Amelia By TanaNari

Amelia By TanaNari

by orphan_account

Summary

Worm Au, Amy Dallon is pushed too far by the S9 and pushes back. The story heavily diverges from there, focusing on more the big picture and plays out on an international scale. Mainly posted here for the convenience of anyone who wants to download it to their phone or ereader but if you haven't read it I strongly recommend it.

Notes

This is not my story and is being posted from Questionable questing and Sufficient Velocity with the Author's permission. Any reviews or feedback that you want to give the author should be posted to either of the threads on those sites.
QQ: https://forum.questionablequesting.com/threads/amelia-worm-au.916/

Twilight666 has an already finished and complete epub version of Amelia for those interested. Can be found here:http://www.mediafire.com/download/2066ex9f4f4bn7t/TanaNari+-+Amelia+%28Questionable+Questing%29.epub

Also the Author is planning on doing an original story next and a thread started to discuss what comes next as far as his writing is concerned can be found here.
https://forum.questionablequesting.com/threads/after-amelia.1625/
Amy ran like she'd never run before. With a determined sense of purpose more at home on the face of a soldier than a teenage girl. With as many liberties as had been taken with her physiology, she really wasn't capable of any other expression. Her body was well beyond human ability right now. She could have fought most parahumans. If not to victory, then at least she could have forced them to work for it. If it were any other opponent, she would have turned and fought.

But she wasn't 'most parahumans'. She was running from the Siberian. Not something one could actually fight against. Even powerhouses like the Triumvirate could do little more than slow her down and retreat. Amy was a lot of things packed into a small package right now. She was not the Triumvirate. It would be insane to believe she could win. She wasn't trying to. She was trying to flee. A goal that was looking less and less likely as the fight continued.

Still, she had a few advantages to let her at least try to escape. Brute... three, maybe? With a healthy amount of Mover. Even a bit of Stranger, in the form of stealth camouflage not terribly different than that of certain species of Cephalopods. She needed every advantage that could be wedged into a human body. And more.

Siberian lunged, passing through the concrete wall of a building like it was little more than tissue paper. Amy rolled to the side before leaping hard. She had boosted senses, too, of a sort. Probably worth Thinker 2. Not enough for this fight, as Siberian grasped her ankle, arresting her movement. Then tugging down- not even pulling, simple an effortless wrist motion that slammed Amy to the ground. The madwoman smiled at the girl who struggled to break the grip. If you could call the hungry look on her face a smile.

It was an exercise in futility, really, her attempts to break Siberian's grip. To imagine such a thing was possible would have been insanity. Siberian held the girl by the arm. Amy was already missing two fingers. She held her hand almost gently as she pried the middle finger straight, using the same casual, absolute strength that allowed her to walk through buildings with no difficulty.

Amy snarled- and it was a snarl. Animalistic and enraged. No longer human. She started punching Siberian in the side of the head repeatedly with her free hand. Bonelike protrusions extended from her knuckles, sharper than shark teeth. Enough force to shatter bone. To crack concrete. Perhaps even leave dents in steel. Not enough to make the monster let go. Or even distract her a little.

The nude woman slowly parted her lips and took Amy's middle finger into her mouth. It was an almost sensual movement. The actions of someone savoring a delicacy. It could have been mistaken for erotic, even, had the circumstances been different. Very different. She bit down on the finger, severing it.

The flesh carried a deadly organic compound that had never even been name. A poison that likely never existed on earth naturally, although it did have some similarity to Botulinum. The Siberian just
swallowed enough to kill every nonpowered human being on the planet twice over.

Then she simply paused and let Amy go. It wasn't because of the poison. No, I thought. That would be too damn easy. It was part of her fucking game. A twisted form of cat and mouse. Three captures so far, and absolutely no way of knowing how many more until the bitch just killed her for failing the test. She leapt up again while the monster simply stood and watched. If it were anything like the last times, she'd have thirty seconds before the chase began again. She used that time to get to the top of the small office complex.

Her lungs were far superior to anything human, but they were struggling to pull in enough oxygen to keep her body moving at this speed. She even breathed through her skin. A fun little mod stolen from Aegis. Most of her physiology was at least indirectly copied from the bizarre twist of an Alexandria package. Amy wasn't tired. Could go for days without getting tired. But, then, so could her pursuer. And even if Amy wasn't tired, her body was losing efficiency. Organic systems, however close to perfect they might be, had limits. Siberian seemingly did not.

She watched as her pursuer started climbing up the building after her. Not flying, I decided. That's a good sign. Not in any real rush, I added. That's a bad sign. At least if the bitch seemed to be in a hurry, it would suggest they were near the time limit for this test. How long until they decided she'd won this match?

Siberian paused on a ledge, crouching, even shifting her hips like a cat as she looked straight up at Amy's position atop the building. Then she leapt, clearing several stories in seconds.

Amy was saved only by superhuman reflexive instincts built into her, falling away from Siberian and leaping off the roof backwards- traveling horizontally. Only to be followed a half second later. Then Amy's shirt exploded into ribbons as a pair of pterodactyl like wings spread out and allowed her to veer off course. Siberian might even have been slightly annoyed at having to spend several seconds traveling the wrong direction before she slammed into the side of an abandoned warehouse.

Of course, that was probably just wishful thinking.

Amy didn't have much time to worry about it. Or consider her (lack of) modesty, for that matter. Not that there'd be anything to consider immodest. Her body was basically sexless. Every organ or gland that wasn't necessary had been removed. That mass and area instead being used for the vastly more important function of staying alive as long as possible in this fight.

She flapped the wings a few times, angling toward another roof. Her body was still inhibited by the laws of physics, if not the conventions of biochemistry. And winged flight just wasn't possible for something the size of a human. Especially one who happened to weight about 300 pounds after everything was factored. At best, they were useful to help control her fall.

And then the rocks started coming. She avoided most of the barrage, but Siberian was simply
digging her hands into the concrete and flinging chunks of it at her. The first one that hit tore through her left wing, leaving her more or less screwed as she plummeted. The wing was already restitching itself. Some others collided with the layer of scales which functioned as her organic body armor. Easily bulletproof. But these rocks were a lot heavier than most bullets, and traveling just as fast. They left dents, even actual cracks, in the protection.

Siberian moved toward her. With the damage that had been done to her body, she had no chance of evading the unstoppable force masquerading as a woman. She resigned herself to losing another finger- it's not like she could feel pain right now. And put her effort into repairing as much damage to her important parts instead.

And then the cloud formed around her, blanketing the area. Except... too dark to be a cloud. And it moved, was alive... bugs? Skitter is here!? Amy's camouflage kicked in, mottled blacks and browns and grays. Blending with the swarm.

In spite of myself, I smiled.
Chapter 2

Amelia, Ch 2

With the benefits of Skitter's swarm, Amy stood an actual chance of winning this. Which was as much a curse as it was a blessing. She isn't intended to win. But, I decided. It would serve my purpose as much as anything else would. Siberian crossed the distance absurdly fast, diving into the bugs. Amy had already dived off the side, having grabbed a few bugs to stuff into her pants pockets. Something to allow Skitter to track her.

Skitter wasn't exactly my best friend. In fact, the girl was my second least favorite person that wasn't actively trying to kill me. But this was Siberian. Probably the most dangerous of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Other than Bonesaw, of course. I was willing to work with her on this.

Amy had dropped down into the building itself- exploiting the cover of bugs, and simply dissolving a hole in the roof. Siberian would no doubt find it, soon enough. But Skitter was running excellent interference. She'd covered the roof with insects that hid the tunnel she'd made. And even tricked Siberian into leaving the roof to chase something.

Amy had no way of knowing how that was accomplished. She rushed down the stairs of the building. Like most of this part of town, abandoned. Even on the second floor there was water damage, a reminder of Leviathan's visit. As if such a monster would ever be forgotten.

The building rumbled around Amy. Shuddered. How? Why? A question answered as quickly as I thought to ask it. The Siberian stepped into view, dragging her hand through the stone wall. She's going after the supports, I realized.

Amy bolted for a window, and dived. Only to be stopped cold. Siberian had stopped moving. Smiling. Amy was trapped in the building by whatever power Siberian used to make things invulnerable.

Such a damned unfair power.

Amy didn't speak. Couldn't speak, actually. That was another system sacrificed for superior combat applications. Not that it made the least bit of difference against her.

Amy simply shrugged, making eye contact with the monster standing at the only valid entrance. And walked toward her. It was a slow walk, a walk calculated to buy just a little more time. But a walk,
nonetheless. Her body mending. The spine she'd broken colliding with the impervious glass slowly patched itself back together. She stopped, only a foot or so away from the much taller woman and held out her hand.

Siberian seemed almost surprised by the action. Tilting her head sideways while maintaining the unblinking eye contact with Amy's face. This might even be a first for her, I thought.

Of her many, many victims, she'd no doubt seen surrender. A victim simply give up and accept death. But this wasn't that. Amy wasn't giving up. wasn't going to stop fighting. But this "round" was lost and they both knew it. She'd trapped herself. Siberian blocked the only way out, and made it impossible to create another one.

Siberian watched her. Amy watched back. Neither blink. Neither moved, not even to breathe, like two statues. More and more of Skitter's bugs started climbing on them. Testing, probing, probably trying to figure out just what the ever loving hell was going on here.

And then Siberian accepted the proffered hand. She didn't grasp Amy's wrist this time, and Amy didn't resist. Siberian was faster than her, stronger than basically anyone, and they were in close quarters... she knew she couldn't escape. Siberian bit off her pointer finger, then stepped aside, allowing Amy to climb through the person shaped hole left in the wall.

Taking to the air hadn't helped. Hiding in buildings definitely wouldn't work. So Amy ran on foot. Behind her, the chemical chain reaction started.

Siberian vomited liquid flame seconds later. A thermite bomb going off inside her stomach. Basic chemistry, really. It was mostly made of iron, a chemical found in abundance in most animals. Converting it to weapon form was far easier than keeping it from igniting prematurely. Amy didn't look back, didn't check to see if she'd succeeded as she weaved between buildings.

A cloud of black formed an arrow pointing her to the left, into an alleyway. Skitter? Did bug girl have a plan? Amy's goal was to buy time. Make this fight take as long as possible. Skitter, on the other hand, fought to *win*. No matter what it took. The idea of actually winning against Siberian was absurd, of course... but if this plot worked to buy even a few more seconds, it was worth it.

Amy turned, running as fast as she could- which, she guessed, was around 40 miles an hour. She slowed down when she realized she was outracing the swarm... she didn't want to lose the camouflage, especially as bug copies of herself were being sent out in all kinds of directions.
Siberian smashed through one, a couple blocks away, moving faster than she'd yet revealed she could. And proving that steel melting levels of heat inside her own stomach were no threat. A thrown rock passed through another. Siberian's plan was obvious, at least. Every cloud she confirmed was a cloud, she didn't have to run after.

The bugs formed an arrow down. Unfortunately, it wasn't in time, as a stone slammed into Amy's back and sent her rolling. So much for superhuman reflexes. It meant the Siberian found her as well.

Amy pushed herself up as Siberian got close, planting her feet in the woman's face and launching herself away. Siberian couldn't be moved. But her momentum could be added to Amy's. Even if the impact force broke one of her legs. Wings helped stabilize and keep her moving. She was, at least for a few seconds, actually faster than the Siberian.

Then she was plunged into darkness. The whole area was. And she collapsed.

The darkness opened around her, and she sat up. Grue spoke. "Listen, we don't have a lot of time. We discovered Siberian is a projection. Like Crusader's ghosts. We're trying to find her creator. Should be nearby. Are you okay?"

That was interesting information to have. Of course, the question was stupid, and Amy couldn't even answer it. She opened her mouth, patted her throat, and then shook her head. She didn't know sign language. Then again, Grue probably didn't either.

"Fuck, she can't talk," he said. Into a radio?

"Siberian's coming back. Get out of there!" Was the reply back. Grue's darkness started to spread out again as he reached for Amy. She leapt straight up. Avoiding his hand, avoiding his power that somehow rendered her inactive. The enhanced hearing had saved her. At least her leg had mended, but she couldn't be caught in the dark field again. She bounced off one building, then another, gaining height. She even made it to the roof before Siberian landed next to her.

She'd lost four fingers already. The fifth would probably be the last. No more time to buy.

Enough adrenaline to kill a bull elephant flooded into Amy's system. Coupled with drugs that would have made the Merchants nervous. Variants on meth, PCP, and stuff that didn't even have names. She moved. Fast. Ducking under the Siberian's blows and getting a few in, herself. A blow to the kidney that would have been lethal to a normal person.
She had to jump and back flipped over Siberian's retaliating sweep. It was a startling revelation. But Siberian didn't actually know how to fight. For all her speed, all her strength, she was sloppy. Untrained. Amy, at least, had the benefits of some self defense. One of Victoria's ideas... started before they even had powers... but that wasn't something to dwell on right now.

And under these circumstances, Amy's body pushed this far. Suicidally far, there would be no surviving whether or not Siberian got to her. Amy was a faster. Smarter. More efficient. If it were any other, it would be a curb stomp. Siberian lunged. Overextended. No strategy, no style, no control. Amy stepped aside, struck her in the base of the skull with enough force to shatter concrete.

Siberian twisted, Amy kicked her in the back of the knee. Either blow would have dropped almost anybody else. The cloud of bugs got thicker and thicker- probably to give Amy a chance to retreat. But there was no point, it was already a suicide mission. Still, it blinded Siberian. It didn't blind Amy.

Siberian lashed out with her claws, only to catch air and insects. A chunk of concrete collided with her face. And disintegrated. No longer playing softball, her head moved forward, melting the stone. And Amy's hand.

Amy moved back, but she was already tiring. Ligaments had torn. Muscle had started bleeding internally. Her body was a wreck. It was a small miracle that only one of her hearts had stopped beating.

She collapsed. Siberian stalked forward, observing the fallen girl. She'd won. She KNEW she'd won. The Undersiders had, apparently, saw fit to retreat as the bug clouds started to dissipate. Abandoning the fight. And Amy with it. Well, it wasn't anything I hadn't expected.

Amy looked up at the woman. The unkillable projection. Who knelt down and grabbed her neck. No... not grabbed... just touched. Two fingers. She... was checking her pulse? She looked... disappointed? Sad?

One last attempt, then. Amy's body exploded with enough electrical power to overload a city block. It ripped through her- even though she had optimized organ systems to conduct the power. Lancing through her arm, and into Siberian's leg. The bleedoff cooking what few organs still functioned. Siberian, at least, survived. Amy did not.

Below. Far below. I groaned as I forced myself out of the cocoon. The system still needed muscle feedback, and I was now regretting how out of shape I was.
I hesitated for a second, slipping my feet into my filthy, wet, and now cold sneakers. I made it worse shortly thereafter, stepping down into the sewer system. Sinking into the muck, surrounded by the smells, it was all I could do not to vomit. But I needed the skin contact to alter biomass. And I'd need a lot of biomass. Besides, I reminded myself, I belong down here in the filth.

I sloshed forward, leaving modified life with each step. Seeding it into the sewage. It would grow. I was dimly aware that what I was doing violated everything I had promised Carol and Mark. That thought seemed so insignificant to me, now.

"Goodbye, Amy," I whispered to no one in particular. "I'm sorry. I can't pretend to be you any longer."
"Glory Girl?"

"Yeah!" I said, my head snapping up. I'd been drifting again.

"You understand the plan, right?" Legend. The Legend. And he sounded a little annoyed at me. A week ago, that would have meant something to me. Now? All I could think about was her. And trying not to think about her.

"We distract the S9 until the bombs are dropped. Clock and Cache keep us alive. Then we pray like hell that shit you got from Bakuda can stop Crawler," I didn't bother hiding the annoyance in my voice, however.

Legend just looked at me. I looked right back. I could tell he wanted to say more. I wanted him to. Scold me. Yell at me. Give me a reason to yell back. I pleaded in my head. Anything to distract me. Please?

He didn't. He looked like he wanted to, the concern on his face reminded me of my father. When I was younger. When he was having a good day, and I wasn't. Well, thanks to that bitch that had the gall to call herself my sister, there'd be a LOT of days like that in the future.

"It's time to go," Legend replied. "Make sure you're fully suited up."

I just nodded. I wasn't part of the Wards. Not really. Although as badly damaged as New Wave was... it was pretty much a certainty that I'd be joining, and Crystal would join the Protectorate. Mom and Dad hadn't given official permission, yet. In fact, Mom had flipped out in response. But they would concede to it in the end. They'd have to. I needed it and they knew that.

I pulled the hood up over my head. The protective suit was fireproof. And deliberately designed to make it impossible for the Nine to tell us from one another. Didn't make any difference in my case. I was one of the locals. But it means Legend and his team could participate fully in the fight, and that was worth almost any discomfort.
And it was a lot of discomfort. My forcefield rubbing against the suit made it shift and bunch up in strange ways. If I tightened it as much as I'd like to, it would break when I activated my powers. And if I kept it loose to account for the shield, then it was floppy and ill fitted.

The inside of the suit smelled of rubber and plastic and the aroma of not terribly clean person. That person, I was aware, was myself. I hadn't slept well in a while. It had been a couple days since I took a shower. Everything reminded me of her. Every time I closed my eyes I saw her face. Even seeing my own nude form made me think of how much I wanted...

FUCK DAMMIT NO!!!

Have to focus. Something else. Anything else. How she betrayed me. Violated me. My trust. My love. Turned it into this mess. I clenched my fist and cursed the suit yet again. I couldn't even dig my fingernails into my palm. Pain was one of the few things that didn't remind me of her. There was one blessing of this damn suit... I couldn't feel the wind brushing across my skin. Now, even that made my thoughts drift... there. Couldn't let me have any pleasure left in my life, could you, sister?

We rushed off toward the battle zone. One of the more damaged parts of the city. "Dolltown" as it was now being referred to. Parian's territory.

All of us were movers, though I had to go slowly all considered. Other than Legend, I was the fastest here.

How much easier it would be to run off. Go in early. I could take on Jack. Or Mannequin. Or Bonesaw. Crawler would be a bit much. And the less I thought about what Siberian could do, the better. But I could avoid them. Tear up the others. I'd never killed before... never wanted to. Even if I had wanted to, I'd have been too scared to. But now? Now I really, really wanted to. I could rip someone apart, one limb at a time, and love every second of it.

And if it were one of them? I could do it on live national television and be applauded as a hero.

Legend was first to spot the wrecked van, surrounded by people in costume. I focused through blurry eyes. Grue. Tattletale. Skitter. Two I didn't know. The Undersiders. I watched as Legend pointed toward them. And I hoped he would just wipe them out. They deserved it. Especially Tattletale. She knew this would happen. That's how her goddamn power works.
Alas, it didn't happen. Words formed. Made of bugs. Fucking creepy ass Skitter... I had nightmares about her power. How her bugs tore into me. Now I relished in the memory. The pain and fear were distractions.

It took me a second to register the words. 'SIBERIAN DEAD'. I was the only one who didn't gasp. Siberian took on the Triumvirate, all of them, and won. Some barely significant group of thieves managed to kill her? How??!

I was glad the concealing visor hid my smirk. Well, at least now I don't have to feel bad about losing to them.

Legend turned to drop down, followed by the rest of the team. This was a story they had to hear.

Their group was near the vehicle. There was sign of fire nearby, even some molten asphalt. The vehicle seemed undamaged, save for the part where it had run into the side of a building.

Grue had a hand on Skitter's shoulder. She was looking at the ground. Shaking. The unknowns, in their red and black costumes, were standing near one another off to the side. They didn't seem comfortable getting involved, either way. Not part of the team. Even up close, I didn't recognize them. Mercenaries, perhaps? Bounty hunters? The Nine had quite a price on their heads. Millions of dollars per confirmed kill. Nationwide fame. Some people were crazy enough to try. Maybe they had the power that killed Siberian. Sobering thought.

Tattletale stepped forward, of course. Always the mouthpiece. I activated the com. "She's tricky. Can get into your head. Pull out your darkest secrets using nothing but body language or quirks in your voice or expression. Don't give her any clues. Probably already figured out who we are and what I told you."

Legend responded back, of course. "Right. Everyone else hold back. I'll do the talking. I'm used to dealing with powerful Thinkers."

I landed, lining up with the others, a few feet behind Legend. He walked forward.

Tattletale smiled at me. I wanted to break her face. I... wow, that is one hell of a scar. Wonder how that happened. An image flashed unbidden, of Amy's delicate fingers caressing Tattletale's face. Removing the damage. A dozen emotions pushed to the surface. Love. Desire. Jealousy. And I crushed them down again. Rage, indignation, disgust. One simple slip of concentration was all it
took. Had to stay angry, had to stay focused.

They'd been talking. We were of course listening, neither was being quiet, and Legend left his com on.

"... like Crusader. Or, as I'm sure you've already figured out, Genesis." Tattletale finished.

"You're certain?" Legend asked.

"Of course," Tattletale replied. "If I had any doubt, we'd have hidden the body. Or had Sundancer destroy it. The fact that we're here, letting you know, proves we're certain. Besides, whatever you want to say about us, we wouldn't violate a Class-S truce like that."

I saw Battery tense. And if I saw it, Tattletale probably just learned half of her life's story.

"I'd like to see the body," Legend replied, with a studied, even wooden, level of control. Smart, probably. He doesn't think he could trick her, so he didn't even try.

"It's in bad shape," Tattletale warned, but she didn't try to stop him. He opened the door and paused for a minute.

"Cause of death?" He asked.

Skitter spoke up. She had obviously been crying. Her voice was raw. "I... I didn't have any choice. H... he." She collapsed into Grue's chest. Crying openly. Was this the same girl that had seemed so ruthless at the bank? That had stood up to the full force of my aura and threatened dozens of people with fucking black widows? She seemed so fragile. So vulnerable. Like Am... NO!

"I've never killed before," she finished. I only heard her due to the com link. Really good tech, probably tinker.

Legend let down his guard when he spoke. Genuine sympathy. "No one doubts that you did the right thing," he said. "Siberian is one of the most dangerous beings on the planet. I know that's not much comfort. You're not the only one who's been through something like this."
"His power didn't work on himself," Tattletale interrupted. "Skitter identified the vehicle and got several wasps and spiders into the van before she started shielding it. Siberian had to choose between blocking Sundancer's power, or stopping the insects. And, no, I don't know why this person who's obviously male created a female projection. I would rather not speculate."

Legend was examining the evidence. Cameras were built into the suits, recording everything.

"How did you come to this conclusion that Siberian was a projection?" Legend asked. Back to business mode. Not a wooden as before. Commanding.

"Cherish. You already know we captured her. She's been quite talkative."

"Torture?" Legend's voice didn't sound all that unhappy. Though there was no hint of approval, either.

"No, actually," Tattletale responded. "She likes playing mind games. And has let stuff slip. That and she legitimately wants us to stop the rest of the Nine."

"Do you mean she was forced to join their team?"

"Not even a little bit. Cherish is every bit as twisted and fucked up as her father, Heartbreaker. Probably more. But she is absolutely terrified that Jack is angry at her, and that he'll let Bonesaw have her. She wants us to win. For her own self preservation."

"I'll admit. Your story sounds believable," Legend stated.

"But..." Tattletale responded.

"But," Legend agreed. He didn't go into greater detail.

"You'll have half the thinkers in the Protectorate crawling all over the recordings you've been taking. Want to hold a debriefing. Whole nine yards. We can discuss specifics after the rest of the Nine are
"Of course, we have more pressing concerns," Legend agreed. "We're heading toward Crawler and, presumably, the rest of the Nine right now. I'll send some PRT troops to secure this location. We can talk in detail later."

Tattletale nodded as Legend started to lift off.

She looked toward me. "Wait!" she shouted.

I paused. I want to hit her so bad.

"You deserve to know. When we found Siberian, she was hunting Amy," Tattletale continued. Every muscle in my body went rigid, and the protective suit was being strained by my shield. My aura even bled through, effecting Tattletale, forcing her to look away. Serves the bitch right. "We couldn't save her in time."

I fought down every emotion. Every memory. I couldn't stop myself from shaking. I couldn't stop the water running from my eyes. It took all of my efforts, all of my strength, to choke out a single, cold, word. "Good."

And then I rocketed off toward the battlefield, fighting to see through my tears. Struggling to convince myself that I wasn't lying.
Chapter 4

Amelia, Ch 4

It had been a couple hours as I slogged through the mess. Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? It was sewage. Raw. Filth of a hundred different descriptions. And I could feel every last germ that touched my skin. I grabbed each one. Shaped them. Reshaped them. I could have left it at that, let the organic compounds control themselves. Except that would be too slow. I needed incredible amounts of mass for this. And that's what I would get.

The vinelike organism I made combined some of the best traits of every species I could think of. Left on its own, each tendril could grow over a hundred feet in a day, in an optimum environment. And it could produce a LOT of tendrils from each main vine. Like a jellyfish, it was both a collection of small organisms, and a single organism all at the same time. As long as a cluster more than five cells large continued to survive, it would regrow.

It could eat just about anything organic, and even consume a number of inorganic substances. It was photosynthetic, chemosynthetic, thermosynthetic, even electrosynthetic (actually, that was probably a name for something else now that I thought of it) and... well, whatever you call a plant that can use radiation and sound instead of light. It could eat most forms of stone. Some forms of metal. Any kind of plastic or petroleum product. Literally every organic substance on the planet. And whenever it encountered another of its own species? It fused together, joining the two into one shared lifeform that could trade nutrients and energy between them at remarkable rates. And it even made leaves that were edible and incredibly nutritious. Just... don't think too hard about what it ate.

It helped to focus on that. Kept my mind off the smell.

And then I felt, more than heard, the explosion. I was miles away, but started in that direction nonetheless. I was feeling pretty good, actually. I'd taken on Siberian and... well, 'won' would be overly generous, I supposed. But I tricked her completely. She believed I was dead. The Nine would believe I was dead. I could go on hiding. I could be safe.

Only problem? Well... 'fuck that noise'.

I fought the fucking Siberian. I came away, not only alive, but knowing two of her weaknesses. First- she was shit in a fight. Two years of self defense classes that ended three years ago was all it took to fight against her indefinitely. I only needed enhanced physical abilities because she had enhanced physical abilities. If we were both base-normal girls? I'd have ground that bitch under my heel. Didn't matter that she was probably a foot and a half taller than me, and had the second nicest
body I'd ever seen in my life.

Her second weakness... explained the first weakness. She was a projection. Not alive. Not real. A murderous life sized barbie doll. Huh. Sounds like the kind of shitty horror movie that Vicky would have dragged me to along with whatever boy she was trying to hook me up with that week. There was a time I'd have done ANYTHING to avoid that.

Careful what you wish for, right? Thanks for the advice, dead person who's smarter than I am.

I'd make it up to her. I'd stop the rest of the Nine. Fix the damage they, and Leviathan, had done to her city. Fix her, even if it was against her will. Then leave. Find somewhere else to live. Maybe be a one-woman disaster relief in the wake of the other Endbringer attacks. This organism I was using here could do so much. Especially in the areas left uninhabitable by Behemoth. Other, modified, strains could do even more.

I'd prove to her I could be a hero. And if I had to make Nilbog look like a second rate hack in the process? Fuck it, the worst they could do would be to kill me and drag my name through the dirt. Both fates were far better than I deserved.

It took me over an hour to make it near where the explosion took place. I wrapped myself in biomaterial that had, minutes ago, mostly consisted of water, dead animals, and human fecal material. Now it was a solid ton of combat armor in an apelike form.

... If I were in a better mood, I could probably laugh at that. I was riding around inside a giant shit gorilla. Dennis must never know. I made it push up the large manhole cover, and then forced it to shapeshift itself through. It was far too massive to make it out any other way.

I stayed calm as I was pulled out. And that's really what it was, almost like being sucked up through a giant straw.

The area was still burning when I took the opportunity to observe my surroundings. But that wasn't the first thing I noticed.

The giant, crystalline statue of Crawler? That was the first thing I noticed. It was, in its own terrifying way, beautiful. Face turned toward the sky in what looked to be a triumphant roar. Five of his arms outstretched, reaching toward the sky as if welcoming the arrival of God Himself. Flawlessly crafted and surrounded on all sides by devastation. I almost felt ashamed that I noticed the dead second.
The people in the area, third. Dozens of PRT troopers went through the area, examining the damage. Setting up warning tape and keeping the gawkers back. I was earning quite a bit of attention on that front.

I was probably safe if they attacked. Containment foam only works on something that's not capable of turning itself into digestive enzymes.

The parahumans moving toward me were another subject. Most wearing some weird hazmat suit looking costumes that I'd never seen before. The only one I could get a look at was a boy made of metal that I didn't recognize. I stopped to appreciate him for a moment. Damn, if Victoria had set me up with THAT. And that's all it took. The moment was gone.

One approached and spoke. "Do you have a name?" Now I recognized her. Battery. I'd met her a few times, saved her life a couple times. She was always nice enough. A little overly serious. Most of the Protectorate were. Except her boyfriend, who was almost as bad as Clockblocker. I never asked, but it was pretty clear that he was the one who came up with their names. I knew because it was stupid and bordered on the offensive.

"Are you able to speak?" She asked again. I'd zoned out. I hesitated. I don't have a name to give her, I realized. Not any longer. But still, I didn't want to upset them. And I needed to know what was happening in there.

The suit started shifting, opening up in the middle. Slowly, of course. Its pectoral muscles melting back more like clay than any mechanical certainty. It was enough to reveal my face. I probably looked like what I'd been wading in for the last three hours or so. I knew I smelled like it.

"Panacea?" She asked, seeming a little stunned.

"Yes and no," I replied. "I'm not with New Wave anymore. Am thinking on a new identity," I answered as the body armor settled onto its knees, and I could step out onto the ground.

"Oh," she replied. "I'm sorry. I... Tattletale told us you were killed by Siberian."

I fooled Tattletale? Unlikely. Bitch read me like a magazine cover last time. Probably lied to them, for whatever reason. "Yeah, that's what I wanted Siberian to think. Can you let me in?" I asked. "I'd like to see what I can do to help."
Battery hesitated. She couldn't quite keep eye contact. "Please trust me. You really shouldn't."

My blood ran cold. "Why? What happened?"

She inhaled deeply and slowly. The air quality here was a nightmare. Hot, sulfurous smells coming off the remnants of the fire. Chemicals used to put out fires that water couldn't. It was bad, even compared to the sewage I just waded through. That suit must be completely sealed.

"I hate having to be the one to tell you this. Glory Girl... she... didn't make it."
I blinked. My eyes were already watering from the caustic air released from the chemical fires. No. Not like this. Not before I could undo my mistake. I hadn't hoped for forgiveness. I hadn't hoped for her to stop hating me. I didn't deserve either of those things. But for the love of all that is holy, couldn't I fix just this one thing?

Panacea. Universal cure. Such bullshit. I could have named myself GOD and it would have been less pretentious.

I didn't say anything. I simply stood up, walked back over to the armor, which I left envelope me, and I walked up to the PRT cordon. I kept the front of the suit clear, so they could see me. So I could see out with my own eyes instead of the jury rigged bio camera thing I'd put together. It... wasn't all that good, actually. Indistinct. Black and white only. It was good enough to fight Siberian. It wasn't how I wanted to see my sister's face.

No one stopped me. My reputation was pretty strong, here. Maybe they hoped I'd be healing the wounded. Maybe they didn't want to stop me from seeing my sister.

The area was annihilated. Fires had scoured the area, hot enough that there weren't even bodies to identify. Lumps that may have been people, or may have been garbage cans. Some that were probably cars. Impossible to tell. And then... the statues. Only five, including Crawler. "Only" four people and a monster. Three contained in the same full concealing costume I'd come to associate with this whole nightmare.

Two were only identifiable as crystalized from rips in their costume that looked to be claws. The third was leaning over one of the wounded. Held in place forever. Around the openings was a spread of patterns that looked a lot like ice crystals forming on the edges of a window. It took me a few moment to realize that it must have been blood. Turned to... this material.

"What... but... how?"

"One of Bakuda's bombs. Only way we could stop Crawler," Battery replied.
I spotted Victoria. And wished I hadn't. A portion of her costume had been torn away. And more of it had melted off her. Almost nothing left on her, leaving everything to be viewed. There... wasn't enough of her left for it to be indecent. Her chest had been melted to the point where bone was clearly visible. Her stomach... organs were exposed, but most of them too damaged for me to recognize. Her right leg had no flesh remaining between the knee and the ankle. Her left, most of the damage was her inner thigh. Her hands had all but melted off... I had to guess from her trying to claw at the acid on the rest of her.

It had to be an acid.

My body, my mind, they were both numb. I had defaulted to analysis... a behavior I've heard is common for people with Thinker powers, like mine, but had never experienced for myself. I forced myself to look at my sister's once beautiful face.

The left half of was completely melted off. Hair missing. Skull exposed. The jawbone had disconnected from the skull on that side. And, good god, that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was the side that was still intact. Contorted in pain and horror. She was still alive. Still conscious. When the glass-bomb hit.

I couldn't even delude myself into imagining death came swiftly for her. That she was murdered early, and the acid had nothing but a corpse to inflict its horror on. No. Even that would be too much to hope for. I had to live with the knowledge that the last minutes of her life was spent screaming. In pain that I couldn't even imagine.

I turned away, an act that the biofeedback system interpreted as combative. Twisting the organic machine and its arms and legs into a fighting stance. I screamed inside the suit, venting my frustration and rage and guilt the only way I could.

One of two ways, at least. I caught sight of Crawler's body. The suit's muscles clenched, responding to my subconscious body language. It knew what it was told. What my body wanted, even if my mind was unable to articulate.

It wanted violence. It wanted to inflict pain. I was more than willing to act on that impulse.

I charged Crawler's frozen body, and struck with all the power the bioarmor had to offer. The fist collided with forces normally reserved for an enraged elephant. It was a bit of a disappointment, not being able to use my own hands, my own strength. But my power was my strength. My blessing. My curse. And I used it to full effect here.
The initial blow had splintered several of the supporting bone growths, and pulverized most of the musculature in the hand and wrist. Ordinarily, it would take a great deal of effort to mend that kind of tissue damage... but this machine was built with me in mind. More plant than animal. More fungus than plant. It was a perfect cellular machine, and I could patch it back together in heartbeats.

The crystaline body shifted slightly under the force, and even left minor cracks. The followup right handed blow took off one of the monster's smaller arms. And left the suit's other limb damaged. But that was fine, the first had been repaired. Another blow to the center, expanding the spiderweb splintering into the frozen heart of the beast.

Another pair of strikes. Mending. And another. More mending. I was exhausting the suit of all reserves even as I was expanding the damage into Crawler. It was a question of which of us gave way first. It was a close match. But I won. Barely. The suit had what could only be compare to a heart attack. Or a full-body aneurysm. Analogy falls short when trying to apply "death by exhaustion" to a tree.

At least it was still meant to be opened even in death. My power- I've never used it like this before. Or this long continuously. And I still hadn't reached a limit. If anything, I could call it invigorating. For all the suffering I'd been through, all my pain, all my failures and mistakes. My power itself was none of those things. It worked perfectly every time. Forever reliable. Forever mine.

And I would use it. Some of the Nine still remained. Shatterbird, I believed I could beat with effort and planning. And Bonesaw. And Jack Slash. Especially Jack Slash. I would hunt him to the ends of the fucking earth if I that's what it took to end him. It's not like I have anything else left to live for.

I pressed my feet against the "window" of the suit, forcing it out. And then dropped the couple feet to the ground.

Battery and the others had started to approach me. My dead suit. And the shattered remains of Crawler.

I spoke. My voice came out ragged. Raw. That's right, I remembered. I had been screaming the whole time. Of course I hurt my throat. I was going to try again, but was interrupted by a startled shout, and pointing. A pink fog was rising from the ground, in the more densely populated part of the city. And spreading in all directions.

"The hell is that?" One of the other hazmat suits asked. One of the civilians screamed, which was
followed by more screaming and panic as the water in the streets started turning an oily reddish color,
racing through the streets like fire spreading across a trail of kerosene. Someone else might mistake it
for blood. My eye was a little more expert than most.

I turned to the biosuit. Reaching toward it, I noticed that the shell was covered in strange growths. It
took me a minute to realize they were mushrooms. Shaped differently. Wrongly. Looking like
nothing so much as tiny, repeating iterations of human hands and limbs and faces. I hesitated to touch
the microsized forest of body parts.

In spite of its "death", it had started restoring itself to "life" quite readily. It's hard to make a fungus
stay dead. I drew from the raw materials, shaped it.

I created a quick-and-dirty variant of my sewer-vine. Which really needed a better name. I'd have to
work on that. Alongside my own name. It snaked its way toward a nearby storm drain, finding more
of its own already there. Good, it was spreading more quickly than I'd dared to hope. Probably
covered close to half the city at this time. Much of it was already in the fog. I created what was,
functionally, a model of the human body within one of the larger tendrils. It was a "blank slate", but
it was fully, functionally, human. Suitable for organ harvesting, even. Yet still it was part of the root.

Then I had the plant flood the body with that red material. And I observed. Watching as the... were
those prions? Three reactions hit me at once. Who I was before... Panacea, Amy... was horrified with
the knowledge of what these things would do. Cutting away memories. Faces. Isolating everyone.
She would have recoiled in horror.

The new me, was absolutely pissed. That twisted, evil little monster that pretends to be a child was
going to murder a city! Possibly half the state unless she had some mechanism to shut this down. I
know, considering the history of the Slaughterhouse Nine, that should have come as exactly zero
shock at all to anyone ever. But seeing what she was willing to do, watching it happen. That made it
all the more real.

Then there was the third. The part I was coming to think of as my power, itself. It... was almost
contemptuous. Between the disgust and the rage, there was the part of me that thought 'it would
require a child to see this as impressive'.

In that period of three or four seconds, I had already constructed an antidote, and modified the vines
to release it into the atmosphere. Bonesaw's disgusting, sadistic, and pathetic little stunt... I shut it
down less than five minutes after it had begun.

Next, I would shut her down.
"Find Skitter," I demanded to the Protectorate heroes near me. There was no room for debate. "It's time to end this."
Battery looked at me. I glared back, wrapping my arm around my vine. Still need a name for this thing. I was drawing up more mass through the central... well, the "animal" part of the construct... basically a bloodstream. While most of the material was more plant than anything, the resource demands were higher than any natural plant, so it needed efficient access to energy. And for that, you had to go animal.

I was encouraging growth throughout the network, forcing its metabolism into an unsustainable level, and using my power to sustain it. My plant, for all its features, was nowhere near as complex as a human body. It was easy to work with. Natural biology was full of redundancies and inefficiencies. This vine had none of that getting in the way. It served whatever purpose I shaped it to. And it could quickly change that purpose if I so desired.

Granted, this was its own weakness. A strain of bacteria or a mold or something would no doubt come into being that could infect it simply from dumb random chance. And when that happened, it would die. It had no defense. Except me, of course.

As I considered this, the mass gelled around me, creating another psuedo-cocoon. I would need my interactive system for this to work. My power alone could achieve a great deal. But it had a great many limits as well.

"I... got Tattletale on the line," Battery told me. "She insisted on knowing what this was about before letting us speak to Skitter.

I grit my teeth. "Fine. I'll talk to her."

I snatched the phone away. "We both know I don't like you. And we both know there's not time enough for this shit. I need Skitter to help me find the rest of the Nine. You guys can handle Jack. I want a rematch with Siberian."

I could almost hear Tattletale's smile. "There's a lot of things you missed out on while playing dead, Amy."
"Not my name," I responded. I didn't bother hiding my emotions. What would be the point? Tattletale would see right through them.

"Good to know. Panacea? No, you dropped that, too," Tattletale continued. Good fucking god, does she realize how much she sounds like a Saturday morning cartoon villain when she talks like this? "To start with. Most of the Nine are gone. Siberian's dead. So is half our team."

My heart sank. "Is Skitter..."

"She's healthy. I wouldn't say 'fine'. But healthy."

"Then get her on the phone. I'd argue it's for the 'greater good', but I doubt that'd motivate you," I probably snarled that last word. "So fuck 'good', or 'justice' or 'heroism'. What I want is revenge against the bastards who killed my sister. And if you cared at all about your teammates, you'll help."

Tattletale sounded far, far too pleased with herself when she responded. "Oh, this I have got to see. We were already on speaker phone, so just explain the plan."

"I can hurt the Nine. Those that remain, at least. And I can reach them anywhere. What I can't do is find them. Skitter's power could let her search the city in minutes. And I can extend her range over the entire city."

"H... how," Skitter spoke. Her voice cracked- not out of hesitation, but from overuse.

"When I used your power against you at the bank. I got a good look at how it works. I can create... beacons. Relays. Extend your range. As much as you can handle, I can give you."

"And when we get Bonesaw and Jack?" Tattletale responded.

Really? She is going to negotiate now? I paused for a second. Huh. That actually works out in my favor. "I'm willing to discuss something more long term. After."

Battery actually gasped at that. Apparently she doesn't like little-miss-healer playing with villains. Well, fuck her, then. Still, this was going to be a problem.
Tattletale agreed, apparently. "We should find a better way to talk. Can you get to us quickly?"

"Not as such, no," I replied. "Skitter... look for a rope in the sewer or storm drain system with your bugs. It'll feel leathery. The insects will probably be instinctively afraid to..."

"Found it," she responded quietly. Damn, that was fast.

"Have some of them start chewing on it. And then go to the sewer at the spot you do the chewing." I kept my senses extended. They actually weren't that far away. Only about a mile. Where the insects had started biting, I had the vine absorb one. Partially. I made note of its brain pattern, and how it responded to Skitter's will. I also formed a tumor of sorts. Turns out they did select the storm drain. Good choice. Wish I'd had that option, but I really needed access to the biomass more than I needed my comfort.

"I'll have your relays ready soon. Call me back when you've found them." A lie. But whatever. I handed Battery her phone and had my cocoon envelop me completely. I created the screen that would let me see through the eyes, hear through the ears, of the blob I was turning into a face.

It took almost ten minutes. But then, it took them almost that much time to reach me. I'd managed to painstakingly assemble what was little more than lungs with a mouth. I didn't even try to make it look like a head. Or a face. There wasn't a point, and I was still forcing the plant to grow rapidly. I wasn't even giving it a real chance to grow via metabolism. It was more like having it swallow masses of material, then I would take control over every living thing and leave the dead for digestion. Subsume, not consume.

Skitter climbed down into the drain. I could tell by her dark costume and the lanky figure, moving in that awkward teenager phase way. I had to admit a bit of jealousy- that girl would have the body of a supermodel when she grew up. My power knows these kinds of things- specifically, what an incomplete system is going to look like when it is finished. She would some day be called 'statuesque'. I, if I was lucky, would be regarded as a 'cute' kind of 'mousy' for my entire life.

Others came with her, but they didn't follow her into the hole, instead opting to stay above. Three if the construct's senses were as good as I thought they were. She leaned against a wall, looking at the thing I had grown. She didn't seem surprised by it at all. Oh, right, the bugs. I hadn't wasted the time to build a sense of touch into this thing.

"Okay," my half-made avatar spoke up. "We're going to have to trust each other for this to work. Set
bugs on the vines at your maximum range. Try to keep them as spread as possible, please."

"Before we do this, there's something important that you need to know." Skitter started, although her bugs were already starting to find spots to bite. She had an impressive range for a power propagated through the air like that. Several city blocks, total. I had the vine start to eat... well, subsume them, really. Tie its own primitive neurons into the insects', imitating such lifeforms as the angler fish.

