away from Panacea. "Um. Speaking of sisters. Your sister was looking for you again, Panacea. She wanted to talk to you about something but she wouldn't say what."

A pained look passed over Panacea's face-

>> "It's taking over your brain, Amy!"

"It's not a big deal. It's supposed to do that. The whole point of the implant is to jump-start the brain to start restoring skills and memories asap. Phase one is rapid growth and integration with existing tissue. Look, Vicky, the implant's only going to keep growing for two weeks. I already scheduled the follow-up surgery for her to reprogram it for phase two. Then it's passive mode from here on out."

"Passive mode." said Victoria flatly. "Great. And are you going to keep calling her 'sister'?

Amy looked at the floor. "I told you, that's a side effect. It's not brainwashing me. I know she's not really my sister."

Victoria stared at her, slowly shook her head in disbelief. "You're going to let that thing live inside your head for the rest of your life. When you could use your power and turn it into Amy brain cells in less than a minute. What the hell are you thinking?"

"I told you, I don't do brains."

"You and I both know that's a lie. Are you even listening to yourself, Amy? Do you have any idea how crazy you sound right now?"

"I don't do brains. You don't understand. I just can't."

"I'm trying so, so hard to be understanding, Amy, I only want the best for you, I want to help you, but I can't understand you if you don't tell me what's wrong!"

"I can't. It, it would hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. I-" Amy swallowed.

She couldn't meet Victoria's eyes. Her own eyes were tearing up. If Victoria pushed her any further she wouldn't be able to hold back. She would have to confess, and then... "I just can't. I could never see you again. You would hate me. You wouldn't...you wouldn't love me anymore. You would throw me away and-"

Victoria recoiled, eyes wide. Then she moved like lightning. She grabbed Amy by the
shoulders so hard it hurt and hissed through gritted teeth. "Amy. How dare you doubt my love for you. After I spent so long standing up for you, supporting you, after everything I sacrificed for you-
"
"Vicky, please-
"
"I know you always hated him. Instead of making an effort to make friends on your own, like a normal person would do, you stewed in your jealousy and wished he would roll over and die so your sister would pay more attention to you!"

"No, I-
"
"Well get it through your skull, Amy! When the wave came and I had two seconds to choose who to fly out of the hospital I chose you, Amy, I chose you. I picked you up in my right hand and the girl who was healing you in my left hand, and I left, and I left Dean there to, to..." Victoria sobbed and stepped away, wiping away a tear.

And then Victoria looked up and she snarled and she was ten feet tall and her face was the mask of God condemning her to burn for her sins and "You should be grateful Amy! I saved your life! I gave you what you always wanted! I left my love to DIE for you! And now you're pushing me away more than ever and healing ingrown fucking toenails so you don't have to see my face and you have so little trust in your SISTER that you won't tell me anything about your problems and you'd rather commit SUICIDE with a fucking brain parasite and make all my sacrifices come to NOTHING! Look in the fucking mirror, Amy! You don't have any right to tell me WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE A HEART WITHOUT LOVE!"

The next thing she knew she was in motion, halfway across the hospital in a dead sprint, body aching from the gurneys and racks of medial equipment she had run into in her mad unthinking dash to get away from the Fury that had been her sister-

Panacea stared at the floor. "I have patients I need to see. If you see Victoria, tell her I'll talk to her when I'm done with the patients with ISS 10 and above."

Good Girl's smile finally wavered. "Um, Panacea, I know you're working really hard, but I don't think we'll be able to get them all before they send us-
"

Panacea had already left the room.

"Oh." Good Girl turned to Jack. "Wow, Panacea is a really hard worker, isn't she!"

Jack studied her retreating form through the open doorway. "Yes. A hard example to follow."

"Yeah, when the boss told me about her I thought 'I can be do that too!', but now that I've seen her I don't think I could ever work as hard as her! I mean, if I had a big sister I would spend lots of time playing with her every day. But not Panacea! She's such an amazing hero that she spends all her time healing people no matter what."

Jack blinked. Now that she had mentioned her family, it was odd that she wasn't accompanied by her parents.

"You know, Good Girl, you have good instincts as a hero." he said. "Some people think being a hero is about nothing but saving lives, but you know better, don't you? When you save someone's
life you're not just doing it for their sake. You're doing it for their loved ones, for their friends and family who care for them and would miss them when they're gone. That means a true hero does more than save strangers, they take good care of their own friends and family too. Something you do better than most. It's an admirable trait."

Good Girl's smile wavered again. "Yeah. That's me. That's what the boss always says. 'You're such a good girl, Good Girl! If I wasn't married to truth and justice, and had kids of my own, I would be very lucky if my kids loved their Mom and Dad as much as you do!'"

>> Another chorus of screams erupted around her. No. Let the heroes handle it. Focus on the patient. Panacea was aware now, her eyes roving, taking in information, but the implant would only keep her brain fresh for a few minutes if she didn't get her blood flowing soon.

Good Girl returned her gaze to her favorite hero's exposed chest cavity, held open by her retractors. Pancreas repaired, spillage of digestive enzymes contained. Stomach, liver, and kidneys stabilized for the next five minutes, not a high priority. One intact lung, that was enough for now. Heart crushed, improvised replacement now fully functional but she had to fix the circulatory system before revving it up to full speed-

Panacea jumped. No, wait. Someone was trying to pull her off the operating table. Glory Girl was hovering in the air, her shattered leg dangling uselessly below her. Glory Girl ripped the straps holding Panacea to the table and lifted her into her arms.

"No, wait, she's not ready yet!" Good Girl cried out. "I need to do her arteries and close her up! Five more minutes-"

Good Girl saw the decision forming in Glory Girl's mind as clear as day. In the pulse of the blood vessels under her skin, in the frantic desperation in her eyes, in the spiking intensity of her aura every time she shifted her gaze. One look at her, one look at something in the rubble, one look through the hole in the wall at an advancing wall of water so tall it stretched into the clouds. She was going to-

Good Girl turned to where her parents stood in the center of the room, holding the roof up over their heads. She read their emotions from a thousand signals from their body. They were on the edge of panic, sensing her distress but not understanding what was wrong, waiting for her to tell them what they needed to do to help their beloved daughter. She opened her mouth to speak but something hit her from behind and knocked the air out of her lungs, dragging her through the air at tremendous speed.

She struggled, gasped, managed to cry out "Momdad, here, jump!" She stuck out her right leg, the one with the augmented skeleton that might be able to take the strain, but her parents were already two hundred feet below her, staring up at her helplessly as she was pulled into the sky-

<<

Jack's features softened. He spoke in a quiet voice. "Good Girl, when you helped us against the Endbringer you were with your parents, weren't you? With your team? I hope your loved ones made it out of Brockton Bay before the big wave hit."

Good Girl's smile flickered, then ratcheted up in intensity. "Oh, everything is just fine! Now, it's been great seeing you again Jack but I have to get back to my patients. I'll show you the way to the cafeteria, okay? Panacea's right, the eggplant is no good but I liked the-"
"You don't have to tell me anything, Good Girl." said Jack. "But I want you to know that I'm here for you if you need me, if you want a friendly ear to listen to your troubles. I understand if you have to put on a smile for your other patients, but it's okay to be honest with me. You helped save my life, to save all of our lives. The least I can do for you is be here for you and listen to what you have to say."

"Wow, really! You're such a nice guy, Jack Slash!" Good Girl beamed at him for a long moment. Then she sat next to him on the side of the bed. She tapped the fingers of her right hand against her left palm, as if she was typing on a keyboard, and spoke.

"Deactivate cheer mode."

Good Girl wilted, seeming to age years in an instant as her facade of cheerfulness melted away.

"You're using your power to change your emotions?" said Jack.

"No. Not much. It's mostly just a...a quick mod to my skeletal muscle system for a few days while I heal the people who got hurt by Leviathan. The boss says it's okay to put on a mask and smile for my patients but she says it's wrong to mess with my emotions. She says I have to let it out sometime. I was trying to save it all up until I got back...back home. Can I...is it okay if I..."

Jack nodded.

"Thanks. Thank you. I.." Good Girl looked down at her hands in her lap. "I don't have anyone else to talk to. They're all gone. All my team. All the ones who came to the fight I mean, everyone but Mouse Protector. She, um, she tagged me so she could keep hopping into the air behind us when Glory Girl flew us away. Glory Girl was amazing, she saved me and Panacea and Mouse Protector even though she was hurt and she had to act fast. But you had to be like Glory Girl to get away. You had to fly or run really fast, and we didn't have any flyers on our team and our best moving guy got hit by lightning and I didn't have time to bring him back and, and..."

Jack put one arm around Good Girl in a half-hug, used his other arm to take one of her wringing hands in his own. She sobbed and gripped his hand tightly, letting tears run down her cheeks as she spoke.

"I...I didn't know them very well. Just for a few months. And they, I don't think they liked me much. They thought I was weird. But they were weird too so it wasn't so bad. We were heroes and we were a team and we all stuck together. Like the moving guy, he was sort of nice like a crazy uncle, and I made him stuff to help him with his speech impediment, and then he started liking me even more. And the woman who told stories, she told me bedtime stories every night if I asked her to, and the stories were really long and weird and scary but she always made sure there were happy endings for everyone who lived to the end.

"Now they're all gone. And...when something like this used to happen, like when Grandma died, I went to Mom and Dad and they would hug me, and I, I always told them I wasn't a little crybaby but they hugged me anyway, and it was nice and it made me feel a little better. Now I want them here with me but they...they..." she swallowed. "They died too. They're gone. All the way gone. I can't bring them back. I probably can't even find what happened to their...to their bodies. The GPS I put in their spine stopped responding, when I ping it doesn't ping back. I keep reaching out to them, looking for them like they were still here because I want them to give me a hug, but they're gone and I can't-"

Jack wrapped his arms around Good Girl in a hug.
"Thank-thanks. Thank you." said Good Girl. She sniffed and wiped at her tears.

"You're welcome." said Jack. "Take your time."

Jack held Good Girl in his arms for a long while.

- **Topic: Who'd you lose?**
  In: **Boards > Places > USA > Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)**  
  *Brocktonite03 (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (Brockton Bay Refugee)*  
  Posted on May 16th, 2011:

  See topic. Friends? Family?  
  On topic posts only, please. No commentary. Nc= no condolences via. private message.

  *(showing page 27 of 27)*

- **Orestia_Wright** (Brockton Bay Refugee)  
  My brother, Hassan. His wife, Farzaneh. Our friends and neighbors and coworkers...I don't know how many of them made it. We were lucky. We got out of the city before the worst of the traffic and drove nonstop for the West Coast. The last wave still nearly knocked us off the highway. We lost everything but we still have each other. Our condolences to our fellow Brocktonites who lost more than we did.  
  Nc.

- **GlasgowGrin** (Veteran Member) (Brockton Bay Refugee)  
  I was out of town on a business trip. I was in a meeting when I got the text from my wife saying that she was taking our kids to the Endbringer shelters. I tried to call them back, send a text, anything, but it was too late. The call volume overloaded the network and nothing was getting through. When I saw the big flood on the news I knew they were gone. My only consolation is that the heroes killed the bastard who did it and he won't be hurting anyone else. Monique, Chloe, Cameron, your lives were not lost in vain.  
  Nc.

- **Mouse Protector** (Verified Cape) (Protectorate)  
  I mourn my brave companions who gave their lives to save the world from a great evil.

  Hi-Liter, where can I begin? Indarkest day, in blackest night, it was you who ensured that no evil escaped our sight. We will all miss your free spirit, your encyclopedic knowledge of PRT regulations on prurient uses of laser beams, and your courage on the front lines.

  Raconteuse, it saddens me to write the words that bring your story to a close. Your guidance on the comms turned countless tales of tragedy into pleasant parables and reunited nearly a thousand lost children with their families. I promise you I will find an editor for your 3,500 page masterwork no matter how long it takes.

  Chuckles, you brought light into our lives. You always had the last laugh against the villains, and in Brockton Bay you had the last laugh again when you broke my record for saving downed capes. One day we'll finish our epic hackey sack duel when we meet again in the big top in the sky.

  Squirrelinator, I am so proud of you. You were always humble, always afraid you wouldn't measure up, but we all knew you had the soul of a great hero. Your bravery in your last moments is an inspiration to us all.
Mr. Walter Cyrus and Mrs. Trisha Cyrus. You supported your daughter with such relentless diligence that I thought of you as honorary members of our team. Your quick thinking during the hospital collapse saved the lives of countless capes and is proof that true heroism doesn't require powers or a costume. I swear I will do everything in my power to help your daughter live up to your legacy and fulfill her potential as a hero.

Rest in peace, dear comrades. Know that the light of your heroism still shines forth as bright as ever. We and the thousands of souls you inspired with your noble deeds will continue your fight for truth, justice, and humanity.

Please give your condolences in the memorial thread or pay your respects at their memorial statues at our branch headquarters.

- WagTheDog (Brockton Bay Refugee)
I hitched a ride out of town on the back of a family's pickup truck. A woman, her husband, and her brother. I think her name was Rosa. We almost got to Providence when the wave hit. I hope they survived but I don't think they made it. The wave probably flipped the car and trapped them under the water. They were kind to me but I was the one who lived, it seems unfair. I got knocked off the truck and dragged for a few miles but somehow I survived. One of the people here has a satellite connection and is letting us use it.

My big problem now is that the wave separated me from my dog and I can't find him anywhere. If you have seen a Scottish terrier, male, black, 20 pounds, with a tag on his collar saying "Rufio", please contact me. I don't have money or property right now but I promise I'll find a way to return the favor.

- CapeJunkie112358 (Veteran Member)
I'm not from Brockton Bay but I have a few close friends who live there. I haven't been able to contact most of them since May 15. Not writing their names here for privacy reasons but you know who you are. I miss you already, guys. I'm praying for you. Please be safe.

Nc.

- Lady Photon (Verified Cape) (New Wave)
Neil. Eric. Crystal. It took me the last 30 minutes to write your names. As if writing it makes it real. I still can't believe this is real. I love you. I love you. I love you. Please don't leave me alone.

- Glory Girl (Verified Cape) (New Wave)
I am posting from the same computer as Sarah. It wouldn't be right for me add to what she said about her family. They were uncle and cousins to me but they were everything to her. I am so lucky my parents and sister are still with me.

I lost my friends from school. I lost too many of my friends in the Wards and the Protectorate. I lost my sister Amy at the hospital but she was brought back by a miracle. Then I lost Dean and there was no miracle to bring him back.

I miss you Dean. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I am so so sorry.

Good Girl rested in his arms for a time, drooping with equal amounts emotion and exhaustion.

"Um. Thanks." she said at last. "You're really good at hugging, Jack."

"You're welcome." said Jack.
"You're, um..." Good Girl hesitated. "You aren't quite as good at hugging as Dad, only sixty eight percent as good, but I can help you fix it. Your skin is a few degrees colder than him and you're a little bony, even for your age and body type I mean. You need to eat like Panacea said, build up your subcutaneous fat for insulation and cushioning. Your posture isn't maximizing the surface area either, and-"

"It's fine." said Jack. "I'll take your advice, but you can't solve every problem with a biological fix. Sometimes it's the thought that counts."

"I, but..." Good Girl sniffed. "Yeah."

After another minute of silence, Good Girl spoke again. "There's more problems, too. Mouse Protector was here for me yesterday but today she's busy with the relatives of the heroes who died. And she's talking to the PRT about me, too.

"Mouse Protector said I did really well in the fight and I have the 'soul of a hero'. So I had to tell her the truth. I liked some things about being a hero. Saving lives and helping the other heroes beat villains and Leviathan.

"But just like you said, it's...it's not just about saving lives, you need your friends and family too. Ever since I became a hero I met a lot of people who didn't like me and were mean to me and didn't like my ideas, and...and now all my friends on the team are gone, and Mom and Dad are gone, and I don't have anything left. I don't know if I want to stay. I don't know what to do anymore.

"Mouse Protector says she'll take good care of me and my 'heroic soul' means I'll be happiest in the Wards. But she also said I might not have a choice. The PRT really really wants me to stay in the Wards because they need me to keep Fletchette is good shape, and bring heroes back to life, and other stuff. So the PRT is going to try to make the judge pick some of their agents to be my new Mom and Dad, so they can make me stay in the Wards even if I don't want to. Mouse Protector says she'll try to stand up to the PRT to make them give me a nice Mom and Dad who'll give me a choice, but she says it's hard because the PRT has a lot of power because their heroes beat Leviathan, and I don't know what's going to happen, and, and..."

Good Girl trailed off and sobbed. "I don't know. It's all crazy. I just want Mom and Dad back. That was all I ever wanted out of being a hero and now they're gone."

Jack held Good Girl for a long moment, then released her and took her hands in his own. He caught her gaze and looked into her eyes as he spoke.

"I understand, Good Girl. You don't know it yet but we have a lot in common. I got my power just like you did, when my Mom died in a car accident. Only you had it worse than me, because both of your parents were hurt, and your power meant that you could try to save them, try for months only to have their lives taken away from you in an instant. It was too cruel. I was lucky in comparison. I lost Mom but I still had Dad with me. I'm grateful for that. I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have Dad. I..."

Jack took a slow breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them his eyes were unfocused, wilder.

"I don't know if I do have Dad with me, now. He was in Brockton Bay. I know he got out of the city but with that big wave I don't know if it was enough. I don't even have a way to find him now. Our house is gone. Dad doesn't really use the internet, he has an email account for work but I don't think he even knows how to check his mail from someone else's computer. He doesn't have a cell phone either. He doesn't like cell phones because Mom was using one when she died. A stupid
reason, I tried to convince him to get a cell phone so many times but he wouldn't give in in no matter what I said.

"So I don't know. Maybe he's safe, or maybe he's lost, or maybe he's somewhere out there on the side of the road trapped in a half-flooded car, dying because I couldn't convince him to give up his stupid cell phone phobia. While I'm here safe in New York and I can't do anything about it. If he's gone I don't have any family left. I-

Good Girl wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

"I..." Jack swallowed. "Thank you."

Jack sat still for a time, rocking slightly in place, letting Good Girl hug him as his mind wandered along the paths his Dad might have taken out of the city. Imagining what might have been, searching for something to give him certainty, searching for an answer that never came.

Good Girl broke the silence. "I'm sorry I said your hug was bad. Mine isn't good either. I put all this hardware into my arms for surgery and combat but I never optimized it for hugs. Sorry."

"It's fine. Your hardware is more practical this way."

"Because you don't need special hardware for hugs, it's the thought that counts. Right?"

"Right."

Jack shifted in place, and after a moment Good Girl released him from her hug. She looked up at him with a faint light in her eyes. Somehow invigorated from sharing in a tragedy, from giving comfort despite her own sorrow.

Jack leaned toward her and held her gaze as he spoke. "Good Girl, please trust me when I say we can make it through this. It's what I told Panacea. There's no such thing as pointless tragedy, you can learn from it and get stronger. So please believe it. Even if you've lost your closest friends and family, even if I've lost mine...we still have things we care for in this world, something to fight for and keep us going. And we still have people who care about us. We have our allies, we have ourselves, and we have each other.

"So let's make a promise, Good Girl. We'll promise to stay in touch. To share our thoughts and feelings, to help each other get through this. I'll promise you that I'll make it through this, no matter what happens, if you'll promise that you will too. Okay?"

Good Girl nodded seriously. "Okay." Then a small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "That's what true heroes do. Use the power of teamwork, just like how we beat Leviathan."

Jack smiled. "Right. And listen, Good Girl. You said you weren't sure if you wanted to stay in the Wards. I know exactly what you mean about not fitting in with the official heroes. I never joined the Wards, myself. I was a hero on my own, I even tried to start my own team. I had everything I needed. Family, friends, the chance to make a difference.

"I want to make a difference at a bigger scale now. To beat the rest of the Endbringers and send a message to the world. But still I don't know whether joining the Wards is the best way to do it. So don't feel like you have to decide one way or the other about the Wards, Good Girl. Let's keep in touch, and if you leave the Wards we can still try to team up again. Sound good?"

Good Girl's small smile grew a notch. "Sounds good." she said. "Thanks, Jack Slash. You're a really nice guy, you know! I met some heroes who are good at saving lives from villains but all the
other times they act like jerks. Well, you're a great hero because of what you did in a fight, but then after in the hospital room you act like a great hero too!"

"Thank you." Jack grinned. "You've been very helpful to me, as well."

"Oh! Right, helping you. I was going to tell you." said Good Girl. "Armsmaster wanted to visit you after you woke up. He's been putting out notices about the Brockton Bay capes who survived to help their families find them. When he comes to visit you should ask him if he heard anything from your Dad."

"You know who survived? The Brockton Bay Wards, the other capes?"

"Sorry, I've been healing people from everywhere, I don't know who's from your city. I see a patient missing their legs and I don't ask questions, I just give them bionic legs and go on to the next, you know?"

Jack let out a sharp breath. "Right. I'll ask Armsmaster when he comes."

Jack pushed off the side of the bed and stood. His new legs felt as good as his old ones ever had. Better, even, a hair stronger and more responsive than the originals. Panacea's work was exquisite.

"Thank you again for the healing, Good Girl." he said. "Good luck with your patients."

"It was mostly Panacea." said Good Girl. She took her PRT-issue phone out of her pocket and opened a screen showing a list of hospital rooms with colored numbers next to each one. "Oh! She already healed six people while we were talking. I really need to go back to work."

"You get full credit for the hugs, though." said Jack.

Good Girl nodded. "Right. Emotional healing. I have to show them a good face."

She rubbed a hand over her face, wiping away the last remnants of the tear tracks on her cheeks. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Then she typed on her left palm and chanted. "Cheer mode power up."

Good Girl's back straightened and her face transformed, the signs of exhaustion melting away until only the bags under her eyes remained. She hopped off the bed, took Jack's hands in her own, and gave him a brilliant smile. "Okay, all finished here! Another satisfied patient. I have to get back to the others now but I'll show you the way to the cafeteria, okay Jack? You need the food and you're really hungry now. I can tell, don't try to deny it! The elevators are right this way."
May 21, 2011

Clink.

Galadriel chipped away another flake of marble. Another step closer to finishing her latest artwork. She repositioned her chisel, tapped her hammer again.

Clink. Clink.

A soft woman's voice came from beside her. A narration wafting into the still, night air of the garden.

"...loved and feared in equal measure by parents, but always beloved by the children who flocked to her readings at public libraries and bookstores. In her time as a member of the Protectorate she wrote the equivalent of one full length novel every..."

Clink. Clink.

Galadriel stepped back and surveyed her work. The shape that she had carved from a single block of marble, that she had put in a place of honor in the public garden, that she had surrounded with spotlights to turn into an island of light in the darkness.

The finished life-size statue of Raconteuse.

It was good. Worthy of her long-time companion. Raconteuse's form sat hunched over her desk, flowing robes billowing around her. Her face was covered by her two-leaved mask with the twin visages of Thalia and Melpomene, looking up with her head quirked to the side, as if the visitor had surprised her at her work. Her left hand held open one of her innumerable Moleskines while her right hand scribbled furiously with a fountain pen. A fine bit of etching on the stone depicted the words she was writing in her notebook, words that crept off of the page and spilled onto her desk, robes, and mask.

Galadriel hadn't gone to art school for nothing. Symbolism was important. Superheroes were super. You couldn't memorialize them with a simple plaque, or a tombstone, or a black and white photograph. You had to make the public remember them as they were in life, vibrant, in motion. Even if Raconteuse much preferred to slouch in front of the console in a loose-fitting T-shirt and faded, ripped jeans, even if she only wore her costume for public appearances...the dramatic, dynamic, mad genius of literature was what the public remembered.

And they would remember. Galadriel would make sure of it.

"...the statue depicts her writing at her desk in the Protectorate headquarters, her words literally flowing off of the page and onto the streets of Indianapolis, searching for heroes, villains, and lost children alike." The narrator paused. "...is this commemoration satisfactory, Mouse Protector?"

"Yes. A fitting tribute." said Galadriel. "Through your words I feel the presence of her heroic spirit in my heart, still with us and within us all. Thank you, Dragon."

Galadriel kneeled and petted the small metal form by her side. The metal wriggled and flowed under her fingers as though it was alive.
"You're very welcome, Mouse Protector. Please be advised: I am not Dragon. I am Dragon.v08788.2add63dae87d, a.k.a. Bixi.232, a limited child process gifted to the headquarters of the Indianapolis PRT. Responsibilities: preservation of Tinker technology, facility maintenance and security, memorial tour guide."

"My apologies, Bixi. I pray that you will excuse my lapse."

"Of course, Mouse Protector."

Galadriel approached the next statue. Squirrelinator. The newest recruit to her Protectorate team, the last statue she had yet to finish. She had chipped away the rough shape his body would take and put the finishing touches on his limbs. His legs were bent in a crouch, ready to spring forward. His right hand was touching the ground while his left reached out to the visitor, furry fingers splayed and claws extended.

She closed her eyes, took a moment to bring his face into her mind. It took her longer than most. Squirs was such a nervous boy. Anxious about his transformation, anxious about his performance in the field, anxious about his luck with his fiancee. The faint lines of anxiety were him, more than any other expression she knew. But the visiting public wouldn't understand. Too many narrow-minded adults who refused to look past surface appearances, too many children who hadn't yet learned better. They hadn't known him, hadn't seen the light of heroism shining from his soul, so they needed to be shown the heroism on his face. She thought back to Squirrelinator's first solo CQC against a villain. His look of determination as he leapt into battle to support his creations as they guarded the mayor's armored car.

She put her chisel against the rough oval of marble where his head would be and began to work. Clink. Clink.

At her feet she heard Dragon's- no, Bixi's voice, drafting the narration she would use as a tour guide. "Squirrelinator, a.k.a. Victor Klempt. Son of Mister Martin Klempt and Doctor Marlina Klempt. Victor manifested his powers at age seventeen, one month after graduating from Herron High School and two weeks after his acceptance at the University of Indianapolis. His powers transformed him into a human-squirrel hybrid with enhanced reflexes, agility, and speed; the ability to rapidly burrow underground; and a Tinker specialty in creating hunter-seeker drones. Inspired by the example of his hometown hero Mouse Protector, Victor immediately resolved to use his newfound powers for great justice..."

Clink. Clink.

Galadriel could hear the faint hum coming from Squirrelinator's surviving creations, his last legacies to his team. The two drones he had left in his workshop in his haste to board the transport to Brockton Bay, and the masterwork he had entrusted to her moments before he showed his true colors as a hero and sacrificed his life in the line of duty. Now his creations were maintained by Bixi, repurposed to serve as the memorial's tour guides, side attractions, and security guards.

One S-800 series hunter-seeker, its red eyes gleaming as it groomed itself, keeping its metal chassis shining and pristine. One S-850 infiltration model, its covering of pseudoflesh making it indistinguishable from an ordinary squirrel if not for the miniature lightning gun it clutched in its paws. And his greatest work, the S-1000 liquid metal model. Bixi was using the S-1000 to speak, having shifted it's metal body into the form of a squirrel wearing a dragon mask.

"...soon began work on a prototype artificial intelligence to supervise his drones, which he tentatively named Squirrelnet. On May 15, 2011, however, he and his team were called to serve as
a search and rescue squad to safeguard the lives of heroes during Leviathan's attack on Brockton Bay. During the fateful battle, Squirrelinator distinguished himself."

"Bixi, pause." interrupted Galadriel. She stepped back, surveyed her work. "What did you do with his AI? Squirs always spoke of your father's work with the greatest respect. His spirit would be pleased to hear that his work gave you new inspiration."

"Dragon inspected Squirrelnet's code and attempted to complete the design." said Bixi. The AI paused. "Unfortunately, Squirrelnet proved to be unstable and had to be terminated."

Galadriel gave a mirthless laugh. "I'm sure he would appreciate the joke. Tell me his AI didn't really try to take over the world."

"Understood, Mouse Protector. His AI didn't really try to take over the world."

She leaned forward again, put her chisel against the marble.

Clink. Clink-

Danger!

Galadriel dropped her hammer and chisel and leaped into the air, unsheathing her PRT-issue nonlethal electrosword and swiping at the projectile her mouse-sense had detected, all in a single smooth movement.

She came to a rest perched on top of the statue of Chuckles, balancing herself neatly on top of his bald head. Her sword crackled with sparks as the projectile's charred remains fell to the ground.

Leaning against the wall was a dark figure obscured by shadows, but unmistakable in her battered leather costume and face mask. Ravager, her arch-nemesis and crimelord of Marion County. Three red dots of light were sweeping over the villain's body, targeting lasers from the hunter drones, but she didn't seem perturbed.

Galadriel hissed. "There is a time and a place for everything, Ravager, and this is not it. I'll have you know that the public is very understanding when a great hero suffers from a momentary lapse of judgement. If you don't scurry back to your burrow in five seconds you might not wake up in a cell."

Ravager snarled. "You didn't even-" She caught herself, continued in a quieter voice. "You didn't even look at my gift! I'm not here to attack you, Rat."

Galadriel hopped down from the statue and spared a glance at the charred projectile. Ah. It had been a bouquet of flowers, tossed to land in front the statue of Chuckles. The hero who had helped apprehend the villain on more than one occasion. If she remembered her floriography, Ravager had chosen the flowers to represent sympathy, respect, and forgiveness. More sentimental than she would have expected from criminal scum.

"Touching. We have visiting hours, Ravager. Use them."

"Chrissakes, Rat! Do you think I'm stupid enough walk into the PRT headquarters in broad daylight?"

Galadriel forced a smile onto her face. "Given your track record I wouldn't put it past you."

Ravager scowled. "You're trying to get me angry. Fine, I get it. The 'great hero' isn't above wanting
to take out her feelings on a punching bag. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to-

"I don't negotiate with terrorists, scalawags, scoundrels who cut up innocent children-"

"For heaven's sake will you shut up and listen to me for once? I'm here to help you. I'm here to pay my respects to the dead and offer to help you."

"Duly noted. If I ever need to arrange a heroin shipment to HQ, you'll be the first one I call. Now get out."

"For heaven's sake! I-" Ravager caught herself. "Look, I can tell you're serious. You stopped making puns and went directly to sarcasm-"

"And I'm still waiting for you to turn tail, Rtvagerbil-"

"So I'll get to the point if you'll just listen to me for one flipping minute!"

Galadriel folded her arms. "You have one minute. Go."

Ravager let out a sharp breath. "Fine. Listen. I saw the video. I heard what happened to your team. And...I'm ashamed to admit it, but I'll confess. I'm sorry. I was wrong about you."

"I thought you were just a clown, a jester, a freak of nature the PRT put in this city to mock me and drive me insane. A deluded child who pretends to be a hero while sticking your head so far up in the clouds that you don't remember what it means to be human. Telling everyone that I'm evil, Evil with a capital E, as if I'm Lucifer and I spend every night plotting to sacrifice babies on an altar! I'm not about that at all! I'm nothing but a virtuous capitalist giving people the harmless release they need from the system that screws-"

"Don't flatter yourself, Ravager."

"Look, fine, my point is I was wrong about you. I always promised myself that I'd show up if an Endbringer attacked us here in Indiana. But when I heard what happened to your team, it finally hit home to me what you guys do. Going to Endbringer fights once or twice a year, showing up everywhere. Here, South America, Europe, even Russia. You team usually came out okay since you were on search and rescue duty, but you were putting yourselves in the line of fire every time."

"When I saw that you guys killed Leviathan I was cheering along with everyone else. I thought, that's one less death threat hanging over my crew's head. Then I couldn't help it. I thought, I'm glad the Rat won. I'm glad she fought that killer for my sake. Then I saw the causalities, I saw all of your team's names on the list, and I thought I'm sorry they're gone. For one minute I saw you and your team as if you were part of my crew. I saw that we're all in this together."

"I'm not saying I'll quit my job. No way. I have responsibilities, promises, people I need to take care of. What I'm saying is that I'll go easy on you for a while, hold off my business until you can get new teammates and get back on your feet. And...if any of the really bad guys make a move on our town I'll offer myself and my crew to fight on your side. If you'll have us. A mini-truce against mini-Endbringers."

Pity from a villain. A disgusting farce, made more disgusting because the villain's supposedly heartfelt conversion was full of inaccuracies. Ravager had fought one A-class threat. She had no right to call them 'mini-Endbringers' when she had never fought an Endbringer herself. An offensive comparison. The difference between A- and S-class threats was day and night.

And Ravager thought her team had survived the last fifteen Endbringer attacks before Brockton
Bay with only four deaths because they were just search and rescue, because they had a cushy job? That was an insult. Search and rescue meant following the wake of destruction and charging into burning buildings, hoping the next earthquake wouldn't bring them down on your shoulders. No, it was her team's skill, teamwork, and heroic resolve that carried them through.

"Well?" said Ravager.

A drug-peddling, hostage-taking, kid-stabbing monster like Ravager belonged behind bars. That was her only rightful place in society. But...

...but Ravager's words had a small kernel of truth. With four members of her team lost in action, and no replacements in sight in the wake of Leviathan's final attack, she would be severely short-handed for the foreseeable future. She only had Mystery Missile and Dodecahedron, her fellow Protectorate heroes who held down the fort while the rest of her team went to Brockton Bay. And she had her precious Wards, of course, but she didn't want to put them at risk against high-class threats. Not after the close call she just had with Good Girl. She had kept her far away from the front lines of battle, and yet the poor girl had still lost both of her parents and come a hairs-breadth from death herself.

Yes. In the face of the next A-class threat it would be far better to let Ravager and her cronies put their criminal lives at risk, than to let her precious Wards risk their innocent ones.

Besides, she had to admit that Ravager's words held within them the smallest hint of heroism. It was a testament to the noble spirits of her departed comrades that they could kindle the spark of a hero in even a hardened villain's craven heart.

Galadriel put a grin on her face. A level six grin with a hint of asymmetry, connoting empathy with a hint of spontaneity.