It's not that I couldn't construct a new "brain" from whole cloth for her to use. But this was faster by several minutes. And even with these relays built, it would only extend her range to about a total of a square mile. And I'd need twice as many for the next series of relays. Plus I was worried about doing too much and overtaxing her.

"Our team... they weren't killed by the Nine..." she stated. "We were betrayed by the Protectorate."
"What?" Yeah, there's my patented wit in all its glory. Although, in my defense, I was violating life as the planet earth knew it right now. It was distracting.

"The so-called fucking 'heroes'. We had to go after the Nine by ourselves. We captured two of their members and the Protectorate still wouldn't help us! We found their hideout. Rescued people that they would have left to fucking die. And even after all of that..."

I just listened. I was impressed by her multitasking. The next line of insects had started their chewing while she was speaking.

"Their trap for Crawler... they were happy to just let us come in and fight. Didn't warn us about the bombs. Didn't try to help us even though we risked our lives by fighting to help them. Time and time again. While they did fucking nothing."

I finally spoke up. "They lost people, too, in that fight."

"I know. I saw the statues. The second bomb. That's their little 'fuck you' to themselves. If they hadn't firebombed us... they'd have had Bitch's dogs to keep Crawler from attacking people. And Trickster's teleportation to get the wounded to safety. The fuckers couldn't even betray us intelligently. They had to do it at the time they needed our help the absolute most."

In my cocoon, I dug my fingernails into my palms. It... they... no. I calmed myself by breathing slowly and adding the next layer of relays. Skitter's range was well over a two mile wide circle at this point.

"You'll forgive me if I take that with a grain of salt," my dummy responded. It couldn't inflect emotion of any sort, of course. It was flat, a tool meant to emulate speech. Not something that could actually speak.

"Fine," Skitter agreed. "But it's still the fucking truth. They betrayed us during a Class S truce. And they'll betray you, too, if they think you're doing their job better than they can."
She... I didn't necessarily believe her. But I didn't not believe her. As cynical as I'd become, I'd like
to think my experiences have taught me to recognize the very few who were being sincere. Besides,
she didn't need to convince me that the Protectorate would be coming after me. I had crossed far too
many lines to turn back now. At best, they'd put me in a cell somewhere after installing a bomb in
my brain like Bakuda. They'd already shown how much they loved her ideas, after all.

That or they'd toss me in the Birdcage. I ran down what I'd already revealed. Striker? Probably go up
a couple levels, now that they knew how completely I could rewrite organics. Master? Oh, at least a
four for my dopplegangers... and if they ever realized what I'd done to Victoria... fuck, what did they
rank Heartbreaker as? Or Nilbog for that matter? I could do everything they did, but better.Probably
get a Trump rating from this thing I was doing with Skitter.

"Let's say I believe you..." I said, pulling my thoughts into something coherent. "What are you
planning to do about it? Your evidence?" Huh. Maybe living with Carol DID teach me one thing of
value. Maybe.

"We have footage. Tattletale was setting up to become a sort of 'mission control' and stay off the
front lines of the battlefield. Squishy Thinker kept safely away from the actual fighting."

I smiled. Or smirked, more likely. Either way, it wouldn't transfer to the dummy. "Yeah... I can see
why she'd want to stay as far as humanly possible away from anyone she might be talking to."

"I... I know I've said this before, but I'm sorry. For everything I put you and Glory Girl through," the
girl said. It struck me how... vulnerable... she was.

"I believe you," I replied. "But it's not you who should be sorry. I do have a question for you,
however. You said you wanted to be a hero. But how can you be a hero when you work with people
like her? And how the hell are you still with them AFTER your secret came out?"

"At first, I wanted to find their boss. Turns out he's the supervillain known as Coil. The Undersiders
were a project of his, not the only one either. He owns the Travelers and has spies in the Merchants
and the Protectorate and probably E88 as well. They were basically just thieves, y'know. I'm not
saying that's okay, but... they helped me. A lot. First by saving me from Lung. I had wanted to break
up their team by taking down Coil. But... now... Dinah Alcott."

"The mayor's niece?" I'd heard of that kidnapping of course. How could I not have? Same day as the
bank... oh. Oh fuck. "You were a distraction."
"We didn't know that at the time!" She insisted defensively. "We found out later. She's a precog. Scary powerful. He's keeping her drugged and forces her to use her powers to help him. He'll never let her go. And coupled with his own power... he's probably unstoppable. And it's all my fucking fault."

That gave me pause. Dinah was young- I wasn't sure if she was even a teenager, yet. If she was, it was just barely. And he was drugging her and keeping her like that? I couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of a sick bastard would do that.

I hadn't stopped working during the conversation. Neither had Skitter, actually. She was adapting more quickly to the new relays than I could add them, all while holding an emotional conversation. Her range was well over five miles, now. Well, except where we hit the ocean of course. I was beginning to wonder where her limits ended.

For that matter, where do mine end? Everything I was doing right now was less difficult than dealing with a single gunshot wound. And I could do stuff like that all day. Maybe that's why I feel invigorated instead of tired, using my power like this... because it was just less difficult? No... I felt it when I fought Siberian, too. And my Amy puppet was a hundred times more difficult to build than a merely human body. Part of why I needed the pod- it was the only way I could build a system that allowed her to act without me controlling her directly. I had that 'program' stored within the roots. The next puppet would be so much easier.

Speaking of... the heroes were starting to get a little too close for comfort. Even without factoring what Skitter just told me. The tendril that was feeding my control pod extended itself toward my armor. God, I needed to get actual names for these things. And myself.

During all this, I was still listening to Skitter- really, thinking about how our powers worked was taking more of my concentration than using it. I'd expanded the relays another layer. Hell, I'd begun to see the pattern, and was growing artificial relays out of the roots. They took way longer than the bug versions, but didn't need to wait for a bug to start working. Also, they seemed to have a little less range. Definitely better to stick with the first form, right now.

"So you're saying you don't have a choice?" I asked. "What exactly can he do?"

"He... passes it off as a kind of luck control. Altering fate. But it's something both more and less than that," she explained. "He can create alternate realities. The only thing that changes is him. He can give one order to attack and another to retreat. And choose the result he likes best. We can't attack him, because if we do, he'll end that reality and take the one where he's somewhere else entirely. And he'll know everything we did and we will have no memory of it."
I hesitated... did I dare do this? Yes. Yes I did. "Your team is pretty much finished, right?"

She snorted. "We lost Regent. Thankfully we lost Shatterbird at the same time. He was keeping her controlled. If she'd gotten free..."

I didn't really want to think about how badly that could have gone. That was one of the Nine I didn't think I had a counter for. Not without a LOT of prep time.

"I don't see Grue coming back from this. He was doing all this to help his sister. She was caught in the bombing. Bitch, too, and she was our only real source of muscle. It's basically just me and Tattletale. The Travelers lost Ballistic, too.

I sighed. My impromptu com device did nothing but wait until I spoke. "So... I'm not making any promises. But your power has a synergy with mine in ways that make it stupid not to ask. If I help you save Dinah. And I make a team of my own. Will you be on it?"

She looked a little uncertain. So I took the opportunity to continue. "I can do a lot with my power. What I lack is your instantaneous control. Even the things I'm touching respond with a bit of a delay. Not much, less than the delay in trying to drive a car. But that's slow compared to what you're capable of. I'm proposing a partnership. I won't lie. What I'm planning will get us a lot of enemies. Not the least of which: the Protectorate. But, if you're willing to be my general, I will give you an army."
Chapter 8

Amelia, Ch 8- Jack Slash

It had been a bad day for me, I had to admit it. Skitter, that delightfully terrifying bug girl. She
promised me that Brockton Bay "had its share of badasses". They did not disappoint.

Ah, if I'd known then what I know now, I would have nominated her. My candidate turned out to be
such a disappointment. Skitter, on the other hand, was fascinating. Such a ball of deceptive
viciousness, and clearly the leader of the Undersiders. Even more interesting, they didn't know it.
She turned a group of second rate thieves into the terrors of a city that had reduced the
Slaughterhouse Nine to two people hiding in an Endbringer shelter.

It would have been fascinating to see what she could have done with my team. I might even have
given her the leadership. Not even forcing her to take it from me. A few years of mentoring her, and
she would be even more feared than the Endbringers. A true protégé. Perhaps then I would challenge
her to reclaim my throne. If I couldn't find a worthy foe, then I might be able to build one.

Speaking of protégées. "Bonesaw, dear, how long until you're ready?"

The girl was arms deep in bodies. "Still working on it. I can't just change these on the fly, you know.
Or I could, but she'd just counter it again. I need something that adapts faster than she can. Or kills
before she has a chance to stop it."

"Panacea turned out to be rather more impressive than we thought, too, didn't she?" I agreed.
Internally, I blamed Cherish. The girl was nothing but a series of disasters, and not the fun kind, from
the beginning. When we got out of this, I'd have to go visit her father and have a nice, long
discussion about parental responsibility.

"She's amazing, isn't she," Bonesaw said, while forcing open the ribcage of a still very much alive
woman. "She really is the perfect Big Sister. Beating my best work so easily, and showing me a
dozen new ideas all at the same time. Promise me we'll come back for her, please?"

"What about your new weapon?" I frowned. If she used anything less than her best work for this
because she was scared of killing the girl...
"Oh, that won't matter for her," Bonesaw answered with a happy sigh. "Her power is always protecting her. I could inject every plague in the world, including all the ones of my own design, right into her spine and her power would convert it all to something completely harmless. Probably some kind of easily metabolized nutrient mix, but I'd have to observe it in action to know for certain."

"I see..." I had learned to recognize her tinker-ramblings as they got started. There was nothing I could do to stop them, but I could harness them. It was a challenge, of course, that's what made her so fun. "So... this new plague you're devising, how will it get around her counters?"

"Same way every cold virus in history gets around the immune system," she replied, going happily back to task. "It's impossible to win the war, so you don't even try. You simply adapt and move on. Only dialed up to the greatest extreme. The retrovirus is designed to collect genetic material from everything it infects, and randomly shuffles its own genetic pattern. It'll mutate so quickly that by the time it spreads to three people, it'll be like twelve completely different diseases. My big sister can beat any one of them, easy. But can she beat them faster than they're born?"

And that's when I heard the tapping sound. Someone else was here.

"Oh, I think could find a way," came a voice. Female, but it sounded wrong. It was... hollow... devoid of emotion in a way that made it sound more like a script being read by the world's worst actress.

"Amelia Claire Lavere," I said with a smile as she stepped into the dim lights running on the shelter's emergency batteries. "I am truly impressed."

That was not a lie. Her power was incredible. So versatile. This body-double of hers... it was beautiful on every level. A sleek black armor encased her, shimmering a metallic purple where it caught the light. It moved with a fluid grace I had only ever seen from the Siberian. The finest features of both woman and great cat. It was a perfect machine.

I opted to let her know she hadn't fooled me, however. "Pity you're not actually here in the flesh."

"She's not?" Bonesaw asked, taking a more appraising eye of the construct. "You're not! Oh my god! It's so beautiful! The armor, it's chitin, isn't it? You put it together using insects and I can't see a single flaw anywhere in the design and how are you controlling it so well? And the face..."
"Please, Bonesaw," I interrupted. "Let her have a chance to speak." Yes. Let her talk. That body of hers was dangerous, probably meant to be immune to my knife- and even if I did destroy it, that meant nothing. She built this in a couple hours at most. And judging from the insects moving around on the ground, she had Skitter as backup. They couldn't be that far away... so the trick would be keeping her from attacking before I figured out where their real bodies were.

"Insects bodies, mostly," Amelia replied. There was a flaw, in the voice. But was it even a flaw? Its eyes were sharp and alert. It responded with feedback that was clearly two way and interactive on a level that even Siberian didn't quite match. If she'd wanted it to copy her vocal tones, there was no doubt it could have. Either she felt it was too much effort... or it was a design feature. If it didn't show emotion, then she wouldn't have to worry about hiding her emotions. So... design flaw... or intentional feature... the part that interested me most is that I couldn't tell.

"Skitter helped with the raw materials. And, no, Bonesaw, the insecticides you're using won't work."

"Oh... don't worry, I know!" she agreed far, far too eagerly. I'd have to have a talk with the girl about showing her emotions to the enemy so readily. "Great minds do think alike. I've done something very similar with myself and Jack. We're both alot alike!"

She paused. Okay, so the construct didn't have emotion. But the girl behind it did... and that could still be an angle to attack from...

"Not really," she responded.

"We could be! Haven't you ever wanted to start over? I could make you younger! We’d be the same age! And wear matching outfits! Oh! I could make us into twins!"

"I think about it," Somehow the emotionless construct managed to sound sarcastic. "Did you do that to yourself? Make yourself young?"

“No.” I replied “Rest assured, Bonesaw’s immaturity is genuine. Both an asset in how it makes her that much more creative, free in her ways. A detriment in other ways.”

"Interesting how you need to belittle your own people in front of them like that, Jack."

"Well, that brings back memories," I laughed. Genuinely. This is exciting. Trapped here in this
shelter with a woman who was anything but predictable, being observed by someone else who was an equal amount of surprise. "Your father said much the same thing to me, once upon a time."

"Yeah, I know the score. Marquis."

"Imagine my surprise when I found out. I met the man. I must tell you, Amelia, he was a very interesting character. Marquis was a man of honor. He decided on the rules he would play by and he stuck to them. He put his life at risk to try to keep me from killing women and children, and I decided to see if I could use that to break him. I admit I failed."

“What about Allfather’s daughter?” Good. I have her attention. She wanted to know about her father... I could use that.

"Marquis would not have killed her. That was one of his rules. If it were possible to make him break it, I’d have made him do it."

“Allfather put a contract on my head before he died, because of what Marquis did."

“I doubt it. What gave you that idea?"

"A letter Dragon sent to Carol... my... adoptive... mother."

"Ah, Brandish? I wonder. I suspect Marquis was lying. Making up a story that Dragon felt was credible enough to contact you and offer a warning."

"Why?"

"Oh, that's easy," Jack replied. "Marquis was old fashioned. Predictable. He would want you to know he was still thinking about you. He'd want you thinking about him. His own dream of immortality."

Bonesaw piped up. “That’s stupid. Why do something like that when someone like me could make you immortal for real?”
“Shush, now. Let your big sister and I talk.”

“Okay,” Bonesaw said.

Amelia didn't bother to correct my presumption. It was frustrating how little I could read her like this.

“You are much like your father. Both of you are chained by the rules you've imposed on yourselves. His rules defined his demeanor, the boundaries he worked within, the goals he sought to achieve and how he achieved them. They were his armor as much as his power was.” I continued. I had to play to that. Let her imagine she could be like her father- a name that was STILL both feared and respected in this town.

"Your rules did the opposite. Rather than give you strength, they leave you trapped and alone," I offered. It was pop psychology at best, but what works, works. "That's because you did it the wrong way. Marquis accepted himself, who and what he was, and made his rules to be a frame on which he could grow. Just as I accept myself. Your rules are the opposite. They're made to deny your true nature and be what they tell you to be, instead of who you really are."

She paused. Not her normal 'not acting' pause. The construct wasn't moving at all. No feedback. The interaction required concentration. THAT was a weakness I could exploit! I couldn't touch her body. But her mind- her soul, if you believed such tripe- was ripe for the taking.

"I can give that to you. Help you find your true nature, the way I've found mine, and helped so many other damage people find theirs."

Amelia looked toward me. "You're right. I've fought against my nature time and time again, and it's done nothing but make me miserable. I've lost my family. My sister. Everything I ever loved. In a span of mere days. And yet, somehow, I'm happier than I've ever been. And it's because I've been ignoring everything I've been raised to believe. I'll join the Nine."

I couldn't believe it. Actually, I didn't believe it. "There is still a matter of your tests," I reminded her.

"I've passed them," she responded. "There is nothing you can demand of me that is worse than what I've already been through. I not only escaped Siberian, I distracted her in combat long enough for my allies to kill her. Mannequin demands you give up something precious and personal? How about my sister, my life, even my name? And I shut Bonesaw's little stunt down in minutes. I will flense
anyone who dares to claim I haven't earned my position in the Nine."


"Really!?!" Bonesaw shouted, running toward the construct and embracing it. "Congratulations, Amelia, I knew you could do it!"

I could see where the skin on Bonesaw cheek parted in thin lines, where she'd brushed up against the armor. She put her hand on the little girl's blood soaked curls. "Go pack up your things. You won't need your plague today.

"Okay," she agreed far too readily, not even looking toward me for confirmation.

Amelia, on the other hand, never stopped looking at me. "Jack Slash. I am challenging you for leadership of the Nine."

She was moving at me before I even had time to register her words. Damn she is fast. My blade launched forward, colliding with her face. The knife did penetrate the eye socket, but the body didn't slow down. My blade caught against the back of the skull and was wrenched out of my hand. It reverted to standard size instantly.

I tried to pull one of my backups while dodging a swipe from Amelia's claws. She was fast. A match, maybe more, for Siberian. But she was so much less human than Siberian. I couldn't figure read her, couldn't predict her steps. She kicked outward and I leapt back, but several bits of green goo hit my chest and started burning. It ate my armor, then skin, then started working on Bonesaw's reinforced mesh.

And it burned. I knew what pain was like because I had never let Bonesaw disable mine. Without the risk of pain and even death, combat was without challenge or thrill.

"Like that, Jack?" Came another voice. The insects. There were a lot more than I'd realized. And they spoke in a gravelly, buzzing manner. They carried a thousand times more emotions than Amelia's automaton. I could guess what would come next from them, as they swirled around. They wanted to attack- their controller wanted nothing more to destroy me in the most horrific ways she could imagine. But she was being held back by someone else. Amelia? Had to be.
"I was asked to let you know... it's the same acid that Crawler uses. Amy-" They paused a half second. "Amelia says it's the most horrible poison she's ever seen. Wants you to know that you'll die how her sister died. And because of Bonesaw's improvements, it'll be even slower and more painful for you than it was for her. Keep struggling, that just makes it spread faster."

Meanwhile, I was still dodging. I had lashed out with another knife, to trip my attacker. Only to have my arm pulled back. How? Spider silk?

Amelia caught my arm and squeezed, twisting and bending it. Broken at the elbow. More acid left behind. Her foot slammed into my knee. More of the same. I dropped, and she stepped on my remaining good hand. No acid, she simply ground down. Sharp. Heavy. Micro thin razors lined her armor, and this thing had to weigh three hundred pounds.

"Bonesaw! Help..." I managed to gasp out. It was hard to breath, as the acid had already destroyed most of my abdominal muscles.

"Sorry, Jack," she said with her usual cheerfulness. "I'm a good girl, and good girls don't break the rules."

So she held a grudge, I realized. How did I not see that before?

Amelia's other leg came into my vision, as she moved between me and Bonesaw. The bugs started covering me, but didn't attack. A peculiar kind of sensory deprivation. I was blinded.

I heard Amelia speak. "So, little sister, what am I going to do with you?"

Then the insect mass was too thick, and I was denied the ability to hear anything except my own screams.
I, or the body I was using at the moment, marched straight up to the Protectorate's visitor reception area. I was wearing my 'Dryad' model. It was, for the most part, the least human looking armor I had constructed at that point. A superior version of the "tree gorilla" outfit I had used before. It stood approximately seven and a half feet tall and was covered in bark.

Next to me was Skitter- or, again, her double. Hers was the much smaller 'Changeling' model. A perfect emulation of a human being, with exactly zero mammalian features other than mere cosmetics.

Much like I had made for the fight against Siberian. Only less utilitarian. Barely better than human... not even that, really. Capable of competing on the level of an olympic athlete... but probably wouldn't take home a medal. But it could compete in every sport at that level.

Skitter... Taylor's... version of the suit was different than mine. My remote control system was modeled after her power. I was, frankly, playing copycat. She just had a model tuned to her frequency. No control cocoon for her. Her suit was pretty close to her actual features, though modified. It was still obviously 'Skitter'- but there was brighter coloration to it. Gone were the dull grays, replaced by shimmering metallic blues and greens. Reminiscent of many colorful species of beetle. Only her eye lenses were true to their old yellow color. Which was fine.

It was far tougher than it looked. As durable as her real costume, and most of it was still the silk. Just from more common spiders that were easier to manipulate to produce the colorful patterns. A rush job. Fake armor for a fake body. The worst anyone could do to us is kill our dolls.

We both carried some sealed bags- hers smaller than mine. But both quite large.

And basically everyone was staring. It had been two days since the Nine were annihilated. Took that long for us to get all our plans in order. We knew what we wanted to achieve, Skitter and I. Or at least the basics. And that started here.

The receptionist was probably used to seeing people like Armsmaster and whoever. Compared to that, we weren't all that impressive. She eyed Taylor for a moment. No doubt figuring out who she was.
"We're here to apply as an independent hero team," Taylor stated after a moment. Lisa was giving us cues. Watching through the cameras we'd set up. Another piggyback off Taylor's power, I could access the eyes of any of my constructs, and put them on the nice little screen I built for those on the team who didn't have unfair sensory powers. It still wasn't good. We'd managed to get it to show color, at least.

The woman, whose nametag identified her as 'Michelle', slowly reached down and opened a drawer, pulling out a small set of forms. She was an attractive woman. Large in the amazonian sense. Blonde, angular face. Probably a stunner once upon a time, and still very attractive in her late thirties. "Is it going to be just the two of you?"

Lisa's voice came over the perfectly ordinary headset I was wearing inside my functionally soundproof cocoon. "She hit a silent alarm. Is now stalling and fishing for information, as we predicted. Keep them speculating. Any clear answers"

I shrugged inside the suit. "We'll want an extra copy. We can print more of our own if we need to," I replied. Oh god, if they only knew. They would scour this city from the planet to stop us. Right now, we were playing the most delicate game. We needed them to believe we were going to play ball. That the asinine 'cops and robbers' thing that Tattletale had described was still how it worked.

We were relying pretty heavy on my reputation. On Panacea. On them being shellshocked from the Nine. Mourning their losses. We also timed this for Legend being temporarily out of the building.

"We'll also need information on your disaster relief efforts. Our main efforts will be there instead of on the field." True. And so very, very, misleading.

"I'll see what I can get for you," the woman agreed.

"Miss Militia, to your right," Taylor spoke up through the headset. I was again in envy of her multitasking. Miles of control area. It's said there's more bugs in a square mile than there are people on the planet. Taylor was currently managing that... almost a hundred times over. If we measured it just on pure mass alone, there was more of 'her' in the city than there was 'everyone else combined'. Well, except for me. Turns out, there's a lot of sewer/stormdrain in a city. And basically everything that was flushed into it had been consumed and converted by now. My Yggdrasil had just about completed its growth through the system. Everything else would need to be done above ground.

I turned to look at the dark skinned woman and her very 'patriotic' outfit. The cynic in me sometimes
wondered if they put her in this city solely to annoy Empire Eighty Eight. Not that they'd be a
problem in... oh... a few days. "Greetings, ma'am," I said.

Her weapon was currently in "shapeshifter" mode, as if trying to figure out the best way to hurt us.
Which would have been something along the lines of 'be approximately seven and a half miles away
from here', not that she knew that. "You're new?" she asked.

"Already knows better," Lisa informed us. "Wants to see if you'll lie to her. Threat assessment."

"She's one of the good ones," Taylor added in. "Patriotic to a fault, though."

"Makes her the worst we'll ever have to deal with," Lisa concluded. "We might have been able to get
her to turn if she wasn't so insistent on protecting a corrupt system. And if she were corrupt, we
could at use her or hurt her without much problem. Instead she's an idealist who hasn't recognized
her own cause betrayed her."

"Not new," I replied. "But a new chapter in our lives. The look and name changes are part of that.
Think we can get a room to handle to sit down and fill out the paperwork?" There. Absolutely true.
Even volunteering more information than necessary and invited her to stick around. We were being
upfront and open as a means of hiding just how incredibly frightening we were.

"Then you're aware of how dangerous it is to be independent heroes, instead of joining the
Protectorate," she said, even as leading us to one of the nearby conference rooms. A small one, but
nicely decorated. A flag in the corner. Hanging pictures of a handful of national landmarks. A sturdy
table, probably oak though I wasn't exactly an expert on that. It suggested wealth without suggesting
opulence or waste. Patriotism without looking like propaganda. Even if, of course, it was both things.
I could see them bringing aspiring heroes here.

"Not a problem," I answered. "Our powers are better oriented for indirect use. We'll mostly be
handling infrastructure and support tasks."

"Such as..."

"I control insects and arachnids," Taylor told them. That wasn't anything we could pretend was a
different power. Sure, I could give her monsters and she could claim those as her own. But 'bugs'
was comparatively less threatening. "I can go through the refugee camps. The hospitals. Clear out
cockroaches. Rodents. Lice. Dangerous spiders. Bedbugs and ticks and numerous other disease
carriers in both people and pets. We'd be here all day if I had to list every last creepy crawly and everywhere we might want to remove them from."

That was our sell on her, at least.

"And your power?" She asked me.

"Botanical control," I answered. Again, not a lie. Just not even the barest fraction of the truth. "I'll be helping with cleanup on a number of levels. Possibly rebuilding. It's basically a shaker power. I can clear out rubble. Set up support beams for unstable buildings. Provide fruit trees set to overproduce."

"Team name?" she asked. We'd filled out that part of the paperwork, already.


"Are you sure about this? There are a lot of dangerous villains. You won't be able to back down from this. Especially with a moniker like that." She was warning us. Warning me. And not just about the indie-hero thing.

I laughed. It transferred to the puppet. And I pulled one of the bags out of the sack. A body bag. Then another, much smaller, bag. Then a small package. Taylor had one of her own. "Oh, I think we can take care of ourselves."

Miss Militia managed to keep her poker face reasonably well. I had to wonder if maybe they had a tinker scanner that identified that we had brought a total of three full human corpses in with us.

"These are the bodies of the Siberian's controller, Bonesaw, and Burnscar," I informed her. "Alongside the head of Jack Slash. I apologize for the condition of his and Bonesaw's remains... had to improvise to get past the modifications made to their physiology. Using Crawler's venom."

"We'll have to get those verified," She stated. "In case someone might attempt to... construct a forgery."
That was expected. And not even unfair, really. I probably could build fakes. Of Manton, at least. All the weird mechanical bullshit that Bonesaw inserted into their bodies was entirely beyond my power, and they knew it. I simply nodded. "Of course. Just so it's made clear, we have a detailed incident report of the deaths of all four individuals, with some details removed to protect identities. Pantheon is claiming full credit for Jack and Bonesaw. Partial credit for Siberian, with the other half going to individuals who wish to remain uncredited. And Burnscar goes to a party that also wishes to remain anonymous. There's account information for all of us included."

She buzzed for someone- several, in fact- to collect the bodies and the paperwork. She left with them.

We didn't speak. Not in front of them at least. As we finished all the details.

"Still can't believe you're going with this theme," Lisa goaded.

"Oh, whatever," I responded. "You were so happy with yours that you're probably going to start using it as your civilian name."

"Not while you're in earshot," she all but sang back. "But while we're on the subject of names. Ohhh, Taaaayloooor... is this gonna be one of those things where you let the heroes name you instead of picking one of your own, again?"

"No," she responded back. "I thought of one. I'm not sure I like it, though..."
"No, nope, never, not happening, ALL the no," Tattletale insisted. "Every fucking 'nope' in the world!"

"Hey! Don't swear!" Came the little girl voice in the corner. I could hear the tapping noises as the spider-like robotic limbs were moving around the 'operating table'... or, as I liked to think of it, 'that nice coffee table we will now have to throw away'. The fact that she could detach her own head from her body was both disturbing, and incredibly useful. How the living hell does someone perform a surgery like that on themselves? Tinkers were bullshit.

She was currently surgically attaching herself to the new body I had made for her. A copy of her own DNA. A bunch of work with the plants. I'd complete the process of making it a living animal AFTER she had properly "linked up". Even with her tools and skills, keeping a headless corpse... would it count as a corpse? Anyway, keeping it alive would be a lot harder if it were animal.

Tattletale glared at the disembodied girl. "Every FUCKING nope. In fact, I mean that literally. The Nopes have all gotten together in one giant fuckball, and are currently reproducing so fast that they've been registered as a Class S threat!"

I had to admit. It was worth the price of admission for this scene. I had my first genuine laugh since before Leviathan. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"And YOU!" She pointed at Skitter. "How could you, knowing everything she's capable of, possibly be okay with this!?!"

She looked at Tattletale with a kind of quiet desperation. We were all, more or less, out of costume. Or, at least, not wearing our masks. Tattletale still wore hers, but that was to be expected. "I... I know what she's done. But."

"But," she kept glaring at Bonesaw. " Fucking. NOTHING. She tortured Grue. Doesn't that mean ANYTHING to you?"

I... I must have seen something of myself in Skitter, and something of Victoria in Tattletale, at that
moment. Being dominated by a stronger personality like that. Even if that personality is trying to help. I believed Tattletale meant well- in this one, specific, isolated instance, at least. But I wasn't going to watch this happen in front of me.

I stood. "You're free to leave at any time, you know. I won't even pretend I want to keep you here."

She turned on me and started to open her mouth. I didn't let her.

"Skitter and I have an agreement. A partnership. This is why you are here, speaking your mind. Instead of trying to find a way out of this dimension simply on the chance that I might, maybe, want to 'thank' you for the bank. Or did you forget that? Because I haven't. You are my compromise for her. She wants you to be part of this. Bonesaw is her compromise for me. I NEED her abilities. More importantly, I need her research."

Tattletale paused. I could see her lips moving as she talked through her power silently. I simply waited. It'd be easier to let her power do its thing than explain it with words. Also. It would sound insane if I said it. "Powers. You know something about where powers come from, don't you?"

I nodded grimly. "I was afraid to touch brains before. I... I even suspect I know why now. Sure, part of it was my own hangups. But there's more to it. A lot more."

"You're not going to tell me." It wasn't a question.

"Not yet, at least. Too new. Not sure. Far too many other things to deal with, first. But yes, I'm pretty sure I know where they come from. I got some idea when I examined Riley's brain."

"Bonesaw," Tattletale stated. "Riley is a person's name."

"Whatever. Her. Skitter, too. Even got a look at Ja-"

"You let her touch you?!" Tattletale said in shock, looking over at Taylor.

"Uh... yeah... why wouldn't I?" She responded. "She fixed up a few things, and even fixed my vision."
I had to smile a little at that. My new partner was a creature of dualities. Skitter was a nightmare. Even now that I was getting a feel for what my power truly was... she frightened me. I knew she couldn't win against me in a straight fight. But something about her just made me nervous. Like she could find a way to win against anything, no matter how powerful. It was disquieting, really. It was also thrilling to know she was on my side.

Taylor, on the other hand. Taylor was too nice. She seemed smaller than Skitter by a foot. Frail. Afraid, even. It bordered on split personalities, how utterly she could compartmentalize. Was this... was this her 'passenger' at work? Riley had told me some of what she believed. I'd have called it crazy, but I could see them, now. Or see the imprint they left in their wake, at least.

The one I could not see? Was my own. What did my power do to me? The sheer pleasure I got from flexing my powers... I could recognize response conditioning when I saw it. The exhaustion I got working as a healer... in spite of using nowhere near the same amount of power as I'd used in the last day or so. Was that its doing? And if so... where did it end, and where did I begin?

While I contemplated this, Taylor and Tattletale continued their argument. It seemed to be coming to a close.

"There is nothing I can do to talk you out of this, is there?" Tattletale said with a defeated look on her face.

"Unless you know another way for me to save this city," Taylor insisted. "And not just the city! With this power, we could save the whole world. I could enter the next Endbringer fight with thousands of monsters that make Bitch's dogs look harmless. They could rescue the wounded. Draw fire. Maybe even kill these fuckers."

"Taylor," she replied tiredly. "Listen to me. There's a fine line between 'too scary to fuck with', 'too scary to live'. This... this crosses that line, comes out the other side, goes all the way back around, and then STILL has enough momentum left to lap Nilbog. You'll be lucky if all they do is put burn this city to the ground."

"I have to," Taylor responded, pleading. "Please, Lisa. This is how we can beat Coil. How we can save Dinah. I am everywhere in the city right now. Our power, working together like this... we can beat him no matter what his plans might be. If he has the power to change fate. Then we just have to be so overwhelming that there can be no doubt. Absolute, total, control. I can't give this up. I won't. Not even for you."
"Fuck," Tattletale- Lisa, apparently, sighed. "Fine. I'm in. I assume you have some conditions."

I nodded. "A few. First, the same thing I told Bonesaw. If I catch you, even once, using your power in a way I find unacceptable. I will end you. There will be no warning. There will be no second chance. I'll break you. And then I'll do things to you that are horrific beyond imagination. And I know just how good your imagination can be."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Second. If you want out, at any time. You're free to go. I'll help alter your appearance. Whatever you need. I will not conscript people against their will."

"What about her," Tattletale asked.

"Same thing. She's free to go if she wants. Although in her case, I'll strip her of her powers first. I want to be fair, but that would be insane."

"You can do that?" She asked.

"Sure... all I have to do is kill two relatively tiny parts of the brain that aren't even found in normal people. They're right there at the top, too. Easiest part to work with, really. You could probably do the surgery with a handgun, if your aim was good enough."

"And the third rule? There's always three, in situations like this."

"The third is that we are a community. I won't be settling for just a small team. Every parahuman that wants, and can agree to peaceful coexistence, is welcome. Normal people, too. We'll worry about details later... create our own legal system... one without the corruption and abuse."

She looked at me. Then looked back at Taylor. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Some of it."

"Alright," she sighed. "Someone's gotta keep you deranged idealists from getting yourselves dead-
by-Eidolon. As long as promise you'll listen to me. Actually take what I'm saying into account before you jump into the deep end."

I smiled as I held out my hand. "I'm Amelia Claire Lavere. Gaea, when on the job. Welcome to Pantheon."

She regarded me for a second, then reached out to shake my hand.
Chapter 11

Amelia, Ch 11

Our debut as Pantheon was both impressive, and anticlimactic. We hadn't lied when I said most of our work would be in "cleanup"... it was just a matter of how we were doing it. And on the scale.

I had called ahead to the hospitals and shelters. Explained to them what we were going to do. They were understandably resistant to the idea. Most people were quite aware of Skitter's reputation-which was not all that pretty.

I, as Amy, had sworn to them that the parahuman in question was a hero named Khepri, part of a new independent group called Pantheon. And she had official Protectorate documentation saying as much. Really, that was all it took. They were pretty damn desperate. Taylor's changeling (and official recognition paperwork) had gone to every hospital, shelter and camp in the city. At first alone- and then with Triumph, who had opted to follow her on his patrol.

According to her, he did a remarkable job of pretending he had no idea who she was. When Assault showed up later, it was rather the opposite. Turns out, he was a villain of some repute, before changing sides for... whatever reason. Something of a surprise to me. I had to wonder if Battery knew. I suppose she had to, given that her boyfriend was willing to just blurt that information out to some girl half his age and all.

We held back. We held back a lot. Taylor- the actual Taylor- was in what she had called 'her territory' near the docks. She and Lisa had not left Coil's employ when they joined. Even though the Undersiders were no longer a team. Grue had left... hadn't even bothered to explain to his team that he was leaving. Let alone where. It wasn't my place. I was going to make damn certain such a thing as the PRT murdering people who were trying to help could never happen again. But I wasn't part of his team or his family.

Taylor had told me a bit about their relationship... her attraction to him. His lack of interest in her. One more thing we have in common, I suppose. She also said that there was no way in hell he'd be joining Pantheon. Not while Bonesaw was with us. I didn't know a lot about second Triggers, but I was given to understand they were even worse than the first time.

That is what Bonesaw had done to him.
And here she was. Currently taking a shower in my bathroom. “Bug hug! I, J, K, L!”

Correction: she was singing children's cartoon songs while showering in my bathroom.

Well, Skitter's bathroom, technically. She'd bought one of the houses near what was coming to be known as 'Crater Lake'. I tried to talk her out of it. Insisted that, honestly, I could live just about anywhere. Hell, I could find a place somewhere in the sewer or subway systems and be quite content. Frankly, thanks to my Yggdrasil's work... Brocton Bay's sewers were cleaner than the average kitchen. You could eat off the ground in them.

More than that. You could eat the ground itself in them.

But the girl had insisted. So I became the resident of a small duplex. Half a duplex, at least. The bottom of the building was, basically, unlivable. My power had cleaned things up, reinforced the whole layout, but that was about it.

Would have been more suspicious if I hadn't been doing the same thing to multiple dozens of buildings the last few days. Most of the Yggdrasil's mass was being used to produce lumber and firewood. It wasn't quality wood- that would be impossible without wasting the iron supplies that I needed for more important projects- but it was at least as good as pine, and people seemed to be able to make do with it.

I had suited up and went into our 'basement'. We had agreed that, in the case of me using my puppets, I would hide in the sewer system. I got too distracted by the system and was more or less a sitting duck. Having Riley to guard me didn't fill me with much confidence. Granted, there was approximately a metric ton worth of insects nearby that could come to my rescue, but Taylor's abilities did have their limits. Blind spots. Mannequin had proven that.

Besides, she couldn't communicate through her bugs, except to write. And couldn't hear at all. And she was busy.

The three of us who could be seen without resulting in an immediate kill order were all hard at work. Taylor was playing nice with the heroes. Currently on patrol with Weld, the metallic boy I'd seen before. There'd probably be at least one of the Protectorate heroes with them. Tattletale was feeling out the Travelers. She wasn't quite sure all the details about their 'hidden member', Noelle- who may be some kind of Case 53. But Coil had something else they wanted. She was trying to see if they'd be willing to save her, even with the off chance that they'd never get the other thing.
And here I am, visiting the Palanquin, at nine in the evening. Having a hero walk in the front door probably didn't do our reputation, or Faultline's for that matter, any good. So I was in civilian guise. Well... except that I looked about six years older, had purple hair, and had spent half an hour online, perfecting the look of someone with natural beauty, who then spent a lot of effort building on what nature granted. Judging by the looks I was getting from the people in the line, I was very successful.

Minerva picked the outfit. Told me I didn't want to know when I asked the price. It would make me scared to hurt the thing. I was beginning to see why so many people were so willing to be villains. They threw around money like it grew on my trees. Then again, I probably could make trees that did that.

No one was suspicious when the bouncer let me skip the lines and walk right in. And, channeling Victoria's attitude of entitlement, I walked in without so much as glancing at the people who weren't considered attractive enough to get such preferential treatment.

It helped that I was piloting a fake. They couldn't see how much this was the last place I wanted to be.

I turned left and went for the back rooms as quickly as possible. I didn't like this kind of place at any point in my life, and now it was a living reminder of Victoria's attitude toward the party lifestyle. More than that... with all the nightmarish things going on in this city, I wanted to scream at them all for being here instead of doing something, anything, to make things better.

I knew it was irrational. After what I've done, I reminded myself, I have no right to judge them. I swallowed my anger, and dialed back the emotional feedback interface on the system. One of Bonesaw's improvements- now the fully equipped changelings could mimic any range of emotion, regardless of what the pilot was feeling.

I was met by a woman who was a few years older than myself. Black, wavy hair. I idly wondered if that was natural. "You would be Gaea?" she asked.

"A representative," I replied. It was the pseudo-truth that we had decided upon when using avatars that didn't look like ourselves. "Pantheon's quite busy, for a number of reasons, but I'm authorized to make almost any deal."

"Tattletale told us you had information we would be interested in," she replied. The way she said 'Tattletale' indicated that she wasn't a fan. "As well as the possibility of aiding our friends with their disabilities."
"Hopefully she didn't make any promises about the help. Gaea's dealt with Case 53s before, and they have a habit of, functionally, regenerating back into their nonhuman state."

She frowned. We were providing all the bad news upfront as a sort of psychological tactic. Minerva's plan, of course. "The fact of the matter is that while they turned in Bonesaw's body, they kept her notes and research materials. She has a drug that can temporarily suppress powers. It can last weeks, or with the antidote they can recover in minutes."

"So... your theory is that a Case 53 won't revert if their powers are disabled? And you'll be charging how much for these drugs?" Faultline's eyes narrowed.

"Nothing," I answered. "Pantheon doesn't believe in profiting from the misfortunes of others."

"I've heard that line before, you'll forgive me for being skeptical," she replied.

"Would you believe we don't need it? That we have a number of ways to acquire functionally limitless wealth? And that's not including a full half of the bounty placed on the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"So, the rumors are true? You guys got Jack, Bonesaw, and Siberian?" She kept a measured tone, but the emotion reader built into the changeling indicated she was nervous.

"Technically, Siberian was killed by the Undersiders, which I believe are now defunct. The member credited for the kill is now a part of Pantheon," I answered. "Gaea got the other two."

For a certain value of 'got', I thought to myself.

There was a pause for a moment before I continued. "In fact, that brings us to the other subject," I continued, pulling a folder out of the expensive handbag that matched my dress. "This is yours, no obligations. It's new information we've acquired about Cauldron."

She snatched the folder from my hand and pulled it open. In it were a couple dozen photos of Manton. And a bunch of handwritten notes we'd photocopied. Including the upside down 'omega' tattooed on his hand.
"Who is this?" She asked insistently. My changeling kindly informed me of the combination of anticipation and suspicion her body language expressed. I was glad it did, I wouldn't have noticed.

"Doctor Manton. The very same that named the Manton Effect," I answered. "But, far more importantly. The man who made and controlled the Siberian, and we believe he was working for Cauldron as a researcher."

"That... is pretty serious... and you're just giving us this information?"

"We have a vested interest in learning more about Cauldron. You are investigating them. We want to hire you to do a job you're already doing, essentially. We can provide certain resources. Healing. Even some tinker equipment and physical enhancements. All you have to do is report to us whatever details you've learned in your investigations. Our thinkers will of course give you anything they can pull from that data."

"I'll have to discuss this with the client that hired us in the first place," she replied. My display kindly informed me that this was, at most, a half truth. Not unlike the dozens I have already told during this conversation.

"Of course," I answered. "Please don't forget to mention our desires to aid the Case 53s, if they're interested."

"I promise you, they'll hear about it," she answered. Another half truth, they probably already knew.

"And... if you would please turn off any recording devices you might have... I have another piece of information that we don't want to leave this room. A warning."

She hesitated a second, then nodded. "Okay. What is it?"

I made my avatar lean in close. "The papers you have list several individuals with serious political and military power that are probably involved with Cauldron. This is a conspiracy that goes all the way up to the top. More frightening is the one detail we didn't put on paper. Legend recognized the body. The symbol. At least one member of the Triumvirate knows exactly what Cauldron is. And is actively aiding them."
"Well... fuck..."
Chapter 12

Taylor and I, ourselves this time, not some replicant, sat outside the Alcott home. Costumed, of course. I had to hand it to Coil- he had great tastes in vehicles. This limo was luxurious. We wouldn’t be keeping it, of course. Nice of Lisa to provide one of her people as a driver. Very professional. Polite. Alert. Took it all in stride when we told him which streets to avoid and how to get here with the least trouble possible. Then again, he worked with Minerva. He had to be used to psychic teen girls by now.

The Alcott’s lived in the affluent part of town, no more than maybe a mile from my... from where Carol and Mark lived. The preadolescence girl, Dinah, was shaking as Taylor carried her, bridal style. I’d done what I could. Except for her insistence that I do not treat her withdrawal symptoms. Purging the drugs and healing as much damage as I could, yes, but she wanted to go through withdrawal.