"So. The villain offers a truce. Easy to suspect it's a barbed one, with venom dripping from its spines. But no matter. It is a hero's greatest joy is nurture the seeds of truth, justice, and humanity wherever they take root. Whether it be in the heart of a hero or the heart of a villain."

Ravager stared at Galadriel.

"Well, villain? Are you satisfied with your pound of flesh?" said Galadriel.

"You agreed. You actually agreed."

Galadriel folded her arms and weathered the villain's incredulity. It was only natural that a villain was surprised by an act of conciliation.

Ravager took a long moment to speak. "You know, Mouse Protector, behind your bluster and being a nutcase, you might be halfway all right." She stepped to the side, revealing more bouquets of flowers, and lifted one in her arms. "I brought flowers for the rest of the departed, too. You're not going to fry these ones, are you?"

"No. Toss to your heart's content." said Galadriel. She grinned, then kneeled and tapped the liquid metal drone on the head. "But if your flowers are a trap, Bixi here will sic the S-1000 on you. The S-1000 can't be bargained with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead."

"Affirmative. Pay your respects with dignity or be terminated." deadpanned Bixi.

The corner of Ravager's mouth turned up in the faintest hint of a smile. "I remember when your kid
pulled that line on me with his first batch of robots. Not a good memory for me, but...he would have appreciated the joke."

"Of course. It is only natural that a hero's jokes bring pain to his foes, but bring joy to them when they become his comrades in arms."

Ravager's hint of a smile grew by a hair, and she tossed the bouquet.
Jack put down his plastic fork and suppressed an expression of disgust. There wasn't any obvious reason to keep up a polite appearance - the overcrowded hospital cafeteria didn't have any people of influence he had to impress - but that was no reason to get lazy.

Panacea had been right on all counts, about his hunger to replenish his lost body mass and about the best ways of fulfilling it. He had eaten the chicken parmesean, a barely acceptable salad, the chicken parmesean again, then finally tried the eggplant dish and found it exactly as inedible as advertised. He would have to go back for another meal. The pasta was looking increasingly appealing, but Panacea had apparently given his body a twenty four hour modification to rebuild his tissue with fat and protein; it would be shameful to waste the opportunity to use his healer-tuned metabolism to get a permanent gain in muscle mass.

Hah. Two days ago he had the willpower to tear apart his limbs to hurt Leviathan. Forcing himself to eat another subpar salad should be no obstacle.

Jack made his way through the crowd to the salad bar. The cashier waved to him as he passed. The cashier had given him an odd look the first time, noticing the generic mask the PRT had given him that made it clear he was a cape, and then had given him another odd look the third time when it became clear he was going to keep returning for meal after meal. But the cashier must have chalked it up to cape business and let it pass without comment. The workload was high enough in the wake of Leviathan's attack that the employees didn't have time to indulge their idle curiosity.

By the time Jack finished paying for his salad his seat in the cafeteria had already been taken. The rest of the cafeteria was filled to capacity. He could probably leverage his status as a cape from the Leviathan battle to get someone to give up their place, but-

>> He dismounted from his motorcycle and strode into the shadows below the underpass, scanning the area for threats. Good. No unwelcome surprises. Only the boy in a plain white mask. He approached the boy and spoke. "I'm glad you decided to come-

<<

The crowd near the doors parted to reveal a tall figure in blue power armor striding toward him.

"Armsmaster." said Jack. "I'm glad to see you."

Armsmaster gave a small smile. "Jack Slash. You're looking much better than the last time I saw you."

Jack nodded. "Panacea and Good Girl do good work."

"I've reserved a small conference room for us to have a discussion." said Armsmaster. He glanced at Jack's plastic container of salad. "We can talk while you eat." He paused. "If you don't mind."

"That's fine. We have a lot to discuss." said Jack. He smiled. "We fought an Endbringer together but we've never really talked. I've been looking forward to this."

The 'conference room' was a cramped break room, barely large enough to fit a table, a few chairs, and a vending machine. He should have known. In the aftermath of the final wave, what the news reporters were calling Leviathan's 'Deathflood', hospitals had been overloaded with patients. When it came to requisitioning space in a hospital, even a Protectorate team captain's influence only went
so far.

Armsmaster stood upright, his power armor too heavy for him to sit in the chairs. Jack placed his salad on the table, then after a moment's consideration he chose to forego the food and stand as well. He needed to project confidence and power, and their height differential was large enough as it was with both of them upright.

"First things first." said Armsmaster. He reached to a compartment in the back of his armor and pulled out a slim laptop and a PRT-issue smartphone, placing them on the table. "We at the Protectorate take care of our heroes. This is a gift to you from the Protectorate to help you reconnect with your loved ones and friends from Brockton Bay, as well as the heroes you met during the battle. We're providing the same to the other Brockton Bay heroes who lost their homes and property in the attack, along with cash payments and free sessions with our employment and financial advisors. We will also provide you with access to our staff psychologists and counselors, should you request it. Should you disclose your civilian identity to our staff it will be kept strictly confidential. We have reserved a temporary room for you at the local Wards headquarters until we can help you find you more permanent accommodations."

"I appreciate it." said Jack. The laptop looked like a new model, not tinkertech but top of the line.

Armsmaster nodded. "It's the least we can do, in recognition of your accomplishments. I've rarely seen anyone match the courage and determination you displayed against Leviathan, and your actions were critical to our victory. We saved millions of lives, if not tens or hundreds of millions, by killing the Endbringer before he could carry out further attacks.

"On a more immediate note, what we accomplished together captured the public imagination and will put us in the spotlight of the media. Chief Director Costa-Brown has scheduled the two of us for a videotaped interview tomorrow morning, with the highlights to be disseminated through official channels."

He paused to let it sink in, before continuing. "In light of our success, there are ongoing discussions in the higher levels of the Protectorate and the PRT about changing our policy toward the Endbringers. One option, the one I favor and that I intend to advocate in our interview, is to use our new weapons to take the fight to the two remaining Endbringers and kill them before they have a chance to adapt. Either prepare calculated ambushes for their next appearances, or if at all possible, attack them before they approach population centers while they are in hibernation.

"After studying my video records I suspect that your power may have the range to reach the Simurgh in the thermosphere. Properly designed railguns empowered by Fletchette can do the same. From your behavior during the fight, I take it you're on board with joining forces again to kill the Endbringers?"

Jack grinned. "Absolutely."

Armsmaster smiled in return. "Good. I already have ideas for improvements. More powerful weapons, ones you can use without damaging your tissue. My workshop was destroyed in the attack so progress will be slow. It will be weeks or months before I can get a new workshop outfitted with the proper equipment. Thankfully I always back up my notes to the onboard computer." He tapped the side of his visor. "A basic step that too many Tinkers forget. I already have sketches for new weapons designs, depending on what our testing reveals about the particulars of your power."

He opened the laptop and called up a series of technical diagrams. "One design is to increase your efficiency tenfold by growing nanothorns radially, much like spokes on a wheel, such that a single
point of contact with the central shaft will allow you to project all of the 'spokes' at once. One of our biotinkers says that she can give you regenerating patches of tissue on your arms, tissue with pain receptors removed and a high density of touch receptors to help you calibrate your contact with the thorns."

"Impressive." said Jack. "You're going to collaborate with Good Girl? With the two of you working together, with you as her mentor-"

>> Armsmaster gritted his teeth. Hero could be irritatingly dense behind his nice guy persona. The man already took enough credit for his work simply by being his mentor. Accepting his offer of collaboration would only make it worse. "No, sir. With all due respect, I feel that I should stand or fall on my own merits-"

<<

"-that might be just what she needs to restore her confidence in heroism after losing so many of her teammates. I've given her permission to give me augmentations to help me use your weapons, but she said the PRT would be reluctant to let her go forward without a veteran Tinker on board."

Armsmaster nodded. "I had envisioned us working independently, but collaboration is also a possibility, depending on the design. I have another design for a weapon that generates a continuum of thorns from nanoscale to microscale to macroscale, effectively a 'dial' allowing you to choose thorns with sharpness and density to suit your current situation. You would attack Endbringers and dangerous villains at full strength and attack common criminals with blunt-edged weapons that do concussive damage. Nonlethal means of attack should be one of your first priorities, because they're what you'll need for 97% of your takedowns as a Ward.

"I have more designs prepared, but the specifics will depend on your powers testing-"

Ha. Characteristic of the man. So focused on his newfound passion, on the goal of killing the Endbringers that finally seemed within reach, that he launched into detail about his ideas for tinkertech weapons and set all other matters aside. Didn't think to tell him about the state of Brockton Bay and the other heroes, didn't ask after his family and friends...and didn't remember that Jack was an independent cape. Armsmaster was so blinded by their successful alliance during the fight against Leviathan that he simply took it for granted that Jack would join the Wards.

Did he want to join the Wards? To join the government system? It would have advantages. Alone, his power was weak. Too many villains could defend against it, like Oni Lee and Cricket, or were effectively immune, like Hookwolf. But as a Ward his power wouldn't be weak anymore, because he would have access to Tinkers like Armsmaster and Good Girl as his allies. He would get weapons and augmentations custom-made to be compatible with his power, ones that would give him the same strength he used to hold back Leviathan.

Being a Ward would have a second advantage as well. He had found that his greatest strength was as a member of a team, as the leader of a team. Gathering information about other capes, about their powers and habits and psychology, and then turning that knowledge into plans to combine the strengths of his allies to strike at the weak points of his enemies. With the Wards he would be guaranteed to have a large team and he was confident that he would quickly rise to a leadership position...

...but all of those seeming advantages would be utterly worthless if they cost him his freedom. His means of expression. His reason for being a cape. As an eminent intellectual once said, it was better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

Admittedly, being a Ward wouldn't make him a servant. His reputation meant that he would take
on a position of power and influence, and he was confident in his ability to grow his reputation and 
rise further once he joined. But the height of his rise, the peak of his power, would be strictly 
limited. He knew it well enough from his own research, from Sophia and Parian's first-hand 
experience. The government system was designed for the sole purpose of controlling parahumans, 
putting them under the rule of non-powered humans. From the criminals sent to jail or the 
Birdcage, to Rogues made to follow restrictive business laws, to the Protectorate and Wards who 
were run by the PRT.

The PRT was the ultimate authority on every action the government heroes took, and membership 
was discriminatory, strictly limited to non-parahumans. Even if he put in years of effort, even if he 
rose to the level of the Triumvirate, even if he killed all of the Endbringers one by one, the best he 
could do was rise to a Protectorate position like Armsmaster's. A team captain, a leader of a small 
band of parahumans. And he would only be a leader in a very limited sense. Yes, he would have 
a degree of freedom in directing his team's operations in the field...but the true power - the power to 
set policy, the power to decide rewards and punishments, the power to overrule any of his 
decisions, the power to choose members of his team - would always lie in the hands of the PRT. He 
would be little more than their tool.

As distasteful as it was, he might be able to stomach being a tool of the PRT if their goals were 
aligned with his own. But the PRT's goals...they weren't entirely wrong, but their methods were 
hopelessly naive, inefficient. The case of Brockton Bay made it clear as day. His own actions, 
along with his benefactor, had cut the rot out of the city more effectively than the combined forces 
of the PRT, Protectorate, Wards, and New Wave. And the reason was simple: the heroes beholden 
to the government didn't even try to end the threat the villains posed. They were content to play a 
game of cops and robbers: respecting the 'unwritten rules', blinding themselves to information 
about the villains' civilian identities, limiting their arsenal by aiming to capture instead of kill.

It was only to be expected. The PRT had too many incentives to want the villains to exist. The PRT 
had fallen into the trap of all large organizations: starting with idealistic motives, but gradually 
coming to crave nothing but its own continued survival. The PRT needed to fight villains, yes, to 
put on a good show for the public to secure a steady flow of cash and jobs from the government. 
But if the PRT ever took the lead of vigilantes like him and ended the threats, their very reason for 
existence would disappear, and so would their money.

So the PRT only went all-out against high-class villains who threatened whole cities, while letting 
'small time' villains go free to be recurring punching bags for their heroes. Letting innocents get 
addicted to drugs, raped, and killed by scum like the ABB and the Empire, in exchange for giving 
their heroes a few more moments of glory. Exactly the opposite of his motivation as a vigilante. He 
hunted villains without money or a job or any other ulterior motive to drive him. He did it in his 
free time, at his own cost, and out of his own desire.

Worse, the PRT misled the public about their true motives. The PRT's press releases implied that 
the reason they gave mercy to villains was in the hopes that the villains would reciprocate by 
defending the city during Endbringer attacks. That was a good idea in theory. In fact, he and the 
other heroes had only been able to slay Leviathan with the assistance of scores of villains.

But the slaying of Leviathan proved once and for all that the PRT went about their campaign of 
mercy entirely backwards. It was only natural that the strong villains would be the greatest help 
against the Endbringers. The critical support against Leviathan had come from the Society, the S-
class threat strong enough to take over whole countries. And the weak local villains that the PRT 
chose to spare? They would have been mere lambs to the slaughter against an Endbringer. In the 
end, the PRT's mercy for small time villains had done nothing more than pointlessly subject 
Brockton Bay to decades of crime.
Which meant that working with the PRT would be...an extremely bitter pill to swallow. Yes, his temporary alliance with the PRT's pets was what had given him the power to fight Leviathan, had given him the thrill of fighting alongside the world's greatest heroes and making an Endbringer squirm. But he had done that as an independent cape. He wouldn't need to become the PRT's tool to fight the other two Endbringers, either.

Besides, even if he wanted to join the Wards, it wouldn't do to join them at the drop of the hat. It would be better to show reluctance, to make them try to convince him. With his new reputation, he would have leverage. He could get them to cede him concessions.

"...Ah. The Wards." Jack said at length. He frowned. "You're speaking as though I've already been inducted as a member."

Armsmaster cut off his monologue on powers testing. "After your performance against Leviathan, there's no question you'll be offered membership."

"I understand that I'll be offered membership, Armsmaster, but..."

"I didn't take you for the self-deprecating type, Jack Slash. You've proven yourself worthy. You told me you were a hero who protected innocent lives, and your actions proved it. Surely you see that joining the Wards is the best way to continue. You'll have resources and the support of a team. My personal support as well, in the likely event the PRT assigns you to my command."

"It's not that I don't want to be a hero. It's just..." Jack shook his head. "I'm still processing it all in my mind. Everyone's told me about a video, that I'm famous, but I haven't seen anything yet. All I know is that our victory came at a great cost. That my city was destroyed, everything around it, cities around it even. I don't know if I have anything left. I don't know if there are even any Wards left to join. What happened, Armsmaster?"

Armsmaster several seconds to muster a reply. "...I see. The doctors didn't think to tell you. You have the rough outline correct. I'll give you the damage assessment in broad strokes."

His voice took on a solemn and formal tone, as if he was reciting a speech from memory. Or as if he was using his visor to call up a press release and reciting it word for word.

"May 15 was a bad day. The worst day by far for an Endbringer attack on American soil. Leviathan's dying flood leveled Brockton Bay and everything else within a twenty mile radius, did severe damage to Boston and Providence, and sent floodwaters for more than one hundred miles to New York City and beyond. Our Thinkers project hundreds of thousands of deaths, with several times that number of displaced refugees.

"The casualties among our defending capes were also the worst on record in the Americas. The only means of escape from the final flood were powers granting invulnerability or high-speed flight, and we lost most of our flyers early in the battle to lightning bolts and water jets. We lost nearly seventy percent of our defending force: 23 confirmed survivors and 53 deceased. Two capes, Sponge and Weld, are missing and presumed to be alive and buried underwater in the rubble of Brockton Bay. It may be weeks before we can locate them to get them out.

"The casualties were also the worst on record in terms of the quality of the heroes we lost. In most Endbringer fights the strongest heroes have the best chance to survive, but in Brockton Bay Leviathan used new weapons to attack our heroes before they knew how to defend themselves. We lost our leader, Legend, and team captains from seven other major cities..."
Our heroes have won their greatest victory in the war against the Endbringers. But we lost many of our best heroes and team captains, the leader of the Protectorate, Legend, among them. The At what cost victory? In memoriam thread is for mourning and for piecing together the picture of who survived.

This thread is for looking to the future. Where will the Protectorate go from here?

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- **The_Easy_Winner**
  Armsmaster should be the new leader! He'll replace Legend on the Triumvirate. Imagine Alexandria dual-wielding Armsmaster's mega-halberds. Badass!

- **ozypandias**
  @Ice_Nine: Eidolon should be the leader because he's strongest? Don't be naive. Strength and leadership are entirely different things.

  No, Eidolon should be the leader because he has the best powers for leadership. He spends his time in Houston using his phenomenal cosmic power to stop bank robberies. What a waste. Imagine if he was the leader and sat in an office all day letting the other capes protect him for once. He would be free to use three A-class Thinker powers at once in killer combos. Predicting crime and disasters, optimizing hero recruitment and allocation, fixing the bureaucracy while he's at it. After a month with him at the helm the Protectorate would shed its cruft and become a well-oiled lifesaving machine.

- **Yael Schmitz** (Cape Parent)
  Alexandria would be an excellent new leader. Her team has reduced organized crime in Los Angeles to almost nil and most of her Wards have grown up to be fine young men and women and great heroes in their own right. She has exactly the work ethic and solid values that we want to instill in all the heroes of the Protectorate.

  So many of you raised Eidolon and Armsmaster as choices but I can't see it at all. Look at their interviews and their approval ratings, then compare them to Legend's. They are good heroes but their personalities don't fit the position.

- **CapeJunkie112358** (Veteran Member)
  @The_Easy_Winner: Nah. Armsmaster's not Triumvirate material. If his armor gave him flight and better damage resistance...maybe.

  @Yael Schmitz: Right. Leadership is about personality, not raw power. Legend was the leader because he was a great guy who everyone loved. Armsmaster is ****ing hardcore but he's got the personality and people skills of a brick wall. Alexandria and Eidolon are smart, even wise, and Alexandria knows how to handle people to get things done...but they're not nice. The next leader will be someone like Chevalier or Exalt. Charismatic to inspire the troops and down-to-earth enough that you'd like to have them as company at your dinner table.

  Hell, if you want to put a Tinker in charge, pick Dragon. She's a great hero with Triumvirate level power and better people skills than 99% of human beings. Why isn't anyone bringing her up as a
candidate? She'd be the easy pick if the laws didn't discriminate against AIs. If that injustice makes your blood boil too, sign my petition!

- **Lost_Luster_2001**
  Alexandria is the greatest hero of our generation and the only real candidate for the new leader. Alexandria took the lead in founding the Protectorate back in the nineties. Everyone knows that she has always been the brains behind the Triumvirate. Legend for his public face, Eidolon for raw power, and Alexandria for the brains. For her, becoming the next leader is simply stepping into her rightful place. She'll keep the Protectorate running without missing a beat.

@CapeJunkie112358: People like you are part of the problem. You admit that Alexandria is the woman with the best qualifications, the power and people skills and wisdom for the job. Then you somehow you come up with flimsy EXCUSES why less qualified men like Chevalier and Exalt should take charge. Exalt? Really? Your one "argument" is that Alexandria isn't NICE enough. Oh, dear, I'm so sorry that she wears black, and that she says what she means, and that she executes vicious murderers with her bare hands instead of using pretty laser beams and shiny swords. I'm afraid I can't hear your complaints over the sound of Alexandria kicking an Endbringer's a** while your great "charismatic leaders" flailed ineffectually with their powers and then flew away into the sky because they weren't accomplishing jack.

I'm sick of people dismissing Alexandria with the tired double standard that women have to be NICE while men get a free pass. It's why people like you constantly push to put more men in charge and fetishize a fake woman like Dragon instead of giving REAL women an opportunity to advance.

- **cheesefan17** (Unverified Cape)
  @CapeJunkie112358: Yeah! We need our leader to be inspiring like Chevalier or Mouse Protector!

- **Index** (Veteran Member) (Archivist)
  Whoever becomes the new leader, they should put all the new anti-Endbringer heroes on the same team. Get them all to train together 24/7 so they can kill Behemoth in the next attack. It wouldn't even be hard to arrange. Keep Fletchette in New York. Have Armsmaster replace Legend as the New York team captain and bring Jack Slash with him as a Ward. They can bring one of the healers too, Panacea maybe, to keep them in good shape.

@cheesefan17: NOT Mouse Protector, dear God! Have you ever talked to the woman? Can you imagine her giving the report to Congress?

- **Besigue**
  @Index: No way the PRT is going to keep Fletchette on a normal Wards team. Do you want to take the risk that the Endslayer gets shot by some random crackhead in a drug bust?

Fletchette's going to be under guard 24/7 until the next Endbringer attack. Chevalier becomes overall leader, Prism takes over for Legend in New York, Armsmaster replaces Myrrdin in Chicago and brings the rest of the Brockton Bay heroes with him. I'll bet you a hundred bucks that's how they do it.

User was warned for this post; prediction markets are not permitted. - **Fafniring_About** (moderator)

Armsmaster dropped his formal tone, spoke with more life in his voice.

"Our heroes of Brockton Bay did remarkably well. A fifty percent survival rate, 12 out of 24
defending capes confirmed alive. With Aegis and the New Wave we had an unusual number of heroes resilient enough to survive to the end of the battle and capable of high-speed flight to escape the flood."

"We were saved by Aegis, then?" said Jack. "Or Alexandria? I'd like to know who to give my gratitude for the rescue."

"No. One of the Society's flying suits."

Armstmaster opened the laptop on the table and called up a video-

The video was taken by a fisheye camera mounted on Armstmaster's visor, the view sharp and clear despite the dim lighting, and tinted in odd colors - probably an enhancement for night vision. On the rooftop next to Armstmaster's feet was a pathetic wreck of a creature, face with too many eyes and mandibles and red, raw scales clustered over the stubs of its many limbs. Himself, after his transformation and his sacrifices. He hadn't been feeling any pain at the time, hadn't realized he looked that bad.

Watching was like returning to Brockton Bay again at the end of the battle. A glowing blue ripple passed through the air above the bay. Leviathan's portal opened and his massive wall of water began to flow. Only seconds remained before it would crush them all.

Armstmaster's point of view shifted madly as he looked for any resource he could use, anything to save them. His gaze landed on Alexandria, flying straight into the air with Fletchette. Occupied evacuating their highest-priority asset. Then Eidolon, who floated in the air with his arms folded, seemingly impassive, a cloud of multicolored sparks gathering around him. Shadowy tendrils like tree branches stretched out from his body, spearing through the water towards the portal. Occupied trying to contain the disaster.

Finally Armstmaster's view zoomed in on a flock of a half dozen Society flying suits making their escape, most of them carrying their non-suited allies. Their suits weren't designed for long-range flight, it seemed, and they were having trouble gaining altitude fast enough to escape the wave.

Two of the suits veered off course toward Armstmaster. The hero picked up Jack in his arms and held him to the side, coordinating their rescue. One suit to carry Armstmaster, the other to carry Jack. The suits hit them full force.

After frantic seconds where the viewpoint moved wildly in all directions, the view stabilized. The suits had adjusted their trajectories to move upward and away from the wave. For nearly a minute the suit continued to ascend, barely keeping pace with the oncoming wall of water. The water grew closer, forty feet away, then thirty feet, then twenty feet-

Then the water disappeared. Jack realized they must be far in the air, nearly as high as the clouds. Armstmaster's view tilted downward and showed what had become of Brockton Bay. The city was simply gone, drowned as thoroughly as if it had been transported to the seabed. The portal seemed to be slowly shrinking with time, either through Eidolon's efforts or from its power source running dry, but it was still gushing water at a tremendous rate.
Armsmaster's view shifted again, back to the sky this time. Zooming in to look at small specks in the air, the other flyers, counting the survivors...

Jack stared at the screen, transfixed, as it finally struck home. It really was all gone. Everything he had known. His home, his school, the barbershop where he got his haircuts. All of his friends from school, probably, or nearly all. Everyone who went to the Endbringer shelters, for certain, they wouldn't be able with withstand the pressure. Nearly all of the capes he had met in the battle, the ones who didn't have flying allies to save them. Even...

Jack tore his gaze from the screen and looked to Armsmaster. "Who else made it? The other heroes, the rogue capes?"

"The New Wave evacuated their surviving members." said Armsmaster. "Glory Girl and Lady Photon rescued Panacea and Flashbang. Brandish turned into her energy ball form and let the wave hit her full force. She survived but was dragged underwater for miles and ended up in Providence." He paused. "What's left of Providence. She's remaining there for the time being to help the survivors with search and rescue.

"For my Protectorate and Wards, Aegis evacuated Vista despite severe injuries for both of them from the water jets. They're in this hospital recuperating, eighth floor. Battery and Shadow Stalker were evacuated by the Society, along with the rogue Parian. They're in Boston now."

A broad grin spread on his face as an undercurrent of tension dissipated in an instant. Both of his teammates had survived the massacre. Far better then he had any right to expect. He struggled to stop himself from showing too much relief on his face. As far as Armsmaster knew, Shadow Stalker and Parian were nothing more than acquaintances he had met for a few minutes before the Endbringer attack.

"That's...that's a great relief. Shadow Stalker was my inspiration to become a hero. I was afraid I lost her before I had a chance to truly know her." Jack paused. "The Society sent a flying suit to evacuate her? Why? Because she was the one who trapped the Endbringer?"

"No. One of the Society capes, the projectile-launcher who was helping Fletchette attack Leviathan, was hit by the first lightning strike and taken to our hospital for healing. When the final flood approached the hospital he evacuated the surviving capes by shooting them into the sky like bullets. A method of last resort. Most of the capes died on impact when they landed, or survived the impact but drowned before they could swim to solid ground, but some had powers that let them survive."

Ah. Shadow Stalker's gaseous form, Battery's temporary super strength and speed, and... "Parian? I didn't think she could survive a fall from the sky."

"Apparently she wrapped herself in cloth and then used her power in mid-flight to sew it into a parachute."

Jack laughed. Wonderful. When he first met Parian she had been afraid of combat, afraid of using her powers for anything more than her fashion career and her part-time job creating glorified anamatronic dolls. He had needed to coax her every step of the way. To do her thinking for her, to come up with ways to use her power in combat, to practically hold her hand as she made her first kills. Now she had taken his lessons to heart better than he had ever expected, becoming a battle-hardened veteran in a single day. A hero with the courage to fight Leviathan, with the skill to occupy him for more than a minute with only her fabric constructs for protection, with the cool head and creativity to improvise a parachute while falling from the sky. Absolutely perfect.
Armsmaster typed on the laptop for a moment and called up a photograph captioned "Victorious heroes (and villains) return from battle." It showed a view from the top of a building on the outskirts of Boston, the streets covered in floodwaters more than ten feet high. Swimming through the water was the Society's massive beast, more than forty five feet long now from head to tail. The water around the beast was suffused with a cloud of deep red - blood leaking from its wounds? The beast carried a strange tableau rooted to its back. A platform colored with a black-and-white checkerboard pattern, centered around an elaborately set dining table that looked like it belonged in a five star restaurant. Presumably a creation of the Society's landscape-warper, the one who had imprisoned Leviathan in the crystal bowl.

The heroes and villains were sitting around the dining table, having a conversation over slices of a cake which they had somehow acquired. The villains sat on one side of the table. Two women in Society uniforms, and a third woman in a frilly purple dress. Next to her was a...shape that was presumably a Society member but was so warped that it was hard to tell where it ended and its surroundings began. Parts of it seemed to be missing, limbs dissolving into fractals or fading out of existence.

On the other side of the table sat Battery, Shadow Stalker, and Parian, waterlogged but intact. Battery was fiddling with her tinkertech backpack, sparing a glance upward to look at the half-collapsed buildings around them. Perhaps meeting the gaze of citizens who had survived the flood. Shadow Stalker had shifted the bottom part of her mask out of the way to eat a slice of cake, and seemed to be in the midst of an animated conversation with the Society members. Parian had cluttered the tabletop around her with bundles of her cloth and was using her power to sew them into small dolls. Jack tapped a key on the laptop to zoom in. An elf, an octopus, two girls in frilly dresses, a vampire, and a miniature Leviathan. Gifts to the Society members as thanks for the rescue? Next to Parian was the giant, pale form of Narwhal, the leader of the Guild. Narwhal sat with an awkward posture, her blood-soaked torso covered in layers of forcefields, as though her power was the only thing holding her body together. Parian was using a fork to feed Narwhal a small piece of cake.

Such a bizarre mixture of devastation and normality, and in the midst of it his allies were making themselves known to some of the most influential capes in the world, heroes and villains alike. Absolutely perfect, once again. Jack smiled, and another laugh sprang to his lips-

>> "I'm saying it's pointless, Dragon." said Armsmaster. "You of all people should understand. Hero lost his life in the line of duty, fighting a villain to save civilians. We should honor him by saving lives, not by standing in an empty field and giving formulaic speeches."

"Your focus on saving lives is commendable, Armsmaster," said Dragon, "but remember that saving lives is a means to an end, not an end in itself. What do you save a man's life for?"

Armsmaster opened his mouth to answer, but Dragon continued. "You save his life so he can live his life. So that he can live together with his friends and family, so that he can celebrate with them during their triumphs and comfort them during their tragedies. Now that Hero is gone, the best thing you can do for him is to be there in his place for his loved ones, to support them in this time of tragedy. To help bring back the life in their eyes and let them feel joy again. Much like I've been doing..."

She trailed off, but her implication was clear. Much like she had been doing for him...

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Of course, it wouldn't be perfect for Armsmaster. Jack couldn't stop himself from smiling, but he managed to dampen his smile and turn it into an expression of concern. "It's good news to hear that they survived. The rest of your teammates, did they..."

Armsmaster paused. "They're the only survivors."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know them well. I can only imagine what it must feel like to lose your long-time comrades-"

>> Armsmaster stood at the edge of the small plot of land, avoiding the other guests at the funeral. This was the part he hated the most. He had already tortured himself enough about the loss of his mentor, about his own mistakes in the battle, reviewing his recording over and over again. It was the curse of a Tinker to have mistakes that were always fixable, to always a reason to regret. Then the funeral had forced him to relive that regret when he gave his speech and spoke to the man's family. That was bad enough. Now he had to relive it again and again every time another guest approached to give him their 'sympathies'-

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"-so I won't do any more than give you my condolences."

Armsmaster nodded stiffly. "Thank you." His head drooped and he spent a moment in silence. Then he raised his head and spoke. "We can still rebuild. I'm making the case to keep our team together and start over in a city where a new vacancy has opened up. Myself and Battery for the Protectorate, and Aegis, Vista, and Shadow Stalker for the Wards. Parian has expressed her interest in joining the Protectorate as well. I'll be interviewing her when I fly to Boston in ten hours."

Armsmaster gave Jack an evaluating look, then continued. "My team as it stands is strong in close- and mid-ranged combat and movement abilities, but weak in long-ranged combat. You would make an excellent addition, and that's without taking into consideration the equipment I can provide you."

"I'm glad you think highly of me, Armsmaster." said Jack. "I wish I could give you a decision now, but there's something more important for my future that I need to resolve first. The most important thing." He leaned forward. "I heard that you've been searching for surviving family members of the Brockton Bay capes. Do you...do you have any news for me? About my family?"
"We will be landing at Boston General Hospital in three minutes." came Dragon's soft voice through the cabin. "Please collect your belongings and prepare to exit the craft."

Jack leaned back in his seat. There was no need for him to bother. His only possessions fit in the backpack the PRT had given him. A few of his best knives they had managed to salvage from the shreds of his old clothes. His wallet. The PRT issued laptop and smartphone, to replace his own phone that had been damaged in the battle. A few other odds and ends. Perhaps most importantly for the next few days, five hundred dollars in small bills and a stash of food and bottled water he had bought with his remaining meal tickets before leaving the hospital. Boston had been hit much harder than New York, and food and clean water were in scarce supply in most of the city. The PRT said they had arranged for his food and lodgings but it was better not to take any chances.

Armsmaster was next to him, sitting painfully upright in his power suit. He twitched at the sound of Dragon's voice, waking from his slumber. He swept his gaze over the other heroes in the cabin, then nodded and began tapping his fingers at his sides, apparently typing notes into his power suit's onboard computer. Admirable, in a way. The man never let a moment go to waste.

On the other side of the cabin the healers were still napping. After spending so much time healing patients in the last sixty hours, it would take more than a soft voice to wake them. Panacea lay with her head on Lady Photon's lap, shifting restlessly in her sleep. Lady Photon had brought a book for the flight but she hadn't read a word. Instead she had ignored everyone else in the cabin and spent the duration of the flight silently contemplating Panacea's sleeping face.

Beside them were Mouse Protector and Good Girl, both of them asleep, Good Girl's head leaning against Mouse Protector's shoulder. Before they left New York Good Girl had been hustled off to an undisclosed location to give Fletchette a checkup and to tell the doctors how to take care of her. She had come back with a backpack full of mechanical parts and electronics, and she had spent a few minutes before liftoff tinkering them into the partly-completed skeleton of a robot of some kind. It was in the rough shape of a large rodent or a small dog, with surgical tools strapped to its paws and syringes on its multiple tails.

With the other heroes exhausted by taking part in the relief efforts, he had sat through the flight with only the four PRT officers for company, but they hadn't been in much better condition to be conversationalists. One of the officers, younger than the others, had talked excitedly with Jack at first, praising him for his heroism against Leviathan and asking him question after question about his powers, until the man's older partner scolded him and made him stop. The young one had gone quiet for a minute, and when Jack checked on him he found that he had fallen asleep in his seat. Now the officers were stirring, strapping on their foam launchers and their other nonlethal weaponry to prepare for landing.

The rear doors of the craft opened to reveal a gray rooftop surrounded by the Boston skyline. Jack blinked. They had landed without feeling a hint of deceleration. An advantage of having an AI as the pilot.

"We are now at Boston General Hospital." said Dragon, in a louder voice to wake up the sleepers. "I repeat, we are now at Boston General Hospital. Healers, please be aware. The six most critical cases have been brought up to the landing pad for immediate healing. Expected survival time without your intervention: five minutes."