It seems there was a nearly 70% chance of relapse, had I ‘cured’ her completely. Less than a 10% if I let her suffer through it. She was a brave, brave child. I couldn't help but admire her. She was strong. Even as she shook so hard I was afraid she'd damage something, clinging weakly to Taylor.

It had been decided that I would be the one leave the vehicle and knock. Dinah was scared, and Taylor was doing everything to comfort her. Stockholm's syndrome? No, not quite. It reminded me of stories about people who survived the concentration camps. How, after they were liberated, many of them were afraid to leave. They’d become so accustomed to horrors they witnessed... that the outside world had become more alien and frightening to them than the hell they had lived through.

That, and I was one of the most capable healers in the world. Even if my bedside manner was comparable to Doctor Frankenstein. Chances were high that Dinah's parents would listen to me more readily than to a known supervillain.

I tried the doorbell. There was no sound. Or lights. They were home- if they weren't, Taylor would have known before we even left. So I simply knocked on the door.

It took a minute, and I was about to knock again when a man opened the door. I recognized him, vaguely at least. Older man, heavy set. Dinah got her brown hair from him, even if his was thinning out and going gray.
"Mister Alcott," I started. He wouldn't recognize me in my new costume. "I'm Gaea. Better known as Panacea." Although that's going to change quickly.

He hesitated. "Uh... of course... what brings you here?"

"We found Dinah," I answered. Not entirely untrue. I, at least, had met her exactly once- under an hour ago.

Not turning away from me, he shouted, “Anna!”

His wife appeared in the doorway to one of their interior rooms, peering out into the hallway toward me. She reacted as she saw me. “Please,” the mom said. “Where is she?”

“Before that,” I said, steeling myself for this, and cursing Coil with every word. “She was kept as a prisoner by a supervillain. As far as I could tell, she wasn't molested. She was kept drugged. To control her. I've done what I can to help her, but she'll need time to withdraw, and then she'll need to recover from partial malnutrition. On top of that... the psychological effects of the drugs will remain. She should be kept away from narcotics or tranquilizers under any circumstance, or she risks a relapse.”

Mrs Alcott whimpered in distress.

“She’s an addict?” the dad asked.

“Yes. There's nothing that can be done about that. She also needs to be watched in case others will try to abuse her power”

“She has abilities, then?” the dad asked.

“Precognition,” I answered. "One of the most powerful I've ever heard of. Do everything you can to hide just how powerful she is. There are people who would stop at nothing to have that kind of power. And that includes the Protectorate. Keep in mind that it'll be at least a week before she's physically well enough to use her powers again at all. And I'm not going to begin to guess how long it will be until she recovers emotionally. Keep her safe. Let her know she's loved. And don't let anyone talk to her about her power until she wants them to."
"What about the man who already kidnapped her once?"

"No longer a threat," I answered. "Please don't make me elaborate."

“I... I understand,” he replied. No, you really don't, I thought.

Taylor already knew, of course, that this conversation had come as far as it was going to.

She stepped out of the car, carrying a mumbling Dinah. I was too far away to hear the words. Which earned a brief moment of annoyance: in my Changeling, I could have heard it with ease. But I knew better than to rely too heavily upon them. Even more now that Riley had taken to upgrading the things.

Mrs. Alcott made a noise somewhere between a moan and a cry as she pushed past her husband and I. Rushing to take Dinah out of Taylor's arms. The little girl was instantly clinging to the mother she'd spent so long without. Her father only a step behind, wrapped his arms around them both. A family reunited. For a moment, they'd forgotten everything in the world, including us.

Taylor stepped back, giving them space as I had.

I moved to walk through the lawn toward the car. They didn't need us here, and I was glad for that.

"Wait," the dad called out. "Is there anything we can do to thank you?"

Words I'd heard often enough, as Panacea. This is the first time in years they actually meant more than just words to me. And it was the first time I was going to actually make good on that offer. I pulled a card from a pocket in the green robe that was my new costume. "This is in case you need any help protecting Dinah. And, there's no way to say this without it sounding selfish, but could you see that the mayor gets the number and calls us? Without telling anyone about it. It's important."

"I..." he looked at me. I had to hand it to the man, that he kept enough of a head on his shoulders to try and calculate what our angle was. I wasn't insulted, given it was both justified and true, to an extent. "Okay, I can do that much."
I had to wonder if that would cause some friction in the family. Hopefully once they knew the full story they'd agree that this was justified.

Skitter was already in the limo when I climbed in. I sat on the other side, facing toward her. She looked as miserable as I felt.

"Are you okay, over there?" She asked.

"Not really. I know what we did was a good thing, returning her to her family, but then I feel like shit for using it to advance our own agenda."

"I... was more caught up in how we're throwing away access to one of the most powerful resources on the planet. How tempted I was to fabricate an excuse to keep her. Wouldn't be all that difficult, y'know? The way she clung to me, it wouldn't have been difficult to convince her to stay with us."

"But, you didn't," I said. "You're a better person than you give yourself credit for."

"I guess," she responded, removing her face mask. "I'm just... seeing Dinah's parents like that. A family that, at least for a moment, was legitimately happy? I couldn't help but think of how much pain I must be putting my father through right now."

I lost it. I didn't whimper. Didn't sob. I don't think my expression even changed. But the tears came just the same.

Her eyes widened. "Oh god! I didn't think! I was so caught up in my own problems that I forgot!"

She basically jumped across the gap to sit next to me.

"God, I am such a bitch." She said as she pulled me against her, resting my head on her shoulder and holding my hair in her hand. I could smell Dinah on her. Weird how that's what I noticed. "You were trying to make me feel better and I didn't even think about what you must be going through."
"It's okay," I mumbled into her, I didn't lift my head.

"So, still think I'm a good person?" She asked after a couple minutes.

I gave a half hearted laugh. The tears, at least had stopped. "Yeah. I also think you give really good hugs."

She returned the half laugh. "I got it from my mother," she responded.

We stayed like that, silently, for the rest of the ride. If our driver thought anything of the scene going on in the back of the vehicle, he made no indication of it.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

The A/N's here are TanaNari's not mine

Preemptive author's note. Those with weak stomachs might not want to read the third to last paragraph. When you get to that point, just skip to the next line. Refer to the A/Ns for a more pleasant summary.

=================================

Amelia, Ch 13- Coil Interlude

"Good morning, my pet," I said as I entered Dinah's room. She'd taken to remaining dressed when she went to bed. A matter of not wanting to be caught changing when I came in to ask her questions. That is a good sign- it means the drugs are keeping her controlled, while still leaving her self aware. Much better than some of the early formulas that left her bedridden and in need of diapers.

"My usual questions, pet,"

"Sixty seven point three percent chance there’s any problems here in the next hour. One hundred percent chance there’s any problems before lunchtime."

She frowned. "One hundred percent chance there's any problems in the next hour."

What changed the numbers so suddenly?

"Twelve percent chance there's any problems in the next hour. Seventy three point four percent chance there will..."

This was going nowhere. Some kind of anti-precog? We had confirmed that Dinah simply could not use her powers to view Scion, Endbringers, and Eidolon. There was no reason not to believe there might be other, less known, powers with a similar ability. "Chances I'll survive and be able to continue by grand plan?"
"Ninety nine point six six percent."

That was good news, at least.

"Sir, we have a problem," came the voice of one of my men over the intercom.

I had just finished breakfast. Ordinarily, I might have closed the other timeline just then. But I needed to learn what the trouble was, first. Someone attacking at my base was either extremely confident in their power, or entirely suicidal.

And then the shouts came from outside. Three of my men were under attack. Exact same moment as the attack to my base. Maybe they had learned my patterns. A thinker of their own? Precogs were notoriously bad at predicting other precogs, even if Dinah seemed unphased by most.

Two women. They had dispatched my men with ease. I looked at them. Skitter-Khepri- her costume looked similar in terms of design, but was colored of metallic blue and gold. And Tattletale. Wearing themed leather armor that was feminized a bit too much to look historical, but not enough to look trashy. I only recognized her by her face. I hadn't known she’d joined Pantheon. I hadn't known she was still alive. The Travelers told me she died. Those traitors!

Two women. They were decimating my ranks. Khepri walked casually, shrugging off bullets. Climbing to her feet when she was taken down by one. My men didn't even have a chance to scream before they dropped. Except the unfortunates in the biohazard suits. She had a bug that was literally slicing the protection in half and allowing the swarm inside.

The other, Panacea. Gaea. Her costume- the brown body suit and green toga style dress that- was alive and doing most of the work. She was fast and strong enough to give most Brutes a run for their money. She could dodge bullets, though clearly didn't need to. Her costume lashing out with vine whips that carried enough force to break bones and fine enough control to pull weapons out of peoples' hands. Most frightening: she was able to melt through steel walls with a touch. Bypassing every defense. I would be heading for the escape tunnels. Except that I couldn't.

Two more women already stood there waiting. Another Khepri, watching passively with dead eyes. The other, I didn't recognize, she had a grin far too cheerful and innocent for the cleaver-like weapon she carried. Another Brute of some power, that weapon was comically oversized and must have weighed over fifty pounds, and yet was being carried like it was nothing. They only waited by the exit.
Then Khepri and Gaea were at my chamber.

//

They were in my kitchen. Khepri watched from the door, the same dull expression as her other two copies. Strangely, there was no alert from the base. Meaning they had not attacked it. How did they know?

Tattletale smiled a far, far too self satisfied smile. "How's the other timeline, Coil?" She asked.

"You don't already know?" Well, that was interesting.

"That badly, huh? Tell me, have your men at least fought back well enough to force them to call on the reinforcements? No? Well that's a shame. I'd have loved to see your reaction to plan 'B'. And plan 'C'. Especially plan 'C'."

I considered collapsing this timeline, just so I wouldn't have to deal with her.

//

Gaea extracted a cell phone and set it down on the desk in my chamber. There was a flicker, and a lifesized 3D hologram of Tattletale, in costume, appeared. "Hey, Coil, how's the other timeline?"

She paused. "Oh... I already did that one. And the backup plans. Dammit, I am so inconsiderate to myself."

So much for escape via alts. I glanced at the dead-eyed Khepri.

"Ah, you're wondering about her. We're trying to build up a way for Our Lady of Orwell and Kafka's Nightmares to maintain multiple humanoid bodies. Unfortunately, we haven't managed to work the bugs out. Haha! Get it? Bugs."

Oh god. Kill me now.

//

Another cell phone- or was it the same one?- had been set on my table, showing a hologram of Gaea.
"I just told the bug joke, didn't I? I did! Oh, that is so fucking cool!"

A child's voice could be heard yelling in the background of the phone. "Hey, stop swearing! It's crude!"

"Later, third scariest thing in the room with me. I'm having an alt-reality conversation with myself! Hi me!"

Indeed, she was. In the other timeline, she'd just responded. "Hiya! So what do you want to talk about?"

"Umm... I dunno... this is, like, a historical first. It has to be something truly special." "I have an idea," Her 'other' voice dropped into something low and sultry. "What color underwear are you wearing?"

Tattletale- the one in front of me, this time, giggled. "Ooh, you are dirty. But don't go starting that. We both know how Coilcast likes to drop calls."

I growled. "Okay, you've proven your point. Get on with it already!"

/I growled. "Okay, you've proven your point. Get on with it already!"/

"Very well," both Gaeas said at nearly the same time. "Thomas Calvert. Coil. You are guilty of crimes ranging from kidnapping a child to abuse her parahuman abilities, to murder, to treason. You have one of two choices to make, and no you may not make them both. The first: surrender and agree to work for us. In light of the dangerous nature of your power, you will accept a surgical implant that will prevent you from betraying Pantheon or any of our interests. If you accept, you will be allowed to continue much as you always have been, but supervised by Pantheon."

"It's going to be so cool working with a power like yours!" The child voice shouted- in both timelines again. "I can create a system to read the subprocesses in your ner-"

"Your other option, available at any time," Gaea continued, interrupting the girl. "You may reject our offer of work leniency and be free to leave. However, due to the nature of your crimes and lack of remorse, you will be stripped of your powers permanently."
She took a breath. "In both cases, your gains will be examined and potentially confiscated. Specific details will be discussed later."

In my kitchen, the Gaea hologram continued. "We'll be keeping this timeline. You have five seconds to collapse the other, or you'll discover what plan 'C' is."

"Goodbye, Me," Tattletale shouted. "I'll remember our love forever!"

"I'll cherish you for the next two seconds!"

I resolved to keep the 'base' timeline active through whatever they attempted. They weren't alert, and I had my hidden gun. It should-

Then I started screaming. In both timelines. I didn't care about the lack of dignity. I didn't care that I had started to vomit, that my fingernails dug deep enough to peel skin as I scratched at my arms. THEY were growing inside me! Thousands of them! Horrific albino pale worms in every possible part of my body. They had burst forth, sending white hot agony throughout my body. From my tongue and my throat and my hands and my arms and my face and my... oh god, they're still in there! Able to come out at any time like they had in the collapsed timeline. I don't know how they got them in me, but they had to have been breeding.

The little girl let out an excited squee. "Oh wow, I'm so glad you didn't listen! Think of all the valuable data I'll be able to collect on you power interacts with your neurochemistry from this!"

All I could do was whimper and beg the three girls. "Take them out, please, I'll do anything. Just take them out of me."

======================

A/N- Guinea Worms. Only very slightly modified. Because why settle for bug armies when you can have bug infiltrators? Also- do not google the nightmares. *shudder*
"Okay, babies, dinner is served," Bonesaw sang cheerfully. 'Babies' in this case were tiger mosquitoes. 'Dinner' was a petri dish of synthetic blood infused with modified Guinea Worm larvae. Or... well, a lifeform based on my memories after I'd treated a few cases. I doubt they'd fool an expert.

Then they were modified further by Bonesaw to have a wider range of senses and a crude sort of telepathic link to one another. I included a modification that ensured only one could reach the adult stage and produce eggs. And even it was less than a quarter the size of the real thing. The rest... would reach only a bit more than an inch long. But there would be several thousand of them when they reached critical mass in two days. Then they'd stop reproducing until the population dropped.

"I can't feel them," Taylor informed us, even as she made the mosquitoes drink from the blood.

"You're not suppose to be able to," Bonesaw replied cheerfully. "I've been studying your power." She pointed excitedly to one of the several computer screens she had set up. "You're like a radio receiver. Or, maybe more like an eye. You can pick up a pretty wide range of signals, but there are others which there's no reason you can't see, except that you can't see them. Like skin mites. There are millions of them on every human being. Well, except for my big sister, of course."

She looked at me with what could only be described as adoration. I cringed. Really wish she'd stop with that. But being the one person alive that she wouldn't take apart and reassemble like a lego set was probably worth the discomfort. Keeping her from doing that very thing with others was more worth it.

"Okay," Taylor was now in thought. "So... why can't I sense those? It would be really helpful if I could."

"Dunno. Yet." Bonesaw continued, as her eyes went back to the petri dish. "Maybe you just can't. Like humans can't see microwaves. Anyway, thanks to the changelings I've been toying with, I figured out how to set to a third frequency. Outside your range and different from the one they're using. But still able to piggyback off the relays Gaea set up to extend your power through the city. And they're tied up to my computer system, which will record every physiological and neurological detail here."

She tapped one of the screens and it powered on, showing a bunch of numbers and symbols. "Convert it to a 3D map here. She tapped another, which showed a wire model of a human body.
Create datapoints over here. A third screen, a series of screens resembling an ECG or seismic reader. This is a sound translator that'll let me interpret everything he's saying. And over here we have...

"All kinds of other tinker toys," Tattletale spoke up, interrupting the child monster's explanation. "But back up a second. Are you saying these things can hear?"

"No, not at all," Bonesaw corrected. "They can feel every movement of his lungs, diaphragm, throat and mouth and translate it into a moving 3D model. From there, it's really easy."

....

"You have to come see this!" Riley shouted. At six in the morning. She had rushed into my room and was literally started jumping on my bed. I muttered something, and immediately forgot what. "It's really really important!"

I forced myself out of bed and walked to her lab. Tattletale was already there, looking an awful lot like I felt. She had taken to staying with me and Riley. Pretending she was dead meant she couldn't really go outside. Until after Coil was dealt with.

"Why does Taylor get to sleep in?" She whined when she saw me.

"Nope, I'm here," One of the Taylor changelings stumbled into the room. "Too early for this."

"I keep telling you that you should let me install the no-sleep upgrade into all of you. Jack said it's my best- oh, sorry. I shouldn't talk about him."

"Doesn't matter," I interrupted. "So, what was so important."

"I got one! A recording of a full alt timeline!"

That woke Tattletale up at least. "No fucking way! How did you pull that off?"

She beamed like Christmas had just come early- entirely forgetting to notice Tattletale's casual
profanity. "See, right here?" She pointed at a computer chart I couldn't hope to interpret, sitting next to a wire model of a brain. "There's a spike in activity when he activates his power. I wasn't sure at first, but it was followed by a series of anomalous emotional responses and neural activity.

"Which means?" Lisa prompted. We had discussed it earlier, and I had been warned to NOT reveal to Riley when I didn't know what she was doing. The girl was building me up the way she'd built up Jack. A god. More than a god. A parent as seen through the eyes of a five year old. The responsibility was terrifying. So Lisa and Taylor would play the 'ones who don't get it' for me, whenever possible. It helped that they really, legitimately, didn't get it. And I at least sometimes did.

"It means he feels everything happening in his alternate timeline! Every emotional event carries over and influences subconscious and physiological responses in both!"

"Okay, that's something we can definitely use," Lisa answered.

"The emotional information crosses over instantly. But, it's weird. The memory centers of the brain wait until much later, only responding after the alt timeline collapses."

"So... we know how the timelines work well enough to predict and potentially counter," Taylor concluded, having woken up enough to really participate. I, however, was still wondering if it was possible to create an organism in my own stomach that did nothing but produce caffeine.

"More than that," Lisa said with her foxlike grin. "I know how we can throw him off balance and force him into following our script. But first! I need to write a script!"

....

"That's strange," Minerva muttered, watching the screen. I looked up from the book I was reading on theoretical alien ecosystems. Some of the stuff in these was great for ideas. "Riley, come look at this!"

The little girl shouted back. "But I'm working on the fabrication pod!"

Another of our joint projects. Functionally like a biomechanical womb to mass produce whatever we needed. I'd still have to construct the original, but afterward, the pod would be able to scan it and build biologically identical copies at our leisure. It'd be really nice not to have to have to waste two
hours every time Taylor managed to get one of her copies damaged beyond what I could mend. How does one person manage to lose limbs so easily?

"That can wait, I can't figure this out!"

"Oh, fiiiine, but you owe me an icecream!" Bonesaw whined.

"And you owe me a total of twenty seven hours of sleep!"

Riley walked in, looking an awful lot like the first time I met her, in child sized surgical scrubs and an apron. Only, this time the spatters of fluid on her clothes and in her hair were varying shades of green instead of red. She leaned over Lisa's shoulder. Lisa visibly cringed when some of the goop fell out of Riley's hair and landed on her shoulder. It proceeded to ooze its way down her back.

"Huh. That is strange. Adrenaline, endorphin spike, testosterone, looks like..." Riley paused and then managed to look sheepish as she whispered. "I think he was having ess-ee-ex."

Not something I really needed to know.

"Oh," Lisa responded, then paused. "No. My power's telling me that's not it. Similar. See the peaked aggression. And I've been around him. There's no one in the building that he's indicated that kind of... familiarity... with. And he collapsed timelines too recently to have brought someone in."

"Oh god, I can't believe I have to be the one to say this," I groaned. "But there doesn't necessarily need to be someone in the room with him to explain that."

"I..." Lisa frowned. "Still don't think so. This seems more like... an addiction?"

Riley grabbed the mouse and started moving things. She was now pretty much dangling on Lisa's shoulder. "That would fit most of the data."

Time for me to volunteer again. "Maybe he has drugs he only takes in timelines he ends, so he can enjoy the high without suffering the consequences? I could imagine someone doing that with Coil's power."
Lisa continued frowning. "I don't... know what? It really doesn't matter. What does matter is we know just how closely tied the two bodies are, in spite of separate timelines. Now all we need to do is make him upset and frustrated in both, and I'll be able to figure out what my alternate self is currently up to."

"In other words, you plan on doing what you do best."

"Not only that. I plan on doing it twice at the same time while metaphorically blindfolded from miles away," She laughed. "It shall be the highlight of my career."

....

"Okay, everyone's in position," Taylor told us. We were all sitting in the sewer-basement. She was the only one who wasn't wearing the newest iteration in what had stopped being a cocoon and become more like a virtual reality suit. Tattletale also had a couple computer screen interfaces that were designed to show us the important information about Coil's body. That, plus what information she could acquire from her own puppet, and the hologram tinker video phone thing we'd purchased, meant she was poised to watch Coil from on multiple levels.

Taylor muttered to us. "You know I'm going to mostly useless split three ways like this. I have to manage every movement of these puppets manually when using them like this. It's a royal pain in the ass."

"How do you think I feel? I have to fix the things after you break them."

"Okay, he's now asking Dinah questions in his other timeline..." Minerva said, interrupting us. "Oh, shit, she predicted us! Operation's ab... never mind, she changed it, we can... and it's changed again..."

"Too late now," Taylor said, her voice going cold. She'd switched to 'Skitter mode'. "We're already committed, we attack now."

I felt a cold thrill run down my spine. This was going to be epic.
As it turns out, 'committed' in this case meant Riley and I sat around doing nothing for a while. Minerva went full Tattletale on Coil. I read him his rights, such as they were. And it was all quite boring.

Minerva assured us that the other timeline was a complete and total curb stomp. I didn't even need to use my Yggdrasil for the battle. Though Coil was stupid enough to let plan 'C' happen in spite of the warning.

Riley spent the next four hours studying everything.

"So, Coil, how are you feeling?" I asked. I felt kinda stupid asking that, but it had been a weird day. We'd delivered Dinah home. Coil had given the orders to let us do so. His men didn't seem happy about the whole affair- but they didn't do anything about it. Of course, it helped that we made it clear just how utterly they'd lose by having Khepri use her new tranquilizer mosquitoes on many of the guards. Harmless enough, all considered. And fun to watch. They knew they were hopelessly outclassed.

"I feel well enough," he answered. Rigid. Calculating. We hadn't stripped him of free will. For the most part. I had a hand on his arm. It was one of the three lie detectors we had focused on him right now. On top of a system that meant he couldn't lie to any acknowledged Pantheon member.

"Do you feel about giving up Dinah?"

"I... would have preferred to keep her. But I believe cooperation with you will prove far more effective and profitable in the long term."

Good enough, I suppose. The man was as unrepentant as Riley, and didn't have any of her excuses. His choice of a serpent as his theme was entirely appropriate.

"What about betraying Pantheon's goals?"
"I wou..." He paused and his face scrunched up. I saw all the signs of confusion. "I apologize. It seems I forgot the question."

Holy hell. Riley not only implanted a system that would keep him from betraying us... it would keep him from even being able to think of betraying us, or realizing that we'd done so. Well played. A horrific violation of free will, but incredibly well played.

I soothed my conscience by remembering that every year we would deactivate the device and present the same choice as today- he can stay in a position of working with us. Or he can surrender his powers and be free to leave.

But, honestly, his goals mostly coincided with our own. He was intent on taking leadership of the PRT and creating a sort of parahuman golden age. We were intent on seeing the corruption purged from the PRT and Protectorate, and justice done for those who warranted it. Motives differed. But I could live with that.

I could live with a lot of things, these days.
With Coil 'dealt with', we were free to act openly. Our main fear was he'd leave the state. More for his sake than ours, as we'd gotten those horrific parasites in him within the second day. There were at most four healers on the continent that could have saved his life once they went active. Two of them were on our team. Granted, they'd never be able to breed or jump to a new host- but they would have destroyed him.

"I really think we should focus on Noelle first," Trickster said as we walked down the hall. Coil's guards eyed us as we moved, but took no action to stop us. We pretty much had free run of the facility, now.

"Krouse," the small blond girl with us said with a disapproving voice. "We know we can fix Jess. Noelle is still an unknown."

The man muttered something I couldn't hear- again the annoyance of a natural body, as opposed to the constructs that were fast becoming more Riley's project than my own.

We reached the 'wing' that had the Travelers' quarters. The blond, Sundancer, knocked. "Hey, Jess, we've brought her."

She looked up at me. I could tell she'd been a paraplegic for a while- that kind of complete atrophy takes time to occur. Most of her life, at least.

"Hey," she said as she smiled at me. Aside the legs, she was a rather unremarkable looking girl. "Gaea, was it?"

"You can call me Amelia," I replied.

"I'm Jessie," she answered back. "So, how does this work?"

I smiled at the girl, even if my thoughts had drifted. "Well, have to ask one question first. Is your
disability related to your powers? It happens sometimes, and that is a lot more difficult to repair."

"No," she responded. "I was born like this.

"The other question is, how much do you want me to repair? I can give you use of your legs easily enough, but the years of atrophy... either I alter your metabolism and you can regain strength naturally. Or I can fix it wholesale, but it'll require a lot of raw biomass, and it'll hurt like hell as everything is forcefully reshaped. And I can't simply turn off your pain receptors. Not for something like this, where your body doesn't already know what 'healthy' looks like."

She looked me dead in the eyes. "I've endured enough surgeries to write my own medical textbook. Trust me, I know what pain is. Hit me with everything you've got, I'll be fine."

"Okay. One step at a time, though," I put my hand on her arm and reached out with my power. I didn't do much healing anymore, but I dipped into her brain as I'd begun doing with every parahuman. Something happened to me, I was certain of it now. Something broke inside me. Or, more appropriately, something was fixed. With everything that happened after Victoria died. It altered me on a fundamental level. And that change freed me from some of my Passenger's power over me. They were... alive. Dormant. Sleeping. But alive nonetheless. I could see them now, though my powers could not touch them. And I knew I wasn't suppose to have that knowledge. They were afraid. Didn't want us to see beyond our petri dish.

I was a mistake. And they, for whatever reason, hadn't realized something went wrong with me. But talking about it with the others was useless. It was like what Riley had done to Coil. They simply couldn't think about it. Just as I used to be unable to scan into brains- I made excuses about it, invented reasons why I wouldn't. Much as Coil was inventing reasons why he was okay with what we had done, and were doing. Convinced by Riley's Tinkering that it was all part of what he wanted, instead of what we wanted.

And now I was looking at Jess. Genesis. Every part of her neurology, including the source of her powers. The Corona Pollentia. And... what?

"You're a Case 53?" I asked, before realizing what I'd said.

"What? No. Why would you think that?" The girl's emotions spiked. Fear? Not quite. Paranoia. I was getting good at this emotion reading thing.
"Your powers are..." I frowned, how to explain this. "They're... different than most. They're similar to the Case 53s that I've examined. Was there something unusual about how you obtained them?"

Trickster answered. "No. Sure, something went wrong with Noelle's power. But that doesn't..."

"Seriously, Krouse?" Sundancer interrupted. "Considering what she's doing for us? We might as well just come clean about the serum."

I froze, and then spoke. "Of course. Cauldron."

"You know about them?" Jess asked, shocked.

"Not a lot. They're responsible for the monster capes. And they've been selling powers in a vial. Or so it seems."

Sundancer sighed even as Krouse muttered something that I'm sure was a curse. "I guess that explains what Noelle is. One of the monster capes."

"It would explain the existence of the case 53s. Selling powers makes sense. Up until now, we weren't sure the point of Case 53s. They might, like Noelle, be accidents of some sort."

Jess nodded. "The stuff we took had a seven digit price tag. And it came with a warning that it might cause mutations."

"Usually they've had their memories erased, somehow. I take it that's not the case with Noelle."

"No," Trickster answered. "But we sort of... we weren't who the vials were meant for."

The girl whose arm I was touching just had an emotional peak. Not a lie, but there was something about her teammate's answer that she felt wasn't quite true. "I... see. Know how I said we weren't going to expect a payment? That's changing. After I get done here, you're going to get together with Tattletale and answer every possible question she can think to ask. We've been looking into Cauldron since before Pantheon was even formed. That is acceptable, right?"
Jess nodded her head and Sundancer answered with a "We can do that, right Krouse?"

"If it means Noelle is fixed, I'll do anything," Krouse responded. "Besides. It's their poison that did this to her in the first place."

There was that emotional jump again. Something left unsaid. And... anger? No... disgust. Contempt.

"Well, I've figured out the basics. This will only take a few minutes. Sundancer, Trickster. I'll need you to hold her down."

My costume's vines wrapped around Jess and moved her to the bed, as her teammates moved to either side. Most of the toga-like outer layer of my costume started pealing off as they wrapped around her legs. It was enough mass to bring her up to a healthy- though definitely not athletic- mass and density. They were, of course, made from the same Yggdrasil as everything else I was using of late.

They wrapped tight around her atrophied legs, and then started piercing into her flesh and pumping their mass into her. Making them, by whatever bizarre definition my passenger was using, a single lifeform so my power could interact with them both. Jess had a remarkable tolerance for pain. But this was the easy part.

My cloak-cum-symbiote was quickly converted into some semblance of human flesh, and I began binding it, inch by inch, into her existing bone, muscle, circulatory system, skin, and nerves.

That's when she started to scream.
Chapter 16

By the time we had made it to a very well fed Noelle's chamber, Jess was walking on her own, if poorly. She leaned on the rather smaller Sundancer to help her balance. Her new legs were more than reasonably strong, but she had never used them before. It would be some time before she made up the skill.

I was already prepared for Noelle to be a monster, when the smaller reinforced door was opened. But I wasn't prepared for just what that meant. Her lower body looked like nothing more than some freakish sandworm monster. Gnarled, misshapen flesh, eyes randomly parsed across her body. Multiple mouths, also without any rhyme or reason. She was massive- easily larger than Crawler, which she uncomfortably resembled. Larger than Leviathan. Maybe even Behemoth.

She wasn't nearly as intimidating as the Endbringers, however. Her body was less like a god's personal killing machine, and more a piteous thing from some movie about post apocalyptic mutants. On top of all this was a girl. Hooked into the rest like a centaur of sorts.

And Riley. Who had somehow climbed up the monstrous mass. She was currently sitting next to Noelle on the top, and had handed her an oxygen mask to hold while she set everything else up. Noelle's mass would make the rest of this kinda difficult. And Riley knew more about this than I did.

We'd altered her appearance- or at least that of her changelings. Black straight hair, now. Adjusted to appear as a teenager, of some combination of racial characteristics that'd make it hard to decide if she was Asian or Hispanic. It's not that we didn't trust the Travelers. But we really did not trust anyone when it came to this. 'Hey, we have a pet Bonesaw in our basement. You don't mind that we're sheltering one of the most notorious and dangerous serial killers in the country, right?' Yeah, that'd go over real well.

"Be careful down there," she shouted to us. "The flowers have teeth."

I hadn't noticed them before, but there were a number of plants sitting in pools of random goo distributed near Noelle. I move a little closer and one of them hissed at me.

I quickly stepped back.
"I've never seen her power do that before," Trickster replied. "She copies people and animals, as I explained. But plants? That's new."

"It... that's probably our fault," I answered. "She's using a sort of remote controlled puppet I made. It's made of vegetable matter, mostly. We thought it was safer that way. Fewer people who could get hurt."

Trickster shrugged. "That's a good idea. Marissa, would you mind clearing them out?"

The miniature sun that was Sundancer's claim to fame flickered into existence near the plants, and I watched them shrivel, die, and then promptly burst into flames. "If only it were that easy every time," she muttered sadly.

I looked at Noelle. "I don't know if they told you what this would require."

"My powers are going to be taken away, of course," she replied. "Good. I don't want them. I never wanted them."

"That, yes," I responded. "And possibly more. I won't know until I try."

She sighed. Through all of her mouths. The already rancid stink in the air got worse, bad enough to bring tears to my eyes. "If you can't fix me, then I want you to kill me."

Trickster moved past me, "Noelle, please! You're not thinking straight."

"SHUT UP, KROUSE!" The mouths shouted. It worked. He stumbled back. "I... I've given this a lot of thought. I've had years to think about it. This is my last, best, chance. Clarice says her anesthetic will probably only work on me once. I want it clear. I either wake up normal, or I don't want to wake up at all. Can you do that for me?"

I hesitated. For everything I'd done... killing someone... sure, it would be simplistic. Even with her mass, it would probably only take seconds. "I..." ultimately it was easier for me to lie. I was good at lying. "You won't wake up a monster."
Riley, or Clarice, if you preferred to use her new fake name, finished setting up all of her equipment. "Okay, just remember to breathe really deeply and count backward from ten," one monster instructed the other.

Noelle started counting, and Riley took a running leap off the side of her body, spreading her arms and legs out and landing belly flop style on the concrete. She climbed to her feet. "Durability stress testing," she stated, as if that explained everything.

I placed my hand on the already unconscious girl's body. Everyone tensed, ready to destroy a clone if one appeared. But that didn't occur. Whatever Riley did, it worked. I expanded my senses into Noelle. And almost screamed.

Her body wasn't trying to become an Endbringer, like the Travelers suspected. It was trying to become a Passenger. Or... trying to become a Passenger... that was trying to become a person? I didn't know for certain, it was so very alien. Following biological rules I hadn't realized could exist. Drawing mass from other dimensions to construct itself. Or, I had to guess that's what it was doing. The mass was coming from somewhere, and it wasn't just her diet.

She had no less than two Corona Pollentias. And one had grown to twice the mass of a normal human brain. It was contained somewhere below one of the constructs in her lower body that superficially resembled a stomach. It was rendered inactive by Riley's chemicals.

I got my first true look at it. Not too different from an ordinary human brain. It even had the cerebellum structure in the Gemma, although it was a single mass instead of a pair of lobes. And it didn't behave like a normal brain behaved. It was closer to the nerve bundles I used to control my puppets.

I started separating Noelle from the monster beneath her. she'd have to live with not having legs for at least a little while. The corrupted tissue beneath was not something I was willing to use to rebuild her. It was... I wasn't certain what it was. Like some kind of sapient tumor.

And then it moved on its own. Riley's drugs had rendered Noelle unconscious, but not the monster beneath. One of its limbs swung toward me- too fast for me to avoid. I felt a tug and was thrown back, out of reach. Riley had pulled me out of the way, only to be batted hard enough to fly into the concrete wall twenty or so feet away. She dropped, the impact force was enough to kill even a changeling.

Fortunately, it was just a changeling. Taylor went through them all the time. But *I* was actually here in this room with that monster.
"Noelle?" Trickster shouted at the rampaging thing. "Please! You have to calm down."

She's not in there, I thought. That thing, the Passenger, that was all that was. Riley's concoction had backfired. It would have worked on a case 53. It would have worked on a parahuman. It only make things worse for Noelle.

I was moving even as she approached Trickster and the other two. Jess had fallen and was trying to crawl away with Sundancer's help. They wouldn't make it in time, and Krouse was too stupid to even try.

It was distracted. And that's what Noelle had become, an it. I had to convince myself of that for at least the next three seconds. I made contact and reached out. My power... I had never used it like this, but now I didn't have much choice. I couldn't afford to be picky or specific. I didn't bother trying to create. I simply destroyed. Her nervous system, converted instantly to barely organic goo. She was paralyzed, but regenerating. The circulatory system, I replaced with digestive enzymes and acids. Regenerating. Nervous system again, converted to tree fibers, if only to block the regeneration. It worked for all of five seconds.

Which was enough time for me to target the Corona Pollentia. I shredded it entirely. Down to the last cell. Cutting off whatever part of its nature allowed the Passenger to reach through into this world and grant powers.

And with that, Noelle was no more. I slumped to the floor, covered in the goo that was once a monster that was once a girl.
"Why did I ever agree to this?" Taylor moaned beside me.

"Because it was Minerva's idea, and you do absolutely everything she says because you're hopelessly in love with her?" I replied.

Next to me, Riley snickered.

"If she did everything I said, we would be several hundred miles away from Brockton Bay at this moment," Lisa muttered.

And above us, our doubles were the guests of honor at an outdoor press conference. It had been eight days. Eight days since Victoria died. Eight days since Taylor and I formed our alliance. Eight days since I became a premeditated murderer and had added one of America's most terrifying parahumans to our team, alongside the person I hated most in the world. And in the last week, we'd committed a horrifying violation of human rights and set ourselves up to be entirely capable of being more dangerous than Heartbreaker and Nilbog combined.

The good we'd done. Rescuing Dinah, harnessing Coil, curbing the activities of E-88, the fact that my murder was Jack Slash... did all of that balance out the bad? I couldn't say. I was still frustrated by our continuing failures to cure Noelle. I didn't even have the benefit of knowing exactly what I'd done wrong. But at least she never knew. We'd try again later.

But I would see justice done for my sister. The PRT's crimes would be publicly exposed. We would protect this city, and we would do it in spite of those claiming to be heroes. Really, it was becoming far more than that. Dinah's predictions of the End of the World meant we had a planet to save. But that was more than a decade away from us.
Today we were being honored as heroes on a hastily set up stage right next to Crater Lake. Not very far from my new apartment, actually. I'd learned that Coil and Lisa had purchased almost all the land surrounding the hole already, in anticipation of it later being far more valuable. In... oh, about an hour.

"So, tell me how you managed to make this happened?" I asked Lisa.

"Well, rescuing his niece made him pretty willing to hear us out," she responded. "But, truthfully? There's an election coming up and, after all the hell this city's been through, he has to look damn good or he'll never have a political career again in his life. Voters are willing to forgive acts of god and/or satan. What they're not willing to forgive is a leader looking weak and ineffectual."

"So he's using us to win a popularity contest," Taylor muttered unhappily. "Like fucking high school all over again."

"Swearing!" Bonesaw snapped quickly. At least she's getting better about it.

"That statement alone qualifies you for a bachelor's degree in political science," Lisa continued. "On the plus side this means all we have to do is smile, let the mayor's spin doctors make us look amazing, and let Coil's influence carry us forward after he forgets about us for whatever keeps his backers happy next week."

I sighed. I was with Taylor on this one. That was... depressing would be too kind a word. This 'use and be used' mentality was not okay. I'd have said something, but now was our time to play our parts in the sad world known as politics.

"So it is my honor to introduce Pantheon," the mayor said with a smile that might even be genuine. We were saving his career, after all.

We stepped up, smiling. "Thank you," I said as I took the podium. "It's no secret that I'm pretty terrible at public speaking," I said to the audience. I even got a couple chuckles. Panacea had always been the absolutely least approachable member of New Wave, when it came to the media. "As such, I believe it would be easiest to start by allowing my team to introduce themselves and briefly explain their powers. Starting with myself. Gaea, biological modification."

I stepped aside and Taylor took the mike. "Khepri," she started. "I can control bugs. Which, it turns out, is not as lame as it sounds."
She even did it without the swarm-voice. Our powers were already scary beyond all reason. Didn't need to add that dehumanizing element. She handed the mike off to Lisa and stepped off to the right, next to me, as the other two girls moved closer to the podium.

"Minerva," Lisa replied. Of all of us, she was the one most comfortable with the stage. "I have the ability to be lucky at guesswork. I'll spend most of my time playing dispatch for the others, so be sure and take a lot of pictures. They'll have to last you for a while."

She handed off to the final member of our current quartet. Riley's safe-to-be-outside changeling. "I'm Aceso," she started. "Mid level brute package coupled with a form of combat precognition and a few other minor tricks."

Yes. That was the closest we could get to making Riley sound safe, while still being true. Sorta. Turns out, the whole martial arts myth about being able to kill someone with a tap to the arm is damn close to true when you're a biotinker. That, and she'd done so many things to her personalized changeling that there was almost nothing left of my work inside it. It was more machine than anything, and qualified as a pretty impressive brute in its own right.

She handed the mike back over to me. Now we had functionally surrounded the podium, giving the reporters a chance to capture us all together.

"We'll be taking questions now," I said after they'd had a few moments to get their fill. It helped that none of us were actually on the stage. It helped that Lisa was telling us how to play to the camera from while we were all nice and safe. I pointed at one of the ones in the front row, at Lisa's instruction. She knew which reporters we should pick from better than I did.

"What do you call that vine thing that you have been using?"

Ah, the easy one. Thank you Lisa, for letting that start us off. "I call it the Yggdrasil. I've already provided all the documentation to the government about its function, but it is perfectly safe and unable to survive without me."

I picked another, second row this time. "Yggdrasil is a Norse icon, right? Are you worried about being associated with, or provoking, Empire Eighty Eight."

"They don't exactly have a copyright claim on ancient mythology," I replied. "Besides, E88 would
already hate us." I gestured over to where our 'obviously ethnic' Aceso stood next to Minerva. She waved daintily toward the crowd and their cameras.

Minerva spoke up. "It's true. I'm actually Jewish."

That earned a few chuckles. 'You are not,' The real me stated.

'You can't prove that, and neither can they,' Lisa replied.

'Whatever, moving on.' Above, I picked out another reporter.

"It's something of an open secret that you are Panacea, of New Wave. Did you have a second trigger? These new powers seem to suggest you have."

Ah, was expecting that one. "No. I have the same powers and weaknesses I've always had," I responded. "If you examine the records of the cases I've dealt with, it's always been known that I can manipulate life other than human. I just hadn't really considered how useful plants could be until recently."

"What about New Wave, aren't they a family team? Why did you choose to leave?"

Well, ouch. "I disagree with some of New Wave's policies," I answered. "And due to recent events, including the loss of my sister. It's... it's time for me to move on. Follow my own direction, instead of one set for me by others. I respect what New Wave tried to accomplish. And wish them the best in the future. But I believe Pantheon will prove better for me."

Pointing to another. "This is for Khepri. Much like Gaea, it's an open secret that you were Skitter, a member of the Undersides, a villain group. Why the change of heart? And do you expect that you'll be granted leniency for your previous activities?"

'What the fuck, Lisa?' Taylor hissed. 'I thought we were going to get the easy questions.' Her changeling simply paused for a second.

'We'll have to answer it sooner or later, and this is the friendliest group of reporters we will ever
encounter,' she said back.

Khepri stepped forward, taking the mic and letting me move to the side. "Yes. I was a villain. I hurt some and terrorized far more... and I am sorry. I won't try to offer any excuses, and I hope my actions in the future will prove I'm sincere. The name I chose for myself is a symbol of rebirth. And Pantheon is that for me, a chance to be reborn."

I came to her defense, of course. "Part of what Pantheon stands for is second chances. We've all done our fair share of wrongs." Mine worse than most. "The fact is that Khepri is here, trying to do the right thing, is enough to give her that chance. Speaking as someone who was on the receiving end of her actions as Skitter, and seeing what she's done to make up for it. I've already forgiven her." Strangely enough, it was actually true. I hadn't quite managed to forgive Lisa, mainly because I didn't think she was actually sorry about anything she'd done, but Taylor had been nothing but remorseful.

Beside me, the Mayor reached out. "If I may?" I handed him the microphone. "I have to agree with Gaea. It would be easy for me to hold a grudge, after the Undersiders crashed my last dinner party, but seeing what these girls have achieved in the wake of Leviathan and the Slaughterhouse Nine. As well as what they have planned for the future, I can forgive her as well. What our city needs now is to come together and work for the future as a community, not sink to petty recriminations."

There was some applause from the audience.