Panacea and Good Girl rubbed the sleep out of their eyes and quickly came to their senses at the
mention of their new patients. They hurried out of the craft, helped along by their adult escorts.

Jack followed them outside. A crowd of doctors and nurses swarmed around a set of stretchers, each one flanked by wheeled racks of medical equipment. Towering over them was Narwhal, holding herself upright with layers of forcefields, her torso and the right side of her body thickly wrapped in bandages. A priority for healing because of the help she could give to the relief efforts.

Armsmaster put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "The Protectorate HQ is across the street. Ask the PRT officers for directions. I'll meet you in three hours and thirty minutes to prepare for our interview with the Chief Director."

"Right." said Jack. Armsmaster had already turned away, striding to the edge of the rooftop and leaping off the side. It seemed that power armor meant never having to wait for the elevator when you were in a hurry.

Jack walked to the edge of the rooftop and looked over the city. The streets were still flooded, water level feet deep in places. Even places where the water was only inches deep were often impassable, cluttered with the wrecks of countless cars, some with bodies still inside. The buildings in the heart of the city were all intact but in the distance he could see miles of damaged buildings and rubble where the city turned into the suburbs.

A shape flew into the sky and headed into the distance, toward one of the worst-hit areas. Narwhal had been healed and was leaving to join the relief efforts.

Jack glanced at Panacea and Good Girl hard at work and gave up on any hope of getting a word in with them for the next twenty four hours. He made his way around the medical hubbub to the elevators and pressed the button for the ground floor.

The lobby of the hospital was overflowing with people, the injured and their families waiting for medical attention. Maps had been put up on the walls with scrawled notes saying which places in the city had fresh water, electricity, and cell phone service. Very few so far, mostly concentrated around the area he was in now. The very reason he was here, in fact.

Jack left the hospital and waded through six inches of water in his borrowed boots, making his way across the street to the local Protectorate HQ. Their power was provided by a generator maintained by a local Tinker, and they were providing electricity for the hospital and for nearby buildings that were being used as improvised shelters for the injured and dispossessed.

The HQ was surrounded by PRT uniforms and vans. Jack showed the PRT uniforms the temporary ID that Armsmaster had given him. One of the men nodded. "Jack Slash. Your appointment is for conference room C. In through the double doors - you'll need to swipe your badge - then take the elevator up to the second floor and make a left."

Jack nodded and turned to go, but the PRT uniform gestured to hold his attention. "I saw you on the video. My uncle passed away when Leviathan hit Seattle. What you did in Brockton Bay, it makes it all worth it, all my time behind a mask supporting you guys. Damn good show."

Jack grinned. "Thank you. I do my best."

He swiped his ID card on the and made his way to the elevators. Shadow Stalker and Parian were living in this building, along with Armsmaster's teammate Battery. They had been helping out with the relief efforts in Boston, parly to give them a convenient excuse to delay the inevitable media attention and interviews until they had time to compose themselves after the disaster.
As Jack entered the conference room, though, this allies weren't the ones he was looking for.

"Dad." he said.

He moved to take off his mask, but was already being drawn into a fierce hug.

"Jacob!"

"Hey Dad," he said, a brilliant smile on his face. "Looks like I did a little better against Leviathan than I thought."

"Jacob, Jacob, Jacob, ..."

After a minute Danny drew back from the hug and looked at him, eyes filled with concern and scanning his face, taking in every detail. "It's really you, isn't it? You look different."

Jacob took off his mask and smiled. "The healers had to use their powers to get me back to normal. One of them thought I looked like Johnny Depp. I had to stop them before they went overboard."

Danny gently touched his cheek, then moved his hand to feel the shape of his face. He smiled. "It looks good, Jacob. It's...different. Not bad, but different."

"I feel good too. Better than ever. Fighting Endbringers comes with a world class health plan."

Danny's forehead wrinkled, but he still couldn't take the smile off his face. "You said you were going out to get the lay of the land. To save kids from the Merchants if you saw a crime in progress and you were certain you would be safe. The next time I see you you've killed an Endbringer." Jacob grinned. "Sorry Dad. I got a little caught up in the moment."

"I'll bet. I saw you on that video. Everyone's saying you're the next great hero. Jack Slash. I...I'm not sure what to think about that."

"You're proud of me, I hope. I told you I'd be a hero."

"Of course I'm proud of you! Of course! I'm just...still processing it, that's all. This is a big deal, kiddo."

Jacob winced.

"Sorry. I mean, this is a big deal, Jacob. You can't expect a father to watch his son cutting himself." Danny swallowed. "Cutting off his arms without getting upset. I thought your power was safe. You showed me in the basement, you always held your knives by the handle. Why were you cutting yourself on the video? How did you even know that would work? Have you been cutting yourself in secret, ly-, I mean, not telling me-"

"No! No, no, Dad, nothing like that at all. Armstrong's nanothorns are special. They're not attached to his halberd, they're hovering next to it electromagnetically. I had to touch them, it was the only way I could use my power." Jacob smiled. "Besides, it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked. Armstrong gave me painkillers, and I knew our healers would fix me up afterward. I made a point of meeting the healers at the PRT headquarters before the fight to confirm their abilities. I knew exactly how far I could push myself. Trust me, Dad, I covered all the bases."

Danny pursed his lips. "That's reassuring, Jacob, but it's not a matter of how much I trust you. I know you're a cape expert, and it's good that you took precautions, but with all those powers flying
around who knows what they'll do. I was so worried about you. On the video when the cape used that...device on you, my God, I couldn't bear to watch. The label on the video said it was a 'healing transformation' but that's what the Society said, who knows if it's true. I thought you were going to die-

"It's fine, Dad. We won. We won, and I'm okay, and we'll be fine."

Danny let out a breath. "Right. That's what matters." He gave a weak laugh. "I had a whole speech memorized to give you about how proud I am of what you've done. About how you've become a great hero like you always said you would. Then the first thing I do is start nagging at you."

"It's fine. I know you're only doing it because you care for me. I was worried about you too. I was so afraid that you didn't make it, that I wouldn't have any way to find you if you did."

"I almost didn't find you. Last night I found the internet site the Protectorate set up for families to get in contact with capes. I used their anonymous contact function, I told them I was in Boston and set up an appointment. But when I got here...

"You're not going to believe this, Jacob." said Danny, leaning forward. "When I got here they told me Jack Slash's parents were already here! Parents, plural! There was a couple, a man and a woman who saw your video and were trying to pass themselves off as your parents!"

Jacob chuckled, then nearly doubled over in laughter. "Wow. I must have really made it to the big leagues if I'm already getting impostor parents."

"It was a miracle I didn't tear them a new one right then and there. There were PRT officers all around us and I was afraid of getting kicked out as the impostor. I couldn't tell them my name, I knew you didn't want me to give away your identity. Luckily they had a connection to the computer cape, Dragon, and it used a program to say that I was the most likely candidate to be your father. '91% probability', it said. Uh, it used a face and body recognition program but it said the scans were confidential. I hope you don't feel betrayed that I let them-

"No, the healers at the hospital know what I look like, too. I don't know how far their confidentiality goes, but we'll have to trust them. It's well worth it to see you again, Dad. What happened to you after the fight? You drove straight to Boston?"

Danny took a few moments to gather his thoughts before telling his story, then nodded.

"Right. I took your warning seriously, what you said about Kyushu and Newfoundland, so I drove as far away as I could. I made it to the outskirts of Boston when the big wave hit. I saw it coming in the rearview mirror. The traffic was jammed, so I ran out of the car into the nearest building that looked like it could take it, a big office building. The wave broke the windows and flooded the building so we all ran up the stairs and waited on the roof until the flood was over.

"I was so worried about you, Jacob. It was like the end of the world, like the great flood in the bible. I thought I had lost you. If the wave was that big in Boston then there was nothing left of Brockton Bay. No house, no Dockworker's association, no...no Dockworkers. I don't know who made it. One of the men on the roof said the heroes had flying and teleporting capes to escape the water. So I tried to make myself believe it. You said you were trying to make friends with other capes, so I told myself you found a friend who flew you to safety.

"The next day the water level went down enough that we could get out of the building. I found a place they were turning into a shelter for the other...well, refugees. They had a satellite internet connection and they told us the news that the heroes killed Leviathan. Some people were excited,
cheering and celebrating, but most of us were too exhausted to do anything. All I could think was that we had lost everything, our home, our city, but if the heroes won the fight then they could have saved you. That you could still be alive.

"That night the people running the shelter found the video the Society put online and played it on a big screen. When I saw you on the video, and you were sticking your hand into that thing, I...I can't even tell you what it felt like to me, as a father. Seeing you fighting on a battlefield before you're even done with high school, screaming in pain when I couldn't be there to help you-"

"I understand, Dad. I know what you must have felt seeing that, but I told you I covered-"

Danny shook his head. "No. It's fine. I wanted you to understand how I felt at first, so that you'll understand what I saw next. I saw them cheering for you, Jacob. Hundreds of people in the shelter. They all loved you. Every time you cut yourself to attack Leviathan they were urging you on. When Leviathan shot at you they gasped and when you dodged the shots they applauded.

"That was when I realized that I had only been thinking about my own worries. About whether you were hurt, whether you survived. I hadn't been thinking about what you really wanted.

"You always wanted to be a hero. Now in front of my eyes I saw that you'd done it. You were their champion. Most people never fulfill their childhood dreams, or if they do it takes them a lifetime. But now you've done it. You're a hero, and the world is with you cheering by your side. And that's what I really want to say. I'm here with you, cheering you on too.

"I know you think I've been overprotecting you, trying to keep you for myself instead of letting you find your own path as a hero. The truth is that I was always trying to help you reach your dream. I'm your father, of course I'll support you in your dreams, and it's...what Annette would have wanted too. But you were taking so many risks, rushing out into danger every night when you had your whole life ahead of you. All I wanted was for you to take it easy, to finish high school for goodness sake, to learn from other heroes and stay out of danger until you got experience to stand on your own.

"But you didn't take a lifetime to fulfill your dream. You reached out and grabbed it in a single night. I'm proud of you, Jacob, so much I can't even say it. I don't know where you'll go from here, where we'll go, but I'll support you in whatever you need."

Jacob took a deep breath. "Dad, I..." He shook his head. He couldn't find the right words. So he did the only thing he could. He gave up on speaking, and wrapped Danny in a hug. "I love you Dad."

"I love you too, kiddo."

For once Jacob didn't wince at the pet name, managed to turn it into a smile. "I love you too, old man."

After a moment they separated.

"Thank you, Dad." said Jacob. "No matter what I said to you before, I've always known I can count on you for support." He paused, gave Danny an evaluating look. "Hey, Dad. Speaking of supporting each other, it looks like you'll finally have to get a cell phone."

Danny flinched, looked at the floor. "You think so, huh."

"Yeah. We almost lost each other because I didn't have a way to call you. Besides, we don't have a house anymore. We can't get a landline."

A pained look passed over Danny's face. He continued to study the floor, but after a moment he nodded. "Okay. You're right. I've waited long enough."

Jacob grinned. "Finally. Congratulations, Dad. You're joining the twenty first century."

"Yeah. I'll have to keep a closer eye on you now, won't I, big shot hero?" said Danny. He raised his eyes to meet Jacob's. "Now that I know what you're truly capable of."

"Yes..." Jacob saw something in his eyes, hesitated. "Something on your mind, Dad?"

"I'm just thinking about how well you held up in the fight." said Danny. "I'm amazed at what you did. People were dying all around you, you were screaming in pain, and you ignored it all to keep dishing out the hurt to Leviathan. Most people act like the Endbringers are forces of nature, as if the best you can do is drive him away. But from what you did in that video, what you said, how you acted...from the very beginning you wanted to kill him."

"Yes. Of course, Dad. You know I'm not a fatalist. There's no such thing as an unbeatable enemy. The only way to protect the world from a monster like that is to end the threat for good."

"I know, Jacob, but I'm not talking about what you did. It's why you did it. You and the other heroes were all trying to kill Leviathan, but what I remember most of all is your face. You looked so different from the others. You were cutting yourself so badly you were screaming, I can't imagine how painful it must have been, but every time you hurt the Endbringer you kept smiling."

Jacob laughed. Yes, it was clear as day in the video if you knew what to look for. No one else he had spoken to had picked up on it, they probably thought he had been grimacing from the pain, but Dad knew him too well to miss it.

"Yes. I surprised myself." said Jacob. "It's what I told you on the phone before the fight. I was afraid my power wouldn't be enough to hurt Leviathan. When I found out that I could make a difference, that I could hurt Leviathan and protect the city, I couldn't help but smile. It meant that I finally got to be a hero. That's what kept me going through the pain. Every time I used my power to hurt him I knew we had a chance to win."

Danny pursed his lips. "Yeah. I could see that. It's just...that didn't look like a smile from protecting someone, a smile of relief. It looked like a different kind of pleasure. Like you liked hurting it. I've seen that same smile on you before, sometimes. When you were young, a lot of times, when you thought I wasn't looking. At James' birthday party, when you were thirteen. And...on that security camera video, the one that got you suspended from-

"Dad, are you seriously comparing an Endbringer to those punks? Look, that's different. I told you, I learned my lesson that time. Do you think that killing Leviathan will make me get reckless and start pulling stupid stunts like that again? Have a little trust in your son."

"It's not that. Listen, Jacob. Annette and I talked about this when you were young. We knew you always had potential for greatness. We knew it was our job to teach you to use your potential for great good deeds. She was better at it than I was. I remember when she helped you find videos of heroes in cape fights, the ones the PRT tried to take down. I thought it was too violent for your age. Now that I've seen what you've accomplished with your powers, I guess it was training in a way.

"Maybe you don't want to admit it, Jacob, but I think the part of you that let you do that crap in school is the same part that let you keep fighting through the pain to kill Leviathan. You weren't just trying to protect us, you wanted to make him suffer for the insult of attacking you. And listen, Jacob, I'm glad for that. I'm glad you're using your potential for a good cause, something we can
all be proud of. It's what Annette would have said, too, if she was still here with us.

"It's just..." Danny picked his words with care. "Jumping targets from a bunch of schoolyard punks to an Endbringer - that seems too far to go in one night. Are you sure you haven't been doing things I should know about? Things you might have...forgotten to tell me?"

Jacob's eyes were wide. He fought to contain his reactions, to keep a calm face. No, wait, to keep an appropriately offended face. Ah, fuck. It didn't matter. Dad already suspected something was amiss.

If he was going to tell his Dad the truth this would be the best moment to do it. They were both fresh with exhilaration from their reunion and he was riding high on his new reputation as a great hero. If he handled this properly his Dad would be probably be willing to forgive the sins he committed in the past. There was a good chance he could be argued into seeing them as less than sins, perhaps even as virtues. Family support in his quest would be invaluable, giving him a source of equipment, cover stories, and alibis. And if he didn't tell Dad now, and the truth came out later, then his lies today would be another strike against him.

...but he couldn't do it, because he couldn't tell him here here. Jacob glanced at one of the light fixtures in the room, the model that Sophia had told him the PRT used to hide cameras for surveillance. No matter what claims the PRT made about confidentiality, he couldn't trust them to overlook anything he said about murder. And it wasn't just himself he had to worry about. The truth would implicate Sophia and Sabah, and that would open up another can of worms.

Even worse, if he wasn't careful with his words, he might reveal the existence of their 'anonymous benefactor', who he was now certain was the Society. An easy deduction: their benefactor 'killed' Bakuda and then the Society's video listed Bakuda as one of their citizens. Apparently his crusade against the villains of Brockton Bay fit into the Society's agenda, into their secret project that was so important to humanity that it attracted Leviathan's personal attention.

Which meant that letting slip his benefactor's existence would be a monumentally bad idea. The PRT wouldn't be eager to forgive him for associating with the Society, however unknowingly, and he doubted the Society would forgive him if he revealed information about their projects to the PRT. Even if the PRT was willing to cover it up, it was blackmail material they could hold over his head, to give them leverage against him. They could force him to join the Wards, put him and his allies under surveillance, perhaps even force them into the dangerous position of acting as double agents against the Society.

"No, Dad. I understand why you're concerned, but when I promised to tell you about my adventures as a cape, I meant it. Trust me, Dad. I was surprised as you were to find out that I could keep working through the pain. I didn't know I had it in me." He smiled. "I'm thankful I did, though. You might be right about Mom helping me learn how to fight as a cape."

Danny studied his face for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. I'm trusting you on this one, Jacob. And listen, no matter whether you were doing extracurricular activities I dont know about, remember that you can always count on me for whatever you need to help you reach your dreams. That's the important thing. I love you no matter what."

"Thanks, Dad. You're the best." said Jacob. "I'll have to take you up on that offer, as soon as I figure out what my dreams are these days."

Danny blinked. "You don't want to work with the other heroes? Join the Wards?"

"That was what I thought at first, but everything's changed so fast. I'm a celebrity now. I'm going to
do an interview with Armsmaster and the Chief Director in a few hours. It would be easy to go with the flow and join the Wards, but I'm still not sure what I really want to do."