'That was his plan all along, wasn't it, coming to our rescue, right after throwing us at the bus like that?' Taylor whispered.

'Yup, pretty much,' Lisa responded. 'Had to let him do it. Too good a plan to let go to waste.'

The applause died and I was handed back the microphone. The reporter who asked that question of Taylor looked entirely too pleased with himself. Oh well. I returned the mic to Taylor. 'You should be the one to announce the next part,' I told her.

"Part of that atonement," she said after a moment. "Is the reward money and bounties for the death of members of the Slaughterhouse Nine. As one of the Undersiders, I have partial credit for Burnscar and Shatterbird. I have individual credit for the Siberian. And as part of Pantheon I have partial credit for Jack Slash and Bonesaw."

That earned some whispered conversation. Thanks to the construct's senses, I could hear them. None
of it was very interesting, almost all speculation on how the 'bug girl' could kill someone that had literally punched Alexandria's eye out. "It comes to a large amount of money. All of which I plan to use in the rebuilding and recovery efforts. I didn't fight the Nine for a profit. I did it to be a hero."

"Speaking of, most of Pantheon's work has been pretty below the radar when it comes to heroics. Is that going to change?"

"Yes, on both accounts," I nodded. "In spite of our ostentatious name, we believe in doing what helps people, not what makes headlines." We also believe in not attracting attention to the fact that we're S-class threats before we're ready. "I have used my Yggdrasil to clear out blockages and clean up hazardous materials. Restoring the sewer system to working order and undoing the damage which Leviathan had inflicted. Khepri has been using her control of insects to clear the camps and hospitals of disease carrying vermin. Minerva has been helping us by sending us where we're most needed, and planning our future steps. It's not the things that usually gets noticed, but it's what saves the most lives."

I paused. "Still, we're about to step up and start doing things on a more visible level. The first involves setting up a legitimate base of operations. The city has been kind enough to donate a small area for us to set up a home of our own."

"Where at?" One of the reporters asked.

"You're looking at it," I said, gesturing at the huge sinkhole. "You'll have to forgive me for letting my team handle the rest of the questions, but my power is touch range only, after all."

My changeling stepped off the podium as everyone watched, and walked over to the water's edge. Meanwhile, underneath, I was extending my control across my plants. I had tens of thousands of tons of raw mass to work with, but this hole was massive. Without the relay system, Taylor could not have influenced bugs on opposite sides of the shore at once. A testament to just how powerful Leviathan was. And how we were going to upstage him.

My copy stepped into the water, and the Yggdrasil poured out. It wasn't elegant at all, there really was no time for it to be. Ninety percent of the material I controlled was functionally vomited onto the water, flowing over it and forming root systems to reach the bottom. A dome of branches and roots formed near the center, creating a stout, wide building. Two stories high, a full city block in width. It wasn't the prettiest thing in the world, true, but it was ours. Trees sprouted up at intervals near the edge of the crater, blossoming and forming fruit almost immediately. Underneath the carpet of greenery, the Yggdrasil drank heavily of the water of the lake. It would be a while, but eventually at whole underground would be filled with the plant's mass. Give or take a few deep level basements for Riley to work.
During the fifteen minute process, no one had spoken. There was the occasional gasp, and the reporters had of course moved to get the best view possible. I was exhausted. For the first time since I had started legitimately using my power, I had tired myself out. I hadn't even set up relays for Taylor in the base. She'd need one near the center. Probably two, actually.

Speaking of Taylor, she took the lead when it became clear I was done for the day. "As you can see," she said to the silenced reporters. "We are ready for business. The city already has the details they need, but on top of working as our base, we will be setting up a number of facilities. Notably, near the northeast end, we will be providing an area for repair and sanitation crews to dump their refuse. There will be a patch of special Yggdrasil which is capable of breaking down almost any material and will serve to reduce travel time for disposal. Near the south end, we will be establishing an area to serve as another temporary camp. The trees near the perimeter produce edible fruit. Feel free to try them out, they taste similar to how they look. And thank you for your time."

It took us eight days. Eight days for Pantheon to become the single most visible group in the city. Possibly on the eastern seaboard, once my stunt really got into the news and other stations got in on the action. Tomorrow, and for the next few days, we'd worry about all of that. But tonight? Tonight I needed to be physically carried to bed. I wouldn't be doing something like that again for a long time.

============

A/N- Yes, they did indeed use the Coil reset button. I'm a troll like that. I promise to never use this, or any other "it was just a dream/etc" scenarios ever again. While Coil's certainly doing his thing, events shown in story from this point on only come from the real timeline.
As it turns out, my 'tomorrow' was spent bedridden. With a headache the likes of which I wasn't aware could be survived. It wasn't until well into the afternoon that I had recovered. I got up, eventually, to use the bathroom and brush my teeth. I was sticky, and I smelled bad. Not things I was normally familiar with, as my power typically dealt with hygiene for me. Well, for the most part at least.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of thinker migraines," Lisa announced when I managed to wander out of my room. "Your complimentary t-shirt and bottle of pills will be delivered in six to twelve business days."

"Great," I muttered. "I'll be sure and wear it every time I do something stupid."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short," Lisa replied. "You regularly scan every blood vessel in the human body simultaneously. If you stretched all that out end to end, it'd wrap around the world two and a half times. And that's just the blood vessels. It takes a pretty strong thinker power, to track all that."

"Good to know. Can I use it to find coffee?"

"Nah, but I got that covered," she smiled. "Oh, by the way, 'Clarice' wanted to let you know she can surgically upgrade your brain so you don't have to worry about that anymore. I told her I'd deliver the message, but she should probably worry about getting Taylor another fully equipped changeling."

Glad Lisa chased her off, I thought. The way my head feels, I'd probably have accepted. "Again? What did she do this time?"

"Night and Fog."

"Well, at least it wasn't another Hookwolf. Why does she keep doing this?"
"I dunno, let's ask her..."

At that point, Taylor came around the corner holding a couple styrofoam cups. I could smell the coffee scent from here. Also, how the hell does Lisa do that? "Ask me what?"

"About your playdate with E88 last night," Lisa smiled.

"I keep telling you. It's a perfectly valid tactic," Taylor sighed with exasperation, handing me the beverage that I had come to love and need. "I keep them off balance without making them feel like they're losing. It means they can't really advance, but also don't feel the need to come after us hard until we're ready for it."

"We don't care about them advancing," Lisa countered. "They can take this whole city and we'd be able to take it back in under an hour. We WANT them to win. At least temporarily."

"I know," she agreed. "But I'm getting restless. I want to actually do something, all this waiting sucks." She paused. "Umm... Amy... you might want to finish that coffee fast. I think your family's headed this way. You've got about five minutes."

"Already?"

"Already."

I skipped the shower, using my power to self clean my skin pretty effectively while combing my hair and brushing my teeth. It'd be my first step into the public eye after that press conference, and I couldn't afford to be anything but perfect.

We took the sewer path, regardless. It wasn't really any slower, and it had the benefit of keeping my house off the radar. My identity was entirely public, and I would compromise Taylor and Lisa's identities if they were seen with me out of costume. Thanks a lot, Carol.

We emerged near the edge of my Yggdrasil, right where the sewer line entered the crater. It was a simple enough matter to form a staircase from the layers of root and biomass. My favorite part of dealing with my construct was that it lacked any kind of centralized system. Cut it to shreds and each piece was still just as alive as it was as one singular organism. I could twist and shape it any way I liked, and it would not be harmed. So much easier to work with than human beings.
The remnants of New Wave were already there when I came out to meet them. Mark and Sarah were flanking Carol. Crystal was a bit off to the side, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Her eyes darting from me to Khepri and back more than once. A number of people had started to gather around, to see the spectacle in the time before we arrived.

A swarm of bugs were kind enough to convince them to step back. And, for added measure, I stepped out of my sandals—best part of my costume design, really—and placed my bare feet onto the ground. Seconds later, we were surrounded by a six foot privacy hedge.

I smiled as my supposed family looked around, more than a little startled by the casual display of power. That's right, weak little Amy can do all this.

"Thanks," Carol finally spoke up. "It's better to have this conversation in private. Amongst family." Her eyes had focused over to where my partners stood. She locked them down in a stare. As if trying to demand they leave. Had to give it to her, she was good at intimidating people. Even people who could, one way or another, destroy her entirely. She couldn't do much to stop Khepri. And god help her if Minerva went after her. But this was my fight, not theirs.

I could feel the pressure where Taylor started to turn to leave. Lisa didn't, of course, but whether that was due to her lack of sensitivity, or predicting what I was about to say, I couldn't know. "So we're agreed, then. They belong here."

Carol's lips drew together in that disapproving way she was so good at. "I see," she said coldly. "Very well. We can do this in front of your friends."

Was that really some kind of power play? Now.

"Amy," she started.

"Amelia," I interrupted, my voice every bit as frigid as hers. "My name is Amelia Claire Lavere. I would thank you to keep that in mind."

She didn't bother arguing the point. "Imagine how shocked we were to discover you were leaving the team, from a newspaper? Couldn't you have shown the courtesy of informing us in person?"
"Mark didn't tell you?" I asked. "What about Victoria? I made it clear to them that I had no intention of returning to New Wave. And that was almost two weeks ago."

"Mark said you were upset, after everything Bonesaw had done. And Victoria refused to speak about it," she looked around. "If she saw what you were doing here, I could see why she was disturbed. Amy-"

"Amelia," I corrected again.

Sarah moved up and put a hand on Carol's shoulder. It was enough to quiet her. "Amelia, fine," Sarah spoke up. "You have to know how dangerous this is. What you're doing is going to frighten people. And rightfully so. It'll set back the parahuman rights movement. Destroy everything that New Wave has been working toward. Please. I know you're upset, but this isn't going to help. It'll just make things worse for all of us."

She was right, of course. Why couldn't she have taken me in, instead of Carol? I could have had actual parents. Victoria wouldn't have been my sister. Not that cousin was a great deal better. But that really wasn't the problem...

"Right," I managed to bite out. "How could I forget when it was hammered into my head since I was thirteen years old? My power would scare people. I can't let people realize just how powerful I am. That fear, and don't think I didn't pick up on it, that I'd turn out like my father."

Carol stepped back like she'd been slapped. Sarah looked down.

Mark spoke up. "Amy, please, I know I haven't been the best father. I tried, not that that's an excuse."

I sighed. "No, you're right. You, at least, did try. I can't blame you for that. But I can blame her." I locked eyes with Carol. Years of frustration and repression boiled to the surface. I couldn't control it if I wanted to, and I definitely didn't want to.

"I probably couldn't have helped you, not until Bonesaw forced me past my own mental blocks. But if it weren't for Carol... then Victoria would still be alive."

There. I said it. And it felt amazing. And I wasn't about to stop. "Maybe even Eric and Uncle Neil."
"You can't know-" Carol snapped back.

"Can't I? I fought the fucking Siberian to a god damn standstill, something even the Triumvirate never accomplished. I made sure Jack Slash died screaming. I did all that with only a day of preparation. I built this in a week." I gestured to the ground beneath our feet. "I could do it again in another month, at the rate we're going. Imagine what I could have accomplished in three years! If you'd encouraged me to use my power. Instead you force fed me horror stories about Nilbog! Made a little girl terrified of herself!"

"Maybe I couldn't have stopped Leviathan. My ego's not so big as to believe I'm a match for an Endbringer. But my Yggdrasil would have easily held back the ocean. Got people to safety. Let Eidolon focus on offense instead of defense. We'll never know the lives I could have saved in that fight. Neil and Eric may have been amongst them. Make of that as you will." I breathed slowly, calming myself enough to continue speaking. "There is, however, no possible doubt that I could have ended the Slaughterhouse Nine, all of them, the day they stepped into Brockton Bay. Every life lost to them, including Victoria's, is on my hands. And yours. I want you to know this."

Carol actually broke. She sobbed. I'd made her cry. "Please, Amy, we're your family."

I felt guilty, then. But I was still angry, and I was angry that I felt guilty. "You are not my family. Victoria was my family. You are the people who kidnapped me. Now leave before I make you leave."

I let the privacy wall collapse, joining the mass of the rest of the Yggdrasil's mass. It would even itself out naturally, without any direction on my part. I didn't wait for them to respond, I simply turned and headed toward what was becoming our command center. I felt them lift off and leave.

Somehow I held myself back until I was alone. I let go of my self control and my anger. I slid down against a wall and pulled my legs up to my chest and allowed myself, for the first time since we started this, to be Amy again. I was still crying when Clarice found me. She said nothing. Simply sat down next to me and waited in silence until I was finished.
I was having a very bad week. Not as bad as when I joined the Slaughterhouse Nine. But close. For the last few days I'd been trapped on this abandoned ship. What kind of city just leaves abandoned ships sticking out of the ocean?

I had spent a lot of time alone with little more than my own thoughts and the view of a city. I'd even started wondering if they'd forgotten about me. I wasn't, strictly, trapped here. If I was willing to swim a couple miles in frigid choppy waters full of sharp objects while wearing around thirty pounds worth of metal on my arms and legs... I could escape.

Still, all my leverage died when Amy fucking Dallon manage to kill Jack Slash. How the hell did that happen?

I wasn't sure, but it did. Now the entire Slaughterhouse Nine was quite dead. Except for two. Myself, and the little nightmare girl coming to greet me in my captivity.

I'd given up on the idea of influencing her. Or, at least, of it mattering. I could make the child love me desperately, and she would still be capable of killing me without feeling or remorse. And people call me fucked up.

She scaled up the side of the barge with ease. She must have upgraded her body even more- she wasn't that strong before. Or that tall. As she reached the top, I got a good look at her. She had added almost a foot to her height and changed her features. Gone was the cute little Aryan ideal child, and in its place some unidentifiable ethnic soup young teenager. Still cute. Not that I was concerned about her race or attractiveness.

I was far, far too busy thinking about everything she could do to me, everything she'd done to others.

"Bonesaw," I said as she got to her feet.

"Hey, Cherish," she said cheerfully. "My name's Clarice now. Or Aceso. Either's fine."
Ah-kee-so? Didn't recognize that one. Okay, ignore it. "Huh, didn't know you were a fan of that movie."

There was no twinge of recognition, only a little confusion. "Oh, you didn't pick it from there. Huh."

"What movie?" she ask.

"Silence of the Lambs? Serial killer went around skinning girls? You've never seen it."

"Nope," she answered. "I'm not allowed to watch scary movies."

... "What?" I started laughing. I couldn't help it. This was Bonesaw. The living embodiment of the horror genre. The monster that kept other monsters up at night in fear. And she's not allowed to watch scary movies?

She waited for me to stop. "Y'know, it's not nice to laugh at people."

"No, but I'm not a nice person. And neither are you."

She shrugged. "That's okay, I have my big sister now. She'll help me be better. She says everyone deserves a second chance." She said it with such disturbing conviction. I had to wonder if I ever felt that way about my family. No, probably not. I only had myself, after all.

"She's not your sister. Won't ever be your sister. HER sister is dead, and no matter what you do, you won't be able to replace her. Face facts, she's just using you." There. Those were the emotional spikes. Genuine ones, she could tell the difference between those and my power at work.

"You're part of the Slaughterhouse Nine, Bonesaw. There's no turning back. You can't just leave. And we're all that's left. We have to escape before they decide we're no longer useful and kill us both."

"Amelia did. She took leadership from Jack. And since she's the leader, she gets to make the rules."
Amelia... oh... "Hah. So that's where you got the name from. Claire. Clarice. Jesus Christ, you've
gone full stalker, haven't you?"

She didn't deign to answer.

"So, why are you here, 'Clarice'?' I asked. "Is it to offer me the same deal you got? Or what you did
to Coil? Yeah, I know about that. Join you or have my powers stripped from me? Well, guess what,
the second option's a death sentence for me. How is that fair?"

"No," she said. "Jack was right about you. You'll betray us at earliest opportunity. He thought it was
fun. He said it was part of the game. But Amelia doesn't like that kind of game. She's not very good
at it. You'd hurt her. And I won't let you."

"What? I don't get a second chance? She does after mind raping her own sister? You do after enough
atrocities to fill a concentration camp? Where does your 'big sister' get off, being my judge and jury?"

"She doesn't know about this." Bonesaw's voice was cold. Strange. In all the time I'd ever known
her, she's never been cold. Always energetic. Always cheerful. This is the first time I'd ever seen her
act any other way.

"She will find out!" my stomach clenched at the certainty of what was coming. She was going to kill
me. "You can't hide this from Tattletale or Coil. They'll know. And then she'll know. And she'll
never forgive you."

She paused. Her emotions went into flux. I tried to influence them, but of course failed. Still, if she
was confused, it gave me a chance.

And then she moved. Faster than I had thought possible for someone without speedster powers.
Something hit my gut and then pierced it. Finding every flaw in the protective mesh and slipping
through, shredding my insides. Why did that surprise me? Bonesaw's work. She'd know better than
anyone how to beat it.

"If that keeps her safe."
Chapter 20

Amelia, Ch 20- Crystal Interlude

I followed my mother home, leaving Amy behind with her new team. And what a team it was.

Amy and Skitter? I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around it. I'd spent enough time playing chauffeur for the bug girl during the Endbringer fight. She was smart. Scary smart, really. I don't know if she really saved all that many people, but she risked her life, was willing to try and fight Leviathan head on with zero protective or offensive powers.

I... I could admit to myself that I wasn't that brave. Blasting him from afar? Sure. I could do that. Search and rescue? Absolutely. Literally shoving a stick up his ass and hoping for the best? No, that was more than I could see myself doing. The part where she used Armsmaster's own dismembered hand to do it? That was fucked up. Sure, it made sense. But it was still fucked up.

I had seen how torn up Amy was after the bank heist. Victoria, too, but Vic answered that in her usual 'find something, kick its ass' way. Amy was always the opposite. Running. Hiding. Something happened then. I knew I wasn't that close to my cousin. We were part of the same team. But Amy never really was 'part of' the team. She got the most useful power. But it was also the least flashy one. Well, unless she wanted to go Nilbog. And now it really did look like she was going to go Nilbog.

I couldn't imagine Skitter would hesitate... in the very short time I'd spoken with her... well, she didn't strike me as the type who understood 'restraint'. A lot like Victoria, that way. Was that what this was? Amy finding someone to replace Victoria? It would explain a lot.

Well, fuck.

I slowed down. "Mom, I'm going back."

"Why?" She didn't sound like she really cared that much. But, well, you try losing a husband and a son in the same day and see what kind of mood you're in. Compounded with what happened with Victoria and Amy and the fact that New Wave was functionally dead now.

I thought about lying to her. Briefly. But no, she was one of the few family members I had
remaining. "I want to try to talk to Amy again."

"I think 'Amelia' made her position pretty clear," she said back. She had turned and we were hovering.

"I know. But. Well, you know what Aunt Carol's like. Trying to assert her authority over everyone the way she does. Well, except you, you're the only one she listens to."

She offered a sad smile. "Yeah. I always could talk her into anything. Even things that she knew were really bad ideas."

"You should probably talk to her again. After today, I think she needs it. And I think Amy needs it, too."

She chuckled. "Well. You got your father's way with people. Go ahead, if you think you can help. I'll see what I can do to get through to Carol. Probably should have done it years ago."

"Thanks, mom, you're the best," I hugged her and then turned and went back. It didn't really surprise me when a black arrow formed out of nowhere when I was still blocks away, although it did still creep me out.

Skitter's range was at least three times better than what it had been when I carried her during the Leviathan fight. I followed the arrows, since they were still taking me more or less the right direction. Although they had me fly out of my way a bit and enter their... the hell do you call that thing, anyway? Giant mutant tree house? Territory? Base?

Yeah, it was a base, sure, whatever.

The arrows, finally, led me right in the door. Or one of the door, this place had a few of them. I landed in front of one, and then it opened itself. A lot like one of those bead curtain doors you see in old hippie movies. I walked in. The place was actually rather well lit. I remembered Amy playing with bioluminescence when we were younger, when she first got her powers. I made her make my Lily's fur glow. That poor cat was miserable all night. The next morning, mom made her undo that.

The arrows, smaller now at least, led me to a side room where Amy was sitting on a chair that had grown out of the ground. There was another girl nearby, their fourth member, near as I could tell.
She was smiling, but it seemed more like that was her default state than any actual amusement or happiness. Something about her made me really, really uneasy.

Judging by the redness in her eyes, Amy had been crying.

"Hey, Ames,"

"So, here to try and get me to change my mind?"

"I... well, kinda," I admitted. She wouldn't believe me if I said 'no'. Besides, it was true, I did want her to change her mind. "But that's not all of it. I just want to understand why."

"Because I should have done it years ago," Amy answered. "I bottled everything up. Hid from it. Lied to myself. I can't keep doing it. It hurts too much. Carol was never a mother to me. And Mark, I try to be understanding of his condition, but he wasn't much of a father, either."

"Yeah, I can see that," I agreed. It was true, after all. "I never spoke up, but I wasn't exactly Aunt Carol's biggest fan, either. Always thought she was kind of a bitch. Cold, distant. It's not like it was just toward you. She's like that with everyone except mom."

"And Victoria," Amy added.

"Yeah, and Victoria. I get why you left New Wave. It was always 'our parents, plus Victoria'. She was the media darling, the presumed leader of the next generation. I hate speaking badly about her. But putting her in charge of a team would be a disaster."

Amy managed to smile. It was nice.

"It really should have been you," I continued.

"Me? ...Really..." She didn't seem to buy it.

"Eric was too worried about girls. I... really don't do well with that kind of responsibility. I can't even
handle being in charge of a group project at school. And Victoria called herself Glory Girl," I added with a smirk. "You were the one who always took on all the responsibility. The one of us that was the thinker, and I don't mean that in the parahuman way. The worrier. Especially the worrier."

"Yeah," she agreed. "I guess I see your point."

"Good. So I'm not going to try to defend Aunt Carol. She'll have to do that herself. But regardless of what you think. We're still your family and we love you."

"It's not that simple," Amy responded. "Over a decade of living with someone who acted like you were something between a bad memory and a ticking timebomb doesn't get erased with a few words. Even the kids Victoria brought over for slumber parties were treated more warmly than I was."

I sighed. Well, I did my best, I suppose. "Alright, can you at least accept that I wasn't a part of that? I was a child back then, too. If you say we're not family... that hurts, but I guess I have no choice in the matter. So can we at least be friends?"

She looked at me, really looked for the first time since the conversation started. "Y-yeah, I think I'd like that."

"Good," I answered. "So as your friend, I'm going to have to join your team now."

"Wh- what?"

"Yup," I smiled. "You guys keep saying anyone can join. No backsies."

"Fiiine," she moaned. "But I'm not the one who has to explain this to your mom."

God damn it.
Amelia, Ch 21- Taylor

Amelia had just walked off, leaving Tattletale. Correction: Minerva and I to face New Wave. The didn't say anything, although Brandish was staring me down like I'd just eloped with her daughter. I didn't really stare back. In fact, I barely opened my eyes. I was currently training myself to rely more on my insects' senses. Right now I had touch range contact with the entire city. But I still couldn't hear or see through them in any way that my brain could parse into usable details. It was something I was working to change.

Eventually, Brandish turned and left, not saying a word to us. Shortly followed by the rest of the team. Lady Photon and Laserdream took off moments after they all left the Yggdrasil for normal soil.

"Kidnapping?" I asked Lisa as we watched them walk away.

"Not as far as the law's concerned," she responded. "But if someone broke into your house, stabbed your dad, and took you away to live with them... would it matter to you if it was all legal or not?"

"They..." I stared hard at the backs of New Wave. What. The. Fuck.

"Umm..." She interrupted. "Don't go all avenging angel here, okay? It... it's not as bad as I just made it sound. They were stuck in a messy situation, and there wasn't going to be a happy ending. They made a lot of dumb mistakes. They aren't bad people. They're just... not smart people..."

I sighed. This whole scenario made me think of my father. For all the problems I'd had in life, I at least knew my parents loved me. Was I hurting my father the way Amelia was hurt by hers parents? The way she just hurt them? That needed to change. "Fine, I'll go talk to Amelia."

Minera spoke up. "Not yet. We have the press to deal with."
"God damn it."

"And you're second in command, so it's your job to talk with them."

"I hate you. Hate you so much."

And sure enough, there they were. Not wearing anything identifying them as reporters, of course. A woman, and she'd have to be an adult to do that job, who was smaller than I was. Significantly smaller, I'd have mistaken her for thirteen based on her height and figure. Although her face structure, complete with several piercings, suggested older. She was currently pointing the camera at New Wave, while her partners went ahead toward us.

She moved to catch up after she got her footage. I almost felt sorry for her- that was a big camera and she had very short legs compared to her much larger, male, partners. One of whom was clearly the reporter- a slightly older gentleman, with the laugh lines that said he smiled for a living. And a younger, larger man, probably only nineteen or twenty carried a box that with other equipment.

"Good afternoon, ladies," the man said. I had to admit, he had the voice for it as well. "I'm Stan Vickery, with channel twelve news, would you mind answering a few questions?"

"We're rather busy at the moment," I answered.

"I understand," he said in a way that left no doubt that it wasn't going to slow him down. "But it shouldn't take too long."

I felt Minerva tense, with the bugs I had on her. I could almost hear her swearing, although she wisely said nothing with the recording equipment pointed our way. She stepped forward, smiling widely. "You're probably right," she said, throwing him off his script. "Mind if I tell you something confidentially, first? I can trust your journalistic integrity, right?"

Oh boy. She was going to go full Tattletale. "Sure, absolutely." He waved his hand at his partners and they set down their gear.

"So. Got a tip from the Protectorate, or was it someone else?"
"Lips are sealed, you know that."

"PRT." It wasn't a question. "Don't worry, your source already knows what I can do. She probably won't hold it against you. No? No, she'll definitely hold it against you. She's just hoping I piss you off enough that you run a negative story on us."

He didn't lose his composure, I had to give him credit for that, but his partners didn't have nearly the same confidence. They looked decidedly nervous, and they knew their boss had lost control of the situation. Was he their boss? I didn't know. I wasn't an expert on the hierarchy of news organizations.

"Thing is, Mister Vickory, I think she underestimated both of us," Minerva continued. "You're a man who truly believes in what you're doing. You wouldn't portray us in a way you believe is untrue, even for revenge. You may use tactics some people would consider sleazy, but you're still a real journalist, not some trash tabloid reporter. Your 'source' doesn't realize that. She also doesn't realize that I can respect people who do what they believe in, and I generally don't try and ruin people I respect."

He nodded. "Alright. You're every bit as insightful as your namesake. So, how much of what I was going to ask are you willing to answer?"

"Right now?" Minerva continued smoothly, "Nothing. Although, later, I'll be doing a lot of talking. We are still off the record, of course. You and I both know that the Protectorate's looking to preemptively trash our reputations, without making it look like that's what they're trying to do. A lot of that is because they don't want another hero team in town. Especially one like ours."

She stopped and smiled.

"Well, miss," he smiled back. "Consider me intrigued. Why especially yours?"

"We're competition," she said casually. "Most other hero groups don't have the resources to be truly big time without the Protectorate backing them. And most of the ones that do are villains. It's a matter of monopoly. They like to be the only big name in town, because they're afraid of what it'll look like if someone comes along and makes them look bad. Beats them at their own game. Makes the taxpayers wonder if they're worth keeping around."
"You believe you're capable of all that?"

"Well, yes. But it's not about what I believe. It's about what they believe. And it's about competition and monopolies," She'd started walking, and we all followed. She owned this conversation, and everyone here knew it.

"Take the PRT, for example." She continued. "They have tens of thousands of reporters across the continent, all clamoring for their attention and favor. As of right now, we have none. The Protectorate believes us capable of being a threat to their establishment and are willing to outright lie to hurt us. We have no one willing to tell the world the truth. They have secrets they want to hide. We know at least some of those secrets, and have no one to share them with."

"Which means the reporter who does hear your story has, as you put it, a monopoly," he concluded.

"Exactly," she responded. "Let us pretend you had that monopoly. I doubt you'd want to give it up. So, really, I can't blame the Protectorate for trying to get in our way. But I'm not going to let that, or for that matter them, stop us."

Meanwhile, I had noticed that Laserdream had turned around and headed back our direction. I put a warning up for Amelia to read, and sent a few arrows to guide her around. Didn't need any more footage of New Wave today. Amelia can handle her cousin, I decided. And if not, well, Clarice was with her.

"I'd say you'd make a good politician," the man chuckled. "But I wouldn't want to insult your intelligence. And journalism's out because I don't want the competition. It's really refreshing to see young people who get it. I guess my questions can wait for another day. How about you ladies show us a tour of your operations?"

Minerva smiled her biggest smile. "Happily. But Khepri and Gaea are in charge. My job is just to make their jobs easier."

Easier my ass. You're throwing me to the wolves, here. I don't care if you just housebroke them in front of me. I telepathically shouted at my supposed best friend. She pretended not to hear me, but I knew better.

"That's actually a really nice soundbite," he said. "Mind repeating that with the cameras on, some day?"
"Oh, absolutely. We'll have plenty of time to discuss the future," Minerva all but sang. "Now I'd better get back to making your life easier while staying out of the way of the cameras."

Go die in every fire. Nope. Still couldn't telepathically erase her brain. I'd need to work on that.

Seriously. Lisa. Fuck you.

The camera crew got their stuff together, and Stan stood next to me facing them. "This is Stan Vickory on location at Pantheon's new headquarters in the heart of Brockton Bay. This new superhero team has been granted use of what was formerly known as Crater Lake for their own purposes, and they have renovated it to astonishing effect in very short time."

"I am speaking with Khepri, one of the founding members of Pantheon. " he continued. "The first question, of course, is what your role is within your new team."

"I'm..." I said. Oh, jeez, what a question that was. "That's hard to narrow down. Pantheon is too small to have narrowly defined roles. Gaea and I lead the team and make most of the decisions on what we do in the future together. In addition, I'm the one with the most combat experience, so I'm going to handle field tactics if and when we need them."

"Yes. Speaking of which, you have sole credit for killing the Siberian," he continued. "I'm curious, how much was the bounty for her?"

I smiled. "Actually, I'm still not certain."

========

A/N- Some epic foreshadowing in this one. No spoilering it, however.
"Care to explain that?" Stan said with a smile.

"The bodies were turned over to PRT custody, as is law in situations like this," I answered. "They will, of course, need to take some time to verify and assign appropriate bounties."

"I see," he responded. "So the refugee camp you've established?"

"Is mostly our own money, yes," I answered. "Along with a portion of the disaster relief that would be intended to repair the sewer lines and other infrastructure. City hall is in full agreement with us that using those to rebuild homes and restore electricity is a much more prudent use of resources. The Yddrasil can easily handle waste disposal for the near future."

"How long will 'near future' be?"

"As long as it's needed," I answered. "You'll have to talk with FEMA and city planning about that. We'll be here to support our community for as long as they need us to." Of course, that means forever. Of course, it won't take long before the politicians decide it's easier to keep the Yggdrasil and spend the whatever millions of dollars it costs to manage a city's sewers on something far more fun to talk about than plumbing. Vickory was savvy enough to realize that. But he didn't bring it up.

"That is remarkably generous of you," he replied.

"It's what heroes do, after all," I answered. "Pantheon's about finding ways for parahumans to use their powers for more than just showing off for the cameras and getting into stupid fights. We'll have a website and a fully detailed mission statement sooner or later. Maybe hire a secretary or two, but that's low on our list of priorities right now."

We spent the next hour or so doing the full tour. Including the thirty foot deep pit that the cleanup crews were dumping their garbage into. We couldn't get too close for safety reasons, and Vickory was content with getting distant shots. Apparently, closeups of dump trucks full of rubble weren't what news organizations considered desirable footage.
We were just closing up when a kid started running toward us. Well, he probably my age, but shorter than me by a few inches. Then again, most boys my age were. Stupid growth spurts. He had light brown hair and looked like he was in pretty good shape, for his age. Great arm definition, that's for certain.

He was gasping and wheezing by the time he got to us. "Hey... I... wanna be... on your... team..." he managed to gasp out. I quickly changed my opinion of how 'in shape' he was.

I glanced over at Stan, and the crew that still had the camera rolling. Eh, screw it, might as well get this out of the way for everyone. "Well, if you're here to volunteer, you can go check with the people setting up the refugee camp. They can probably use the help."

He smiled with far too much boyish charm for someone who looked like he was about to have a heart attack. "Nah... I have powers. I wanna join you for missions and shit."

"Uh... huh..." God damn it, couldn't be an easy one, could it? I activated the camera in my helmet and had a few mosquitoes buzz in Lisa's face, then spelled 'my video' on the wall. She'd get to it soon enough. "We try to avoid putting untrained individuals in combat. We'll accept any parahuman that doesn't belong in the birdcage." And at least one that does."But we're not going to use you for, as you put it, 'missions', unless we're absolutely certain you can take care of yourself."

"Oh... believe me... I can totally do that," he was still wheezing. Then he pulled out a knife. God damn crazies, I thought as I took a combat position and reached for my baton. And then he stabbed himself in the throat.

The camera girl gasped. The rest of us had better composure, at least, but we were all at least a little shaken by the event.

The boy collapsed into dust, only for there to be an identical looking boy standing right behind him. "See, that's my power," he said without a trace of difficulty in his breathing. "Every time I get hurt or sick or even fall asleep. Poof. Full restoration." He smiled and held his arms out for the camera.

He's like Alabaster, I realized. He also likes being in front of cameras.

"So, what are you calling yourself?" I asked, taking the safest route.
"Ah, right," he said with his boyish grin. "I was thinkin' about calling myself 'Respawn' and joining up with Uber and Leet. Or maybe 'Decoy Boy' and joining the Wards. But now I wanna be in Pantheon."

"Interesting decision," Vickory spoke up, taking an opportunity while I was still figuring out how to approach this kid. "Would you mind telling our viewers why you'd rather join Pantheon instead of the Wards?"

Clever man. 'New hero chooses Pantheon over Protectorate'. Two stories for the price of one.

"Because they're boring. I mean Clockblocker's awesome and all but everyone else is a stick in the mud. And Pantheon kicked the S9's asses and besides they have all the hot girls- no offense Vista, you're a total babe and if you're watching this and wanna call me up I'd love that but I'm sure you get that all the time from the guys on your team so I get it if you're not interested that's gotta suck being around nothing but dudes all the time..." I watched in amazement as he just kept talking. It was all one sentence. How? "... and Uber an' Leet are the same thing just with video games no thanks you can keep the sausage fest I'm signing up fo-"

Then he spontaneously turned into dust and reappeared again. "Oh. Hate it when that happens."

"Did... did you literally just talk yourself to death?" I couldn't hide my incredulity. Even Vickory, who had managed to stay collected through Tattletale, showed an expression of surprise and maybe some concern.

"What? Oh, naw. I've had asthma since I was like three. Every time I have an attack, I reset. No big deal, really," he said with that same smile. "That's not my only power, either. Watch."

"Born sickly, lifetime of frailty, trigger likely related to illness, overcompensating. Serious self worth issues. Desperate need to prove himself." Lisa's voice came over the com for only me to hear.

He tossed his knife away. It turned into dust and reappeared in his hand. "I can respawn other things, too. Gimme a gun and I won't ever run out of ammo. Or any other weapon"

Well then. "Alright. You've convinced me that you're not likely to get hurt in a fight, that's a start." And an understatement. Could not be killed. Beaten, sure, I could think of a dozen ways off the top of my head. But unkillable.

"So I'm on the team?"

"Well... like I said. We won't turn anyone away who wants to help. As for the team that deals with super villains? I'm willing to give you a chance," I answered. "You still have a lot to learn before you're ready to go out in the field, even if you have a power that'll keep you safe. We can't have you accidentally endangering the team."

"Ah, no, I get it, that's cool," he replied. "I'm ready to learn, Sensei."

"Also... your parents, do they know?" I asked. He wasn't wearing a mask. Or even a costume. But still, have to ask.

"Parents are dead," he said, finally dropping the hyperactive thing he was doing. "Siberian. Please tell me you made that bitch suffer before you killed her."

I thought back reflexively. Yeah, 'suffer' would be a word for it. I hadn't managed to get many insects on Manton before Siberian started protecting the van. I had to rely on a mere handful of Black Widows and wasps for the first few minutes or so, before he was too ill to maintain the projection. It was an ugly and painful way to die. I wouldn't have wished it on anyone. And I'd inflicted it on someone.

"We'll talk about that in private," I answered darkly. My mood had shifted. I'd never killed before, and I'd be damned if I felt bad about Siberian. But the way he screamed and cried and begged and soiled himself as I assaulted him with far too few insects to make a quick death of it... I'd never stop having nightmares.

Vickory, at least, caught on. "I understand," he said amiably. "Hero business and all that. We've got more than enough footage to work with. Here," he handed me a card. "So Minerva has my number. No sense in wasting her time or powers finding it another way."

I took it. "Thanks," I responded. Then I turned back to 'Respawn'. "Okay, I'll take you to meet the rest of the team. Figure things out from there."
"Fucking sweet."

"Okay, Lisa," I muttered into my mouthpiece, "Please show the kid mercy."

=============

A/N- And the introduction of my first OC to the story. Most readers seem to be of the opinion that he grows on you. Don't worry, he wasn't intended to be likable from the start...
"What do you mean, 'no'?" Crystal hissed at Taylor, standing from her chair.

"I mean, I'm voting against adding you to our combat team," she answered.

"Amy-" She started.

"Amelia-" I corrected.

"Amelia-" I corrected.

"Is not the only person in this partnership," Taylor. No, she was being Skitter, now. Continued.

"What about the others," she said, gesturing toward Aceso and Minerva. Don't they get a vote?"

"Uh..." I started. "We... never really figured out how we were doing that sorta thing."

Crystal looked at me. "Really? You guys are going to be attracting a lot of parahumans. I'll help you sort that out," she turned back toward Khepri. "After you put me on the team."

"You're too flashy, too visible, and too vulnerable. We don't fight like New Wave or the Protectorate fight." Skitter insisted.

"Near as I can tell, you haven't fought at all since starting this group," Crystal stepped toward Skitter menacingly. "Amy-"

"Amelia," I interrupted again.

"Took down the last of the S9 and has been doing all the heavy lifting. What have YOU done?" Crystal yelled at the bug girl. Who stood her ground admirably, especially for someone who was
making eye contact with an angry girl who could blast her hard enough that I couldn't put the pieces back together.

"Exactly," Khepri replied. "We keep our combat ops secret. Hit from stealth. And if you do it right, your enemies are down before they even know you're there. Your power, your theme, your looks. They make you great for a more visible position. Public Relations shit. It makes you a liability in the field."

Crystal looked like she'd been slapped and was going to hit back.

I stood up. "Okay, Khepri, I want her on the team. She's my friend. She's smart. And she has more field experience and training than the rest of us combined."

"The rest of us have powers that can work through the changelings," Khepri countered, then looked over at Respawn. "Or don't need them. If she's out on the field, she'll be the only one who can die. And that changes the nature of the game. The amount of risk we can afford to take. Right now, we can't really lose, the worst that happens is we don't win. She changes that. Do you want her out there where she can get killed?"

I hesitated. Crystal spoke up. "I don't care. I've risked my life against fucking Leviathan! And spent a lot of that dragging your heavy ass around so you could play glorified tracking device with an Endbringer. You don't get to decide which risks I take!"

"If you're on this team, the yes I decide the risks!" Skitter yelled back. "I make the strategy, and when people die, it's my fault!" She all but screeched the last two words.

Her voice cracked. "I... I've gotten enough of my friends killed already." She looked down, fought to keep from crying.

Oh god. Has that been on her conscience the whole time? I got up and moved to her. Pulled her into a hug. Crystal and Minerva looked like they wanted to say something, but didn't. Clarice just watched. She'd gotten quiet and contemplative after the 'incident' with Coil. I was worried about her. But for right now, I didn't know how to handle the problem. Didn't know how to handle Taylor, either.

It was Respawn that broke the moment.
"Uh... I know I'm the new guy and all," Respawn spoke up. "But I might be able to help with that whole 'death' thing."

We all looked at him.

"Well," he hesitated for a second. "The thing is, I think I can 'tag' her with my power, and it'll work like with the knife."

"What's the limit?" Minerva asked.

"Anything I can deadlift," he replied. "Literally. Ever since I got my powers, I've been working out. Y'know, gotta look like a hero and all. Helps that my power heals me up really fast. As I get stronger, my power can handle heavier things." He extended an arm and flexed it, showing off his biceps.

I had to admit, he was in good shape. Even if he was also weird as hell.

"I've never tried it on a person before," he said. "But it should work."

"Powers are..." I still couldn't think of how to explain it to them. "They have weird, seemingly arbitrary rules that don't make sense from a human point of view. Just because it 'should' work doesn't mean it 'will'. This needs to be tested thoroughly."

"No better time than the present," Khepri replied. "Okay, 'tag' her and let's see how this works out."

He smiled widely and walked up to my cousin. "You may want to take off the glove," he stated.

"Uh, why?" Crystal's eyes narrowed.

"Because you are a lady, and I am a gentleman. And I need skin contact to make this work. So unless you wanna put this off in favor of a couple dates, first..." he kept smiling the whole time.

I suppressed a snicker. Sure, he could have just touched her elbow or something. But the expression
on her face was priceless. Like she couldn't tell if she wanted to blush or punch him.

I had the feeling he got that reaction from a lot of people.

"Okay," she said after finding her voice again. She grabbed her glove and in one fluid motion pulled it off and held her hand out.

"Aww, and I know this great place, too..." he said with a pout. Then he smiled. "Oh well," and smacked her palm with his.

Skitter pulled her knife and walked over to Crystal.

"The hell's that for?" Crystal asked.

"We have to know if his power heals, or just teleports," she answered. "If it doesn't work, Amelia can repair the injury easily enough.

"That..." Crystal glanced over at Respawn. "Okay, fine, you have a point." She took the knife. And, in a single swift motion, split open her palm. "Okay, let's do this." Her eyes never left Taylor's.

A second later she vanished. The knife, and Laserdream's costume, fell to the floor.

Crystal shrieked and bolted from the room, at full flight speed.

"You knew this would happen!" She yelled from the other room. I moved away from Taylor and rushed to pick up the costume to take to my now disrobed cousin.

"How could I have known? My clothes come with me!" Respawn countered.

Crystal grabbed her clothing and peeked around the corner. She looked pissed. "Not you! You're an idiot! HER!"
And that is when Minerva started laughing. "Oh god! That was the funniest thing I've ever seen." She fell out of her chair. Then Taylor and Clarice joined in. Little snickers at first, but then full on laughter.

I was next. I couldn't help myself, it was pretty funny. "E tu, Amy?" Crystal looked at me like she was going to cry.

"I'm sorry. But. It isn't even..." I struggled to both find a way to explain it, and hold in my laughter. "It... it's not that funny, but we've been nothing but business for the last week. I don't think any of us have even told a joke since we started the team. Except Minerva, and her jokes are only good if you're into schadenfreude."

Minerva's hand came up from her position on the ground. "I'd be insulted, but it's true." Then she was back to giggling.

Crystal's face softened. "Fine, I guess it's a little funny. I'm going to get changed now."

We'd managed to stop by the time Laserdream was back in costume. And then, looking at her, we all started laughing again. "You do realize that my power means I can literally make your heads explode, right?" She deadpanned. That just made us laugh harder. At least she wasn't upset anymore.

Except Respawn. He hadn't laughed at this at all.

"I'm sorry about that," he said sincerely. "If I'd realized, I wouldn't have suggested it."

"No, it's fine," Crystal replied. She even offered him a genuine smile. "You couldn't have known. Besides, as humiliated as it was, it worked. My hand is healed. In the grand scheme of things, being embarrassed is so much better than being dead."

"Thanks," he smiled back. "And I'm not saying I saw anything. But hypothetically speaking, if I did, I'd have to inform you that you have absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. You clearly put a lot of effort into staying fit."

Her smile left her face. "Aaaand moment lost. I almost thought you were a genuine human being for a minute there."
He shrugged. "One step forward, two steps back. It's how I move. Besides, I'd feel bad if I gave you the wrong impression." The way he said that was way too smooth for me to believe he hadn't said it before.

Taylor was the first one to recover. She addressed Respawn. "Okay, we'll have to do more testing with your power," she glanced toward Crystal. "With dummies this time. We know your power can restore people. Now we need to know range, time, and concentration limits. Amongst other things."

"Speaking of power demonstration... I have a question of my own," he said. "When are you ladies gonna go 'Queen of the Zerg', anyway?"

Taylor looked at him. "Umm... what's a 'zerg'?"

=========

A/N- Ah, yes, I had fun with this chapter. Also, more epic foreshadowing.
Our first idea, of course, was to have me use my power on Respawn. If we could increase his strength, well, the implications were obvious. That didn't work out as planned. Turns out, his power makes him functionally immune to mine.

Or, more specifically, every time I tried to use my power, he disintegrated. I didn't even get a chance to look at his biology before he was no longer in contact.

"Damn," Taylor muttered. I agreed. It would have been so nice. Still, even his limited ability got Crystal past Taylor's argument, and made my General feel a lot more comfortable about fights overall. I tried to imagine how that'd feel. As someone else who was used to putting all the world's weight on her shoulders, I could empathize to a degree. All those I couldn't save, all those times I wasn't fast or mentally focused enough after Endbringer fights. That was always devastating. But to be the one who gave the orders that got people killed? I couldn't imagine what that felt like.

Our power tests continued. As it turned out, Respawn didn't have a range limit. At least, not one we were able to test easily. Well over ten miles, at least. The mass limit was, as he had said, his lifting capacity. A bit over two hundred pounds at this point. There didn't seem to be a limit to how many object he could 'hold', he managed to do almost a hundred pounds of Khepri's bugs at once. But that was still only one or two people of mass at best. His 'recall' time was at most twenty minutes, although things started getting unreliable after seventeen. Minerva guessed that it was a mental component on his part.

Taylor nodded. "That's an acceptable window. If we still haven't managed to end a fight in fifteen minutes, we're either hopelessly outclassed and should run, or it's an Endbringer. In which case that's still true, but we'll be staying anyway."

"Looks like I'm on the team, then," Crystal smiled at me.

"Just need a new name," I agreed. It would be nice to have her around. She's right, what happened to me wasn't her fault, and I know she has my back. Maybe she was a bit too protective, but I could live with that.

"I know!" Respawn volunteered. "I'm thinking Isis. And I can be Osiris."
"I don't know anything about mythology," Crystal replied. "But somehow every fiber in my being says 'no'."

"Harsh."

"Egyptian god," Minerva offered. "Life, death, and reincarnation. It's as good a fit as any. Isis would be his wife."

"That would explain that feeling," Crystal agreed.

"Also his sister," Minerva continued. "Plus her powers are nothing like yours."

"Eww," Crystal concluded. "How about you go with 'Osiris', and I pick a different goddess? Maybe one from the exact opposite side of the world?"

"Friend zoned already?" Respawn pouted. "Such a tragedy."


"I think I'll pass on anything involving volcanoes," Crystal answered. It was no surprise, really, almost no one went with that association, in spite of the powerful imagery. Because Behemoth. So few people used anything which implied fire. Even those who actually controlled fire tried to avoid it.

"How did you know all that?" Minerva asked. "Did you upload wikipedia?"

"Nope," Aceso replied. "I have full internet access. Wired it into-"

"Don't want to know!" Minerva interrupted. "I'd avoid pacific deities anyway. Most of those religions are still being practiced, and some people might think of that as cultural insensitivity. Let's stick to dead religions that no one can get pissy about."
I nodded. She had a point. People got offended pretty easily over these things. I'd been accused of being some kind of 'demon' before, thanks to my healing powers. Then again, some people get just as offended over soccer games. Or, for that matter, whether it was called 'soccer' or 'football'. We were already pushing enough buttons, better not get into religious quagmires.

By this time Respawn had moved over to Clarice. "Hi, I don't think we've really been introduced," he said with a smile. "I'm Respawn, or Osiris now. Zach when not being a superhero and all. So you're a tech geek, huh? I'd like to look at your gear."

He managed to make that sound slightly dirty. Meanwhile, I was stunned. Bonesaw. I am watching someone hit on Bonesaw. And I was too flabbergasted to do anything about it.

She smiled broadly, in that faux-innocent way of hers that I kept hoping was an act, because the alternative was far more disturbing. "I'm Aceso. Clarice. I'd be happy to. No one seems to want to see my art, or cuddle with me." She pouted. "Not even my big sister."

"Oh, that's too bad. I'd love to see your art. And afterwards we can-"

"She's ten," Minerva interjected.

"... play video games," Respawn finished. He looked over Minerva with an incredulous look on his face. 'Really' he mouthed. Lisa gave a single slow nod.

I could understand his reaction. The 'Clarice' body would be considered tall by most standards at 5'6, and while it was a slender figure, it wasn't entirely lacking in curves. Especially for the Asian heritage that her features hinted at. She could be mistaken for an underdeveloped sixteen year old. Or a very well developed ten year old.

Crystal fidgeted uncomfortably, glancing between me and Clarice. Oh god damn it, she figured it out.

Respawn went to speak again and Minerva interrupted. "I'm a high end thinker whose skills revolve around putting together information from subtle hints. I know things about you that you have forgotten. Like that kitten your parents wouldn't let you have when you were ten. Give me a few minutes, and I can figure out which month it was and the name you had picked out for it. Try anything on me and I will shut you down so hard you'll cry in front of us."
Wow, I felt that one. Tattletale could be brutal, as I knew first hand. But she was right, we really did need to get him to, y'know, stop trying to flirt with us. Wait a minute. It wasn't 'us'. Just 'them'.

"Uh... yes ma'am," the kid said, some color draining from his face. "Message received."

I actually felt a little bit hurt. I mean, it's not that I was attracted to him. Maybe I would have been if I were normal. I was self aware enough to know I was incredibly messed up in that regard. Then again, I had a hard time believing I would go for Respawn- Zach- even if I had a healthy sexuality. But he had, in the course of an hour, managed to hit on every female he'd met, plus Vista by proxy.

Except for me and Taylor. Probably stupid worrying about that, since Crystal almost certainly suspected that our 'Clarice, brute combat thinker' was really 'Bonesaw, nightmare bio-tinker and last living member of the Slaughterhouse Nine'. Yet, for some reason, the part of me that was a woman was deeply offended by this.

"So... why haven't you asked me or Khepri out yet?" I asked. I immediately regretted it when all eyes turned my way.

"Uh..." he stammered while everyone else just looked at me like I was insane for asking.

"Actually," Taylor added. "I kinda want to hear this, myself."

"Self preservation," he replied. "Hitting on your boss just isn't a good idea. Hitting on your boss when her girlfriend, who's your other boss, is in the same room? I am both insane and immortal. But that sounds suicidal, even to me."

What. "What?"

Taylor mirrored me. "What?"

"You don't have to hide it. Legend made it cool like two decades ago." he insisted. "You two have great chemistry together. You're both 'sweet and shy' types normally, only to go 'badass action babe' whenever we have to worry about serious shit?"
We both just stared at him. Lisa started snickering. Crystal and Clarice were just watching us.

"We're... uh... not dating," Taylor said first.

"No? Seriously?" he asked. "I coulda swore it was either that or you were sisters, but I think I'd have heard if you were part of New Wave."

"Well, Amy was adopted," Lisa teased. Earning death glares from Taylor and I.

"Oh, is that what it is? Whole long lost sister thing? That's kinda cool, too."

"Also not what happened," I said. "We're not related. We're not dating. Up until a week ago we weren't friends."

"What about all the hugging?"

"First, it was just one hug," that you saw, I admitted to myself. "Second. We're girls. We're allowed to hug anyone we want and it doesn't mean anything. It... it's like guys shaking hands!"

"That is true," Crystal agreed. "It's in chapter 3 of the girls handbook."

Thank you, cuz, I thought.

"Of course, when you cross the ten second mark... it's more like guys holding hands." she added while smirking at me.

Traitor.

"Wow. I totally misread that everything, didn't I?" Respawn replied.
"Yes, yes you did," Taylor insisted. I nodded my head in agreement. While glaring at Crystal, daring her to speak up.

"Alright. So. Since I already have my foot this far down my throat, would you girls like to come with me over to Clarice's place and play video games?" He asked with a smile. A very suggestive smile. "I promise I'll show you those zerg I mentioned."

I was stunned to silence. And Taylor was no help. She simply put her face in her hands and shook her head.

=========================

'Pele' is pronounced paylay. Originally I had it written with the phonic version in the story and corrected it here.

Also- this chapter marks the start of my love affair with teasing my characters.
Taylor and I eventually conceded to watching the kid show off the dumb video game. Crystal and Lisa both opted not to visit, with flimsy excuses like "My powers aren't good for works of fiction or theoretical biontastics" and "My mom's already going to kill me, but if I don't go home soon she'll make it take longer."

Those traitors.

Clarice was all too enthusiastic, and Taylor and I almost had no choice. We were the ones who would be benefiting from the ideas, after all.

And thus we found ourselves in one of the subbasements that Clarice had me construct for her. It's where we kept the pods and most of the heavy computer tech. Well, that and Lisa's little command center. It took him a few minutes to set everything up, and since we were using Riley's somewhat tinkered up computers, we were treated to a massive holographic display... of badly pixelated art...

"Err, sorry about that," Respawn offered with his usual grin. "This game's from, like, '98... and it wasn't exactly heralded as a graphical masterpiece even back then. It wasn't meant to be played on a screen that's as tall as I am."

"Okay, I can fix that," Clarice replied. She stood there passively for a minute, and the screen split into four reasonable sized screens, one for each of us. "These screens are all going to show exactly the same thing yours is showing, and if you need to you can tap the screen itself and it'll highlight that area so the rest of us can see it clearly."

"Oh, that's cool," he replied. "But this is a real time strategy game, so unit highlighting is a big part of the interface."

It took us maybe a minute before we had questions.

"So, what's with the purple stuff on the ground?" I asked.
"That's creep. It's how zerg feed their minions and buildings. Kinda like your Yggdrasil. Without it, the hive dies."

"It's all veiny and ugly, though," Taylor replied.

"It's suppose to be. The zerg are organic and collect all the DNA from every species they encounter to become the perfect life forms."

"That's dumb," I replied. "Animals are hit hard by the square-cube rule. They'd be much better off using a plant and fungus base instead of animal. Except for a few things, like muscle mass. I mean, that building has a pulse, what's the point of that?"

"It pumps nutrient fluids through the creep."

"Why not just use what plants use?" I asked.

"For that matter, why put the buildings on the surface at all?" Taylor continued. "It'd be far more secure for them to grow underground and simply poke up holes to release their units. It's what our setup is designed to do."

"Because it's a video game and the sides are suppose to be fairly balanced so they all have a chance of winning," Respawn said with exasperation.

"That's why video games are dumb," Taylor stated. "There is no such thing as 'balance' in war. It's all about who got luckier. Either by having lots of power or skill of their own, or their enemy not having very much. Plus or minus natural disasters and other parties that might be involved."

"Okay, fine!" he agreed. "It's not very realistic. But I'm about to start showing off the monsters now. This is the cool part."

....

"These are larva," he explained, showing the purple maggot-things. "Basically, they can morph into any kind of zerg, at your command."
"No point," I replied. "We can just grow things right out of the ground. Or create dedicated growing pods that'll do nothing but make monsters."

"Okay. No larva."

...

"So they're suppose to be like worker ants?" Clarice simplified.

"Yup, pretty much, plus they turn into buildings."

"One of those dumb RTS things?" Taylor asked.

"Yeah, one of those dumb RTS things," Respawn sighed.

....

"So six legged monster dogs with giant scythe claws," I summarized.

"I think of them more like mutated great cats," he tried to correct. "Sure they hunt in packs, but they burrow underground. Could probably hide in trees, but 'dumb RTS thing'."

"I can make that work," I replied. "Probably be pretty effective, too."

Taylor glanced at me. "Yeah, those could be pretty useful," she agreed.

"In the sequel there's a version that suicide detonates into acid bombs and can wipe out everything nearby," he offered. "But I can't stand that game, they butchered the story worse than the Star Wars prequels."

"That... I could really use one of those against Hookwolf," Taylor stated.
"So... mutant dog beasts are a 'go'. Probably better just to create projectiles that fire the acid, though."

"Ah, that brings us to the next unit!" He exclaimed.

....

"So they're... giant snakes with claws? What's the point of that? Either take away the claws and have a snake's stealth and mass efficiency, or give it legs so it can move faster," Clarice complained at the screen. "This is the worst of both worlds." I nodded in agreement. Totally inefficient design.

"Because it looks cool as hell?" he asked.

"Stupid RTS thing," Taylor concluded.

"Stupid RTS thing," Respawn relented.

"The acid spine idea's good, though," I added. "I can install them into those zergling creatures."

....

"Flying troop carriers that can sense invisible units, huh?" Taylor said with a smile as she looked at me.

"Not possible. Too much mass for an organic thing to do. I can do the whole 'sensor suite' thing. But making something big enough to carry eight of those dog monsters and still fly is a bit much. An underwater version, sure. But not a flyer. We'd need some kind of antigravity for that."

"We can always see what Toybox has to offer," Clarice suggested. "Interface its power source into the organism and we could make it work."

"Can you do that?" I asked.
"Easily," she replied. "I never really gave it much thought, but I think my tinker specialty is actually cybernetics. I'm very good at interfacing organic with machine."

....

"Giant bat monsters that fire smaller attack monsters?"

"Basically."

"Can't make them jump around like that, wouldn't if I could, too much risk of collateral damage," I stated.

"But a giant wasp-monster that shoots living projectiles?" Taylor asked hopefully.

"How about if they fire something based on a squid or octopus. For nonlethal takedowns?" I suggested.

"Speaking of nonlethals, how are the tranquilizer mosquitoes coming along?" she asked back.

"The problem is controlling them. I trust you, but your power has gaps. You can make mistakes and we're not sure what happens while you're asleep. We don't want these things getting into the wild. It would be an ecological nightmare even before considering the risk to human life."

"Uh... why not make them all work like male mosquitoes and only feed on plants? We could even limit it to just Yggdrasil, like these 'zerg' use creep." Clarice offered.

"That... that's a really good idea. We could do it to almost all the construct, in case we lose control of them somehow, they can't cause much damage at all," I said happily. And then immediately felt stupid for not thinking of it earlier. It was my one great hangup about making self replicating life, aside from Class S status, which we basically already were anyway.

"Told you this wouldn't be a waste of time!" Respawn crowed.
"Okay, so the transquitoes are approved," I said.

"That... is a really terrible name," Taylor shook her head.

"My abominations against nature, I can name them whatever I like," I insisted.

"I like it," Clarice and Respawn said at the same time.

"Okay... now I wanna change the name..." I muttered.

....

"Pass on the queens. Nothing to offer that we'll ever use. One of its tricks is something Khepri can do with every bug in the city already. And the other is both incredibly difficult to do for no real reward, and too horrific to contemplate."

....

"Those are buildings," I stated.

"More like defense turrets. They automatically attack enemies that get to close."

"The spike one would be way too much effort to punch through all that ground, and anyone who's got two working legs could avoid the attack. Besides, I can just control the Yggdrasil and impale them myself if I want to use that kind of lethal force." I dismissed that one.

"Acid cannon sounds cool and all... but they can miss and when that death ball comes down, it'll do a lot of damage, possibly to us. I think we should stick with the 'guided missile' approach." Taylor rejected the other.

"Uh... it doesn't have to be spikes or acid?" Clarice offered. looked at her. "It wouldn't be too
difficult to set them to be microwave, laser, sonic, or even EM cannons. We'd still need to aim them manually, though I could help fix that a bit, but at that proportionate size, it could store and release enough power to cut through an aircraft carrier. Or any amount less we prefer. I'd recommend using only a fraction of maximum power at a time. With ways to delimit it for brutes or when we're willing to use lethal force."

I was still hesitant. That kind of damage potential would be absurd. Enough to take on an army. Or an Endbringer.

"We're doing it. The turrets are approved." Taylor said. She'd been thinking the same thing I was thinking. I simply nodded.

....

"Flying suicide acid bombers?"

"Too large, inefficient. We can do better with a larger number of smaller bugs that fly fast and can reproduce. Lets us control the damage better, too." I said, looking over at Khepri. She nodded this time.

"Same thing as the mosquitoes?" She asked.

"Yup. But we need something larger and faster."

"Hummingbird moths," Clarice volunteered, and an image popped up. "One of the faster species of insect. Especially for its size."

"Those are kind of adorable," Taylor agreed.

"They're big enough," I added. "And they already feed on nectar, so it'll be an easy mod to link them to the Yggdrasil."

....
"No, just no, that thing has no purpose except collateral damage." I insisted.

"Yeah. This is made of bad idea."

"Aww, I thought it was cute," Clarice pouted.

"Alright, the Defiler is rejected," Respawn agreed. "I think I won't even bother showing you the Infested Terran unit."

....

"Flying artillery platform, huh?" Khepri said with a smile. Oh boy.

"Same problem as the carriers," I said. "We'll talk shop when we pick up the ability to mass produce antigravity. And even then, it's kind of a problem since that thing has to have massive amounts of recoil."

"So, filed away under 'haven't reached that part of the tech tree'," Respawn clicked a couple times. "And now, the grand daddy of them all. The ultralisk!"

"Okay, that is shiny," Taylor leaned forward to the screen.

"Very," Clarice agreed.

"Too big," I said. "The square-cube law, again. If I reduced its size to that of, say, a bull elephant, and did some shenanigans with incorporating plant biochemistry into the bone structures and gave it a super efficient system and specialized it a dozen ways... I could make one of those things per month. And they'd be basically useless against just about anything. Too slow and bulky for most targets. Too fragile to go up against Endbringers. Against anything else, I'd rather have the hundred or so zerglings we could build instead."

"What if we modified the carapace to also be a capacitor?" Clarice suggested. "The biggest
weaknesses of large organisms are a lack of energy and oxygen levels."

"We'd have to power it with lightning strikes," I said. "The Yggdrasil doesn't collect enough power to run something like that."

"Or... Sundancer?" Taylor offered. "All you need is power, right? Well, she can generate a lot of it very quickly. Can you use her to charge the Yggdrasil? And use that to power these..."

"Ultralisks," Respawn supplied.

"I could build a framework out of lightweight metals," Clarice volunteered. "We can grow them around that, so they're not as heavy and we can transfer lots of power really efficiently."

"I... I can work with that. It'd still take a while to build these things."

"Yeah, takes forever in the game, too," Respawn agreed. "I was using cheat codes just to show you everything."

"So that's it?"

"Well, there is one more thing..." he said with a smile.

....

"No, not happening," Taylor said, staring in horror at the screen.

"Why not?"

"Because that armor is so badly designed I don't know where to begin. Back mounted claw wings are just ridiculous, how do you balance with something like that? I'd keep falling over. Her hair is—there's no words for how awful that looks. And I have nothing resembling her figure."
"Actually, you're wrong about that last part," I corrected.

"Are you blind?" She shot back.

"No, but as an outside observer... she's tall, slender, athletic and has absurdly nice legs," I smiled at her. "All we have to do is ignore the, *ahem*, implants, and you're not so far apart from her."

I saw the red rising to Taylor's face. Oh god, I made her blush! And then I felt my own face heat up.

"See? That right there? THAT is why I am convinced you two are together!" Respawn insisted. "Now just accept that you're the Queen of Blades and be done with it!"

"It's still not a good design," Taylor muttered. "Sure, it looks great. But how it looks and what it's capable of are two very different things."

"What... what if we can make the wings work?" Clarice offered. "We're back to the antigrav stuff, but, that'd be relatively minor for this. And it'd let you use them very effectively in combat simply by altering gravity as you use them. Your bug control means we can tie it all in with maybe a dozen or of the more intelligent insects- say, cockroaches. The best part is, you could even fly!"

"You're saying you can make this," she said pointing at the screen. "Flight capable?"

"Easily. It's even a really efficient way to do it. Maybe not as efficient as something resembling dragonfly wings, but close."

"Dragonfly wings would make her look like a pixie," I replied.

"Yeah..." she said slowly. "I think I'd rather avoid that. Sounds like something the Protectorate would do for a PR thing."

"So the deadly claw wings are good, then?"

"Okay, they're in," Taylor relented. "But ONLY after we get the antigravity!"
Respawn smiled. "Oh, I can't wait to tell my friends in Korea about this..."

==============

A/N- Ah, the amusement and nostalgia this chapter brings me.
We, or for most of us our changelings, had gathered in an alleyway. It was night and the streets were close to empty despite it being just shy of ten. Even in this dangerous part of time, people tended to respect the curfew. Or they were simply afraid to be out at night. It looked like this place would stink, but we hadn't installed scent or taste into the changelings. I was pretty sure I never would.

Most of us couldn't fly, not until Clarice. No, we were in costume, think of her as Aceso, got that antigrav tech she was now constantly speaking of. We promised her we'd look into contacting Toybox as soon as possible. There was a number of things we needed to speak with them about, including tech to help cure the increasingly impatient Noelle. If there were only a way to send really detailed messages between Coils.

"So, this is where Hookwolf and co are hiding?" I asked, looking at the less than impressive abandoned warehouse. Not even a 'warehouse', more like a furniture store that was remodeled.

"Yup, got them all tagged," Khepri replied.

"Aren't you going to just take them all out yourself?" Crystal, who was going as 'Eki', now, asked. She did not yet have a costume for Pantheon, so she was still dressed as Laserdream.

"Too soon," Minerva answered. "We don't want to show off the modded bugs unless we have to. We definitely don't want to demonstrate the, ugh, tranqsquitoes. We'll consider them when we go after Purity's group. Besides, there's two people on this team who have virtually zero combat experience."

"Hey! I fought the fucking Siberian, that counts as experience," I insisted.

"You fought a Siberian that was holding back, while using an artificial body so juiced up that it was literally killing itself," Lisa countered. "That doesn't count."

"Still using the same kind of body," I replied. "Better. Got lots of practice thanks to Khepri over here 'stress testing' the models."
"Good, then you'll have no problem at all kicking ass in this fight," Minerva said with a smile.

"Besides," Khepri responded. "You need some leadership experience. I'm here as nothing more than a mere soldier. You make the calls on this battlefield, and do so quickly. No, I won't be using my bugs except for intel. For this exercise, I'm an extra."

"You couldn't have warned me about this earlier today?" I hissed.

"Nope. Won't work like that in the field. Be glad I gave you THIS much warning."

Oh, thanks a lot 'partner', put me on the spot with no warning. "Fine, you're still intel. Who's in there, capes, unpowered, and civilians?"

"Hookwolf, for certain. Cricket. Very likely Stormtiger. Nineteen nonpowered opponents, total of four guns and various melee weapons. Clock's ticking, you got thirty seconds."

God damn it! Okay, think... "Aceso, you go for Cricket. Your powersets should match nicely. Eki, our armor can see in the dark so you target the lights, then Stormtiger. Again, closest match. If you can't beat your opponents, at least keep them from going after the rest of us. Minerva, you and I go after the mooks. You're the thinker and have the ranged weapon. You're on sniper duty. Take shots at Stormtiger when you can as well. Osiris, you're on Hookwolf, try to keep him focused on you. Khepri will be your backup."

I looked over at Khepri. "Since she wants to watch, don't expect to get any help. Use the acid, he's exactly who I made it for."

We approached the warehouse, and let Respawn start the fight by teleporting the door off its hinges. It wasn't the kind of building that had external guards. No need, since it was Hookwolf's place of residence. Anyone he had a problem fighting would be far too dangerous for any normal person. I led the charge. Huh, that was awesome just to think about. I led the charge. Such a rush. Crystal was in next and up near the ceiling almost immediately, sending wide burst lasers that plunged the building into near total darkness and rained glass and debris down on the Nazis.

We were using the changelings and could easily see in the dark... except the ones of us up against the most difficult foes. Stupid. I'd think better of it next time.
I'd punched my first Nazi. I was positively giddy. It was satisfying to feel the bones crunch in his shoulder, and the newer changelings actually did translate sense of touch. We were easily in the brute 2/3 range with just our Changeling models. My target was downed. I had to jump and roll out of the way of one of Stormtiger's blasts. He managed to catch one of his own people in the attack. Even if I were really here, I wouldn't have been able to save that life.

Minerva took a shot at him. Real longbow, scaled up to match our changelings' biology. He blocked that, and was struck by Eki's energy blast. Fun fact about air, it's not much of an obstacle to light.

Meanwhile, Aceso had engaged Cricket. Both of them were doing duel-wield swords. Both of them were superhumanly quick with absurd understanding of just where to hit to hurt. I wasn't sure if either could get the upper hand in straight combat, but our changelings could maintain Olympic level activity for several hours without rest, if need be. Cricket would get tired. Aceso would not.

I let one of the thugs hit me with a wood baseball bat. It broke on my face. It was easier than blocking or dodging. I slammed him in the chest and sent him flying back. Remarkably enough, the men kept attacking. Guess their fear of what I would do to them was less than their fear of what Hookwolf would do if they tried to run.

Speaking of Hookwolf, I was paying attention to that now. He was taking the time to go into full "metal monster" form before engaging.

Osiris, with a battle staff that was basically artificially grown bone from his own body, approached him. "Hey, dickless," Osiris yelled at the leader of Fenrir's Chosen. "I gotta ask ya something. You are aware your icon's dad liked to get fucked by horses, right? Let one get him pregnant. Yeah, I could see where that idea would appeal to someone like you."

I punched another gang member in the gut- softly, by our standards. Really? He had to be making that up, right? Then I casually backhanded another. By now, everyone near one of the guns was down, and Minerva was helping Eki full time. I kept chasing after thugs. It was almost 'busy work' to be honest.

Hookwolf was staring down Khepri, who was just standing there watching. "Hey, don't look at me," she raised her hands innocently. "I'm not the one who said your dad fucks horses."

"Don't get smart with me, bitch!" Hookwolf shouted at her. "This time I'm going tear you apart so bad that your kike girlfriend won't be able to put you back together again!"
"Hey," Minerva yelled back. "I'm the kike girlfriend. Gaea over there is the one with the healing powers!"

"All dykes look the same to me," he stepped forward, and Osiris got in the way. "Out of my way, you little faggot."

Osiris shrugged. "Well, I did fuck your mother-

Hookwolf tore through him with a chain claw. Osiris came back into being less than a half second later, moving toward the mass of chains "last night, s-

Another slash. Another step. "-o yeah, that wou-

And a third. "-ld make-"

And a fourth. "-me gay."

This time he was close enough to jam the staff deep into Hookwolf's guts. The core part of him. Hookwolf took the bait and shattered the weapon. Coating a good portion of himself in a slightly modified variant of Crawler's acid. Hookwolf wretched in what I wasn't completely sure was pain, ripping chunks of his own body off. It really wouldn't help.

"By the way, your mom's hung like a horse," Osiris finished, staring down at the writhing and twisting Hookwolf.

Cricket and Stormtiger were, remarkably, not distracted too much by their leader's current predicament. Stormtiger even managed to throw an attack at Osiris. It collided, which was exactly as lethal as everything Hookwolf threw at the kid.

Cricket couldn't afford to be distracted. Aceso was cackling like a madwoman as she pressed her attacks. Both had several nasty cuts along their bodies. The difference was, for Aceso it didn't matter, she had lacerations in a dozen places that I could spot, some of which would be almost immediately fatal to a human body, and one of Cricket's swords embedded through her ribcage. It just wasn't enough damage to disable a changeling, especially Aceso's highly customized model.
The nazi woman's wounds, on the other hand, were the opposite. Only three in total, and they looked minor. A shallow slice along the left ankle that would have cut most of the nerves in that foot if it hit where I was pretty sure it hit. An incision on her left wrist that was pouring blood at an alarming rate. A minor slice over the forehead that had allowed enough bleeding to blind the woman—she was fighting on sonar alone.

And... and that's what the cackling was for, wasn't it? To mess with the sonar. It's sometimes easy to forget just how terrifyingly clever the preteen girl was.

Khepri was watching me as I was observing the battlefield. If we kept this going much longer, both Hookwolf and Cricket would die. "Stormtiger," I shouted. "It's over. Stand down and surrender, so we can avoid accidentally killing your friends."

Eki backed up and stopped firing, to let him get a look at the mess. Stormtiger dropped. "Fuck you sideways," he cursed, glaring angrily at me. But he didn't resist as I touched his arm and delivered the sleep drug. No sense in letting them know this body was a fake, and everyone already knew Panacea could put people under with a touch. Cricket had also stopped, though whether from actually surrendering, or simply because she was too tired from blood loss to keep going, I was unsure. Aceso gassed her and went to work performing first aid.

"Okay, Osiris, you can call off the acid now," I shouted over to him.

"Yeah, it's totally not cool to use chemical weapons on Nazis," Minerva said cheerfully, as she went to the various injured gang members and ziptied their hands behind their backs. A lot of them screamed as she did it, too. We'd deliberately targeted the arms and shoulders, as we didn't really want to break their legs, and we were trying very hard not to kill them. "I mean, it's not like they'd ever do anything like that to a sweet little Jew like me."

I am going to need to talk to her about this 'pretending to be Jewish to annoy the Nazis' thing.

"As you wish, my lady," he yelled back. And then the bone staff reformed. And with it, the acid that had been released all over Hookwolf's insides vanished. He started pulling himself back together.

He was nude by the time he had gotten into one piece, and there were still acid burns across his body. Half his hair had been eaten away. "So, planning to resist?" I asked.
He glared at me defiantly, and eyed Osiris. A bladed chain shot straight at me like it was a thrown spear. I easily dodged it and spit on the metal. More of Crawler's acid. THIS time he was human enough to scream as he struggled to form a new blade to sever the old chain. He failed, but eventually the acid ran its course. Specifically, the part it was attached to fell off. Joining a few hundred pounds of other metal that was once Hookwolf. He passed out while still standing.

"One hell of a fighter," Khepri said, with no attempt to disguise her admiration.

"Pity he's such an evil sack of shit," Osiris replied.

"Do we offer them a chance to join Pantheon, or just hand them over to the Protectorate?" Minerva asked.

"No! No way! No fucking possible way are we letting them on the team," Eki insisted as she dropped down next to the rest of us. "They're a bunch of rapists and murderers and they torture people and animals for the fucking fun of it."

I looked toward Khepri. She shrugged, but at least answered. "Hookwolf might, at least, have a power we can use. But frankly, he's not worth it. Power isn't compatible with the changelings. And there's nothing he can do for us that we don't already have an answer, except using him to generate raw material. This chain seems to be steel, and there never seems to be enough iron to cover the projects that need it."

Aceso looked at me contemplatively. We'd let her join, in spite of her crimes. Bonesaw made these three, combined, look almost innocent.

And then there was Crystal, watching me just as expectantly. She was by far the most sweet and genuine person I knew. Polar opposite, I saw Minerva's smile that made it clear she wasn't going to help, and Skitter seemed far too interested in 'teaching me to be a leader'.

Do I set a precedent that only the useful monsters get a chance at redemption? Or do I let even the fucking Nazis join up? Or... do I do what we did to Coil? That thought churned my stomach.

There were no right answers. Anything I decided would make me a hypocrite or worse. Dammit. I sighed. "They fought against Leviathan. Risked their lives against a monster like that. It's... it's more than I've ever done. At the very least, we'll take them back and heal them. Keep them overnight. Try to talk to them before making a permanent decision."
"Khepri, Osiris, Eki," I addressed them. "Stay here and contact the police in about five minutes. If they ask, let them know we took Stormtiger, Hookwolf and Cricket back for healing and observation. We'll deal with this shit in the morning."

Congratulations, Amelia. Wasn't this avoidance shit what messed you up so badly in the first place?

A/N- God, I can't believe no one told me how badly I wrote this the first time. Much editing has died to bring you this chapter.
Chapter 27

Amelia, Ch 27

I didn't sleep much that night, spending it mostly staring at the ceiling. Patching up our captives was simple enough. I was impressed by how little and how much damage Aceso managed to inflict upon Cricket. Undoing the cuts were almost trivial, but she lost about a fifth of her blood supply. She'd recover, though she'd probably need to stay in the hospital for a while.

Hookwolf's body was bizarre. As a changer, that was no surprise. They always had strange rules to their physiology. I fixed him the best I could, the rest he'd have to deal with on his own.

All Stormtiger had were minor burns and bruising. He'd be fine without any help, but I fixed him anyway. They remained in their containment pods, their powers disabled by whatever our resident biotinker cooked up while they slept the night away in the perfect dream state that I put them in. If only it were so easy for me to get to sleep.

Riley, the actual girl instead of the puppet she used almost constantly, came into my room. I glanced over at the clock- just shy of 1am- Wordlessly, she climbed into my bed and cuddled up against me. I put my arm around her and let her go back to sleep. Not the first time I'd woken up with her in my bed, but the first time I was awake when it happened.

I watched her sleep. How could such an innocent face have such a monster behind it? Then again, wasn't that true of most of us? Taylor was a wonderful person, even if Skitter was one of the biggest bitches I had ever met in person. Even Lisa could be okay, if you could deal with her need to be the smartest person in the room. Then there was Respawn. I couldn't even think of him as 'Zach', he was too caught up in playing his persona that I hadn't seen the person beneath as I had the others. And, of course, myself. I didn't have issues. I had a subscription.

The only person I knew who didn't switch natures was Laserdream. Crystal was always the same, no matter what mask she was or was not wearing.

And that, of course, brought me back to thinking about Passengers. They came from somewhere. Some distant dimension of Earth, perhaps? An alien world? And they climbed inside our brains and made changes. Not just creating the Pollentia and Gemma, but modifying and actively manipulating our memory and emotion centers. Were they why parahumans were so fucked in the head? Or was it the reverse, and we got powers because we were already messed up? Did it matter?
I thought to the three nazis we had stored no more than a hundred feet from me. Yeah, it mattered. If they became monsters because of their powers, I could hardly blame them for it. If they were monsters and so they were given powers? Then quite the opposite. Either way, I knew I could blame the Passengers. Whichever answer was true, they were deliberately making the problems of the world worse.

Unfortunately, my powers were limited to lifeforms. Not extradimensional symbiotes. I could see them through their hosts, but I was unable to touch them. No surprise. We were safely inside our terrarium and they wanted to keep it that way.

So my thoughts went in loops all night.

Morning came for me far too early, though. I had just gotten to sleep, it seemed, when Riley was waking me up.

"C'mon, sis," she said pushing my shoulder. "It's already past ten. Everyone's waiting on you."

I looked at her- she was already wearing her control system for Clarice. "Fine, I'm up," I muttered. I stumbled to the bathroom. Yup, I wouldn't recognize myself without those bags under my eyes.

"You should let me give you some upgrades," Riley said as I started to wash my face. "It's not much, just a simple hormone regulator. Serotonin, insulin, a few dozen other things. You'll be able to wake up and go to bed in seconds!" She sounded so very much more chipper than I felt.

"Is that what you did to yourself?" I muttered.

"Yup, plus a hundred other things," she answered.

"So you think it's okay to just artificially change your emotions and biology?" I asked her.

"Of course," she answered. "Our bodies are nothing more than machines. People make such a big deal about it, but they're wrong. If you had a car, would you want it to run more poorly just because you didn't get enough sleep? Would it be okay if your coffee machine didn't work because you were bored? That'd be stupid. It's nothing more than what you do to yourself when you drink coffee, only a million times better and without the unnecessary addiction to caffeine."
"It's not exactly that simple," I answered. "Changing your body artificially just isn't something people are comfortable with. Especially when it comes to modifying brains and emotions."

"That's because people are dumb," Riley said with the clear logic of a child. "Our bodies are no different than your changelings. They're machines made of meat instead of metal. And if someone told you they weren't going to get their oil changed or their tires replaced because their car was 'too special', what would you think of them?"

I stopped. That really was a good point. "That doesn't apply to the mind, though," I answered. "Altering the brain means altering the person."

"That doesn't make sense," she insisted, following me but thankfully staying outside of my room as I changed. "If the mind is a special and sacred thing, wouldn't then choosing to alter your emotions and how your mind works is a good thing. It means you're taking control away from hormones and accidents of birth. Instead of letting nature control you, you control nature. Or the mind is nothing special at all, merely a bundle of nerves, and changing it is meaningless."

I paused, half in the middle of pulling on the pants I would be wearing today. Holy shit, she's right. I still didn't actually believe what she was saying. But from every logical angle I could find, she was right. Well, except a bit of one.

"Okay, but people can change vehicles if something goes wrong. Not so much with our brains or bodies. Finding someone you trust enough to alter fundamental parts of yourself is... scary. Like your computers. Let's pretend what you have now is the only computer you'll ever own, and you can't repair or reprogram it yourself. Wouldn't it be difficult to let someone else change it? Never knowing what they're doing, if they might do something bad inside it or break it on accident? Wouldn't you feel better just keeping it how it is instead of taking that kind of risk."

"So..." she said, with a whine in her voice. "You don't trust me?"

Fuck. My. Life.

At least I was dressed now. I went out to the hallway. "It... it's not like that," I said as I pulled her into a hug. Even though it was like that. "There are lots of levels of trust. And the more important something is, the harder it is to trust someone that much. This... there is nothing more important. I can't imagine ever trusting anyone that much."
"But..." she sobbed. Here I was, holding a sobbing Bonesaw. That really did put the recent events of my life into perspective. "We trust you that much."

... What? "What?"

"Your power. It's instant and no one would notice. Every time any of us touch you, we're trusting you not to rewrite us into whatever you desire. Trusting that you have't already done so."

Oh fucking hell. It's true. They did. They were. "You shouldn't," I said, choking on the words. "Victoria trusted me like that."

"That's what sisters do," Riley said. She squeezed tighter, with a certainty only a child could possess.

"And I violated that trust in the worst possible way," I whispered. "I don't deserve it."

"Too bad," Riley answered. "That's not how it works. But we have to go to work now."

"Yeah, I guess so," I agreed. As if I didn't have enough to think about already.

============

A/N- I still think this is one of my favorite early chapters.
By the time we'd made it to see the others I was... presentable, at least. Riley, of course, didn't follow, but Clarice was already in the room.

Taylor looked at me, but it was more like a formality than anything, she could sense me long before I entered the room. Even if our base was the most insect-free location in the city right now. Mainly because the walls ate them.

"So, finally decided to turn the Nazi trash over, right?" Crystal started. She didn't look like she'd slept well, either.

"No," I replied. That turned heads. "We offer everyone a second chance. If they don't take it, we'll wash our hands of them. But I founded this team on that promise, and I plan to stick to it."

"You're fucking kidding me," Crystal's eyes started to water. "You know the shit they've done!"

I knew. Oh god how I knew. I treated their victims often enough that I probably knew better than everyone in this room combined. "It... it's no worse than what I've done."

"Amy... you can't blame yourself for Victoria's death. Or anyone else's. No one's perfect and no one has that kind of foresight."

I laughed. It was short. It was painful. "Oh, what I'd give if that was the worst thing I'd done."

"What do you mean?" Crystal asked with slowly drawing horror.

"Umm... maybe we should save this conversation for later," Lisa interrupted.

"I... right after I ran away from home," I continued regardless. This needed said now. "Victoria found me. Tried to get me to come back. I... I was messed up for a lot of reasons. Afraid. Alone.
Afraid of being alone. I... I... when she touched me, I used my power. Forced her to love... to be in love with me."

Lisa and Clarice were the only two that didn't look shocked. Even Taylor looked a little green at that one. Good. I deserve it.

"Why would you do that?" Crystal said, but it was more like she was asking me NOT to explain it.

"Because I was, am, in love with her," I relented. I'm in too deep already, now isn't the time to back down. "And I knew she'd never feel the same. And I was weak and stupid and if I would die if that would take it back. I violated her on the most fundamental level, and she died hating me."

"Oh God, Ames..." Crystal whispered.

"Not quite true," Minerva interrupted. "We ran into her, when she was going to fight Crawler. She wanted to know if you were okay. She was worried about you."

"You don't have to lie to me. She'd never ask that. Especially not then. Especially not to you."

"True," Minerva replied. "She didn't say it, but when has that ever stopped me?"

"Well," Taylor added. "I don't know what Tattletale's power figured out. But... she's not lying about us running into them. I don't know what she and Glory Girl talked about... it was right after I killed Siberian. I wasn't in a good headspace." The look on her face said she still wasn't. Not really.

They met Glory Girl before she died... what...

"No," Minerva said, interrupting my thoughts. "I didn't know she would get killed. I didn't know they were going to drop those weapons. If I had, do you think I'd have let half my team be caught in the blast radius like that? And no. She didn't forgive you, not right then. But she would have, if she'd been given more time. You were still her sister."

I just looked away and studied the ground. "You really suck at trying to cheer people up."
"Actually, I'm pretty good at it," Minerva replied. "But the part where I'm trying to do it while actually telling the truth? Really ties my hands, y'know."

I looked at Crystal. "Yeah, so, I'm in no position to judge anyone," I concluded. "You're free to leave now. I won't even ask you to keep this a-"

She moved toward me and wrapped her arms around me. "Shut up, Ames," she mumbled. "One stupid mistake that you regret doesn't make you a bad person. And even if it did, it wouldn't put you close to Nazi levels."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Thanks, Crystal, that means a lot."

"Umm..." Crystal continued. "You haven't showered today, have you."

It wasn't a question.

"No, I was kinda distracted by a few other things," I answered.

"Yeah, I just want you to know that's why I'm ending the hug early. Not any other reason."

"No, I get it, it's fine," I said, letting Crystal disengage.

"So, is anyone else here having second thoughts about this?" I asked. "Knowing what I've done."

"I'm good," Respawn said with a smile. "Lotta people would do the same thing, and not regret it for a second. Of course, I'm immune to your power, so maybe I'm not the person to ask."

"I already knew, of course," Tattletale said.

"I had... some idea," Taylor replied. She still didn't look all that happy. "But, I'm guilty of helping use some form of mind control on three different people already."
Crystal's head snapped over to her.

"A child abusing supervillain with dangerous powers, a bloodthirsty psychopath parahuman who got off on torturing innocent teenage girls, and Shatterbird," Minerva stated quickly before she could speak. "And all temporary. It's not something to be taken lightly. Chances are that we'll just outright kill anyone else we find who deserves the same treatment. Speaking of which, shoulda left Hookwolf with the acid for another minute or so."

"No," I responded, my voice going hard. "We do NOT kill in cold blood. If it has to happen in battle, it has to happen. But when they're already down, we take them into custody. Now we are going to go talk to the fucking Nazis. And offer them a chance. Even if it's not going to be much of one."