"I thought it was what you always wanted." said Danny "You could join Armsmaster's team. I'm not an expert on cape fights, but it looked like you two had chemistry together. We could move to follow him to his new city."

Jacob rubbed his chin. "Joining the Wards is attractive, yes, but I'm not sure it's best for me. I wanted to be a hero but I'm already a hero now. I helped kill an Endbringer. I can't really go any higher than that. And my power, the way I used it with Armsmaster...you can't use that against criminals. It's incredibly lethal, they'd be disintegrated in an instant.

"I might be able to get the best of both worlds. Join the other heroes against big threats like Endbringers when we need lethal force, but follow your advice about my priorities. Finish high school, make friends, live my life. I spent the last years training non-stop to be a hero. Now that I've succeeded in my dream of being a hero, I can start thinking about new dreams."

Danny sighed. "It sounds like a good plan, Jacob. I hope I can give you that option."

"You think it won't work?" said Jacob

"I'll have to find a way to support you. I guess I've lost my job. No Brockton Bay Dockworker's association anymore. I'll be looking for a new job, but...you know what happens to the economy after Endbringer attacks, and this was a bad one. We lost all our property, too. Our house, our car, the jewelry I kept in our safe deposit box. My bank account, too. I did my banking with the Credit Union of Brockton Bay and now they're gone. My account's FDIC insured, but my banking records were in the car when it got wiped out by the flood. With all the other refugees here, I don't know how long it'll take to get my account straightened out and get our money back. I don't want to pressure you into going into the Wards, but..."

So stupid. He hadn't even thought of their finances. He had always left them to Dad, taken their money for granted.

"The Wards give a good salary. You're right." said Jacob. He managed a faint smile. "You're saying you want me to be the man of the house."

Danny returned his smile. "I knew you'd surpass me someday, Jacob. You can hire me as your manager. A publicist, maybe, to set the record straight about the 'great hero' when the next fake parents crawl out of the woodwork."

Jacob laughed. "I'll consider it. It sounds like the plot of a bad comedy, though. 'Capedad Part 2: Double Vision'. Let's see how the interview goes, first. We still have a few days to consider before we make a decision."

He would have to handle this carefully. He needed to keep his options open. The Wards were his best bet for using his power to keep his family afloat. But if he joined the PRT's scheme, he would do it on his terms. He refused to give up the freedom to choose his own goals, the freedom to send his own message to the world.

That meant he needed leverage.

He had assets. His parahuman power. The skills he had developed leading his team - leadership, researching his opposition, planning, tactics. The personal connections he had made with other capes, especially Armsmaster and Good Girl; he had only known them for a short time, but a few
hours of interaction during a life-changing event was enough to form very strong bonds. Most of all, his new reputation as a great hero, one of the killers of an Endbringer.

All valuable assets, but unfortunately, they would be of limited use in bargaining with the PRT. None of them were critical assets, vital to the PRT's ongoing operations. Not like Fletchette, who killed an Endbringer. Not like Good Girl and Panacea, who held the keys to Fletchette's health and who would save the lives of hundreds of capes in years to come. Not like Armsmaster, who created weapons to shear off an Endbringer's outer layers, weapons that could be given to any number of other capes to wield.

And once he became a Ward, he would have a great deal of trouble staying in the favored graces of the public. His powers and skills were far better suited to work as a vigilante than the life of a government cape.

His success came from working in the dark. Meticulous plans, rehearsed tactics, the element of surprise, all to amplify his team's power to take down seemingly superior enemies. A fundamentally active role. One where he could carefully pick and choose his battles, then destroy his enemies in a single decisive strike before they knew he existed.

Government heroes didn't have that luxury. They were fundamentally defensive, taking a role as protectors. That meant villains could gather information about the heroes at their leisure and use it to create unwinnable battles - ambushes, concentrated forces to attack lone heroes on patrol, rehearsed power combinations to create inescapable traps. No matter how much the villains stacked the deck in their favor, the heroes were obligated to defend.

Which meant the government model favored capes like Armsmaster and Aegis. Capes who were tough enough to survive a surprise attack, had the raw power to make a counterattack in close quarters, and were fast enough to escape if they had to.

Jack Slash had none of those things. The government model had no place for a sniper from the shadows. He would be doomed to an eternal backup role, far away from the action in the eyes of his superiors and the public.

His reputation would sink, and with it his freedom.

Danny was studying Jacob as he considered his options. Jacob spoke to fill the silence. "I'm thinking about the Wards I've met. They would be my friends and teammates if I joined. Hmm."

The only solution was to convince the PRT to give him a role that played to his strengths. It would be a hard sell. His best bet would be impress the PRT with his reputation and raw power, boosted by equipment from Tinkers like Armsmaster and Good Girl, and use that to convince them to give him a special leadership role. Then he would have a chance to prove that he wasn't a one-trick pony, to build a track record of success in tracking down villains and ambushing them in their dens.

The problem was that his strength came from the weapons he wielded. That meant the PRT had the perfect carrot and stick to control him. Be a good little pet and they would give him time with their Tinkers. Disobey them and they would deny him the tools he needed to succeed, and his reputation would sink.

No. He needed a way to leverage his reputation into something more permanent. To gain an asset of undeniable value that the PRT couldn't take away from him. An asset that would be equally useful to him as a Ward or as an independent cape. A means for him to resist government control and take his destiny into his own hands.
One obvious solution presented itself...

Jacob cleared his throat. "I was thinking, Dad. You promised to support my career as a cape, and we were talking about the best ways to do it. It made me realize just how lucky we are to still have each other. I survived the fight and you survived the wave. We have each others' support, and that's why we have a bright future together.

"Most of the Wards aren't as lucky as us. It's a tragedy. I met the Wards in the PRT headquarters, got to know them, fought by their side during the battle...and that made it especially painful when I heard what happened to them afterward. Most of them died in battle, and most of the survivors lost their families. They have a lot of courage. They're the ones who would be by my side on the Wards. They want to work through their losses so they can keep being heroes. But it's hard for them without any support. The Wards I talked to said they're afraid for their futures. The PRT is trying to get its agents picked to be their foster parents, treating them as tools to be used instead of children to be loved."

Danny's face fell. "That's awful. When I saw the wave coming toward me, I imagined that for just a split second. What it would be like if I died and you lived, if you were left alone. I couldn't stand to think about it. All I could imagine was that the PRT would take care of you and give you the treatment a hero deserves. I guess that's not the case, huh."

"Yeah. It's a shame." Jacob studied Danny's face carefully as he spoke. "I wonder if we might be able to do something about that, Dad. When you talked with Mom about our future as a family...did you ever talk about what it would be like to have a daughter?"
Jacob grinned. "Yeah, Dad. An interview with the Chief Director of the PRT. Showing off the young guns who ended the Endbringer. Preaching the gospel to the masses, inspiring the young folk to join the heroes."

"I still can't believe it." said Danny. "It's going to take days for this to sink in. Weeks." He shook his head wonderingly, then smiled at Jacob. "At least you're taking it in stride. I know you've been looking forward to this for a long time, showing your face as a hero. This is all new to me. Is there a book for this? How to be a cape dad in ten easy steps?"

"There is, Dad. Remember the book I got you for Christmas? The memoir by Vikare's father?"

Danny winced. "Oh. 'The Tale of Taitale'. I, uh, only got halfway through it, but-"

"I know. It's fine, Dad. He's drier than dust, he makes cape life seem as thrilling as reading an encyclopedia." That had been intentional at the time, one of many ploys to make Danny underestimate the drama that came with life as an independent hero. But Danny didn't need to know that. "I'll find you a better one next time."

"No, no, I'll do it. Listen, Jacob." Danny put his hands on Jacob's shoulders. "It's my responsibility as a father to guide you. I didn't live up to it. I didn't understand your passion, didn't make an effort to understand your chosen profession. That's what I'll do now. That's what I'll have to do, before I can agree to any of your more...advanced ideas."

"Ah. What I said about adoption."

"Yeah. Taking care of a kid from the Wards...to be honest, it's a scary idea. We already had our hands full with you, even when Annette was with us. But you're right. You're lucky enough to have a parent while the others lost everything, all because they risked their lives to save us all. I can't make any promises, kiddo, but I'll...I'll consider it."

"That's all I'm asking for, old man." said Jacob. He reached out and gave Danny a hug. "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it. I'll be counting on you."

Jacob was a hair disappointed at what was left unspoken. It was clear that Danny was missing the point of what had happened in Brockton Bay. He simply wasn't the heroic type. He was ordinary. He valued his family, then his friends, then his co-workers in the Dockworker's union...but the rest of the world was an abstraction, far off from his everyday life. Even earthshaking battles between heroes and villains didn't mean anything to the man unless someone he knew personally was involved. Jacob had a vivid memory of his Dad skipping over newspaper articles about the serious gangs in order to read about the pathetic villains Uber and Leet, simply because one of his old dockworkers had joined them as a henchman.

That meant that Danny could only understand their victory against Leviathan through his narrow, personal lens. He would feel pride for his son's role in the victory, would mourn for his lost friends at the dockworkers union...and would studiously avoid thinking about the implications for the world at large. The idea that his son had changed the course of history was too big for him to grasp, too overwhelming.

Jacob would be left alone to deal with the big picture. To feel the ripples he had sent through society, to guide them and shape their impact on the world. He had made peace with that, to a
degree. It was the same scenario with his team. Sophia and Sabah helped him cull the villains of Brockton Bay but they were fixated on narrow, personal goals. Only Jacob's patient coaxing had given them the beginnings of broader motivations-

A knock came at the door. Jacob glanced at the clock. "Dad, my interview is in thirty minutes. We'd better get going."

"Right, right." said Danny. He took a step toward the door, then hesitated. "You'll have to help me out, Jacob. I'm new to the world of capes. Am I supposed to wear this?" He picked up a plain white mask from a table. "The PRT gave me this, but the people at the front desk already saw my face."

"Safety first, Dad. Best to put it on." said Jacob.

He put on his own mask and opened the door. The hallway was empty - no. A shadow passed through the doorway and solidified into a woman in a white mask, dressed all in black.

"Shadow Stalker." said Jacob, a warm smile breaking out on his face. "It's wonderful to see you again."

Shadow Stalker took a step forward, then hesitated-

>> Sophia gave the boy an appraising look. After everything Emma had said about him, he didn't look like anything special. Well, it didn't matter. She only needed him to be useful. If she could recruit him for the Wards it would be a feather in her cap, and the queen bitch Piggot would finally cut her some slack. The trick would be making the right impression-

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Ah. Jacob glanced back at Danny. Well...they had planned for this. They couldn't keep it a secret forever. Best to put on a good show. Jacob returned his gaze to Shadow Stalker, gave her a wink.

Shadow Stalker flew forward and wrapped her arms around him in a fierce hug.

For a moment Jacob had no idea how to react. She had never been one for physical affection, let alone such a spontaneous display. He finally settled for simply responding in kind, mirroring her intensity of emotion. After a long moment she released him and put her hands on his shoulders, her stern-faced mask belied by her bright and shining eyes.

"Jack Slash! You back to normal? They healed you?" She studied his eyes, as if searching for flaws in Panacea's work. "They told me they fixed everything but you looked like The Fly, nightmare level shit-"

"I'm fine. Better than ever. I'm glad to see you're alive and well. I gathered that you're one of the elite who made it out of Brockton Bay." Jacob leaned in closer. "That was badass, the trick you pulled on Leviathan. Did you see the motherfucker jump? Scared the shit out of him. Turned his armor into a coffin, set him up for his funeral."

Shadow Stalker snickered. "Seriously? Is that what you have to say to me?" Jacob raised an eyebrow at that, and she continued. "That's just like you, Jake. Yeah, you're right. I'm a major league badass. It was a rush, shooting an Endbringer and making him hurt. But you...do you have any idea of what you did? That was glorious. Fucking amazing, hardcore shit you pulled. Shaved your arms off with a fucking meatgrinder, what the hell, what the fuck did you..." She shook her head in disbelief. "Just how the fuck do you even do that? And then you killed Leviathan. More than killed him. Made him panic, made him squirm. Made a motherfucking Endbringer run
Jacob grinned. "Hah. Well said. I've been hearing that a lot but it means the most coming from you. You heroes of Brockton Bay were my inspirations to come out and fight. We couldn't save the city, in the end, but we made it-"

Shadow Stalker laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "I told you, Jake, can the false modesty. I get it, you're getting ready to suck up to the PRT brass, but it's me you're talking to here. You and I both know you're better than any ten of those assholes put together. The suits and costumes in charge have their fancy titles, like to treat everyone else as dress up dolls and chess pieces, but times like this strip away the pretense and show everyone who's at the top of the food chain."

Pleasing to hear, but was she forgetting that the room was bugged? Jacob said nothing and simply smiled.

"God. It's a...what's the word. A tragedy? A pity? We won't be able to top that for the rest of our lives."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." said Jacob. "I'm an optimist by nature. I'm sure we'll think of something suitably worldshaking." He paused. "By the way, the name's Jack. Not Jake. Jack Slash."

Shadow Stalker gave him a long look, then rolled her eyes. "As if your skimpy domino mask was hiding anything. Besides, I knew it was you the second I heard your voice." She took off her mask, revealing a grin a mile wide.

"What...you're...but..." said Danny. He swallowed. "You're...Sophia Hess?"

"Hey Mister Hebert. I'm glad you made it. You can drop the mask, by the way."

Danny glanced at Jacob, took off his mask. "Sophia. Good God. You're a hero. You've been a hero all this time. You...I..." He turned to Jacob. "Did you know about this?"

Jacob set his own mask aside and shook his head. "I had my suspicions, but..." He turned to face Sophia with a practiced nonchalance, keeping his Dad behind him for the moment. If Dad saw the expression on his face, the light in his eyes, it would have given away the game.

"Let me guess, Mister Hebert." said Sophia. "Jake spent months planning his career as a hero. Practiced his power, got you to help him, made play charts like a football coach. The whole nine yards. Plans for what he'd do to fight crime if only he had a team of capes on his side. Is that about right?"

Danny couldn't help but smile. "That's pretty on the nose."

Sophia laughed. "And then the first night he fights on our side we fuck up Leviathan. You're going to have to face it, Mister Hebert. Your kid is a fucking genius."

Hah. Dad actually blushed at the praise.

"Thanks. Thank you. I'm proud of him." said Danny. "Though, uh, I'd rather you say it a bit more, uh..."

Sophia looked at him quizzically.

"He's talking about your language." said Jacob. "Dad, after what the heroes went through I think they deserve to celebrate their victory with any terms they please."
"Yeah, Mister Hebert, don't you know how kids talk these days?" said Sophia.

"Now wait a minute." said Danny. He turned to Jacob. "You're going to do an interview with the Chief Director of the PRT. You can't use that language, not on national TV."

"No problem, Dad. I'll be on my best behavior." said Jacob. "Any advice, Sophia? You've done this before."

"Only for local TV. It's easy, all you have to do is feed them a few sound bites from the PR department." Sophia scoffed. "They always give us a prep session. Can't have heroes giving the public the straight dope about what really goes on in the streets. It'll be the same for you, I bet. If you don't say what they want, they'll edit the tape till you do."

Jacob suppressed a scowl. As he thought. He prided himself on his ability to win an argument with well-aimed turns of phrase, but his subtlety would be wasted here. He couldn't ensure that his audience would hear every word he spoke. And to complicate matters, he would have to appeal to two audiences: the public, to spread his message to the world, and the PRT, to secure his future as a hero. Troublesome. He'd have to show the PRT that he was fully aware of his political capital, convince them that he was perfectly willing to stay independent if they didn't give him a fair deal.

Sophia would have it easier. Personal motives, simpler concerns. She wanted to show off her accomplishments as a badass cape, and the PRT would give her a script to do exactly that. It helped that she'd been taking his advice to heart in the last few weeks, seeking status by working within the system. Steeling herself to hide her true sensibilities and put on a PRT-friendly facade, telling her teammates and boss the lies they wanted to hear.

Ah, but it would be prudent to reinforce his lessons. She was riding a high from their success against Leviathan, and it wouldn't do for her to backslide at this critical moment.

"Did you already do an interview?" said Jacob. "The PRT is riding the wave of publicity, and you're the one who set up our deathblow on Leviathan."

Sophia shook her head. "I'm going next week. Me, Aegis, and Vista. Battery says it's going to be scripted. Make it look like we're all a big happy family."

Excellent. "I suppose that's convenient for you. It's easier to get the tone right when you don't have to worry about picking the right words."

"Yeah. Plus, I cooperated with the Society. Everything I say has to be cleared by the legal suits."

"Only you? That should be same for all of us."

"That's not how the lawyers see it. Yeah, the Society flew in and gave you a boost, but you guys were doing your own thing. Me? I pulled the trigger." Sophia leaned closer. "Did you see what they're saying about me online?"

>> "Is this the best you can do? Piece of shit is what this is." said Steven. He didn't even look at her, didn't raise his voice. That only made it worse. As if she was beneath his notice. Not even worthy of his anger.