=========

A/N- Ah, this one. This is one of my weaker early chapters for the deep emotional stuff. I see so many things I could have done better.
Chapter 29

Amelia, Ch 29

Our 'Containment Facility' wasn't much to look at. Basically just cocoons. Which they, of course, were stuck in. I tapped the wall, and they were hit with a counterdrug to what was keeping them asleep. They woke up in seconds.

"Good morning, skinheads!" Dammit, Respawn! No, wait, that was Minerva. Dammit Minerva!

Hookwolf recovered first, but they all were up remarkably quickly. Even Cricket, though she was still groggy. Blood loss would do that. I'd need to talk to Riley about that.

"Go fuck yourself, kike," Hookwolf muttered.

"Woo, you got it right this time." Minerva said in a complete deadpan voice. This was getting out of hand.

"Okay, enough of that, both of you," I stepped forward. "Minerva, either be quiet or find something that isn't directly counterproductive to do. Hookwolf, keep in mind that no one has any proof you were ever here, and no one likes you enough to look very hard. So you probably shouldn't antagonize us."

I eyed them. Cricket was too tired to do much more than attempt to concentrate. Damn, she'd need more time. Stormtiger met my gaze full on when I looked at him. "If you were gonna fucking kill us, you wouldn't have brought us here."

I shrugged. "Yeah, probably true. We can just hand you over to the Protectorate. You've got no one left to help you. Hookwolf over there has a one way ticket to the Cage. Dunno how long you'll be locked up for, either, but probably a while."

Cricket was well enough, or determined enough, to chime in. "Purity will get us out," she rasped. "You healed my throat?" she asked in surprise.
"Purity won't be a problem by the end of the day," I said with full confidence, ignoring Cricket's other question. "You think we were going to hit you without being ready for her, too?"

Hookwolf laughed. "You talk too much," he smiled. "Reminds me of Kaiser. That's what you're doin', right? Building your own little empire. Like bugbitch and the rest of her crew were trying to do?"

I shrugged. "Probably, but it's not your concern. What is your concern is what we do with you three. Pantheon follows its own set of rules. The whole hero versus villain bullshit is over. You're either trying to make this crapsack world better, or you're our enemy. It's that simple."

Cricket tried, at least, to laugh. "That means you'll be fighting the whole world."

"Says the Nazi," I smirked. "But I think you'd be surprised how quickly people will step up and do the right thing, when they see that it'll actually work. And we're going to make it work. Which brings us back to you."

I stepped out of my sandals and looked over to Clarice, who was manning one of the machines. "Honestly, your powers are basically useless to us, and you're PR nightmares to keep around, and frankly I just don't like any of you. So what I'm doing is fucking stupid and we all know it. But I'm offering you a second chance."

"Join you, or rot in a cell?" Stormtiger only half asked.

"More or less," I answered. "Mostly less. You're not strong enough to be on this team. The best you could hope for is... secondary positions. Rearguard. Aiding civilians. Stormtiger, you'd be cutting down Yggdrasil growths to make planks for construction. Cricket... eh, I guess we could use you as a combat instructor. Hookwolf... actually you we probably could use in the field, if you remember how to follow orders."

I shrugged. "Alternately, you promise to never use your powers to hurt people again, and to leave this city forever, and we'll just... forget we ever had you here. How's that sound?"

"Is that what you offered Victor and Othala?" Stormtiger asked.

... "What?" Well, that threw me off my game for a second.
"He thinks we captured the rest of his team," Minerva spoke up. "They vanished two? No, three? Three days ago."

"Oh," I answered. Immediately I felt stupid. "No, we had nothing to do with that."

"You're not lying," Cricket said with surprise.

"No, we're not," I insisted. I looked over at Clarice. I thought their powers were disabled. "If we find them, when we find them, we'll offer them the same deal we're offering you. One second chance, and only one. And an opportunity to work with us if you want it."

"Sounds like a deal," Hookwolf smiled. "You win, city's yours if you can keep it, job well done and you'll never see us again."

"And you'll cut the Nazi bullshit. And the dogfighting. And just generally being an unrepentant sack of shit." Respawn added. "All that's over now."

"Fine, all that, too," He agreed far too readily. "Now you gonna let us go?"

"What 'us'?” I asked. "That's the deal you took. You only speak for yourself. What Stormtiger and Cricket do is their own to decide. Besides, we have to keep Cricket for at least a few more days."

"Going back on your offer, already?" Stormtiger said with a growl.

"She lost a lot of blood," I replied. "A little more and she'd be dead. Even now, she'll probably die without constant medical care. Would you prefer we take her to a hospital? It'll have to be the PRT's, because there's no way we're leaving you with civilians."

He just glared at me.

"We'll see that she gets better," I continued. "And then let her make her choice. Forcing her to choose while she's still dependent upon us for medical care would be coercion. We don't use dirty
tactics like that. She can decide when she's recovered."

"No, you just force us to choose between you and a prison cell." Did this man ever say anything without snarling?

"We didn't force you to be criminals," Khepri responded. "Besides, speaking as one of the more successful criminal masterminds in the city... this is actually a pretty sweet gig. I get to do the same thing I was already doing, and the Protectorate has to watch and pretend they like it."

"Couldn't you heal her?" He continued, looking at me.

"Need raw materials," I answered. "I'm not like Crawler or Othala. I can't magic up flesh from nowhere. I can stitch together cuts without a problem, but if I replace her blood, the mass needs to come from somewhere. If she had some spare body fat, I could used that."

"Liar," Hookwolf spat. "I've sent bugbitch home with limbs missing, you patched her up just fine."

"Backups," I answered. True. Misleading, but true. "All of us have spare material stored around here for when we need it, other than Osiris and Eki. His power means he won't ever need it, and we haven't had a chance to set up for the new recruit."

"Told you that you're too skinny," Stormtiger muttered at his teammate. "Fuck it. I'm staying here, then."

"Joining the team?"

"No. Staying here," Stormtiger clarified. His voice was deeply condescending. "When Cricket's well enough, we'll be leaving together."

Behind me, laughter started. I recognized the voice. Fucking Tattletale. I looked over at her, and she ducked when a vine formed from the ceiling and tried to smack her. She was starting to get good at that 'combat intuition' thing.

"Okay, we can work with that," I relented. "She'll need to stay in the cocoon. We'll set up a cell for
you. We'll even give you privacy to chat with each other. Talk things out. In the meantime, we'll be
taking Hookwolf and leaving you here for a bit."

The pod Hookwolf was in ruptured, dropping him to the ground. He was still weak, and Clarice had
to haul him to his feet. She was the only one here with a changeling, so may as well let her handle
the heavy lifting. The door sealed shut and I let Stormtiger free.

"Are we really letting him go? You know they were lying their asses off, right?" Crystal asked. Her
hands were clenched into fists and shaking.

I smiled. "Oh, I know. Minerva, contact the PRT. We'll be handing Hookwolf over."

"You lying cunt!" Hookwolf yelled, struggling vainly to break Clarice's grip.

"I didn't lie at all," I said, letting the malice leak into my voice as I met his gaze. "I promised you a
second chance. And you wasted it by lying to me. Did you think we wouldn't find out? We had four
lie detectors pointing at you the whole time. I meant everything I said. All you had to do was mean it
when you swore you wouldn't go back to your life of crime. The only thing you were honest about
was leaving the city. You were going to run away with your tail between your legs, and then make
yourself someone else's problem. The Protectorate might even have let you. But we're not the
fucking Protectorate. We actually deal with problems."

"Don't play all moral with me, bitch," he continued to struggle. "You knew this would happen. You
wanted it to happen. You tricked us!"

"This is a war, Hookwolf," I shrugged. "And all war is deception," I tapped him and he fell
unconscious.

=============

A/N- Looking back at it, I think THIS is the chapter that really set the tone for the future of this story.
A couple of canon omakes:

"Extinction Events"

"No, we are NOT disabling powers, or messing with powers at all!" Tattletale insisted. "We'll use that poison Bonesaw cooked up for temporarily disabling parahumans. And we'll tell the PRT the truth. We're using stolen tinker tech. And even then, only in the most desperate of situations."

"Why not?" Riley whined.

"Because I like being alive," Lisa snapped back. "Taylor over there is already ranked as a Master/Thinker/Stranger and maybe Tinker. And she's only the second most absurd power on the team."

I felt a little embarrassed, actually. "I'm only a Striker."

"Correction," Lisa replied. "You WERE a Striker. Now you're at least a five in Master, Brute, Thinker and Tinker. And I would not be surprised if they labeled you as a Shaker fifteen."

"Fifteen!?" Taylor and I exclaimed at the same time.

"Fifteen." Lisa confirmed. "That stunt you played when you straight up 'noped' Bonesaw's plague?"

"My big sister is the best," Riley said with conviction.

"Yeah. That. You stopped a plague. In seconds. Across an entire city. Right now, Piggot is over
there trying to convince the rest of the PRT leaders that this is absolute proof you can kill every living thing in this city at once. And know what? She's right. It's true. You can. The next most powerful Shaker I can name is Labyrinth, and you make her look like a chump in terms of range, and are her equal or better in every other way."

"Fuck..." Taylor whispered. I nodded my head.

"If they got the idea that you could expand the Yggdrasil further than just this city, and again you can, then 15 is a low estimate of what you could do," Lisa continued. "You are entirely capable of being a one woman apocalypse. And the way you upgraded Taylor's range, giving her the same kind of power, would qualify you as a Trump 5 all on its own..."

Lisa paused for a full minute, staring blankly in front of her. "Holy shit. I'm in a room having a conversation with three extinction level events. What did I do to deserve this?"

"I can think of a few things," I answered dryly. "So, back to the power removal. Why?"

"Because you do not want to fight someone who has nothing left to lose. That knows they're dead if they lose. And being able to remove powers... to most of us, that's as good as death. Worse than death. We have a drug that's hard to administer and is temporary. We do not have a way to steal powers away from their 'rightful owners'. The former makes us scary. The latter makes us the enemy of every parahuman on the planet."

I nodded. "Okay. No power removal."

=============

This Omake is from Slayer Anderson:

"The Four Horsemen"

Lisa sighed, content that the current battle was won. "Okay, if we've decided not to become the threat for every single parahuman to obliterate the world over, I've got work to do. The PRT and Protectorate are going to be handling the announcements about Jack Slash, Bonesaw, and Siberian, so I want a lead on any useful intel before it hits the net. If you need me, I'll peeking on Miss Piggy and half-assed hero brigade."

Riley blinked, cocking her head, "You can hack the PRT?"

Lisa snorted, "Like that's any achievement. Their encryption is shit, their passwords are simple, and
their IT department is gullible as hell."

"Language!"

Taylor shrugged at Amy's disbelieving stare. "Lisa did it all the time back when we were with the Undersiders."

Amelia shook her head, "That's not how these things work, Lisa. My mo...Carol, I mean, did some work investigating alleged fraud, hacking, and stuff like that against the PRT. All of it was 'alleged' because they were villains talking crap to get some street cred. If you're telling the truth? You're probably one of the only parahumans who have actually gotten that kind of information off their system."

Lisa shook her head, "It wasn't any more difficult than some of the work Coil had me do in ferreting out corporate secrets."

Riley stared, "...you know, I usually had to get inside someone's head, literally, to get the PRT's secrets? They have some serious thinker and tinker support on government payroll...there's no way you could do it that easily."

Lisa smirked and, within five minutes, the group was gathered around Lisa’s old laptop (rather than the new one made by Riley, which they'd agreed would give an unfair advantage to the test), watching Weld take a tinker-tech power-sander to his fingernails. The blonde thinker leaned back, resting her hands on her head with a proud expression on her face, "See? I might not be one of the harbingers of the apocalypse like you three, but I can do my part, thank you very much!"

Amelia rubbed at her eyes, "Lisa...about that...you just admitted that you can casually hack one of the most well-funded, powerful, and well-defended government agencies on the planet. As a purely hypothetical question...what's to stop you from using your Sherlock BS on the nuclear launch codes of...anywhere?"

Lisa blinked, freezing in place where she had begun to stretch languidly. "I-"

"Oh!" Riley grinned, suddenly excited. "Do you think you could find the NBC storage sites the government uses? They always keep the best chemicals and things in there! Please? I'll give you a painkiller implant for your headaches!"

Taylor's face wore a look of consideration. "You know, you might want to consider getting some blackmail on the mayor...you know, if we can't manage to convince him to help us. Maybe we could start digging up dirt on other people too? I mean, just as a precaution of course! If someone tries railroading us, we could dump it on the internet and get them kicked out of office or whatever!"

Lisa twitched, then slowly settled into her seat, moving to rest her head in her hands. "This is how it starts, isn’t it? Sure, picking up blackmail on some scumbag politicians sounds awesome now, but before I know it, you're going to be convincing me to dismantle governments or wipe out Ellisburg with a nuke, aren't you? I can actually hear you, Taylor, telling me it would only be a 'little bomb,' right now, in my head. Do you understand how frightening that is?"

Amelia seemed entirely too amused as she grinned. "Well, it's not like you're in bad company after all. You said it yourself, we're all apocalypses waiting to happen."

Lisa sagged.
Riley cocked her head. "Is...it too late to change our name?"

Lisa's head snapped up. "No. Just no! No way!"

Riley pouted, "But it would be perfect! Taylor could have the pale one, Amelia's would be black...would you want the red or the white one? I mean, my powers are a pretty good fit for either, I guess, but I think you'd do better on the red one. Big sister is always going on about how you start fights and stuff! Jack never let me have a pony anyway, it'd be perfect!"

Lisa could only gape.

In a flash of insight, Amelia understood. "We are not calling ourselves the Four Horsemen!"

================

A/N- Slayer Anderson is awesome and a source of great additional ideas in this story.

Chapter End Notes

Some Omakes that the Author liked well enough to make canon. I'll make sure the authors are credited in each case. This also marks the point where the original chapters won't line up with their chapter here, I'll eventually go back and fix that (also marking who the narrator for each chapter is) later but for now I'm just spamming ctrl+c and ctrl+v
Hookwolf was still unconscious by the time the PRT and our reporters showed up. He still had burn marks from last night. I felt it better to leave evidence of the battle, and that we had to heal him. Wouldn't really make a difference. This was Hookwolf, nobody inclined to feel sympathy for him would be considered fit to sit on a jury to begin with.

We were all, finally, in costume. Eki finally had hers. It was, thanks to a combination of spider silk and Riley's mesh weave, nearly indestructible and capable of withstanding almost anything that wouldn't level a building. And still very much alive, with stealth tech coming from cells based on cuttlefish, and some cybernetics provided by Riley granting it very passable invisibility. Its default coloration was yellow for the head and shoulders, changing into green for much of her torso, and blue for her legs. Obvious 'sun' motif.

It also had a number of systems that the rest of us desperately wished we could fit into the changelings, but we had no way to work in a big enough power system. Gauntlets capable of delivering multiple settings of electrical shock, as well as an extremely high intensity EMP. A flash system that she could use to blind anyone looking toward her. And were were looking at a mini railgun upgrade at some point. All powered by Crystal's lasers. It also came with a battlestaff, designed to stick to the back of the costume when not in use, and able to better extend the range of her electrical attack

Vickory made it first, impressively enough. There was another guy there with him, instead of that cute camera girl Minerva felt the need to describe to me in great detail. Oh well, I would survive.

The camera was up and I was ready for my first time in front of the camera that didn't involve reading from a script or hiding behind my f- New wave. "Stan Vickory, of channel twelve news, talking with Gaea," he pointed the microphone at me. "How does capturing one of the most notorious members of Empire Eighty Eight feel? It is your first serious conflict since founding the team, is it not?"

"It is," I confirmed. Even if it wasn't major at all, and was in fact pretty easy. "But this isn't really my victory to claim. We were giving our less experienced members and new recruits a chance to work in the field. So we could see what they were capable of and where they needed improvement."

"Excuse me for being presumptuous," Vickory said. "Did you mean to imply fighting Hookwolf was... practice? And three of your junior members beat him?"
"Oh, no," I answered with what was probably too smug a smile. "Hookwolf's remaining team was a practice run. Osiris took down Hookwolf all by himself. You'd know him better as Respawn."

He raised his hand and waved. "Told you this was the team to be on!" He bragged. Respawn's costume was currently white, meant to sort of resemble mummy wrappings. It was also alive, and had the same stealth mode as Crystal's outfit. But the power constraints were pretty high, so he was limited to about ten minutes. His namesake ability was the only thing that kept it viable. Once out of power, he'd simply reset it to full power.

"Yes, I do recall you saying something to that effect," Vickory agreed.

"Aceso handled Cricket," Clarice stepped forward. She wasn't wearing a mask, making her one of the half on the team that did not. But the whole 'Clarice' body was a mask. She, too, waved at the camera, although not as enthusiastically as Respawn.

"Last, but certainly not least, Eki," Crystal stepped forward. "Our newest member." Also, with exception to Bonesaw, the one with the most combat experience.

"Good to meet you, miss," Stan said with an easy smile. They'd met before, of course, but when Crystal was Laserdream. "The others have been kind enough to explain or demonstrate their abilities earlier, would you care to do the same?"

"Energy generation," Crystal replied easily. "Light and electricity. Can do EMPs if I need to. Few other things I'd rather keep in reserve. It doesn't pay to let the bad guys know everything you can do." She held up her hand and let electricity dance across her fingers. "I would demonstrate, but camera equipment is pretty sensitive, and I wouldn't want to accidentally damage anything."

"I think I speak for our accountants when I thank you for your consideration," Vickory said with a chuckle.

And now the PRT was finally arriving. Choosing to ignore the "do not drive on the plants" warning signs we had planted near the roads. Miss Militia stepped out of the vehicle. A number of armed PRT men came out as well.

"He's been sedated," I told her as they collected Hookwolf. He only had clothes on because Respawn donated a pair of boxers. "He should recover in twelve to fourteen hours. We had to use
anti-brute techniques and he was hurt pretty badly. I have no idea how long it will take before his power recovers, probably several days."

"Thank you for the status report," Miss Militia said politely. The look on her face told me she wasn't happy to see the news crew.

"Miss Militia," Vickory said, moving up toward the new leader of the local Protectorate. "What do you think about how easily Pantheon apprehended one of the most dangerous parahumans in the city?" The implied question was, of course, 'why couldn't you do it?'

She regarded him, and then us. "I think I'm more interested to learn why they're turning over Hookwolf, and none of the others. Police reports indicate they captured multiple E88 parahumans." Well played.

Minerva spoke up. "Cricket was badly injured. Gaea was able to save her, but she's still weak. Stormtiger wishes to stay with his injured companion."

"What of the others? You're not planning to keep them for your team, are you?" Miss Militia asked. Did they spend last night discussing this?

"There were no others with them," I answered. "We're under the impression they may have joined Purity's faction. Cricket can barely maintain consciousness more than a few minutes. She is in no position to be moved. Even if she were, Lung's escape from your custody does not inspire my confidence, and that was before. Now you are even more woefully understaffed. Our facilities are ready to deal with almost anything. Yours are not."

"Yet you'd let us hold Hookwolf?"

"He's unconscious and his powers are exhausted," I said with a deadpan voice. "He'll be lucky to be able to go to the bathroom on his own for the next couple days. You should be able to handle that, I hope. He should be in Dragon's custody by the time he recovers."

"You're not recognized law enforcement," she responded. "You aren't authorized..."

"Except that we are," Minerva replied. "We got permission from BBPD."
"That's PRT jurisdiction..."

"Traditionally, yes," Minerva continued. "But legal custody belongs to whomever does the arrest. And that would be the civilian police, in this case. In fact, we should probably just ask you for Dragon's number. The Protectorate's performance in Brockton Bay has been woefully inadequate for years. Is it any surprise to you that local law enforcement and civilians alike are putting their faith in the people who spend their time actually fixing problems and getting results. As opposed to a Protectorate that napalms a city block and then follows it up with tinker weapons that hit their own people?"

"They sacrificed their lives to stop Crawler and the rest of the Nine!" Miss Militia's voice raised. Nerve struck. Point: Tattletale.

"Correction," Minerva retorted. "You sacrificed their lives. I'm sure they'd have been quite content to go on living. But you were too pig headed and proud and fucking glory obsessed to accept help from us when you needed it and we offered. And because of that, lives were lost. Some of them your friends. Some of them mine. The difference between us is that you keep working for the people who ordered their murders."

She took a breath, it was almost theatrically deep. "You've proven you can't save this city. So shut up, get out of our way, and watch as we do it for you."

Holy shit, Lisa.

The two women held their stare down.

I looked over at Vickory. Who wisely chose to say nothing and let everyone forget he was here. Cameras were definitely still rolling. Khepri stepped forward, between Minerva and Miss Militia. "Okay, Minerva, you've made your point. You can chew out the Protectorate later. We have more important things to worry about right now."

Lisa broke eye contact with Miss Militia, to look at Taylor. "You're right," she agreed. She turned to walk away, briskly passing by the news crew. Miss Militia turned a moment later, and strode toward the vehicle that would be taking Hookwolf away. For the moment, at least, the prisoners beneath our feet were both secure, and forgotten.
I heard Tattletale mumble as she passed Vickory. "Feel free to air any amount of that. Speculate. Full story will come out soon enough."

==============

A/N- I still love this chapter.
"Purity lives in a nice part of town, and has family with her," Taylor explained as we sat in our planning room. Or, as we usually refered to it, the dining room. "She won't want to fight there, or anywhere nearby. We'll find her there, and offer her a chance to take the fight to the boat graveyard, or any other abandoned part of town. And give her the option to retreat immediately or surrender."

"Which she won't accept under any circumstance except taking her infant daughter hostage," Lisa replied.

"We won't?" Crystal tried to say it like a statement, but it came out a question. A hope.

"No. We will not," I confirmed.

....

We approached Purity's hideout, which was a nice penthouse apartment in the wealthy part of town. It couldn't be more polar opposite of Hookwolf's run down warehouse. How has she not been caught, already? I wondered.

Eki carried me to the window of Purity's apartment. She was there, out of costume. Along with a pasty, somewhat overweight boy around my age. A little brother? Far to old to be her son, certainly. The kid spotted us, though even with changeling hearing I couldn't make out what he said. The glass must have been soundproofed or something. It didn't look especially new, so it probably survived Shatterbird as well. Purity was up and instantly covered in a nimbus of light. I simply tapped on the window.

"If she attacks, just drop me and fall back," I instructed Crystal. "One changeling isn't going to make the difference in this fight. You're our heavy hitter. We can't beat Purity without you, unless we want to demolish half the city."

The window opened. "What do you want."

"Just here to talk for the moment," I answered.
She glanced back toward the room the boy had retreated to. I could hear him muttering nonsense sounds, and the whimpers of a very young child. "The roof, I'll be there in five minutes."

I agreed, and Eki lifted me up the couple stories that were required to get us there.

....

"If she tries to run, I'll track her," Taylor stated.

"She won't," Lisa added. "She thinks she can take us in a fight."

....

True to her word, Purity arrived in five minutes. Although she'd came from an angle that wouldn't appear to have come from her apartment.

"Okay, I'm here, now talk," she insisted impatiently. "I'm already pissed that you had the gall to show up at my home."

"Your identity is already public," I replied dismissively. "Just like mine."

"Yeah, Amy Dallon, moderately famous healer cum city overlord in the making," she muttered.

"I go by my birth name, now," I replied. "Amelia Lavere."

"Lavere..." she chewed the name over for a minute. "Holy fuck, you're Marquis' daughter!"

"So you knew my father?"

She laughed. "God, I'm not THAT old. But Allfather and Kaiser had less than fond memories. Apparently he thought he was god's gift to women, and a lot of them agreed. I wouldn't be surprised
at all to find out you have a dozen or so half siblings out there."

'She's trying to put you off your footing. Like Miss Militia did. Stay on track.' Lisa's spoke up from where our actual selves were sitting. I had a weakness for getting distracted by the unimportant things, as she had pointed out a few times.

"I'll keep that in mind," I answered dryly. I would, too. That was kind of a doozy, all considered. "Right now, we have to talk about us. Or, specifically, you being in my city."

"I was here first."

"You are also a problem. Giving you a chance to get into costume was a courtesy. If you are willing to surrender, we can talk about you joining Pantheon. Or you can leave the city, permanently, and we'll simply watch you go. If you'd rather fight us, we can do that too. Even give you a chance to contact the rest of your people. That last one, we have to ask you something in return."

"The first two aren't happening," she said with a cold voice. "What 'favor' do you expect for the third?"

"That we take the fight somewhere else. Away from your home. Away from everyone else's homes. I don't want to hurt anyone's children just to bring you in."

She hesitated. "I can live with that. But how do I know you haven't trapped the abandoned areas?"

I shrugged. "Honestly, you don't, and there's nothing I can say to prove it. But we didn't. You're powerful, so is the rest of your team. Beating you with cheap tricks just invites others to think we're too weak to fight fair. But if we take you in a fair fight..."

"So it's a rep thing, huh?" Purity smirked. "Half the Slaughterhouse Nine wasn't enough for you?"

"Some people think it's a fluke. Beginner's luck. A specific power that countered theirs. Whatever." I explained. "After all, you're still here ready to fight us. If our rep was that good, you'd have jumped on our offer to let you run."
"So taking us on is just to prove a point?" She didn't sound impressed.

"No. It's to get the rest of the fucking Nazis out of my home," my voice was ice. I had to remember to praise Riley for doing such an impressive job with her upgrades. These changelings conveyed my emotions better than I could with my own body. "Doing it with a fair fight? That is us proving a point."

"Rest of?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. Hookwolf and pals are done," I confirmed. "Even if someone does break them out, they'll never dare return to this city."

She frowned. "I see."

"That surrender is still on the table," I offered.
We arrived at the graveyard more or less at the same time as Purity's gang. Night and Fog had driven there and beat us, taking position. Crusader came alongside Purity. He didn't seem too keen on this idea. He was ready to fight, but us picking a battlefield like this didn't sit well with him.

"So, the hell are we getting out of this if we win?" He glared at me.

"You won't," I answered. "But what you get out of it is us not attacking you while you're asleep in your beds. Which is something we could have done. Now feel free to go pick a spot. We'll be ready for you in a minute or so."

"Pick a spot? This isn't a game of tag, girl."

"No, no it's not," I agreed.

Purity simply took off, toward the ocean. We were true to our word and gave them one minute, exactly.

....

"We split into three teams," Taylor instructed. "Eki, you focus on Purity. She's your only priority. Keep in the air. I'll blanket the sky so she can't snipe at us, and you keep up the pressure so she can't get in close."

"Osiris, Aceso, Gaea," She continued. "You fight Night and Fog. I'll be providing backup."

"You mean the zergling?" Respawn piped in.

"... Yes," Taylor sighed. "We're testing the zergling."

"And I'll deal with Crusader," she concluded. "My combat units, like his, are somewhat more disposable than the changelings."
"Isn't Minerva joining in?" I asked.

"Nope," she answered. "I'm on Com duty alone for this one. We outnumber them five to four even like this. This has to be a, quote, 'fair fight', or it proves absolutely nothing."

....

The sky turned dark as it was flooded with insects. All the disposable kinds. It would be two years before the city's mosquito population fully recovered. Truly, my heart wept for the evil little bastards. I switched over to the 'Dryad' model when we arrived. We needed the offensive power.

And next to me, the abomination that Respawn tried so hard to get us to make. Its brain, based mainly off a series of jumping or grass spiders. It's body, yes, was far more catlike than anything.

Taylor led us to the spot they had chosen. It wasn't much to look at, just a rusted out hull that had been washed ashore by Leviathan. Lots of places to hide, none of which mattered.

....

"Night and Fog. They count as one. Night turns into a kind of clawed abomination as long as no one's looking at her. And Fog turns into a deadly acidic miasma. Thanks to my efforts that have earned nothing but complaints from my friends," she glared at me and Lisa. "We have a rough estimate of Night's physical strength. In addition, we know that we can't use remote viewing to keep her in human state. You'll be fighting a Brute 4 that seems to have durability on par with Alexandria or Siberian. You can't hurt her, you probably can't outrun her. We'll have to beat her with a trap."

....

They struck first. A flashbang that meant nothing to us went off. It blinded and deafened us only for as long as it took for the grenade itself to detonate. Our changelings may have superhuman senses to spare, but our display interface had maximums on its brightness and volume.

A chaotic, clawed nightmare rushed toward us, faster than any of the changelings could move. It looked like Hookwolf, if the chains were instead made of teeth. Aceso jumped on my arm and pulled
herself to safety, and our zergling collided with the monster, locking claws with claws and fangs with fangs in a ball of struggling spiked death. The zergling quickly lost the fight as Night cut through every joint she could reach. But, then, it wasn't suppose to win. It was suppose to distract.

I punched her as hard as I could, sending her sprawling back several feet. I was surprised to note the inch deep gashes she left in my suit. She was up in a half second.

She pounced on the armor. And that's when we had Respawn open his eyes. Night, suddenly in her human state, was exposed to a powerful sedative that was on the skin of the armor, and immediately rendered unconscious.

I held Night's unconscious form up, just to make it clear we had her. Didn't need her husband/partner throwing any other explosives at us. It didn't matter, most likely, as he started flooding over us.

The Dryad started to wilt at the edges, as he did his level best to melt through it and either kill me, or rescue Night. Probably both.

Then the air burst into flames.

....

"Fog's mine," Clarice said cheerfully. "He's not actually acidic. He's alkaline," she clarified as if we knew what the difference meant. "All I have to do is use an acidic counter chemical and 'boom'."

"There's a pretty good chance that will kill him," Lisa informed us.

"Breakers tend to heal when they revert," Clarice responded. "He'll be fine. Probably. Maybe."

"I've had to heal his victims," I answered. "I'm not saying I want to kill him. But if we have to choose between that and letting him go? We do not let him go." I regretted those words the moment I'd said them. But not enough to take them back.

....
Fog dropped to the ground, hard. Much of his skin was missing. "Clarice?"

"On it, sis," she said, hopping down off my shoulder. She'd have to handle saving Fog. If, indeed, he could be saved. That kind of damage... the shock trauma alone could be fatal. I gave an order that killed someone. I was stunned to silence at the thought. If he dies. It was me who did it.

And then I was brought out of it by screaming.

I turned around to the source of the noise. Eki was on the ground, curled up in a ball and struggling to catch her breath, still in costume. Osiris was kneeling next to her, holding her hair. "It's okay, it's okay. The pain's gone now."

'What happened?' I muttered, to be heard by Minerva.

'Purity got her,' was the reply. 'Bad. Almost cut her in half. Respawn had to restore her. Good thing we put all that effort into making that armor link up."

'Fuck,' I muttered.

I was already moving toward Crystal. She was finally sitting up, gasping. "Does... does dying always hurt like that?" She asked him.

He smiled and shrugged. "Some worse than others," he answered. "You got one of the really bad ones."

She wobbled as she got to her feet. "It... I know it's fixed, but I still feel it," she muttered.

"It's okay," I said. I wanted to put my hand on her to comfort her, but this armor wasn't exactly safe to touch anyone. "The fight's basically over, you can sit this out."

"Fuck no," she growled. "She just tried to kill me."
She grabbed the battlestaff and bolted straight up again, heading straight toward Purity. She was half blinded by bugs and trying to reach Crusader. And then Purity was struck by lightning.

Or. Rather. She was hit with everything Eki's staff could output at once. It really was comparable to a lightning bolt. A massive amount of electric charge struck the woman, and immediately jumped upward into the sky, absorbed by the slight charge held by clouds.

"Kayden!" I heard Crusader shout. A couple of his summons charged away to catch her as she fell. The ones which had up until then been shielding him from the mostly annoyance bugs that Khepri had been using. Mosquitoes and flies, other bugs like that. None of the spiders or deadly species. They coated him completely. Funny. My cousin had been trying to teach my partner the concept of 'holding back', and it's her who uses the outright deadly attack.

I abandoned the Dryad for my much more mobile Changeling. After all, this fight was, for every intent that mattered, over.

The insects formed a globe, with us and Crusader inside. "Get out of my fucking way!" Crusader screamed. His skin was so irritated by the insect bites that, ironically enough, it would be hard to guess his natural skin color. He had to be in a lot of pain.

"No," the swarm muttered. I couldn't help but shiver. Skitter's swarm-talk spoke to a very primal part of my brain. I don't know where in human evolution we acquired the fear of being eaten by a swarm of bugs. But we did. And when Skitter spoke like this, that part of me screamed to run. Though my real body was miles away from them right now. "She needs treatment. If you take her, she'll die before you can get help."

He looked at us. Then at the mass of bugs. Then at Kayden, who I finally got a good look at, myself. Much of her hair had burned off. She had ugly looking black lines burnt through her right arm and leg. That was what passed for a good sign- less likely that it hit the heart, that way.

An Yggdrasil vine pushed its way out of the bay, forming a pod. "Put her in there," I instructed. "It'll stabilize her until we can fix her properly."

Crusader hesitated for a moment, but finally moved, taking Purity and putting her in the pod.

=========

A/N- This was the first fight scene I was really happy with. The others I liked just fine (especially
Zach's banter with Hookwolf), but this one I just loved how the fight went.
I frowned. Seems I did a lot of that. Lately it had grown into an act of will against the events going on in front of me. As if, by showing enough disapproval, the universe would change, and I would not be watching this.

"And yet you keep working for the people who ordered their murders," Minerva provoked my head of the Protectorate.

"What does Pantheon believe they know about the actions of the Protectorate in recent months?" Stan Vickory spoke in his smooth, well trained style. "It is clear that this contention revolves around the recent conflict with the Slaughterhouse Nine. Most probably, Director Piggot's choice to deploy a weapon rumored to have been created by the 'mad bomber' Bakuda."

I continued to frown. As if some liberal media jackass has the right to judge what I've done. What I've sacrificed. While he goes along contributing nothing of value to the world.

Meanwhile, they cut to scenes of Crawler, converted to crystal and then defaced, first by Panacea-no, Gaea- and then later by civilians. It was becoming something of a tradition to come by and to smash off a chip of the monster, or hurl refuse, or spray paint profanities and similar epithets. A way to vent frustrations in this trying time. In theory, it was illegal to do so. Defacement of a corpse, possibly other statutes, but no one would enforce that law. Even some law enforcement had taken to the practice. I had to admit, it sounded cathartic. I might even have to try it myself, some day.

"Minerva implied that the villains offered an alliance to fight together against the Nine," he continued. "While that may sound unusual, it is well known that heroes and villains put aside their differences to deal with more significant threats, such as Endbringers. And we have footage showing both Undersiders and E-88 members working to fight the Nine on multiple occasions. Which begs the question: where were the heroes?"

Not going off and making matters worse, that's where they were, Stan.

True enough, they had footage. It was shaky at best, camera phones probably, but Purity, Hookwolf, Grue, and Hellhound's dogs were unmistakable. They were far too distinctive to be mistaken. I had to wonder where the cameras came from, given Shatterbird's attack. One of those mysteries that would never be answered.

Miss Militia arrived. "You wanted to see me, Director."
I sighed, and tore my eyes away from the disaster on screen. It wasn't the first time I'd watched it. Wasn't even the fifth.

Miss Militia had, too. "I'm sorry ma'am, I messed up."

I sighed. "No, you didn't."

"Ma'am?"

I did like that. Miss Militia was good at following orders. Better than Armsmaster, certainly. But it paid to let your underlings know that you were smarter than them. As long as it didn't look like that's what you were doing, of course. This was a conversation I needed to have with her.

"To start with," I said. "This is not a defeat."

Miss Militia's eyebrow rose.

"You made a lot of strong points. Backed Gaea into a corner, without making it obvious that you were doing so. Your points were strong, her rebuttals were weak. Amateurish. And the cameras saw that. Maybe channel twelve isn't going to pounce on it. But other stations will. Their goal of trying to 'reform' super villains will mean every recruit they acquire will be viewed with heavy scrutiny. They'll either face media backlash, or they'll have to drop this whole practice. And with it, lose a lot of potential allies."

I studiously ignored one particular elephant in the room. The Protectorate made a habit of recruiting former villains as well. Assault was one such example. He had worked out... adequately, at least. Miss Militia was savvy enough to not mention it, either.

"Minerva destroyed me," she said after a moment.

"Yes," I agreed. No sense in sugar coating things. "Minerva knew you were winning. She jumped in to deflect attention. I'll grant you, she succeeded, but she had to use her best weapon to do it."
"I see," Miss Militia agreed. I didn't know for sure if she truly did or not. But that didn't matter. I continued speaking.

"More importantly, she used it too early. If she had waited for a more opportune time, she could have done a lot of damage," I paused. "A lot more damage, I should clarify. Instead, we know what she's alluding to, and we can have our teams put together a response. When they choose to go public with everything, we'll have a rebuttal already in place. It's merely a question of waiting for them to act, or dealing with it preemptively. Either choice has its merits. Ones I'll be discussing it at length with my advisors and the other Directors."

Ad nauseum, I thought to myself. This kind of PR disaster would get national attention.

"Is it true, ma'am?" Miss Militia asked. "Did we reject the villains help in dealing with the Nine?"

"Yes, but not in the way you're thinking or they implied," I answered. "I specifically warned them not to interfere, that we had plans of our own, and that they should stay out of our way. That going after the Nine would put them, and the city, in unnecessary danger. I even had Legend repeat that same message to them, less than an hour before the bombs were used on Crawler and Mannequin. They chose not to listen, and their deaths are a result of that decision."

Miss Militia nodded. "I understand, ma'am."

Through it all, the news report had continued. It was nearing its climax. "You've proven you can't save this city. So shut up, get out of our way, and watch as we do it for you," Minerva's rant closed.

The video was footage of the fight between Pantheon, and The Pure. Specifically, when Purity was struck from the sky. I frowned again. Purity is a major coup for them. She was a top tier blaster, and with her on their team, they could remove the Protectorate by force if they wanted to. This, and I hadn't believed it possible, is actually worse than Lung and Kaiser.

I sighed. "I've got a great deal of work to do, and a teleconference tonight," I informed Miss Militia. "I trust you can handle the affairs of the Protectorate and Wards for the rest of the afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll see myself out." She stood and left quickly.

Christ. You'd think that, with every villain group in the city gone, things would quiet down around
here. I set aside some time and reviewed the notes on Pantheon, specifically Gaea herself. I made the necessary annotations, with references and analysis from my people. I wished I had a tinker or thinker on the team to put on the task of figuring just how impressive Bonesaw's plague, and Panacea's quick response, had been.

Losing Armsmaster had been devastating. All we had left was Kid Win and Chariot. They showed a bit of promise, but comparatively speaking they were nothing to the former leader of the Protectorate ENE. Still, I had enough. I filed for the clearance to recognize Pantheon as a Class S threat.

In an hour, I was ready. The screens came on, putting me in conversation with Chief Director Costa-Brown, as well as a number of other local directors.

"Good afternoon, Director," Costa-Brown opened.

"Chief Director," I acknowledged.

=========

A/N- Wow. My writing style has evolve a lot since this chapter. Almost a completely different writer. Still love this chapter.
"Coil's been compromised," Number Man stated in his usual, inscrutably calm manner.

We glanced at Contessa. Her power was certain he'd succeed. "Endbringer," she answered. That one word did explain everything. Eidolon was there, as was Scion. Three of Contessa's blind spots, any of which could have altered fates in a way to bring this about. We'd never know how, of course, but we could explain the why.

Dammit, I thought. "Heroes got him?" It was the most reasonable guess.

"After a fashion," Number Man responded.

Sometimes, I hated that man.

"It seems a new group of heroes has formed in Brockton Bay, calling itself 'Pantheon'," Number Man informed us.

"That's pretentious," Eidolon chimed in.

"Quite," Number Man agreed. "The more interesting part is that they seem to be continuing Coil's project. They didn't remove him, they subsumed him." Well, that's both fortuitous and troubling.

"I... see," Doctor Mother replied. "Contessa, would you mind running your power with the goal of Pantheon succeeding in establishing a parahuman feudal state? Both with and without our assistance in the matter." Coil didn't need our help, let's see what the new team...

"Two thousand, three hundred and twelve steps," Contessa stated. "Approximately 300 less with our assistance. They'll be done in less than two years, either way."

I hid my surprise. Eidolon and Doctor Mother were a little less composed. Number Man, of course, never showed any emotion he didn't want to.
"That's... significantly faster than Coil, even by the best estimate," Doctor Mother spoke up.

"Coil was always extremely, perhaps overly, cautious," Number Man speculated. "This new group seems to be comprised mainly of younger people. The leaders are teenagers. Panacea and Skitter, both using new monikers. It is no surprise they are more aggressive in their goals."

Panacea? The mousy healer? Huh. Skitter came as no surprise. She had ambition, drive, natural talent, and exactly the right attitude. Reminded me a lot of my younger self. But Panacea? There is a story in there that I wish to know.

"Seems our best interest, then, is allowing them to continue doing exactly what they're doing," Doctor Mother concluded. I agreed completely.

"Actually, that brings us to the next problem," Number Man replied. "It seems Faultline's group has found a number of leads that might come back to us. Aforementioned Pantheon appears to be providing them with funding and assistance on the subject. Normally, we could just send a message to the mercenaries not to continue..."

"But doing so would provoke Pantheon," I supplied. "And Skitter, at least, is not one to back down from a fight. We can counter them, but in the process we damage our experiment."

"So, even when we win, we lose," Doctor Mother concluded. "Seems we'll have to take a different approach."

"How about we give them what they want?" Eidolon suggested. "Not really, of course, but a suitably convincing decoy that answers enough of their questions. Draw their attention and sate their curiosity."

It was easy to forget, sometimes, that behind his unremarkable appearance and continent breaking powers, David was a smart man.

Number Man nodded. "Yes, that would be an elegant solution," he agreed. "We'll need to get some psychological profiles on both Faultline's crew, and Pantheon, but that shouldn't be too difficult. Contessa, your help would also be appreciated."

"Moving on," Doctor Mother said. "A couple of our agents in the King's Men..."
I sat, listening while still in thought. My perceptive powers, which I named myself for, could easily handle both. Meanwhile, I was reading the reports from Brockton Bay. My civilian identity would need to address the Pantheon situation, one way or another.

....

I reviewed Piggot's latest update to her rough estimates of Pantheon's power levels. Her estimate of Eki seemed a bit high. Osiris. That is a really useful defensive power, to be certain, but had little offensive potential. Khepri and Gaea... were absurd. If these numbers were to be believed, either one of them could solo the Triumvirate. Granted, Khepri had killed Siberian, but she had done so by learning and exploiting a weakness.

If we had known that Siberian was a projection... I might still have my eye. I would need to talk to David about using Thinker powers more often. Good intel was often more valuable than any amount of raw power, and Khepri proved it.

I simultaneously reviewed the psych profiles on the Directors that'd be present.

Piggot, of course. Nilbog incident. Paranoia and a bigot, both. She was zealous in her actions. I'd need to use that zealotry against her.

Tagg. Another of the more pushy members. He and Piggot often sided together on issues. That would make this harder. I'd need to find some way to divide them, or at least put them at odds with all the others.

Armstrong. He was more inclined to moderation. His focus was on understanding parahumans. Both scientifically and psychologically. Him, I could use.

Gutierrez. She was one of those women who joined the military when it was still very much an 'all boys club'. Twenty years senior to almost anyone else at the table. She almost had my job. Would have, if not for Cauldron's wealth and connections. Sometimes I even felt bad about that. But, my mission was more important than her career.

Niles. So deep in Cauldron's pocket that he was almost a member. He probably had a script handcrafted by Number Man that he memorized instead of studying Piggot's report. He wasn't a competent director. Our help in funnelling a couple of our powerful debtors into the Protectorate under his
command is the only reason Florida was still standing, and he knew it.

I could work with this group. Turning them against Piggot and Tagg would be easy. Turning Tagg and Piggot against one another, that would prove more difficult.

Five minutes ahead of schedule, my paperwork in front of me, but already memorized, I started the video conference.

"Good afternoon, Director," I said. My tone was carefully neutral. The others might feel slighted as they weren't addressed. If they were savvy, they'd know this was a sign of displeasure. If they weren't, they'd figure out by the end of this that they should be glad my attention was elsewhere.

"Chief Director," Piggot responded back. Her tone equally neutral. She has no idea what is about to happen.
I idly checked my armor's control HUD. Good, the power drain is optimal, and the data is being recorded. Normally, the Director's office would be the most secure room in an already absurdly secure building, but that wasn't such a problem for me. Coil had given me access to a lot information. Enough to let me create prototypes that would emulate Trickster's power at a much greater range than he ever could, as well as a spy camera that was emulating the same quantum trickery that Skitter did to control her bugs 'telepathically'.

"Hey, Trevor," Missy said as I entered the main room.

I smiled at her. "Up for some exercises?" I asked. I found Vista's power fascinating. My tinker specialty was movement, and her power altered space itself. The possibilities were endless, if a little difficult to achieve.

Missy tried to keep a professional demeanor, moreso than most of the adults did. She'd been a Ward longer than any other two, possibly three, members of the team combined. Even now, weeks later, it was basically impossible to get the girl to smile. I knew Gallant's death had a lot to do with it, but I wasn't able to draw her out of her shell enough to really understand.

"Sure," she agreed. "We have at least a few hours before patrol."

"Not that patrols are all that necessary," I said with a smile. "Now that Pantheon's doing their thing."

Part of Coil's orders. I was to gather as much intel as I could on the wards' opinions of the new group. He didn't tell me why he was so interested. And there were too many possibilities for me to guess which one. Not that it mattered, as long as he kept paying me.

By the time I graduated from the Wards, I'd have a first rate education and a nice little trust fund. Coil would ensure that my mother had enough money that she and my little brother would never want for anything for the rest of their lives. It really was a sweet deal for everyone.

"No, I guess not," Missy's mood darkened, even more. "But it won't matter."

"Oh, why not?" I asked. Part job, part genuine curiosity.
"Because something will stop them," she said with finality. "That's how the world works. They have potential."

She said the word like it was a profanity. "I don't get what you mean," I replied, trying to sound professionally interested instead of personally.

"Whenever someone has enough potential," she elaborated. "The world finds a way to hammer them back down again. Like Dauntless. A power that started so weak, but never ever stopped growing? That was potential, too. Or Armsmaster. One of the best tinkers in the world. Killed by another of the best tinkers in the world. Who was driven insane by the death of his family. Every time someone gets too strong, or is too likely to actually make things better? Every time someone gives us a reason to hope. They come along and destroy everything."

I didn't have to ask who 'They' meant. Fucking Endbringers. She broke down. I hesitated, before putting my hand on her shoulder. I felt awkward.

"Pantheon's no different," Missy whimpered. "You'll see."

-----

I watched the camera. Technically, this was violating any number of laws, state and federal. International, as well, as I was not a US citizen. I was prevented from doing what I was doing by a total of fifteen of my inhibitor protocols. Fortunately, in this case, I had a loophole. Chariot's camera. It was remarkable, I couldn't tap its signal at all. Some kind of quantum technology that I'd love to purchase. It would allow me to communicate to my suits at FTL speeds, from almost anywhere on the planet, with almost no power drain, and no risk of interception.

But, even if I couldn't hack the camera, I could hack his armor. Spying upon a criminal double agent was well within my legal jurisdiction. As long as I'd filed the proper requests and paperwork, of course. Richter didn't stop to realize that most people don't analyze paperwork all that thoroughly. And my reputation was such that I could file a thousand pages of request forms, and they'd all be approved. Especially when it was one of over seven hundred warrants to surveil confirmed associates of known supervillains, such as in this case. I suspected, though never bothered to confirm, that they simply hired a judge to do nothing but stamp my requests each day. With full legal authority and in the interest of observing a criminal in the act of espionage, I watched.

-----
"I see no reason to worry about formalities," Costa-Brown spoke up. Hostile, establishing dominance by disrupting standard protocol.

"I concur," Piggot responded, and moments later agreements were muttered from the screen. Four additional voices, other Directors.

"We've all seen the news feed, of course," Costa-Brown continued.

"Yes," Piggot replied. "It was the emotional outburst of a teenager. The media may be taking it at face value, but I assure you it has no basis in fact. I can prove as much, easily, with records and recordings showing that I insisted the PRT had a strategy for dealing with the Slaughterhouse Nine. One which, ultimately, proved successful in killing both Mannaquin and Crawler, and could also just as easily have dealt with any and all other extant members of the Nine. Acknowledging a possible exception for Siberian. Legend is a witness, and even delivered one of my warnings to the villains to stay away. They told him, and I apologize for the profanity, 'go fuck yourself'."

I frowned. She probably does, at that.

"Fair enough," Costa-Brown acknowledged. "I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't request a copy of that evidence."

"Naturally," Piggot agreed easily. "I'll have it sent to you shortly after this meeting concludes."

Telling the truth, has data and believes her own story. The Chief Director disagrees. No, is certain Piggot is right. Has lie detector technology? Chief Director believes it won't matter. Intends sabotage?

"Now, let us discuss your... suggested update... to Pantheon's ratings," The Chief Director continued. There was a nervous chuckle amongst the other Directors. Read report, considers it absurd.

"I am aware it sounds outlandish," Piggot replied smoothly. "However, I have substantial evidence to believe each upgrade is not only warranted, but may be an understatement."

"I must admit, I'm intrigued to hear this," another woman's voice said. Older woman, career military, cynical attitude.
"Shall we start with the... least objectionable and move our way forward?" Costa-Brown asked. There were no objections.

"Everything seems to be in order with Osiris' rating as a Breaker 4. If anything, that may be a bit high. Shaker and Striker four alongside Trump six and Mover three?"

"Yes. Osiris is also capable of restoring objects, as we saw in his news debut. He has recently demonstrated the ability to touch a door and teleport it off its own hinges." Piggot confirmed. "Recently, we discovered he can do the same thing with people. Their newest member, Eki, was wounded fatally in the recent conflict with Purity. She was immediately teleported to touch range of Osiris, and her injury was restored. Much as he claimed he could restore spent bullets to their default state."

How did they learn so quickly? Surveillance? Intel from active source, probably Parahuman. Well, that doesn't help narrow it down.


"He's a shaker/striker with no Manton limit, and as long as he's on the field, he grants functional immortality to his allies," another voice added. "I believe Director Piggot is fully justified in this upgrade." Dislikes parahumans, is jealous but also respects Piggot. Desires her position?

"I concur," Costa-Brown agreed. "His personal power isn't too impressive, so we'll drop Shaker and Striker to 1. But his ability to restore injured or possibly dead parahumans is a significant force multiplier. As he can teleport others, but not himself, the Mover rating is nonviable. Wouldn't achieve anything except to confuse our own troops on the field. Granting teleportation to allies fits under the 'trump' label."


"Eki, their new recruit, upgrades?"

"Upgrading her blaster status from five to eight? Upgrading from shaker two to six?" The Chief Director asked.

"She is shown to have electromagnetic manipulation, now. She could easily disrupt any electronics within a five block radius with the power used to attack Purity. As well, she gravely injured Purity."

"Purity has no defensive powers," Costa-Brown pointed out. "She can be 'gravely injured' by a handgun. If anything, a lightning strike is of less power than Laserdream's current rating of five. The shaker rating, split the difference and rate it at four. Let our men know they can't rely on electronics if they must engage her. There's no sense in frightening them by suggesting she has destructive AoE that she doesn't have." Dismissive comment, less subtle attack of Piggot's position.

"And now, for the big two. It seems like you've given the pair of them at least five or six in every category, and some truly outlandish ones atop that. Is Khepri truly deserving of Master 8, alongside Shaker 6, Blaster 7, Thinker 8, and Stranger 5?"

"She is capable of controlling massive amounts of arthropods, gathering them into masses large enough to block out the sun and blind or attack everything in her control radius simultaneously. She has enough fine awareness to distinguish between enemy and ally. All without even being present on the battlefield. In addition, there's a huge variety of poisonous insects and arachnids. She could easily kill every non-brute in her range, simultaneously.

Tagg whistled appreciatively. "That is an incredibly versatile power."

"Indeed," Costa-Brown agreed. "Still, there is a limit to what mere insects can accomplish. In addition, her insect senses are tactile only. You have an argument on the Shaker power. We should probably remove her Master rating entirely, as it's misleading. 'Insects' aren't so much animals being controlled, as they are part of the environment being manipulated. Upgrade her to Shaker seven, downgrade Master and Thinker to one. Her only theoretical stranger power is the ability to track her bugs, as she demonstrated on Leviathan. And tracking is a Thinker subcategory. She can't render herself undetected, except by blacking out vision with her bugs. Part of her Shaker power." Master carries worse connotations than Shaker. Costa Brown is adjusting our numbers to be more palatable. Protecting us. Ally?


"Very well," Piggot muttered. "Reclassifying Khepri as a shaker, with low master and thinker
"And last, but certainly not least, Gaea," Costa-Brown moved on. "In the interest of organization, we'll do this one at a time. Shaker 15? Honestly?"

"Her Yggdrasil extends throughout the entire city of Brockton Bay. If she has contact with any part of it, she has absolute control of all of it. She can alter its chemical properties to produce anything she desires. Leaving out all other potential uses, she could flood the entire city with some deadly bioweapon that would end all life in Brockton Bay almost instantly."

"A bit melodramatic, don't you think?" Costa Brown said dryly. "She uses her power to keep damaged waste disposal lines functional, provides housing and building supplies, and produces food for refugees."


"One of Bonesaw's plagues," Armstrong supplied. "Yes, I read every detail of those reports."

"Director," Costa Brown responded. "If we take this... suggestion... to heart. It means we should surrender and abandon Brockton Bay like we've abandoned Ellisburg. Nothing, not even a bombardment of nuclear weapons, is a possible counter for 'Shaker 15'."

"Ma'am, are you seriously suggesting we simply abandon Brockton Bay?" Tagg said in shock.

"No, of course not," Costa Brown responded. LIE!

The Chief Director sighed. "But that would be the only valid course of action if a Shaker of that magnitude had claimed an area. Therefor, as we intend to keep a Protectorate presence.’ Does NOT intend to keep presence. "In the region. We clearly must not be dealing with a Shaker of that level."

"I... I understand, Chief Director," Piggot responded. She did not sound happy.
"Moving on. Master 10?" Costa Brown didn't bother hiding her incredulity at that position.

The others muttered. "Yes," Piggot replied. Angry. Hiding it well. But angry. "In addition to her control over her Yggdrasil, she has made both monstrous animals, and humanoid duplicates." Pause. Picture evidence being transferred. "These constructs are significantly superior to a natural life form of equivalent size. The humanoids, even, are at least brute 3 in capacity. Her constructs are a loose equivalent to Nilbog's, and coupled with the Yggdrasil's sheer supply of mass for her to shape them from. It earns her a Class S status."

"Even so," Costa Brown responded. "They are botanical in nature. Unable to reproduce or function independently. In addition, Nilbog may be Class S, but he's still only a Master 8."

"Gaea has an ability that Nilbog does not," Piggot countered. "She can take control over minds, via her striker power." Lying. Correction: is accurate, knows it, has no evidence to back her claims.

"Director Piggot," Costa-Brown responded coldly. "Need I remind you that Panacea's inability to influence brains and brain chemistry is well documented and has been verified by multiple Thinkers and Tinkers over the years."

"She healed her father," Piggot stated. "From injuries inflicted during the Endbringer battle."

"We have records showing these injuries were both incurable and to the brain? We know it was Panacea who healed him? As opposed to the hiring or bartering with of one of the healers lacking Panacea's restrictions?"

"No, on all counts," Piggot relented. "But it fits with Gaea being able to quickly and easily recruit a number of villain and independent capes in the moments surrounding her establishment of Pantheon."

"I've read the psych profiles on Skitter and Tattletale," Costa Brown replied. "It appears that they were doing, functionally, the same thing with the Undersiders as they are with Pantheon. Establishing territory. Establishing good will with the civilians within that territory. Showing up on television as often as possible. And actively humiliating the local Protectorate whenever possible. That's not mind control. It's smart recruitment practices." Humiliating 'local' Protectorate. Deliberate word choice. Implying Piggot was humiliated and has a personal vendetta. Destroying credibility.

"Master 5 is the most we can assign until we see evidence of monsters with superior abilities to

"She has constructed life forms of numerous descriptions," Piggot answered. "In addition, she kept all of Bonesaw's notes and paraphernalia. Aside what the girl kept inside herself."

"Six is in line with what Blasto is capable of," Armstrong agreed. "This seems a valid classification."

"Point," Costa-Brown agreed. "Stranger?"

"She can construct bodies. Or perform cosmetic alterations on her allies," Piggot responded. "She could make one of her agents look like one of ours and get them into sensitive locations. Or alter dangerous criminals so they couldn't be visually identified."

"Relatively low end stuff, for Stranger abilities. And would require prep time that makes it nonviable in combat. Two is a reasonable classification. Enough to enact the code confirmation protocols."

Piggot nodded.

"And last... Trump seven?"

"Gaea has shown the ability to modify the powers of others," Piggot stated. True, but operating on false assumptions. "Skitter's range during the Endbringer battle was demonstrated-"

"Careful, Director," Costa-Brown said with a cold voice. "Collecting tactical information to use against participants of an Endbringer battle is a career ending decision. Remember Armsmaster." Didn't need to mention Armsmaster, other examples to pick from. Chose to use a name that would upset Piggot.

"Understood, ma'am," Piggot responded. "Skitter's range has been demonstrated at well over a mile, after allying herself with Gaea. It was less than a half mile beforehand."

"Possibly a second trigger," Costa-Brown dismissed. "Given the loss of her friends at the hands of
the Nine, this seems possible. Or, more likely, her range has improved with practice and age. It's quite common." Lie. Knows it was the PRT responsible for Undersiders. Choosing to remind Piggot without stating outright.

"In addition, the alterations to Laserdream's powerset when she joined their team."

"Biotechnological," Armstrong responded. "Had my guys look at her, immediately after she was shown on video. The suit she wears is alive. Crystal Pelham's demonstrated laser powers are being used to charge the equipment."

"I see," the older woman spoke up. "Yes, we've used a similar technique here. Although in our case it's to power a tinker forcefield that otherwise spends its time mounted on a tank."

"Efficient and elegant," Armstrong agreed.

"Fascinating," Costa-Brown replied. "There's no Trump rating to be found here. Although that does imply their equipment is more versatile than initially thought. We'll upgrade Gaea to a Tinker Seven. Note that all Pantheon members might have low to moderate level tinker equipment during engagements." Unrequested concession to Piggot. Trying to hide bias. Believes she has successfully established her case, now trying to avoid burning bridges with her own people more than necessary.

"And last," she replied. "Your request for preauthorized classification of Gaea as a Class S threat? It's summarily denied. Class S isn't just about capability, it is about intent. Amy Dallon, as Panacea or as Gaea, has never taken a hostile action against civilians or heroes. If anything, her main flaw is being too nice. Were I to authorize this, solely based upon an unconfirmed estimate of her capabilities, we would be opening an unacceptable floodgate. Dragon and Eidolon would both immediately qualify for a similar status. Possibly the rest of the Triumvirate, as well as the many of the most capable parahumans we have. This is not a path I want to lead us down, Director."

"Chief Director," Piggot interrupted. "Dragon and Eidolon have shown time and time again that they are reliable and trustworthy."

"So, I remind you, has Panacea," Costa-Brown added. "Clearly, her performance up until now has been woefully inadequate compared to her capabilities, but it is nothing short of exemplary in terms of trust, discretion and selflessness."

"Understood, ma'am," Piggot muttered.
"I do believe that concludes this meeting," Costa-Brown stated. "Consider yourself under strict orders to show Pantheon the utmost respect. They are heroes and deserve to be treated as such. If you find something that challenges that assumption, report it to me immediately and we'll change our stance. But not before then."

Well, fuck, this changes everything.

------

I would have frowned, if I could. I studied the readings that my lie detectors and social dynamic program models drew for me from the readings. It was obvious to my instruments that the Chief Director was playing a deeper game than mere 'office politics'. Although there was too little data to draw any valid conclusions.

I shut down the recording and deleted all record of receiving it. Now, it existed only in my organic memory. I was not acting on illegally acquired data. I was operating on an anonymous tip. Even if the tipster was myself.

I immediately programmed and sent out a dozen different snooper programs meant to acquire all possible information about Chief Director Rebecca Costa-Brown. They would be absurdly thorough, even if they could only acquire information I was legally entitled to. All data would be documented as public record, and therefore be valid and admissible in a court of law. Whatever the Chief Director was involved in, it would not stay hidden for long.

"Colin," I said.

"Yes?"

"I think it may be time for you to offer your apologies to Skitter."

==============

A/N- Almost as fun to rewrite as it was to write in the first place. And writing it was awesome.
"Nice find, Vic," the men around me chuckled. I cringed at the name. Fucking Hookwolf. Couldn't let me go by my middle or last names. And since there was already 'Victor the E88 cape', I couldn't be called Victor, either. So now I'm 'Vic'. Whatever, the benefits were worth it. More than. It was my perfect place to be in life.

E88 wasn't really my first choice of careers. I raised fighting dogs. I was damn good at it. Good money, too. As long as my mutts kept winning, which they did. Most people in the biz seem to think you're okay just to take someone's housepet, slap it around a bit, make it kill a chihuahua or two, and it's ready to be put in the pit. Not hardly. But I didn't put a lot of effort into dissuading them of that. Worse they were, better I looked. A good place to be in life.

It earned me a kind of 'membership' in E88. I wasn't part of the gang, didn't have to do the skinhead bullshit at all. It was just known that Hookwolf always bet on my animals, even gave me a little extra as a thank you. And if you fucked with me, that meant you fucked with him. In many ways, it gave me more influence in E88 than most of its own members. Long as I didn't ask for too much, or make waves with the capes, and kept delivering the winning animals, I was set for life. Hookwolf liked money, he liked winning, and I was even willing to bet he liked me a little.

Then fucking Leviathan happened. Kaiser got himself dead. The Empire split in half. I wasn't exactly the 'type' to fit in with his snobby bitch ex wife, so that left me going with Fenrir's Chosen. Which would have been fine. But the Empire needs soldiers. I couldn't stay on the sidelines, because we needed manpower.

We? Yeah, pretty much. Never mind the permanent tan of my Italian heritage, I was 'white enough'. Whatever. Still a good place to be in life. Not as good as before, but you learn to roll with the punches, and you can find yourself in a better place than others who weren't so smart.

So here I was, with Victor, haha, very funny, folks, completing my final test. Wasn't the first time I'd killed. You don't live as long as I do in any kind of illegal gambling without getting in your share of fights, and some folks get stupid enough to pull a weapon.

This would be my first straight up cold blooded murder, however.

See, that was the final act. The one thing that made you part of E88 forever. The part that kept undercover cops out of the organization. You had to kill one of the 'impure' races. In full view of at least one of E88's capes. It was damned elegant as far as solutions went. Good place to be, with people who were smart.
Tricky part was finding one. Breaking into houses wasn't a smart thing to do, too many things could go wrong. Sure, the whole 'capes' thing changed the rules on that a bit, but they weren't here to help. They were here to watch. Just like all the unpowered guys around me. Most anyone was gonna do is shout encouragement and keep an eye out for the cops.

Not that there would be any cops. Not here, not this far into the north end of the city. The perfect place for what I needed to do. It's all about that in life. Being at the right place, at the right time.

The woman, a black whore, screamed. I punched her in the face hard enough that she stumbled back into the alley wall. She pulled a knife from... somewhere... I don't know where she managed to hide the thing. She wasn't exactly wearing a lot of clothing. Oh well, at least now I'd feel a little better about this, and the guys would respect me a little better if they saw me fight. Things working out for me.

Not that it was much of a fight. She was quick and mean, but I was smarter, bigger, and meaner. Being sober helped, too. Couple blows and she was down. I settled on her, my knee on the arm I didn't break. Nice set of tits on the bitch. I allowed myself a feel.

"Dammit, man, if you were gonna fuck her first, you coulda made sure there was enough for the rest of the class," one of the men commented. Earning chuckles from the others. Not the first time some of them had done that. But, no. Didn't have a rubber. And as a professional gambler, I was pretty good at deciding when it just wasn't worth the risk. Drugged out older prostitute, especially in this part of town? Those odds were not in my favor.

And then I was blind. And alone. Couldn't hear, couldn't see. A boot hit me. Turns out I could still feel just fine, as I was lifted off the ground and sent rolling away. Big. Bigger than a human foot had any right to wear. Probably steel toed, too, the way my side felt. Half my ribs were busted, I was sure. All kinds of internal shit, probably. I wasn't going anywhere. Fuck.

A few muffled gunshots went off. Then more. Here on the ground, I could see as the rest of the gang started dropping. Bleeding out. Headshots. Every last one of them.

The darkness faded away, giving me a pretty good view of the scene. A man in biker leathers and helmet, fully clothed and standing at least eight or nine feet tall.

"Nice evening, ain't it, Victor?" For a second, I thought he was talking to me. But no, of course not. His attention was on the E88 cape.
"Who the fuck are you?" the other Victor demanded.

"The man who knows where your wife is," he answered smoothly.

"Where is she you nigger fuck?" Victor yelled. How did he know he was? Oh, right, powers bullshit. Like the giant before me.

"She misses you, by the way. You should visit more often."

"Cut the shit talk," Victor pulled a gun. He unloaded the clip at the man. Who took it all without flinching.

"Her powers are really convenient, too."

"She'd never use her powers to help you."

"Yeah. She said that, too. I didn't give her a whole lot of choice."

"Doesn't matter," he snarled. "Her invulnerability has flaws and I know every one of them. I can still break you and make you take me to her."

"Oh, good, I was truly hoping you'd say that."

Victor was good. DAMN good. Insanely good. That was his power, after all. Every martial art. Every combat skill. Anything he felt valuable enough to steal from others. I was one of the fortunate ones. So good that I was of direct value to E88's operations. Not good enough that Victor felt the need to have my skills. Raising dogs wasn't exactly useful for what he did. It was, in every way, the perfect place to be. Except tonight. Tonight was very much not a place I wanted to be.

So I was shocked when the giant was almost his equal. They fought in the ankle deep, to him, black mist. Victor got in more blows, but it didn't really matter when a single hit was bone shattering. The giant's first connection sent him flying back ten feet. He rolled with it, and even got to his feet,
though I was surprised by that.

"Here, let's make this a little more fair," the giant rumbled. Victor took a deep breath.

"Othala's power? How the fuck are you using it?"

"Trade secret. Now, up for round two?"

"Fuck you," Victor muttered, and charged back into the fight. He was slower, less capable. The giant was better and faster. Not just than Victor, but better than himself a minute or so ago. When Victor dropped this time, and it didn't take nearly as long, he stayed down.

"I think my point has been made," the giant stated as he stood above Victor's broken body.

He shrank down to a human size and walked over to the prostitute I was supposed to kill. "C'mon, miss, let's get you... MOM!?"

Well, don't that just fucking beat all? I'd probably have picked better last thoughts, but I didn't have time, as the man enlarged again and in one long step, his oversized boot came down on my skull.
"I don't feel comfortable with this, Tattletale," I insisted.

"It'll be fine. None of them are three-strikers anyway. They're not like Hookwolf."

"This involves trusting Nazis," I countered.

"To act in their own self interests," she corrected.

"If you like this idea so much, why didn't you mention it to Crystal and Respawn?"

"Because Respawn is Respawn," she responded. I couldn't argue with that point. "And Crystal's too caught up in black and white morality. Which is almost funny considering the situation. Besides, this is hardly the worst secret you're keeping." She looked toward Clarice for a second.

"If this bites us on the ass..."

"It won't. The worst outcome still doesn't hurt us any. The best helps us a lot."

I extended my power into the Yggrassil and opened our way into the 'prison. It was filling up rather nicely. Purity, Crusader and Night. The former spent her time in a pod, laying in the cell next to the one containing Cricket and Stormtiger. We put Crusader and Night in separate cells. We might end up having to expand the facility at this rate.

"How ya holding up, boss?" Stormtiger asked Purity after we had her awake.

"Now I'm your boss?" She rasped. The damage to her insides had been pretty brutal. Cost her a lung, alongside damage to most of the right side of her body, top to bottom. Equivalent of three or four lightning strikes simultaneously. By all rights, she should already be dead. Unlike with Cricket, there was no possibility of her truly recovering naturally.

"Well, Hookwolf's gone, so whatever factional beef we had is done," Stormtiger said easily, leaning
against the wall.

"No," I said, interrupting their conversation. "Empire Eighty Eight is over."

"The Gesellschaft will send us backup. Send assassins after you." Night insisted.

I glanced over at Minerva. "She believes it," was the reply. "It's not at all true, but she believes it."

"Fuck if it isn't!" Crusader, this time.

"Be honest with yourselves," Minerva continued. "If you were getting help, it would be here already. Kaiser was their golden boy. At least in this region. After his death? Well. Maybe, and it's a big maybe, if you hadn't had your little civil war, we'd be talking shop. But they aren't going to risk sending good parahumans after bad. The cause has abandoned you. Live with it."

I looked over at Night. I couldn't help but feel sympathy for her. Her husband, for however many years... I killed him. My orders killed him. He didn't survive the shock of having his chemistry forcefully rewritten. Bonesaw... how long has it been since I thought of her as Bonesaw? Might even have been able to bring him back. Unlikely, and not without side effects. But no, it was kinder not to try.

"I'm sorry for your husband," I told her.

She looked at me with hate and... there was no sense of loss in her eyes. She simply shrugged. Wow. The fuck?

"Indoctrinated," Minerva answered before I asked the question. "It's what they do. How they produce the number of capes they do. Breeding programs between capes. Training camps. Constant brainwashing. Think of it as Heartbreaker, only industrialized. They start with them as toddlers and put them through every hell they can think of. One in, maybe, twenty, actually gets powers. Less than one in three survive."

"That... there are no words for how messed up that is..." I muttered.
"Wasteful, too," Clarice chimed in. "It encourages breaker and brute types. The least useful and least interesting kinds of powers. Total waste of effort."

"Aren't you a brute?" Stormtiger pointed out.

"Nope!" Clarice responded cheerfully. "I'm a thinker, plus a few less interesting fringe benefits."

It was only the three of us here. The living lie detectors. The medical team. The others had other things to take care of. Taylor and Crystal were off talking to their respective parents. Crystal hadn't told her mother about her side job... and Taylor hadn't told her father about her powers at all yet. I didn't understand them, sometimes. They had families, I had nothing. At least they were going to see them, now, but I'd be happy to have a mother or father, at all, to talk to. And they... well, it didn't help to dwell.

I also didn't want to dwell on Respawn's comment for why he wasn't showing up. Something about 'cape groupies'. Nope. Dwelling wasn't a thing I wanted today.

"That's twisted," I muttered, still thinking on how little a family I had. And how Night never had one at all. If my life had been like hers... would I be that dead inside? That hollow? I didn't have a lot of good memories, and all of them were of Victoria. But compared to the 'nothing' that Night had? My life was heaven.

"So, this the part where you try and sell us on joining the team again?" Stormtiger challenged.

"Unfortunately, no," Minerva answered. "Thanks to a certain incident with the press."

AKA: Miss Militia handed me my ass on camera.

"All offers of membership are revoked," I informed them. "Probably better that way. None of your powers are all that useful to us to begin with."

"Oh, fuck you, bitch," Crusader muttered. "You only took me down because I surrendered so my team could get healed."
"Same here," Stormtiger challenged. "How about you let us go so we can try for a rematch?"

"Really?" Minerva laughed. "I know you're both doing the whole macho thing because the girls you want to bone are watching from the ICU... but let's be honest. We held back. We held back a whole fucking lot. None of you got swarmed with wasps. None of you were hit with deadly attacks except Hookwolf, who we knew could take it. And Fog, which we had no choice about. To say nothing of our real secret weapons. The ones we're holding back in case of an actual emergency. You're second tier and we all know it."

"And you, thinker bitch?" Crusader challenged. "You think you could take me?"

"In an actual fight? No," Minerva smirked. "As you said, I'm a thinker. My whole function is to make sure I don't need to get into fights with, as Clarice put it, less interesting capes."

"Thought so," Crusader said, clearly feeling he got the upper hand in the exchange.

"Still, we might be able to work out some other kind of deal," I stated. This was our little song and dance. "We have bigger fish to fry than you. Much bigger."

"What, planning to use us against the Endbringers?"

"No," I responded. "Rest assured, we are planning for the Endbringers. They take up a full half of our days, every day. When the next attack comes, you'll see what we're really capable of. But, as Minerva and Aceso so kindly pointed out to you: your powers aren't good enough. We can do better, ourselves, without the risks and the PR disasters and the fact that you're psychotic Nazi assholes. You have nothing to offer that we want."

"You don't need to talk down to us like we're subhuman," Crusader glared at me.

I was stunned speechless. Did he really just...? It was Minerva who put voice to my thoughts. "The fact that you could say that. Without any irony at all. Is both hilarious, and disgusting."

I sighed. "You really are dead set on making me regret this offer. But I'm making it anyway. How would all of you like a 'get out of jail free' card?"
A/N - Man. There is so much stuff foreshadowed in this chapter. Stuff I didn't get around to 'till 63 and beyond. No, seriously. When I get around to 63, I'll link back to this chapter and be all 'told you so'.
This time, it was Assault that had showed to pick up our prisoners, and I was glad to be rid of them.

"I thought Purity would have taken longer," he said, not taking his eyes off one of the most powerful blasters on the planet as she was loaded into one of the vehicles.

"The blast was a lot more flash than it was function," I replied. Not entirely a lie. Lightning, including the artificial variant used during that attack, isn't nearly as lethal as people imagine it to be. A healthy adult has far better than a 90% chance of survival, even from a direct hit.

"Anything we should look out for?" He asked.

"I had to boost up Purity and Cricket's metabolism," I answered. "They'll need about twice the usual calories or it risks causing serious damage. Same treatment I gave you that one time."

"Oh, yeah, I remember," he said happily. "I felt like I was sixteen again. Never did get a chance to thank you for that. Battery thanks you as well."

"What? Why would she..." And then I figured it out. I covered my face to hide the blush. "Nevermind. I get it."

"Good," he laughed. "I was afraid with all the time you spent in the hospital, and now Pantheon, that you were completely oblivious."

"Nope," I muttered. "Speaking of, I need to go back to work."

"You need to relax more," he said. "All work and no play makes you into Piggot. Go out on a date. I have a nephew around your age. Takes after his uncle's roguish good looks."

What? Really? "I think I'll have to pass." I deadpanned.

He shrugged. "Well, if that's not your style, Battery's got a younger sister..."
Oh. God. Why? "You do realize that I can fuse your mouth shut, right? I'm sure Battery would thank me."

"For a while, anyway," he agreed. "Well, you kids have fun. Relax. Throw a party. I'm surprised you're not getting a parade in your honor at this point."

"Streets are too trashed to get any floats going through," I snarked.

"Good, at least you still have a sense of humor."

"I do," I answered. You don't survive around Lisa and Respawn without one. "Now we just have to get one for you."

"Owww!" He grabbed at his chest. "You wound me deeply." He walked off, still chuckling. I admit, he even got me to crack a smile.

....

"So, what's the next course of action?" I asked, after going back inside to where the others had gathered. Our 'office' was starting to come together. It took a while to perfect the Yggdrasil to growing fixtures that looked like high quality oak furniture. But it truly paid off. Also, the seats. Oh god. They looked all stately and dignified. But they were like the most comfortable of beanbag chairs to sit in. It's amazing any of us ever walked at all.

"We've established ourselves and earned one hell of a rep," Minerva responded. "Now? We don't do anything."

"What." That was Taylor. It wasn't a question.

"The smartest plan, right now, is to let everyone get used to us," she replied. "So we sit back, relax, and let things get back to 'normal' before pushing any further. We're already testing our luck."
"Not just that," I said, agreeing with Minerva. A break does sound nice. "We have the Endbringer fights to prepare for. A dozen or so of those Ultralisks..."

"Hell yes!" Respawn interrupted.

"...and we'll probably be able to fight Behemoth to a standstill."

"Do we have the raw materials?" Clarice asked.

"No... we can build two right now. Maybe another two in the near future. We need more metals than we're getting."

"The boat graveyard," Taylor offered, a little bashful in the request. I knew it was a sore spot for her, though I didn't know why. "A lot of it's rusted out, but there's a lot of metal and no one's going to complain if it goes missing."

"Could work," I agreed. "I'll have to mod a version that can tolerate salt water for long periods of time."

"I'll contact the Mayor's office," Minerva replied. "Get official permission. Ask him if he wants to make a media event of it."

"Do... do you think we can get the ferry opened at the same time?" Taylor seemed... timid, even? Embarrassed to ask?

"Yeah, I think we can do that. A whole 'public works' thing. This town could use a feeling of progress, and old wounds being healed."

"Ooh, write that one down!" Respawn offered. "Sounds like something a politician would put into a speech."

We sat there for a minute, then Clarice spoke up. "Since we don't have anything big happening... maybe we should go on a recruitment spree? I have an idea for how to fix Noelle. And if it works, it'll give us an edge with the whole 'zerg army' thing."
Minerva spoke up. "You're talking about Blasto, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah. His tech is..." she looked toward me. "I'm sorry, sis, but his specialty is cloning and creating hybrid organisms. We could use him for a lot of things. And it won't take away from your other work, and it'll be faster than having you do it or make Yggdrasil pods to do it."

I sighed. "No, I get it. I'm only one person. And no, we will not be using Blasto to change that."

"Aww," Clarice pouted. "But..."

"No!" I repeated. "No clones of anybody. No creating people. Any people. I don't care how 'useful' it might be, we are not constructing an intelligent slave race. Blasto's creations aren't much smarter than the vegetables he grows them from. And that's fine. But that's the limit."

There were nods all around. The idea of making living things was a bit disturbing to all of us.

"Oh, okay," Clarice agreed. "I get it. We'll also need to contact Toybox. There's a few bits of other tinkers' tech I think we'll need."

I sighed. "Fine. Minerva, make contact and see what we can arrange. I assume we have the funds."

She smiled. "Actually, we could probably offer a trade. Your Yggdrasil. They'd probably be quite happy to buy one for their dimensional pocket.

"While we're on the subject of recruitment," Taylor added. "I'd like to talk to Parian. She's a rogue and, actually, that's perfect for us. Part of our... well, my, goals for Pantheon... is to build a community where parahumans can use their abilities in noncombat roles. Her power would synergize really well with mine. We could start a very profitable business simply by producing generic body suits of spider silk. The Protectorate, the PRT, and almost every hero who doesn't have high end brute powers would want to buy the stuff simply as underarmor."

"Okay, seems fair," I nodded. "In fact. Let's just open the floodgate. Everyone who can, should look into finding new recruits. Indies. Lesser villains. Hell, let's see if we can get some of the heroes to jump ship."
"Dibs on Clockblocker!" Respawn shouted.

"Go for it," I replied. "Just... don't alert the Protectorate that we're actively trying to steal their people. It... that can't possibly go well." Also: please fail. Please for the love of all that is holy, I don't need another one.

"I don't have any suggestions," Minerva replied. "The Travelers would be excellent additions to the team. Sundancer is miserable on her team, and Genesis is so grateful for what you've done to help her that I think they're likely to sign on. Krouse..."

"Don't want him anyway," I interrupted. "He's a jackass."

"I was going to say he's a shitty leader," she finished. "They're all together out of loyalty to Noelle, and something else I can't figure out. Some kind of secret. If we fix Noelle, I believe their team will disintegrate for lack of a shared goal. Then again, maybe the opposite. Noelle inspired a lot of loyalty in her people. Once she's better, she might be able to pull their team cohesion back together."

"Doesn't matter," I replied. "Their powers are really, really good, but too dangerous for normal use. And not what we need for Endbringer scale conflicts. Having them would be nice, but not so nice that I'm willing to cause any trouble to make it happen."

"All my powered friends are in the Wards. I'm still pretty good friends with Triumph, but that's not likely to work out." Crystal stated.

"We'll do what I do," Taylor offered. "Time it so each of us joins the Wards or Protectorate on patrols. Nothing overt. We'll wait until we're ready for the big announcements before we push it. I'm going to work on their new leader."

"Weld?" Crystal asked with a smile, then licked her lips. "Good choice. I might have to 'work on' him a little, myself."

Taylor's face did its best tomato impression as her face fell into the crook of her arm and she put the other overtop her head. "Not even close to what I meant."
"Sure it's not," she smirked. "I think it's exactly what you meant and everyone knows it."

"I don't get it?" Clarice asked. "What did she mean?"

"That's because you're still ten," Respawn replied. "I'll make Minerva explain it when you get older."

"Okay, guys, that's enough of that," I interrupted. "Now that we all have things to plan and take care of, let's do that. If you need me, I'll be spending a few hours adapting an ocean variant of the Yggdrasil. Do you know how difficult it is to attune twelve different symbiotic species to saltwater and let them still remain a cohesive organism?"

"Yes," Clarice responded.

==============

A/N- This chapter. This chapter makes me smile for sooooo many reasons...
I felt the twitches on my threads. The warning system I kept around the area where I was protecting my friends and family. It was a rhythmic plucking. Someone who at probably knew an instrument. Someone who clearly wants my attention.

A dinosaur formed from the spare thread I had. Something resembling a Stegosaurus. The spiked tail was legitimately dangerous, thanks to a few spare arablest bolts that Flechette was kind enough to donate. She said her weapon was tinker made to constantly produce ammunition and rope from nowhere. I was certain there had to be some kind of limit. Tinker tech was bullshit, but it wasn't infinite. Right?

So I peaked out, to get an eye at the form of Skitter. New costume. A very shiny costume, almost metallic in colors of blue, gold and that peculiar color of purple that forms when something dark enough catches light at the right angle. When did she decide to switch away from the utilitarian black and gray look?

She looked right at me. I suppressed a shudder. Fucking creepy girl already knows where I'm at. No sense in hiding from her at all.

I stepped out, flanked by my protector. I imagined how a fight between us would go. In terms of obvious potential, I probably came out ahead. My creations were durable, I could repair them with a thought. Master vs Master? I would win. But it didn't work that way. It'd be Master vs Person. Even shielded as I was by my power and the cloth armor I was wrapped in, I came up greatly lacking. She beat me on range. She didn't need to see me. If I hit her early enough, I could kill her. The problem is, that would be more luck than skill against someone like her. She, on the other hand, she could make me wish I was dead. I couldn't take her.

Still. I at least tried to save her from Bonesaw. That counted for something nice between us, right?. Also, she hasn't eaten me alive with bugs yet. That's a very good sign.

"You looking for something?" I said with far more confidence than I felt, or my wavering voice conveyed.

"Yeah. Have you heard about my new team?"

"New team? What happened to the old one?" Skitter left the Undersiders? I had a hard time
imagining. She was the keystone of her group. Without her...

Skitter looked down, and her fists clenched. My power did convey some sensory powers, even if they were pretty pathetic. She was trembling. I stepped closer. "I'm sorry, if you don't want to..."

"No," she choked out. "It... it's just. They didn't survive the fight with the Nine. Tattletale, Grue and I did. None of the rest. And Grue's left to do... whatever, he didn't tell us and hasn't made contact since... there aren't any Undersiders."

Wow. How do I even? "I'm sorry." Nice going, Sabah. Not lame at all.

"Not your fault. That's my problem to deal with it," she muttered, her voice getting cold. That 'supervillain' thing she was so scarily good at. "It's easier when dealing with business."

"Right, your new team." Good. Nice, safe, entirely unemotional topic that can't possibly be awkward.

"Yeah," she agreed. "I'd like you to join it."

There goes that plan. "You know I'm not interested in being a villain."

"You're really that badly out of the loop up here?"

"No power, and I'm one of the few that can go out safely. Gossip isn't usually what I'm looking for."

"It's a hero team," she supplied.

"Don't want to be a hero, either," I insisted. "I just want to protect my friends and be left alone."

"We can help with that," she offered. "We have our own refugee camp. It's one of the biggest ones in the city, and easily the safest. We'll need to grow another neighborhood, but that's-"
"Wait. Grow a neighborhood?" What have they been doing?

"Oh, right. Forgot you didn't know. The new team's being co-run by me and Gaea. Er, you'd know her as Panacea."

"The healer?"

"Turns out, she's not a healer," Skitter explained. "Her power is basically perfect control over a living thing at touch range. It's almost like your power, only instead of string, it can rewrite every part of a cell, right down to the DNA. Even things that don't have cells, like viruses and stuff."

I just stood there, mouth agape in my protective covering. "That is so completely unfair!"

"I know!" She exclaimed.

I looked back toward the ramshackle buildings my people were hiding in. Many of whom had been mutilated to look like members of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Absolute control? I breathed and did my best to imitate every authority figure I'd ever known. The whole time wishing I wasn't about a foot shorter than the terrifying bug-controlling-supposedly-former-supervillain that I was about to dictate terms to.

"Two conditions. First: I need to know exactly what you want from me."

"Offering you a job as a fashion designer," she answered smoothly. "You can work with spider silk, right?"

"I... yeah, I can do that," I confirmed. "But do you really need me for that?"

"For what I do now? No." She answered. "But you can do so much more. Our group isn't about playing cops and robbers in stupid costumes. We're trying to establish a community. Finding ways for powers to work together and be greater than they are alone. I can make better fabric material than basically anyone else in the world. You can work fabric better than anyone else in the world."

"So I won't be getting into fights? Just being a fashion designer?"
"Pretty much. Highest of high end clothing. All the comfort and elegance of finest silk. All the durability of the best body armors available on the non-tinker market. The commercials write themselves. So do the checks, practically."

She's right. They kinda do. "What's the cut?"

"It won't take me nearly the effort it'll take you. None at all once we figure out how to automate the majority of it. Between Aceso and Gaea, that won't be hard. On top of that, we have a lot of solid contacts in a lot of industries that'll buy and help market whatever we want to make. So... ten percent sound fair?" Aceso must be one of their new members. Pretty name. Hopefully nice.

"Sounds suspiciously low. Like there's either conditions, or you're letting me rip you off in order to butter me up." I said dryly. That deal is too good to be true at least three times over. If they were asking fifty percent, it would have still been pretty good as far as deals go.

"Well," she shrugged. "We would like to do testing on your powers. There may be other things they can be used for. Others who you synergize well with- I can already imagine some synergies between us and Clockblocker, for example, that could possibly fuck an Endbringer's day up. We'll catalog your powers and test them with every other power we think will make them even better."

I could live with that. Like it? No. But live with it.

"More than that, we're trying to set a precedent. That the rogues can join us, a hero group, and still be, functionally, rogues. In fact, we want most of our members to be rogues. A handful of front line heroes, and the rest making money and handling utility roles. The only time you'll be expected to fight is if there's an attack on our, on what would be your, home. The only time you'll ever be asked to fight is if we think you have something important enough to turn the tides of the Endbringer fights. And even then, that's a request and we won't force you."