Sophia tensed. She knew what was coming next, and it took all of her willpower to force herself to lean into the blow. The slap still made her lose her balance, made her rock back onto her heels. He was more than twice her weight, and this blow was harder than the last.
It would have been easy to surrender. To let him strike her down, to fall to the ground, cry and beg for mercy. But she knew how he operated. Give in even once and it would mark her as a victim. Prey to be exploited. He would never stop, never let up, take and take and take until there was nothing left of her. Worse than death.

No. She refused to give in to him. Refused to fall. Refused to rub her cheek where he struck her. She would never let him break her. She would survive. She stood up straight and silent, glared up at him-

"No, but I can imagine." said Jacob. "The hardliners tar everyone who associates with villains, even if they do it under duress. They must be having a field day. They're too cowardly to accuse the Triumvirate so they're going after you because they think you're an easy target."

"Yeah, exactly, only they're going completely bugfuck insane on me. They're calling me a Society dupe, saying I trapped Leviathan in the city so it's my fault for the Deathflood. Some rich assholes from Providence want to sue me for damages. Some bullshit law about collateral damage from heroes using illegal weapons from villains."

"That's..." Jack blinked. "Well that is an absolutely monumental pile of bullshit."

Sophia sneered. "Obviously. Victims. Thought they had power, found it wasn't worth shit when it really mattered. Now they can't handle their pathetic lot in life and go crying to mommy to make it all better. Leviathan kills your city, I kill him back, and you blame me 'cause your Porsche got washed away? Ungrateful shitheads."

Danny muttered something under his breath. Jacob thought he was going to chastise her about her language, until the man began to speak.

"God, that's terrible, Sophia. Unconscionable. I've seen this before. Just like the cash-grabbing freighter line that blamed us for saving their crew from faulty stowage." His voice was getting louder, more intense. "Only you and Jacob, you saved the world from an Endbringer. How low can you get? Those pathetic, parasitic-"

Danny paused, visibly calmed himself. "Listen, Sophia, I was in the shelters when they showed your video. When you shot Leviathan, everyone cheered. We're all on your side. You can't let a few bad eggs get to you. If you let them get you off balance, that means you let them win."

"Yeah, Mister Hebert, I know how the world works. There's no meal so delicious that some asshole won't shit in it."

Danny winced. "I wouldn't put it quite like that."

Sophia shrugged. "Whatever. I won't let them get to me. The suits are going to make it all go away. I'm too big of a deal for the PRT to let me go down to those chumps."

Jacob laughed. "Oh, it's better than that, Sophia. This will do wonders for your reputation. You're already in the spotlight as an Endbringer-slaying hero. When the fat cats file their case against you the public will rush to your defense and bury them. And best of all, the next time you're in a controversy the public will flock back to your side once again. A conditioned response."

"Oh, you think so?" Sophia chuckled. "You're an evil genius, you know that Jake?"

"It's only common sense." said Jacob. "You just need to make yourself presentable. Help the common man empathize with you, put himself in your place."
"This again. We're *not* like them, Jake. We're heroes, they're civilians. They don't know a damn thing about what it's like."

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that what they *see*. They're looking for a kid hero they can get behind. Earnest. Respectful. Courageous. Self-sacrificing. Persevering through tragedy." He saw the expression on her face and raised a hand. "An unrealistic ideal, yes, but you don't have to fulfill it. They want to see the best in you. All you have to do is throw them a bone. Get halfway close and their minds will fill in the rest."

She frowned, considering his words.

"Sounds like you've been listening to our union rep, Jacob." said Danny. "I don't always agree with it, but if you're concerned about PR, I know a lawyer who can give you tips. Alan is a master of..."

Danny's voice trailed off. His face fell. "Oh. Oh God. I was going to say we should ask Alan Barnes for help. But I...I don't know if he made it. Or his family. Alan and Zoe, Anne and Emma..." He looked to Sophia. "Do you know if they're okay?"

"No clue." said Sophia. "I told Emma to get out of town but she hasn't returned my messages since. No calls, no emails, nothing. You hear anything, Jake?"

"No. I woke up less than a day ago."

"Don't let it get to you, Mister Hebert." she said. "If they made it, they made it. If they didn't, they didn't. Simple as that. Can't tie yourself in knots worrying about them when you've got your own shi-, I mean, stuff to deal with."

Jacob suppressed a smile. Sophia might keep up her stoic persona for Emma and her family, but she had certainly been singing a different tune about him five minutes ago. She hadn't been able to hold back her emotion - wrapping him in a hug, asking after his health before anything else. It was pleasing, how far they had come. To earn her respect and admiration had been quite a project.

"You're right." said Danny. "I guess we don't have a choice. We lost so many good people, it's hard to hope for the best. At least your family made it out all right?"

Sophia closed her eyes, let out a breath. "Did you have to fucking ask that?"

"Oh God." said Danny. "I'm sorry, I..."

Sophia spoke in a quiet voice. "Not much to tell. Mom didn't care enough to take my advice. I told them to get out of town. Mom took one look at the traffic and took Terry and Marlene to the shelters..."

"God, I'm sorry." said Danny. "I didn't mean to hurt you by bringing it up. I only met them once, but I know they were good people-"

"I don't need your fucking-" Sophia took a breath, swallowed. "They're dead. I'm alive. I'm not a *victim*. I don't need your pity."

Danny started to say something, but Jacob stepped forward-

>>> "Shit, shit, shit." Shadow Stalker's hands and left leg were soaked in blood. Some was hers. Most wasn't. She tried to lay still. Emma and Mister Barnes were doing her a major favor. The least she could do was spare them the trouble of cleaning up after her. Emma had thought ahead and covered the back seat of the car in a sheet of plastic,
but there was still the chance of a leak, and bloodstains were a bitch to get out.

Emma peered at her from the front seat, her fashion model's face creased with lines of worry. "Are you sure you'll be okay, Sophia? Your leg? We can take you to the hospital if-

"I'm fine." she growled.

Emma hurriedly returned her gaze to the road. Damn. She hadn't meant to snap at her. But seriously, what exactly had Emma been trying to say? That she wasn't tough enough to handle a little pain? That she was so lame that she'd get depressed over letting a mugger land a hit on her? That she was so weak that she'd be crushed with guilt about killing street scum?

No. All those things...they made her angry, yeah. Angry at herself, for her shitty footwork that got her injured. Angry at the idiot mugger, for leaning into her bolt and getting himself killed. The anger was good. That was how you learned, how you got stronger.

But she refused to let herself care. She wasn't going to cry about it. She wasn't dumb enough to waste her time crying about things she couldn't change-

"I understand, Sophia." said Jacob. "You're resilient. Too tough to let something like this ruin you. You know exactly what you want out of life. You have a goal, you have allies to carry it out, and you've just proven your skill beyond any doubt on the world stage. By all rights you should be having the time of your life right now. So I know you won't let this tragedy drag you down.

"I know you weren't as close with your family as some of us are. You couldn't trust them to have your back a hundred percent, like I can with Dad. But when I met your family, saw how you treated each other...you might disagree with me, but from what I saw, there were roses among the thorns. There's no shame in reminiscing about those times gone by. Learning from both the good and the bad.

"So if you do decide you're missing something, if you want to take some time to process it, or if you just want to shoot the shit about memories of Brockton Bay...you'll have friends to go to. I can't speak for the Wards, but I'm here for you."

Sophia scoffed. A little too quickly to be fully honest. "Always with the inspirational speeches, Jake. Touching, but I don't need it. Yeah, it sucks. Terry didn't deserve it. Marlene didn't deserve it. Mom...she didn't deserve it, I guess. But I'm not going to break down and bawl about it like some people I know." An expression flickered across her face, a flash of disgust. "Half the Protectorate is cracked up. Battery weeping about her boyfriend. Parian...God. I thought she took it like a champ. Took double shifts on the relief efforts, barely slept. Then yesterday she shut down and locked herself in her room. I got her to open the door this morning, but she took one look at me and the waterworks came out. Useless."

Ah. There was her ever-present problem. Sophia had convinced herself that caring for others was foolish, a sign of weakness that the world would use as a weapon against her. So she pushed others away, squandering her potential as a cape by gravitating toward a solitary life in the shadows.

A lesser cape would have seen her as a lost cause, but Jacob had seen her as an opportunity. If she could be coaxed to feel a bond of kinship with even one person then she would treat him as the sole focus of her attention, latch on to him with a fierce loyalty. That was coming along nicely.
The problem came when he recruited other members for their team. She had to learn tolerance, to forgive her teammates for their 'weakness' of caring for others.

"I get what you're saying, Sophia. It is a shame the other capes haven't held themselves together as well as we have. When I spoke with Parian she seemed like a woman with a good head on her shoulders. I'll have to check on her when I get a chance.

"But listen, Sophia. I wouldn't call her weak. As a cape, I want allies who do three things: kick ass, have my back, and keep a cool head in a fight. That's the only strength that matters. I don't care if Parian falls apart after every fight, as long as she pulls herself together in time for the next one. Hell, we just killed Leviathan. We've all earned a few weeks of rest. Whether they spend it celebrating or weeping is a minor concern. Do you honestly care whether Vista spends her free time sulking in her hospital bed or saving orphans on the streets?"

"Well..." said Sophia.

"Exactly. And it's not their business how you spend your time, either. Not unless they're a person whose opinion you truly care about. Someone who means more to you than a mere ally of convenience during cape fights."

"Is that so." Sophia smiled. "Interesting. And now I notice that you're making it your business to know how I spend my time."

Danny spoke up. "He's very considerate for others, when he wants to be. You were right, Jacob. It didn't hit home for me at first. Now that I've seen the impact on one of your own friends, seen what a difference it makes to have a parent you can count on...I can almost see myself getting behind your adoption idea."

"Wait, what? What are you talking about?" said Sophia.

"Jacob was telling me about how the Wards lost their families. He said that since we were lucky enough to still have a family, we should help support the others. Adopt one of the Wards, raise them in a family with another cape to set a good example. It's a wild idea, but-"

Fuck. The idea was to get a hold over a powerful cape he could use as a bargaining chip with the PRT. Ideally an impressionable cape who could plausibly leave the Wards and go independent, like Good Girl. Sophia was the opposite. She was already firmly in his camp, and despite her impressive performance against Leviathan she would have little value as a bargaining chip with the PRT. Having her as a sister would just put him further in their pocket. Not to mention that Dad's parenting style was entirely unsuited to a girl like Sophia.

The disgust on Sophia's face made it clear that she shared his opinion of the idea. Jacob spoke quickly.

"No. I don't think that would be a good idea here, Dad."

Danny scratched his head. "Really? I thought...well, since Sophia is a Ward, and we already know her, you two are already friends, I thought it would be just what-"

"No. I'm grateful that you're so open to the idea, Dad, but as you've seen, she's a strong and independent woman. I doubt she's eager for our charity. Besides, Sophia and I are already close. The idea of having her as a sister is...uncomfortable. For a number of reasons."

Sophia smirked. "Yeah. For a number of reasons."
A sound came from the hallway behind them - Armsmaster, coming out of an elevator. Ah. It wouldn't do for him to be late to his interview.

"Dad, put your mask on." said Jacob. He moved to put on his own, but Sophia stopped him with a hand on his chest. He raised an eyebrow, and she smiled.

"You know, Jake, you're right about the PR shit. The man on the street is never going to understand what we've been through, what we've done. Even the average cape on the street. There's no point trying to hammer the truth into their little minds. Maybe it's easier if we accept the mask they give us to wear, to let them convince themselves the world is full of puppies and sunshine. You're skilled at it, a natural."

>> Shadow Stalker watched the dealers in the alley below her, crowded around a cowering middle school boy. Apparently the boy's shithole parents had sent him out to buy cocaine from the same dealer his daddy had scammed a week ago with a stack of counterfeit cash. An industrial-grade clusterfuck.

The only question was her own resolve. If she took this step forward it would mean she was officially a vigilante. A cape. There would be no going back.

One of the dealers took out a knife and waved it in the boy's face. The boy lunged forward and tried to wrestle the knife away. Ballsy motherfucker. The kid actually managed to knock the asshole down before the others started kicking the shit out of him.

A step forward, then. Shadow Stalker took a deep breath, tightened her grip on the crowbar, and leaped-

<<

Where was she going with this? Talking about putting on a mask to face the public...was there a hidden threat in the interview, something she didn't want to say out loud in front of the PRT cameras? His eyes flicked to Armsmaster, approaching in the hallway. Sophia had already told him about the man's prototype lie detector...

"I'm glad you agree." said Jacob. "I'll keep your advice in mind for the interview."

"But you can't deny your true self forever, Jake," said Sophia. "You need to have a place where you can take off all your masks and shoot the shit with someone who knows what's real. It's not an easy place to find. If they're below your level they can't understand you. If they think they're above your level they won't respect you.

"I've been thinking. In this line of work we could die any day. Hell, fighting an Endbringer is a one in four chance. So from now on I'm going to live in the moment instead of waiting forever. And since we've both proved ourselves as badass Endbringer-ending motherfuckers..."

>> Sophia approached the girls gathered at the lunch table, then hesitated. She felt a fluttering of anxiety in her chest. She had never been one of the popular kids, and some ingrained sense of social status was screaming at her. This was wrong. Unnatural. Not her place.

But she was a cape now, and that came with benefits. Now it was time to collect.

She stepped forward, cutting in front of one of the girls to take the seat at Emma's side. The girl gave her a dirty look, opened her mouth to make a crack at her, but Sophia
ignored her.

"Hey, Ems." she said. "So glad you hooked me up with tickets to the concert."

Emma turned to her with a smile. "Any time, Sophia. It's my pleasure to introduce a friend to a hidden gem of a musician."

"Too bad Craig looks better in his music videos than he does in real life."

"That's so true. He isn't helped at all by his hack of a costumer. He's lucky he's in a profession where his voice is the selling point."

The other girls reacted. A change of expression, a shift of attention. The words told them a story of shared experience, an *exclusive* experience they hadn't been invited to, hadn't even known about. But the words weren't the point. The message was simple. *Mine.*

...that means we're both qualified to do this."

Sophia stepped forward and kissed him on the lips.

In that frozen moment of time, Jacob realized that he had misread her entirely. He was such a fool. Her joy to see him, her words, her body language. It should have been obvious. But he had interpreted them through the lens of his secret career as a vigilante. He had spent months strengthening her motivations to join his team. Her need for a confidante to lend her a sympathetic ear, her obsession with exerting power over the weak, her eagerness to cut a bloody path through the underworld of Brockton Bay. And in doing so he had underestimated her other motivations simmering beneath, the *personal* color of her affections.

It...it wasn't that he was oblivious. He had known that cementing their bond as teammates, gaining her respect and admiration, could lead to something more. He had known it would inevitably have to be resolved one way or the other. The tension couldn't last forever and she wasn't the type to wait for a boy to take the initiative, but he had thought she wouldn't move for months, she must have taken their success as an encouragement to-

A single sentence rose in the midst of his racing thoughts.

*Her lips feel good against mine.*

Sophia drew away from him and met his gaze. Her eyes were a storm of emotions. Excitement, anxiety, judgement, hope, and raw, burning intensity...

Of course. Doing it here, now, in front of Dad and Armsmaster...she must have planned this. She knew that he would use his relationships with the Wards as a point of leverage in his negotiations with the PRT, knew his fondness for cloak-and-dagger games of misdirection. With this act she was refusing to be a pawn in his games. Cutting through it all to make him *hers*, unambiguously, in front of everyone who mattered.

His instinct was to tailor his reaction, prepare an eloquent speech to manage the outcome. If only he knew what outcome he *wanted.* He had always put off matters of the heart in order to focus on his mission, to the point that he scarcely felt that he had ever had a heart at all.

Now, forced to confront it...he couldn't deny the appeal. Sophia was strong, tenacious, like-minded
in many ways. They had fought back to back, spilled blood together, fought the most formidable enemies the world had to offer. What he had always believed she lacked was depth, creativity, the ability to see a bigger picture beyond her narrow ambitions. But today she had found a weakness in his plans, taken him by surprise and forced his hand. That was far more interesting than he had ever expected from her...

...ah, but none of that mattered, in the end. He didn't have time to think. Her eyes demanded a reply here and now. And, with his plans cast aside and nothing else to guide him, only a single response came to mind.

Jacob took her in his arms and kissed her back.

After a long moment they drew apart. Sophia's eyes were shining now, lips halfway between a smile and a smirk. Triumphant.

Jacob mirrored her smile. Perhaps this was for the best. He had spent so long fixated on the big picture that he had lost sight of what was in front of him all along. After his success in Brockton Bay he could afford to take some time to enjoy the simple pleasures in life. There was no telling how long it would last, but...

Well. He could give it a shot.

Danny cleared his throat. "Jacob. You, uh, didn't tell me you had a girlfriend."

Jacob smirked. "You didn't ask."

A clanking sound drew his attention to the doorway. Armsmaster was standing outside, towering over the rest of them in his power armor. He gazed at Jacob and Danny, then at Sophia.

Sophia gave him a lazy salute. "Sorry, boss." she said with a grin. "We got distracted and lost track of the time."

Armsmaster's lips quirked in a faint smile. "...I see. I was going to introduce you two, but it seems that you know each other quite well already."

Hah. No doubt Armsmaster was pleased with this development. Jacob had played up his reluctance to join the Wards. Now Armsmaster would believe he was certain to join.

"Yes. She gave me quite a surprise." said Jacob.

Armsmaster nodded. "The perils of working behind a mask. Jack Slash, I should inform you that you are still technically anonymous to the Protectorate, but if you unmask yourself in our branch headquarters..."

"Right." said Jacob. He put on his mask, took the time to make sure it was on straight. Presentable. "Let's get going, shall we?"

"Wait." said Danny. "Armsmaster, before you go. I want to thank you again for everything. You saved my son's life. You reunited our family. You even set me up with the PRT counselors to help us get back on our feet. We lost everything, and you're given us everything we have. It means a lot to me. To us." He paused. "If there's ever...well, you must get this a lot. But if there's ever anything I can do to repay you, I'll be glad to help."

"You're welcome, but there's no need to thank me. Thank the Protectorate. It's what we're offering all the cape families from Brockton Bay. The well-being of our heroes," Armsmaster paused,
looked pointedly at Jacob, "and of all others who join us in facing S-class threats, is a top priority."

"Still, thank you. I just...thank you so much. You're a good man, Armsmaster."

"You're welcome. I would be glad to speak with you more, but our interview starts in ten minutes." Armsmaster turned to Sophia. "We'll talk later. Unless there's something you want to tell me?"

"Nah, I'm good." said Sophia. Still grinning.

"Good. Follow me, Jack Slash. The Chief Director is waiting for us on the fifteenth floor."

Jack Slash smiled, bid his father and his girlfriend farewell, and set off to face the director of the most powerful collection of capes in the world.
"My first advice to you is: don't panic." said Armsmaster. "Public interviews can be stressful for a cape, even for veterans like myself. The fact that this will be your first, and with the Chief Director of the PRT, makes a healthy degree of apprehension understandable."

"I appreciate it, but I'm not worried." said Jack. "I've been looking forward to this."

Armsmaster studied him for a moment, then nodded. "You're telling the truth." He pressed the button on the wall to call the elevator. "That's a good attitude, but don't get cocky. I've seen capes go into live interviews with all the confidence in the world and come out wishing they had never been born. Fortunately for you, this will be a more accommodating environment. The interview will be recorded, not live, and the PRT will edit the tape before showing it to the public." A small frown passed over his face. "A luxury we can all too rarely afford."

>> Armsmaster was nearly done securing the time-stopped forms of the criminals when he heard a voice from the mouth of the alleyway. The smooth, professional tones of a television reporter. Probably that bastard Manzaneres from channel 4.

"...the scene where the thieves were taken down by a new hero who put a stop to their crimes - literally. Fantastic work, young man. How did you pull it off?"

The boy chuckled. "Like this!" He flung out one of the ropes he held and froze it in the air, as if to block the path of an imaginary foe. "Freeze, criminals! Your time is up!"

Armsmaster groaned. The puns. The boy had practiced them. Mouse Protector was bad enough as a colleague. To have one of her kind as a subordinate would be-

"Amazing! Fantastic! Astonishing!" fawned the reporter. An obvious trick to gain the boy's confidence, but the child was eating it up. "And what name should the people of Brockton Bay call their new hero?"

Armsmaster hurriedly secured the last set of cuffs and took off in a dead run toward the boy, shouting for him to stop, but he was late, too late-

The boy struck a dramatic pose. "Villains beware! Give up your life of crime or be put on pause forever, by the mighty power of the--"

<<

Jack raised an eyebrow and gave him a sympathetic nod. "Ah. Helping us present our best face to the public?"

"Right." said Armsmaster. "We're the faces of heroism in Brockton Bay. We want to look good, the PRT wants us to look good, the public wants us to look good. If you make any embarrassing misstatements the PRT will clean up on the tape."

Hah. The PRT would scrub his 'mistakes' from the tape. In other words, the PRT would control the message he sent to the public. But he wouldn't let them steal his fifteen minutes of fame. This was his chance to address the world. He would have to send his message in a way the PRT wouldn't censor, or couldn't censor even if they wanted to.

"It's good to know--" Jack caught himself before he finished the sentence, stopped and took another
tack. "It's good to know that you have my back on this. I'll try to learn from your example."

Jack suppressed a scowl. There was another problem. Armsmaster's lie detector. He had been about to say 'It's good to know the PRT has our back', but that wouldn't have been entirely true, would it? It would be troublesome, double-checking everything he said in the interview to make sure he wasn't crossing any lines. He didn't know the limits of Armsmaster's technology, and in any case Sophia had told him that Armsmaster's tools were constantly being refined and improved. He couldn't afford to take any chances.

The elevator door opened and they entered. Armsmaster hit the button for the fifteenth floor. Two from the top.

"I expect the director to give you softball questions. 'What inspired you to become a hero?'. 'How did you get up the courage to join an Endbringer fight on your first day out?'. 'What kept you going, when you found out the cost of using your power on Armsmaster's halberd?'. 'What do you want to tell the other survivors from Brockton Bay?'." Armsmaster paused. "You seem well-read about capes. You know about trigger events?"

"Yes." said Jack.

"Good. You don't need to worry about that, she won't ask you about yours. She'll be directing the harder questions at me. As leader of the Brockton Bay Protectorate, our conduct in the battle was my responsibility. I'll be the one she wants to answer detailed questions about the battle, and those that bear on PRT policy."

Jack couldn't suppress his scowl this time, and turned away to hide his face. In other words, Armsmaster wanted to control the flow of the interview. Armsmaster wanted to maximize the credit he got for their victory and send a message out to the public to shape policy. While he wanted Jack to obediently play the courageous rookie who followed the veteran's lead, a boy with his head filled with an earnest desire to be a hero and nothing else worth mentioning. Not a chance. He wasn't their dog.

But he would have to choose his moves carefully. Armsmaster was surely preparing a scheme to control the public's first impressions of their collaboration. The man had to know that, if he left things as they were, Jack's contribution would be far more impressive to the public. True, it was Armsmaster's halberd that had enabled them to attack Leviathan. But at the critical moments of the fight Armsmaster had been reduced the role of a page, girding the knight for battle and then standing still and idle as he fought. Jack had been the one to wield the blade, to make the sacrifice by feeding it his flesh, to risk his life to deal the deathblow.

Jack would have to find a way to outmaneuver Armsmaster and get the credit he deserved. He would have to tread a thin line. It wouldn't do to oppose the man directly and draw his ire, but it would be a dangerous mistake to go too easy on him for the sake of the cameras. If Jack was going to be a Ward under Armsmaster's direction then this was the time to set the tone for their future working relationship. Far better to make the man respect him as a forceful personality than take him for granted as a doormat.

The elevator slowed to a stop. Armsmaster led Jack down a long hallway, past a series of offices. Most of the doors were open, revealing a hive of activity. Administrators and support staff busy coordinating the relief efforts between the Protectorate, the locals, and the national disaster response agencies. The offices were surprisingly spartan and run-down, not what he would have expected for a major branch of the Protectorate. Then again, Boston was one of the first cities to receive an official Protectorate branch, so it's facilities were bound to be older than most. Jack felt a
twinge of regret that he had never gotten to see inside the Protectorate's high-tech floating fortress in Brockton Bay, aside from one of the public tours.

Most of the office workers barely looked up as they passed, clearly jaded to the presence of capes by their service in the Protectorate headquarters. A few of the looked up, though, apparently recognizing Jack from the famous video. Jack gave them a smile and a wave as he passed, and delighted at the matching smiles that rose on their faces.

"...are you listening?" said Armsmaster. He had been talking, something about the proper way to hold oneself in front of the cameras.

"My apologies." said Jack. "I was distracted by the state of affairs here. Boston was hit harder than I thought."

"Yes. You won't get to meet the Boston Protectorate and Wards today. They're assisting the relief efforts, aside for a few off duty members and a Thinker who stays at headquarters."

Armsmaster opened a plain door labeled "Media Room A" and led them inside. The room was swarming with personnel. People aiming cameras and boom mikes, jotting notes, editing film clips on laptop computers.

At the far end of the room was a stage for televised broadcasts. A flag bearing the symbol of the Protectorate was draped from the ceiling at the center of the stage, with the flags of the Protectorate member nations draped on the left and right. A crowd of people obscured his view of the stage, apparently wrapping up another interview.

Jack stepped forward to approach the stage-

>> She didn't understand it. She had sat through the entire funeral feeling only a cold chill in her mind and a sense of guilt that she didn't feel more. Only now, a week later, was it finally hitting her. The tide of emotion she should have been feeling all along.

She sat on the couch, absolutely still, holding her head in the palms of her hands. Trying to keep her feelings under control. Mom had taken her call, said that she would be coming home early to keep her company. She would save her tears until then-

<<

Jack turned to a gentle touch on his arm, a familiar voice.

"Jack Slash? Is that you?"

Jack grinned and clasped his teammate's hand in his own. "In the flesh. It's wonderful to see you again, Parian."

He tactfully neglected to mention that Parian looked much the worse for wear. Her doll-like mask was spiderwebbed with cracks, from when she had taken the brunt of Leviathan's water echo with only her golem for protection. Her elegant lacey dress was mottled with discolored patches where rips and tears had been replaced with new fabric. Everything below her waist was marred by brown and black stains, presumably from her work with the disaster relief crews, wading through dirty floodwater in the ruins of the Boston suburbs.

From the way she held herself, Parian's psychological state wasn't much better. It seemed that Sophia's account hadn't been an exaggeration.

Parian took a second to respond. "Yes. Yes, good to see you Jack. I, I came to watch your
Meaningless pleasantaries, her eyes unfocused.

"I appreciate your support." said Jack. "We Brockton Bay capes-"

>> The Deluge. The wrath of Allah, with no ark to save us. Parian shut her eyes tight. She couldn't bear to watch, couldn't allow herself to comprehend, as her friends, her family, her city of Brockton Bay that she had failed to protect were all washed out to sea-

"-should stick together. We did everything we could to protect our city, more than anyone had done before. We couldn't save our people, in the end, but we can still honor their memory, preserve their spirit. Stay strong and set an example to the rest of the world, to inspire them to fight and kill Endbringers as we did, until the world is safe again."

Parian stared at the floor. "You still talk like that. Like everything worked out for the best. After we lost...lost every..." She cut herself short, lifted her eyes to his. "I thought so. That's how you are."

"I do consider myself an optimist-"

"That's why I came to watch." she continued. "To learn how you do it. I saw your video. You never gave up hope, you kept fighting like you didn't care how much it hurt you."

>> Anh's smile was teasing as she made her friendly critique, showing more insight from thirty seconds of wearing the dress than Sabah had had from hours of designing it. Sabah's heart sank. Another profession where she was second rate, even with her power to help her-

"Don't underestimate your contribution." said Jack. "You stalled Leviathan better than most seasoned veterans and lived to tell the tale. To be perfectly honest, you played a part in my own success, as well."

"Me? I-" Parian blinked, tilted her head. "You don't have to pretend."

"It's true. I tried my power on Leviathan and barely scratched his hide with my knives. I had myself convinced that I was useless to the fight. Then I got a wake-up call. A rogue from Brockton Bay kicking ass in her first Endbringer fight with nothing but a few bolts of cloth. After I saw that, I couldn't let myself rest without making a contribution of my own."

Her eyes widened a fraction. "Oh. You're...kind to say that."

"I told you, it's true. Don't ever think that your show of courage was for nothing. We gave our all to save the world from the Endbringer, and it took everything from every one of us to succeed." He leaned forward, whispered. "Let's talk later, okay? Catch up on old times."

She hesitated, then gave a slow nod. Jack turned to go, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Wait. I forgot. Here." She pulled a bundle from behind her back and pressed it into his hands. Black fabric...ah. A new black jacket and domino mask. A replica of the costume he had worn to fight Leviathan.
"The PRT people wanted you to dress the same like you did in the fight. An image thing," she said. "You lost your costume so I made you a new one."

"A pleasant surprise. I appreciate it," he said. He tossed aside the plain white mask the PRT had given him and put on his old costume, noting with approval that the jacket had the same hidden knife sheaths as the original. He gave her a winning smile. "Exquisite work."

Ah. That brought a hint of life to her eyes.

Jack bid her farewell and moved toward the stage. He almost bumped into Armsmaster. The hero was trying to escape a conversation with a man from a horror movie. One of the monstrous capes, a Case-53. A man without a neck, and with a hunchback so severe that his head was nearly at chest level. Grotesque growths studded his arms and legs, like a second set of muscles on the outside of his body, that forced him to stand in a stiff, rigid posture. The man's voice was ordinary, though, and animated with a kind of liveliness that came with desperation.

"Listen, man, my peril sense went directly from 'Holy shit this sucks balls' to a pure null, for both Weld and Sponge, just five minutes apart. There's no other explanation. They found a way out of the rubble from the Deathflood-"

"Or they lost their lives," said Armsmaster.

"No way! Weld is a tough SOB, and Sponge is one of those lucky idiots who couldn't get himself killed if he shot himself in the face. Look, Director Armstrong won't let me lead the search, but you're in charge of Brockton Bay, right? Just give me a boat and let me-"

"Your power doesn't give you a location, Hunch. They could be anywhere within a hundred square miles of flooded land. Or washed out to sea, or buried underground. It will take us weeks and a fleet of ships with metal detectors to do a proper search. That's the PRT's jurisdiction, not mine."

The man flinched at the lecture but didn't back down. "Please, man. I'm begging you. I can't leave them down there."

"Your loyalty does you credit, but if you haven't noticed, my city is now a flooded crater. I don't have any resources to give you. Keep the PRT updated and they will mount a rescue effort as soon as it becomes feasible."

Armsmaster pushed past the man and turned to Jack. "Let's go. We've had enough distractions."

Jack took a moment to meet Hunch's eyes and give him a sympathetic look. Armsmaster's leadership style left much to be desired. He had given Hunch the raw truth, explained why they couldn't mount a rescue in exacting detail, and then become irritated when he persisted in the face of the facts. Exactly what the desperate man didn't need. It would have been simplicity itself to curry favor with the man. Armsmaster could have sympathized with him, told him that he wished he had the resources to help, and made a harmless promise to put a word in with this Director Armstrong. A lost opportunity.

Armsmaster led Jack through the crowd of PRT media people to the stage. The stage was positioned in front of a large floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the Boston Skyline, colored by a faint purple tint from the forcefield protecting the building. In ordinary times it would emphasize the power of the Protectorate, the majesty of the city it protected. Odd that they were showing the backdrop now. The skyline would be patchy, with occasional buildings listing or collapsed and entire counties on the outskirts of the city reduced to flooded rubble...ah. An unobtrusive strip of cloth had been placed across the bottom of the window, discreetly screening the worst of the
destruction from view. The PRT, at least, knew what they were doing.

The furniture on the stage had been arranged to give an informal atmosphere, one he would have expected for a televised talk show. Three comfortable-looking chairs around a small round table with the Protectorate and PRT emblems on the surface. The chairs bore the marks of subtle reinforcements, modifications to support capes with power armor or unusual physiologies.

But what caught his attention were the two women at the center of the stage who had just finished their own taped interview. His heart beat faster as he saw who he'd be joining on the stage. The pair of twin suns around whom the crowd of low-ranking personnel orbited.

One was a statuesque figure in a familiar black bodysuit, visor, and long, flowing cape. Alexandria. Her costume was nearly pristine, but had faint scratches and smudges from her work in the relief efforts. Probably calculated for her televised appearance to give her maximum popular appeal. Appearing perfect and spotless in this time of tragedy would hardly have cultivated solidarity with the masses.

The other figure was a hair shorter, a hispanic woman wearing a blue business suit with a straight-backed posture reminiscent of military training. She was middle-aged, he knew, but her smooth face and lively eyes made her look nearly a decade younger. She turned to him as he climbed the stairs to the stage and greeted him with a warm smile, one that he had seen countless times on the news.

"Good to see you again, Armsmaster. And welcome, Jack Slash. Our new hero of the day. I'm Rebecca Costa-Brown, the Chief Director of the PRT."

Jack grinned a mile wide. It probably made him look like an idiot, but he couldn't suppress it even if he tried. It wasn't every day he had the undivided attention of the woman who directed the most powerful cape organization in the world.

"It's an honor and a pleasure." said Jack.

The Director shook his hand. Her grip was firm and professional, and he did his best to match it.

"I want to be the first to thank you for your heroism in the slaying of Leviathan. It was thanks to your selfless and courageous efforts, along with those of our heroes, that we ended a threat that claimed millions of lives."

"Thank you. It's thanks to the examples set by heroes like Armsmaster and Alexandria that I got where I am today. Fighting with them was a dream come true." said Jack.

"I believe you two have met already." said the Director, with a glance to Alexandria. "But not in this capacity."

"It's official, then?" said Armsmaster.

Alexandria nodded. Her face was serious, but the corners of her lips had the faintest hint of a smile. "Yes. We had the swearing-in ceremony by teleconference, expedited due to the state of emergency. As of twenty minutes ago, I am the new leader of the Protectorate."

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