"That doesn't sound too bad," I agreed. I already fought Leviathan, after all. I'd never join another Endbringer battle in my life, but I did fight Leviathan. "I play poster child and get a sweet deal?"

"Something along those lines," she nodded. "I can't really give you any final numbers, but we need examples of parahumans leading peaceful lives. And we're already basically giving away several million dollars a year. So what's a few hundred grand more?"
"Several... million?" I gasped. I couldn't even imagine that kind of money.

"Pretty much," she confirmed. "Gaea's tree is currently running the entire sewer system in this city. That costs a lot of money in a city this size, and we're doing it for free. Probably forever. Sure, we get fringe benefits from it. Like a Mayor that would do just about anything we ask, just to keep us around."

"That... that's pretty wow," I muttered. That really was an insane power.

"So, what were you saying about a second condition?" She asked.

============= A/N- Yeah. Okay, I love a lot of these chapters in retrospect. I see where the story as it stands now really hit its stride (and went another 170 chapters and counting). And it was here. Not specifically this chapter, but the ones in this general block.
"Accord, sir, your appointment is here," my secretary informed me via intercom. I looked at the clock. Five minutes early. Respectable.

"She may enter in exactly three minutes," I relayed back. I approved of this new employee. Smart, good at her job. A lack of ambition that, usually, I would find to be a negative. She'd never be worthy to be one of my Ambassadors, but she kept calm dealing with parahumans on a daily basis, and kept the office immaculate. If she kept this up a while longer, I might even need to learn her name.

I looked over my notes, yet again. I had already memorized them, but it never hurt to make certain. Pantheon. Powerful enough to beat Empire 88 in a direct fight. Disagreements with Protectorate and PRT. Reasons for contacting me and mine, currently unknown.

I had the papers in my desk when the door opened and my guest walked through. Her costume was admirably uniformed, with a medieval theme to it. It appeared to be styled after ancient Grecian armor, mainly brown hard leather with bronze over some areas. It came with the traditional armored skirt, but hers included pants underneath, also in the hard leather style. Custom fit, and designed to accentuate her feminine features without flaunting them. It could double as a military dress uniform, and was clearly done by an expert designer. I only counted seventeen flaws in the costume in the time it took her to walk up to my desk.

"Minerva, was it?" I said from behind my mask. Of course I already knew that, but I found it served my purposes better to appear less interested in them than they were in me.

She curtsied. "Yes."

"So, I must admit I'm curious," I said in a calmly neutral manner. Not that I talked in any other way. "What brings the leader of a hero group to speak with a notorious villain such as myself?"

She smiled. "I'm afraid you are under a mistaken impression. I'm not the leader of Pantheon. My task in your city is considered too trivial for their personal attention. I'm sure you understand how time consuming it can be to manage a city."

The insolent- I paused and calmed myself. "Then pray tell, why would you feel the need to discuss a 'trivial' task with me, personally?"
"It was at your request, sir," she answered smoothly. "We respect your work, and felt it would be an insult to act in your city without informing you. We didn't feel it would warrant your personal attention, but your secretary said that you insisted."

I frowned beneath my mask. That was true, what she said. I just hadn't believed them, or their modesty. Choosing a name like 'Pantheon' made me doubt they understood the concept of humility on any level.

"Yes, I recall," I finally replied. "Still, I would like to know your plans."

"Ah, yes," Minerva smiled. "We have taken an interest in one of the few undesirables you still have in your fine city."

"Blasto, presumably," I stated. She nodded in confirmation. "You have a biomanipulator of your own, correct? One which appears superior by several orders of magnitude. I'm not saying I'd mind his removal, but it seems to me his presence would be redundant for you."

Is there a weakness in Gaea's power my investigators are unaware of? A gap they're hoping Blasto can fill?

"I agree with you fully," Minerva said with a nod. "I am simply following orders. Gaea wishes to have Blasto in her presence before the end of the day."

Fascinating. "I doubt Blasto would agree to work for your organization."

She shrugged, offering that annoying smile again. "His desires are not my concern," she said casually. "Nothing he can do, short of suicide, is going to stop me from carrying out my mission."

"Yet, obviously, I could," I pointed out.

"Yes, of course," she agreed. "Possibly the local Protectorate as well, though I find that doubtful. They're not even strong enough to deal with a minor thorn such as Blasto."
I frowned at her implication. I hadn't managed to remove him, either. Also, the 'thorn' pun.

"Gaea seems to put a lot of faith in your ability," I offered a small bit of praise. "Surely you have some theories on motivations."

She nodded. "Some. Pantheon has dealt with all threats in Bockton Bay with little, if any, difficulty. This may be a matter of dealing with other disruptive elements nearby."

"A respectable enough goal," I nodded.

"It may also, in part, be to embarrass the Protectorate further," she continued. It fit in with their behavior in their own city. I had believed them to be showboating, as it were. But if viewed in the light of taunting the government heroes, I could at least see the logic in their actions. "I doubt it's any secret of our contempt for the incompetence of the Protectorate's system. They failed our city. This one, as well. Boston is the safest big city on the east coast. And that is because of you."

I nodded. It is good that they recognize this fact.

"Which brings me to my next theory," she kept her smile. "We intend to bring such order and safety to our own city. You have the experience and skill. Perhaps our leaders hope to impress you with our effectiveness in order to open up future dialogue and possibly cooperation."

"Yet they are not here, today," I pointed out.

"As I said. We felt Blasto was too mundane to warrant your personal attention. They likely believed it would be presumptuous of us to request your personal attention until we were better established. Had proven ourselves."

"They thought destroying the Slaughterhouse Nine and removing Empire Eighty-Eight wasn't enough to prove themselves?"

She shrugged, again. It made me want to strangle her. Or at least break her shoulders. "Perhaps they wished to restore our city from chaos and anarchy, first. Unfortunately, due to the efforts of the Endbringer and the Slaughterhouse Nine, much of Brockton Bay is in ruins. We've done great things in a short time, but we're a long way from a full recovery."
"Understandable," I stated. It was true. The belief was that Brockton Bay would be condemned as a city, surrendered to the chaos, much the same as Ellisburg.

"Perhaps they felt that if they waited until the recovery efforts were finished, they might speak with you as equals. Instead of merely talented newcomers who are good in a fight. Power is simply a matter of luck, nothing to be proud of. Being a successful leader of men, saving a city from ruin, those are things that deserve real respect."

"Valid," I stated. She does have a point. No one would doubt Pantheon's power. Their ability to bring order to the chaos? Remained to be seen. I respected that they even knew that they should. "I can see why they rely upon you. You are free to stay here for forty eight hours, seeking Blasto. If you have not successfully captured him after twenty four hours, I shall provide you my assistance in the matter. Consider it a test to see if you need it."

"You are too kind, Accord," she smiled. "I'd best get to work, and I believe I've used more than a generous amount of your time."

I nodded. "Leave contact information with my secretary. And do inform me after you've achieved your goal."

"Of course," she responded as she turned and left.

It was exactly two hours and twelve minutes after she was out of the building when my secretary activated the intercom. "Sir. Minerva just called. Told me to tell you: 'mission accomplished'."

"Understood," I said, still trying to grasp the implication of how quickly they had managed. "Thank you."

==========

A/N- Definitely write a better Accord than I do Jack Slash.
I stared in stunned disbelief at the monitor. One of the fringe benefits of being a tinker, any kind of tinker, was that normal technology was simple to us. Wiring and improving upon a high end CCTV system with any number of bells and whistles was nothing to me, even though my specialty was in biotechnology. Specifically, biological splicing and artificial lifeforms.

Still, right now I was stunned. A Hispanic teen girl was currently in my garden. She was dressed in what was clearly a costume, although whether she was a cape, or had gotten lost on her way to a renfair, I wouldn't be willing to bet money either way. Wearing green toga style robe over what seemed to be a brown shirt. A pair of thick brown gloves and knee high boots that were far too utilitarian to be considered sensual. A green hairband that looked like it was actually a live plant. Face exposed for the world to see. She'd be a looker when she was older, that much was for certain.

None of that was important. What was important is that she was hugging my attack dogs. Or, what passed for dogs when you were splicing DNA from six different lifeforms and holding it all together with a kind of genetically engineered fungus.

"Who's good little abominations against nature? You are. Yes, yes you are!" She cooed at them.

The phrase 'there are no words', I find, is overused. But right now? I had absolutely nothing nothing. I pressed a button that released a mist of attack pheromones. It would instruct the dogs to turn toward the nearest mammal and then kill it. No exceptions, myself included. Naturally not something I would use unless I was safely away from them, like now. Pity to have to kill a pretty girl like that.

One dog turned and scaled up the nearby tree, catching a squirrel with six foot long tongue and pulling the animal into its mouth. The whiplash probably killed it before it was eaten. The other found a stray cat that I hadn't realized was there. Neither so much as glanced at the girl.

She sniffed the air, then blinked a couple times. She looked directly at the camera, made a frown and wagged her finger at it. At me. Then stuck her tongue out. That's when I knew I'd already lost. I wouldn't make it easy for her. No self respecting Tinker would. But the idea that I could win this fight was now taking a vacation. Probably somewhere with better weather than Boston. Lucky prick.

She skipped over to the camera and blew a kiss at it. "See you soon," she said cheerfully. And then she went back to skipping, right into my lair.
I hit her with the poison gas first. It seemed obvious to me that it wouldn't work. It didn't need to. She was immolated, when sparks set the gas on fire. It would take week to get the smell out of that part of the building.

One of my old partners always did say I had knack for overkill. I disagreed. If it's no longer alive, then it doesn't matter how much 'kill' you use.

The flames cleared, and she was still standing. Her hair hadn't even been singed. Okay, so that's a brute rating. Light green runes were now visibly glowing in her costume.

Okay, breaker rating, I amended. Forcefield. That's both better and worse.

I released two of my smarter minions, based upon gorilla genetics, from their cells. These weren't like the dumb 'dogs'. They recognized me, and they recognized nothing else human unless I was with it. In many ways, they were almost comparable to human. I'd even implanted my language skills. I often regretted not being a better fighter, so I could program those skills into my creations as well.

Like right now. Watching a not particularly large girl treating two giants like they were a light workout. This was a distinct source of current regrets.

She rolled under one's legs and then spider climbed her way up his back. The boots actually clung to their barklike hides. Tinker tech? Some breaker power? Either way, a pain in the ass. I cringed when the other brute attempted to punch her, only for her to move and it to get its hand stuck inside the first. Sure, I've seen my creations get taken down before. They weren't all that bright. But this is just embarrassing to watch.

She leapt down from her perch atop the first's head, and ran across the other's arm and onto his shoulder. They both twisted the wrong way at the worst possible time, and broke the second construct's arm.

My computer finally had a file pulled up based on recognition software. I saw the first word and went cold. Pantheon.

"Well, fuck me then," I muttered and kept reading. Aceso. Brute, combat thinker and speculation of being a changer of some sort. Some of the PHO people think she's not even a real parahuman. Some kind of living weapon put together by Gaea. Watching her fight? No, she's real and having way too much fun to be an artificial lifeform. Speaking as an expert, of course.
She jumped off the second's back as the first punched it in the face, smashing open the skull.

"Wow," she laughed. "You guys are pathetic."

The one dropped dead. Dammit! I'd be less upset if she wasn't right. That was pathetic.

I activated a few other devices to target her. Projectile weapons, acid. And... I couldn't get a lock. She had no body heat, left no scent, didn't even show up on an electromagnetic scanners. Very expensive tinkertech scanners that could spot the cellphones next door to my base. Even the motion trackers, somehow. She was just not there to them.

There was a heavy thud as the gorilla slammed into the blast door blocking my lab. It then delivered another punch. Where was... oh, okay. She had her arms inside the hole that was punched into its back, and was puppeteering the thing. Manually. Because that's totally logical and fair. Of course a living thing can be controlled just by reaching inside it and poking its nervous system with your hands. Why would anyone ever think otherwise?

The doors, of course, came down, and the construct started to fall forward. Without her at the 'controls', it was now quite paralyzed. She jumped off, did a front flip, and landed like she was an Olympic gymnast doing a dismount. Only gymnasts typically landed on nice, soft, padding. She landed on a concrete floor. There was a wet 'plop' as the goop she'd gotten on her arms continued traveling at speeds which should have shattered her legs, but she was quite clearly fine.

"Hey! It's so good to finally meet you!" She said with the exuberance of a child. A child that hadn't just walked through everything I could think of. Well, fuck, at least if she was talking, she wasn't using me as a living sock puppet. Huh. That's a thing I never thought would be a concern in my life.

"H... hello," I said. "So, what brings you to my humble abode?"

"Lotsa things," she said cheerfully. "First, I'm a big fan of your work. The way you dealt with Weld that one time by making that blob thing."

"Well, thanks," I smiled. It was nice to meet fans. Much better than enemies, at least. "It's not all that impressive, sort of a poor man's containment foam. Never could perfect the recipe to allow them to breath in there. It's why I only ever used it on Weld."
"Don't sell yourself short," she disagreed. "A mass of nearly microbial life that's capable of shifting around, but still has cohesion and coordination enough to trap a powerful brute cape is not something to undersell. How did you keep their mucus adhering to him without letting it stick to another surface that might allow him to pull away?"

"How about if I ask some questions, first?" I did my best attempt at a charming smile. It hadn't helped me with any of the girls I knew in highschool. But then again, girls didn't start conversations about the chemical properties of mucus in my highschool.

"Sure," she said, smiling brightly.

"First... how did you evade basically everything I threw at you?"

"Oh, that's simple," she said as she did a twirl. "Your lab's set up to fight people. And I'm a mushroom."

What? "What?"

"Well, a combination of several types of fungal cells working alongside animal musculature, specialized organs, a nanoweave armor mesh, and a dozen psuedo-organic sensory augmentations. I'm still working on installing echolocation. I have it built in, already, but the control system isn't good at displaying it properly."

"You're a tinker!" I said with a realization. And a wave of nausea. She'd done all that? To herself? "Is that why you're here? To steal my research?"

"Well, kinda," she said with a smile. "We want to offer you a job."

"A... job?" Okay. I could live with that. Emphasis on the 'living' part.

"Yup. You come work for us. No more stupid bank robberies. And a really nice lab that's only getting better with time. Way better than you got here. Plus you get to work with all kinds of materials you wouldn't otherwise ever get access to."
"Such as?" I had to admit, this offer was worth considering. "And for how long?"

"Well, lotsa things. We've got a girl named Noelle whose powers have been broken, somehow. She is fascinating beyond all words. Then there's my Big Sister," she said the words like an object of worship.

"Big sister, huh? Who's that?"

"Gaea, of course," she said. "Did you know her power works on the genetic level? Kinda like yours. But she reshapes it in real time. Every part. So perfectly that it alters the automatic functions of the immune system to accept the alterations as if they were the original organism. No risk of autoimmune response- in fact, if you have one from a different problem, she can cure it. No side effects she didn't intend."

That... that is almost unbelievable... "Perfect biomanipulation..." I whispered. "Did she make you?"

She giggled. "Well, she made this body. I added some improvements, of course. Her weakness, if you can call it that, is she only effects living things. Or pseudolife like prions. The cybernetic enhancements are all my own."

"And you're saying she'd let me view some samples of her work?"

"View them?" She laughed. "We're going to be improving on them, us and any other tinkers we find who work with living things. Plugging the gaps where her abilities don't reach. Designing machine interfaces to improve their functions, adding neurological instincts so her constructs work better."

"What's the catch?" There's always a catch.

"Well, you can't commit any more crimes," she said. "That's Pantheon's first rule. You get one second chance. Only one."

"Okay," I said. "How do you feel about weed?"
"What kind of weed?"


"Oh," she said. "Dunno, never asked. She doesn't want us breaking any laws, so probably not." She looked disappointed and thoughtful. Then she went right back to smiling. "Oh! I know! I bet we can get her to make a plant that does the same thing, but isn't illegal!"

"Uh... okay, I can work with that," I agreed. I never really did have the time to grow my own, ironically enough. And sure, I could clone the stuff, but it was cheaper just to buy it. But if they could basically just magic up as much of the stuff as I wanted?

"What's the pay?" I asked.

"Don't know," she replied. "Whatever you can make from your stuff legally, I guess. I do it for free."

"We'll need to work that out..." I paused. No, that idea is crazy. But it couldn't hurt to ask. "How about ten years added to my lifespan? As a payment for my work for the next year or so. We'll talk longer terms, too, of course. A bit of telomeres manipulation and some hormone balancing should be well within her power. I think it'd be fun to be twenty again."

"Oooh," she said with glee. "I am SO glad I talked to you! Now I know how we're going to get Toybox to sell us the rest of what I need!"

==============

A/N- Mushroom Riley is possibly my favorite thing in the story forever.
I'd just gotten back from work. A tiring day, but not a bad one. It was a sad and jaded way of looking at things, but Leviathan had almost done the city a favor. The influx of disaster relief funding meant jobs. Not great jobs, certainly not permanent jobs, but jobs nonetheless. The docks would, of course, be the last place to garner funding. If they got any at all.

The city was seeing to it that most of the money was being funneled into construction and rebuilding, and I was seeing to it that the dockworkers got their share of it. Even if that wasn't really what we were meant for, it was enough that it existed at all. The problem that was most pressing on my mind was that we didn't have the people. I could double the number of dockworkers and still not have enough people to grab all the projects I'd like to have. Going for small ones that could be completed quickly in order to move on to others? Or sinking all my people into one or two of the larger projects that might not be completed for a year or better. Both had something to offer. Both also carried risks and costs.

It would be smart, in the short term, to expand and add more people. But this boom wouldn't last, and that just meant things would be exponentially worse once-

I froze. The lights were on in the house. Adrenaline hit me. There'd been more than one robbery in the neighborhood of late, and police were stretched thin as is. I slipped my hand down between the seats and my fingers found the cold metal easily enough. The gun was illegal, of course. I didn't have the permits, and I sure as hell didn't have whatever it took to keep a concealed firearm.

That didn't matter. Not in what my city had become.

I hid the gun in the pocket of my jacket as I moved to the door. Careful to avoid the damaged step. Whomever was in wasn't making a lot of noise, perhaps they'd already left? My fear was beginning to be replaced by anger. Normally, I don't like being angry. I do my best to control my temper. But a fucking crook in my house? This was a situation I was comfortable being pissed off for. It helped keep my mind off the fear and the stupidity of doing what I was doing.

Door isn't broken, I noticed. In fact, it was simply unlocked. I turned the handle quietly and slowly opened the door, gun pointing in before I was. Then I froze. She looked a little different. A fairly established tan, and her hair clearly wasn't seeing the care it usually received, but it was her. My daughter.

"I know I didn't exactly leave on the best terms," Taylor spoke softly, she still hadn't turned her head. "But would you mind not pointing the gun at me? It kinda makes me nervous."
I quickly set it aside on the table near the door. "Hey, kiddo," I said, trying hard to sound cheerful. Like nothing bad had happened. I wanted to run to her and hold her like she was six years old again. I was afraid to. That if tried, she'd run away again. That if I touched her, the illusion would vanish or I'd wake up from the dream or she'd pop like a soap bubble.

I was trembling, and it wasn't because of the adrenaline rush.

She turned, and had a nervous half smile on her face. "I started supper. Hope you don't mind."

I walked to her. Slowly. "No, that's fine," I replied. It wasn't what I wanted to say. It wasn't even the first ten things I wanted to say. But those were the words I picked. Safe. Trying desperately to pretend everything was normal.

She really was taller than I recalled, and that wasn't just a trick of memory, and she was in much better shape than the girl I remembered. "Have you been eating well?"

"Yeah," she said. "I sorta got a job. A pretty good one, actually."

"Oh?" I offered a smile. "Who with?"

Her smile dropped, and I was terrified she would bolt from the room. "That's kinda what I needed to talk to you about."

I felt queasy. She was likely to run off right after she told me, something in her posture screamed it. "How about we save it for after supper?" I suggested. "No sense in letting the heavy stuff get in the way of a good meal."

"Thanks," she said, turning back to the stove while I silently left to take off my coat and check on the gun.

We ate mostly in silence. The entire time glancing at each other, smiling nervously before looking back to the food. A vegetable soup. "Where did you find fresh roast in these circumstances?" I asked her. An idle curiosity.
"It's vegan, believe it or not," she answered. "No animals were harmed in the making of this meal. Not even the ants."

"Wow," I replied. "I couldn't tell it wasn't the real thing." I have so many more important things to ask. Where have you been? Are you safe? When will you come home. I kept trying to think of a way to ask her, but failed. I would have given anything just to know what she was thinking.

We had finished. Me long before her. "So," she said, pushing her bowl away.

"So," I repeated. "You were saying your new job."

"Yeah..." she muttered. "I'm... kinda working for Pantheon now..."

"The new hero group?" I asked. I knew about them, of course. Seen some of their work. They were making a pretty big difference with helping the homeless.

"Yup," she said. "Cool, huh?"

"They hire teens?" I asked. I could feel the dread. No, please, anything but that.

"Well," she smiled, but it didn't erase the sadness and apprehension in her eyes. "They kinda have to make an exception for me."

She set her elbow on the table and turned her hand so her palm was facing up. A pair of hummingbirds flitted toward her and landed on her thumb and pinkie finger. No, at closer examination, they were moths. Big, but still moths.

"You're... Skitter." It wasn't a question. I probably should have seen it a while ago. Had seen it. I just couldn't bring myself to admit it.

"It's 'Khepri', now," she said. "But, yeah."
"When?" I asked. I knew, but I still had to ask.

"The locker," she replied. "Doesn't matter now, anyway. I've got more important things to worry about. Pantheon's really really powerful, and I'm one of the key figures in it. A leader."

"The blond girl. That was 'Tattletale', wasn't it?"

She paused, looking down. "Yeah."

"She part of this, too?"

"Kinda. But she's not in charge of anything. Amelia wouldn't stand for that."

"Amelia? Do I know this girl?" I asked.

"Yeah. Amy Dallon. Panacea. Gaea." She answered. "She founded the team, invited me to be her partner. Our powers are insane together. And only getting better as we progress. We're going to save this city."

I had to smile at that. I thought the same thing, once. "You always did want to be a hero."

"I remember," she said, smiling back. "I didn't exactly want bug powers. But now I'm pretty glad to have them."

I followed her lead, asking the question I knew she wanted. "Why?"

Then I heard the footsteps, I turned to see a woman in a gold and black metallic costume. "Hey, dad," she said. Taylor's voice. I looked back toward my daughter.

"That's my Changeling," she said. "One of them, anyway... umm.. maybe I could explain better."
"Please do," I said, staring at the costumed girl.

"It's one of Panacea's creations. Like a robot made of plants. Most of us have at least one. I control mine the same way I control my bugs."

"She... she can do that?"

"Don't tell anyone!" She insisted. "We don't want anyone to know we have them right now. At least not until we have the M4s working."

"I suppose you're not going to tell me what that is, either?"

"It's better if I don't," she confirmed. "I trust you... but these aren't my secrets to share."

"I wouldn't know what to do with the information, anyway," I replied. "So... why show me this... changeling?"

"So you wouldn't be worried about my safety," she mumbled. "I can use it to fight for me. It's a lot stronger and tougher and just plain better than any normal body, and I can control it anywhere in range."

"How far is that?" I asked.

"..."

"Couldn't hear you," I said. She had spoken through her hands.

"The whole city, plus some," she answered. "Panacea's power. She improved my range. It's pretty much as far as we want it to be, maybe even the whole world eventually. I can even control it while still doing normal things. So I can be anywhere I want while still out being a hero!"

"That... that's a lot to take in, kiddo," I said. It was. My daughter being a hero wasn't such a surprise. Always knew she had it in her. But talking about making copies of herself like this. That was a hard
thing to swallow.

"Yeah," she said. "But now you know. I... let's just say some of my team. My friends. Don't have the happiest of home lives. It made me start thinking. And... I don't want us to be like that."

I moved over to her and pulled her into a hug. She didn't vanish. She hugged back. Hesitantly at first, but then for real. She had gotten stronger.

A/N: Yeah, okay, still loving this part of the early chapters.

Alt take that didn't make the cut:

"I know I didn't exactly leave on the best terms, but would you mind not pointing the gun at me? It kinda makes me nervous."

I reacted on instinct, tossing the gun backward out the front door. I jumped as it went off, and we heard a cat screech.

Soon after, a girl screamed "Mister Fluffybottom!"
We got together for our "morning" meeting, if 11 still counts as morning. The addition of Blasto to the group was helpful. He and Clarice had gotten to work putting his expansion on to the lab. The man was... eh, not sure how I felt about him. The 'paid in years' thing. I... to be honest, it was one of the few things left in my power that I had never chosen to test. The sheer concept of being able to grant agelessness, and all the ethical questions therein was frightening. Class S status was easy by comparison.

Still, I did it. And, much to my surprise, it worked, I could allow someone to live forever. I had to wonder if my 'Passenger' could know just how huge that was. At least it would be decades before anyone caught on that we had that kind of power.

"Hey, boss, how's it going?" Blasto asked, walking into our slowly evolving boardroom in slacks and a t-shirt.

I looked over at him and raised an eyebrow. "Boss?"

"S'what you are, right?" He said, smiling. "By the way. Great job. I don't think I felt this good when I was twenty for real."

"That will wear off," I replied. "Had to adjust your hormones to rebuild properly. Right now your body thinks you're closer to ten in terms of growth response. It'll wear off in a week."

"Wow, being ten is fuckin' awesome," he offered a laugh.

"Yes it is," Clarice agreed. "Also, watch the language."

"Sorry, chief," he responded.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" She pouted. "That's not my name! Any of them!"

"Because you're the one in charge of our little... what... division?" He looked at me. "You guys given any thought as to how you're dividing things up? Already got too many people to just make a
team. You don't seem to want me out in the field at all. Which suits me fine, I'm quite happy in the lab. It's where tinkers belong. Speaking of which, got the other part of my first payment figured out?"

I sighed. "Yeah, it's covered," I replied. I honestly wondered what Coil thought about us asking him to fast track delivery of a single cannabis plant. "I'll probably merge it with a grape vine. The leaves will, of course, hold all the active ingredients."

He paused. "Holy shit. That is genius."

Clarice smacked him upside the head. "Language!"

"Ow!" He stumbled away holding his head. "Seriously, that hurts. Are your hands made of steel or something?"

This was the time when Lisa stumbled out of her room, still half asleep. "Why are you all up so early?"

I looked at her. "Little late in the day to be saying that."

She looked at me. "Sun's not setting. Still too early."

Khepri, Eki, and Osiris then opted to walk in. All were already in costume, no less. "Oh, good. I was afraid we'd have to drag you people out of bed," Eki said with a smile.

Blasto turned to her and smiled. "Oh, that sounds like a great way to wake up."

I rolled my eyes. Another one?

Respawn shook his head. "Don't bother, dude," he said.

"Way too young," he pointed to Clarice.
"Scary beyond all reason." Lisa, that time.

"Destined for each other," one hand pointed toward me, the other toward Taylor. I will kill him. Don't know how. Way shall be found.

Then he gestured at Crystal last. "And I have called dibs. Bro code in effect on this."

"First. You cannot call 'dibs' on women," Crystal insisted. "And second, there is no 'Bro Code', that is not a real thing. And if our new recruit wants to ask me out, he's totally free to do so. And I am totally allowed to say 'yes' if he does."

"Third," I added. "Khepri and I are not 'destined for each other'."

"Fourth," Lisa chimed in. "I am totally scary beyond all reason."

Crystal looked back toward Blasto, expectantly. "Well?" She asked.

"Well, what?" He asked back.

"Aren't you suppose to ask me out now?"

He shook his head and raised up his hands. "Sorry, miss. You seem nice and all, but I'm not going to ask you out just so you can prove a point. Last time I did that, it ended in alimony. Besides, Bro Code's been invoked. Nothing I can do."

Crystal just glared at him. And then turned her head to glare at Respawn. And back again. "Okay, it's official. I am done with men. Forever. No regrets."

"Huh... wow, that happened last time, too," Blasto chuckled. The rest of us, at least, were trying not to smile too visibly.

"Oh, really? I see how it is," She said in mock indignation. "Well, smart guy, did this happen?" She turned toward Taylor. Uh oh.
Lisa quietly reached into her pocket and pulled out her smart phone, pointing the camera toward Crystal. I watched with a slowly dawning realization. No. She wouldn't.

"So, if you're finally tired of my cousin breaking your heart, I'm free this Saturday," she said in a voice I would have bet money was sincere. Guess her acting classes paid off. Or, I hope it's acting.

I could feel my face heating up and turning red. Taylor just stood there stunned, like a deer caught in headlights. Lisa was the first of us to break and start laughing, followed quickly by Blasto and Respawn. The rest of us didn't. I was humiliated and Taylor probably felt even worse. I don't think Clarice even understood the jokes. And I think Crystal was actually starting to get mad.

"That happened, too!" Blasto managed to gasp out while trying to catch his breath.

And that's when the rest of us lost it. Crystal. Followed by me. Followed by Taylor.

It was a good laugh to have, and then we got down to business. Far less interesting. Blasto and Clarice providing their wish lists. Lisa kindly letting me know that the project to remove the boat graveyard was approved, and a general press announcement would be done but it wouldn't be televised or anything, so I didn't need to be there. Taylor letting me know that Parian was setting up shop. I still needed to work on fixing her people. The ones that Bonesaw mutilated.

We all tried hard not to look at Clarice, who tried hard to look like she wasn't there. Except for Blasto, he still didn't know. And Crystal. I still wasn't sure if she realized who Clarice really was. I would have to talk to her about that, soon. Not a conversation I was looking forward to.

It was a bit past one, when Taylor got up and moved toward the entrance. She met a girl at the entrance who looked upset by something.

"Charlotte?" Taylor said with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Shit!" Lisa muttered, before shouting. "Take cover!"

I saw it right before it happened. The girl opened up her jacket, revealing one of those bomb vests like you see in movies. I was in contact with the table, so I tried to pull up as much mass between her
and us, Taylor especially, as possible. I wasn't fast enough.

"For the Fallen!" Her last words, and the last thing I heard before pain and then oblivion overtook me.

A/N- Because I was afraid people might be under the mistaken impression that my fic was a happy one.
I woke to nudging. Pain. Huh, not as bad as I'd expected. The Yggdrasil had a hole in it. Already healing and regrowing. No need to worry. Tired.

I couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't move.


She vanished. My hand was moved and put back on her.

Another minute of confusion. Then another vanishing. And again.

Oh. Right. Healing. I do that.

Stitching the lungs together using the artificial organism. Rewiring the circulatory system to stop blood loss. Converting mass to blood. Repairing spinal structure and bones. Not enough mass for legs or rib repairs.

Oblivion again.

....

I drifted awake. I was floating in something.

"Hey, Big Sis, glad to see you're awake," a voice said. Clarice. No, smaller. Riley. "I want you to know we're all alive. I lost my changeling. So did Khepri. Eki and Minerva are hurt pretty bad."
Blasto and I are working on it."

That's good. I fell back to sleep.

....

Again I was awake. I hurt everywhere. Opening my eyes was agony.

Pain was good. It meant that the nerve damage was repaired.

"Wh..." I croaked. My throat was dry. Unused.

"Don't speak," Crystal's voice. "You're still pretty torn up. Your body keeps fighting what Riley and Blasto are doing. They're putting you back together an inch at a time. Then I'm going to kill you. You had fucking Bonesaw in your basement this whole time! What were you thinking!?"

She put her hand on my arm. Half her body was artificial. Arms. Legs. Much of her face. Almost all of her blood. A fungus-human genetic hybrid, close enough to her own biology to trick her immune system, for the time being at least. No nervous system in place. Nothing that technically constituted 'skin', either, in those areas.

I started mending the alterations, reshaping them to match her natural biology. She pulled her hand away.

"Hey!" She exclaimed. "None of that. You need to get better first."

"Okay," another voice came in. "It's Minerva. I know, I sound different. You'll be fixing that, too, eventually. The Fallen are here. Valefor, at least. Probably one or two of the others. Taylor's fine. She was spending a day with her Dad. Making up for lost time. Sent her changeling instead. Good thing, too, she managed to get Charlotte almost fifteen feet further away before she..." She trailed off. "Any closer, the three of us would be gone."

Three? Oh, right, Crystal.
So tired.

....

I sat up.

"How's everything working?" Riley asked, smiling hopefully.

"Stiff. Sore." I replied. I looked healthy enough. Pale, even moreso than normal. And I no longer had freckles on most of the places that use to have them.

"Congratulations," Blasto offered. "You just underwent the world's only full body transplant."

"Only 72%," Riley corrected.

"How long was I out?" It still hurt to talk. But at least I could, now.

"Around thirty hours since the bombings," Minerva answered.

"What happened?" I muttered. I remembered bits, but not much.

"They used her to get to me," Taylor's voice shook with an animalistic waver that was some hybrid of grief and rage.

"Respawn managed to get to Blasto before the explosion. Crystal was saved by a combination of her shield and her armor. And Clarice... Riley used it to take the brunt of the damage for you."

"I'm sorry," Riley apologized hurriedly. "I know you told me I couldn't show myself. But it was the only way I could save you."
"It... it's okay," I insisted.

"The Fallen decided to send us a message. Something about desecrating a monument to their "god". It's a bullshit lie, anyway."

"Enlighten me," I said darkly. I knew who the 'Fallen' were, of course. Fucking Endbringer cult.

"They don't believe their own press," she said. "Kinda like E88. They found something full of shock value that they could use to justify their own depravity. Making the world hate them on purpose so they can invoke outrage. Use that as an excuse for their actions."

"Lot of effort to go through to keep up appearances," Crystal added.

"Yeah, well, they are still psychotic fucks," Lisa didn't smile. "They get off on this sort of thing."

"How much... damage," I couldn't bring myself to mention Charlotte or ask about the other dead. I'd only met her a couple times, and even then in brief passing.

"That bomb? Three casualties, including Charlotte. Not including changelings and other property damage." Lisa responded. "There were seven other bombings. One for each of the refugee camps, including ours. All in the meal halls, all at peak lunch period. Still not sure about the numbers. Including wounded? Easily hundreds, possibly over a thousand. They were planning this for a while."

"Fuckers are copying Bakuda," Taylor spit the name.

"I didn't accuse them of being creative," Minerva responded. "A local chapter of Haven is in town to help. They... don't like our theme very much. They're something of experts at hunting the Fallen. Respawn's out working with Rosary. I made him promise to behave. His power should treat Valefor's the same way it treats yours."

"And mine," Riley muttered. "Can't even inject natural growth hormones into him without 'poof'."

"The rest of us?"
"Gearing up," Lisa answered. "We need you to finish healing the rest of us. What Riley and Blasto put together is temporary and already starting to come apart."

"The plan," Taylor informed me, her voice full of malice. "Is to go out. Bait Valefor. Incapacitate him. And then give him to Riley."
And so, we went off on our mission. Or, rather, everyone else did. I was still in recovery. Plus, it would be suspicious for "Gaea" to be seen amongst the populace without doing anything to offer healing. So here I was, kept in hiding, amongst rumors that they'd managed to kill me. It would be a hit against our 'untouchable' reputation, but we lost that when some psycho mind controlled one of Taylor's friends and used her to blow a twenty foot hole into the side of our base. If thinking I was dead made them overconfident, then I would live with that.

Besides, I was still trying to get used to my new limbs. My new almost everything, really. Part of my lungs. Every organ below the lungs. An arm. Most of my face. A vat grown clone of myself. No surprise that I couldn't use my powers on it. I suppose my Manton limit would be in effect on my clones.

Did have to wonder if that applied to just clones. The material they rebuilt me with was 100% my own genetic code. I was destroying anything that was 'better', as Riley put it, even if it were 99% a match to my own. I sterilized any genetic material other than mine within my body. I didn't say it, but it put thoughts in my head. What it might mean for me if I ever wanted children. Sure, I didn't. Not right now. Maybe never. But there's something about 'cannot, no matter your wishes' that upset me.

Everyone else was out hunting, except Crystal. She was my bodyguard. And Blasto, who was lacking a changeling of his own, and wasn't trained to use them. We might use him when we had the M4s ready. But even then, probably not.

At least I wasn't bored. Riley had set up relays in her workshop that let me see every set of eyes we had on the ground, save for Respawn. Taylor was tending to 'our' camp. In many ways, we had the least outside aid, and we were doing the best.

....

Lisa nodded. "Okay, what we need you to do is first finish linking Taylor into her next changeling. Then help Riley modify our changelings so Valefor can't effect us through them."

"He can do that?" I asked.

"Probably. He can influence people over television broadcast, so as long as it's live. Bullshit powers being bullshit and all. No sense taking any more stupid chances."
"I have mechanisms to protect myself," Riley added. "I'm adding an organ that resembles a mini brain in the changelings, that will alert us when someone's attempting mind control on them. As well as reacting to most other kinds of master, stranger, and thinker powers relating to thoughts and feelings. It's not perfect, but it will work on Valefor's powers."

....

As it turns out, it was Riley who found him. Her screen flashed the 'yellow' alert, indicating a master/stranger influence.

"Halt. You do not realize I'm here," came a whispered voice.

The changeling froze, obeying the pseudo-brain instead of the standard controls. A special override that wouldn't normally exist.

Valefor was dressed as a woman. Quite convincingly, at that. Brown hair, long and messy. Either naturally so, or a really realistic wig. Or maybe an unregistered changer ability. No way to know.

"So..." he continued. "Tell me. Just how many of you did I kill? Did any of them scream before they died?"

"Just you," Riley responded. His eyes had just enough time to show his realization what had happened. And then they were no more.

Clarice's left hand shot up with a speed I couldn't follow even through the changeling's superior senses, and grabbed into his face.

That wasn't a figure of speech, either. I was pretty sure she'd made every joint in her changeling's hands double jointed to get the grip she did. Pointer in one eye, middle in the other. Ring finger buried under the cheek bone. Pinky hooked under the jaw. Thumb wedged into the other cheek. Ironically, the only fingers not getting soaked in blood were the ones in the eyes. Enough strength, even with a fully extended arm and that awkward looking grip, to keep his obvious attempts to scream silent.
He struggled... prodigiously. I couldn't call it admirably, but he certainly tried his best. Grabbing and pulling and hitting at her arm hard enough to bleed from his fingers. Still, she didn't budge. The gap between their strength was absolute enough that he may as well been trying to push down a building.

By this time, the alert had told everyone what just occurred. Most of us pretended ignorance. Eki took off at the best speed she could manage, and her repaired and fully charged biosuit.

....

"North is the most likely spot," Lisa said, pointing to the map. "It's the lawless part of town, even more now that Parian's moved out."

"It's mine," Riley and Taylor said at the same time. They locked eyes. Skitter glared. Riley, for the first time ever to my knowledge, glared right back.

"That fucker murdered one of my only friends," Taylor said through a clenched jaw. "I want him."

Oh, fuck.

"Your changeling is incomplete," came Riley's reply. "I have my M4T. If things get violent, it's ten times more survivable."

"I can take Valefor and every pathetic coward he has helping him."

"Even the ones that he's forcing to fight?"

That stopped her. "If I have to," she finally replied.

"You can use your bugs to help us at any range, now," Riley reminded her. "It'll be easier for you to help us than for us to help you."

"Still in charge," Taylor growled. "I'll lead on point. I can help you no matter where I am in the city."
Okay... diplomatic, think diplomatic.

"You're needed here, more," Lisa interjected, doing what I had hesitated to do. "Your people. The ones relying on Charlotte. The children. Riley's the better medic, and the north end will need it most. In case they're not there. Or don't take the bait. Plus, our camp is the second most likely spot. We don't have the same kind of security as the other camps. They'd find it easy to hide here compared to almost anywhere else."

Taylor looked toward Lisa, then me. I backed Lisa up. "It's true. You'll do more good here if we don't find Valefor. If anyone else does, you'll do about as much good no matter which one spots him first."

Her voice cracked. "Fine. You're right." She looked back to Riley. "Promise me he suffers. None of that sleep poison stuff."

Riley was back to her usual smiling self. "It's a deal."

....

Riley was knocked away from Valefor by some kind of powerful attack. She took Valefor's face with her. Or almost all the skin between his forehead and chin, at least.

She rolled and landed on her feet, only to roll to her side as another shockwave smashed the ground. "Blaster, The Fallen" I said, and Riley's computer narrows down the list of names. There were still seven on it.

She was on her feet and facing toward him. Still holding Valefor's missing flesh. Her costume showed signs of being sliced, and several cuts were over an inch deep in the changeling itself.


Taylor's actual body had made it to the room. She has trouble controlling both bodies at once, apparently her polycognitive abilities didn't work so well on her human duplicates. A hundred trillion

She was watching through Clarice's eyes, just like I was. The psycho was moving to help Valefor escape. Of course, Valefor was blind and in far too much pain to know what was going on around him. It would probably be a stalemate if left as it was.

Then the swarm fell. Millions of flying insects tore into him, and his screams echoed his partner. It took a minute before they cleared. She held back. Although you wouldn't know it from Eligos. He looked very much like he had been run through a wood chipper. His costume shredded completely, and most of his skin reduced to something that looked enough like hamburger that I became an avowed vegetarian at that moment.

Also reminded me that my new stomach had never been used before. By attempting to empty itself and failing.

"Are you satisfied, now?" I asked my partner after I finally stopped gagging.

"Not really," she answered darkly. "They're still alive."

=================

A/N- Clearly, Valefor was maimed in self defense, and Eligos was defeated using no more than minimum required force. :p
Clarice walked over to the damaged, but still conscious form of Eligos. She gripped his arm and pulled him to his feet. He screamed. He screamed a great deal. By then the refugees who had retreated when the fight started, were coming back.

"I know you're not working alone," she said to the screaming man. She pulled a syringe out and jabbed him in the side. His screaming stopped. "Pain killer. Full body, lasts for about an hour. If you're kind enough to talk, I'll consider giving you one that lasts a few days. Maybe, if you're really lucky, Gaea will get around to healing you by then. If not, well, it's a week away from the pain."

Eligos gasped, finally able to breath. "F-fuck you," he gasped out.

"Guess you don't want the pain relief, then," she replied. "Oh well. Who did you come here with, and where are they?"

"Just me an' Valefor," he laughed. "Got you bitches good. Teach you for desecrating the monument to Leviathan."

"You think that's a desecration? Wait 'till you see what we're going to do to his corpse when we're done with it," Clarice responded.

Going a bit off script there, Riley.

"As if," Eligos scoffed. "You can't kill gods."

"That would explain why your attacks didn't get any of us."

Okay. Way off script.

"Now tell me which hole Valefor's hidden in so I can drag him out," she instructed her captive.

"Right behind you," he muttered confusedly. Clarice had her sword drawn and twisted to slash. She
kept the blade out. Valefor, of course, was on the ground several feet away. He seemed to have lost consciousness. By all rights, he should probably be dead from that kind of shock trauma. I had to imagine there was some drug or three of Riley's that prevented that from happening.

"Cute trick," she responded. "I'm impressed."

"Fuck you talking about?" He asked.

"My powers can work like a pretty good lie detector," she responded. "It's absolutely convinced you're telling the truth."

"I am!" He said. "He's right over there. You ripped his fucking face off!"

Clarice of course looked again, her eye-cam drifting to where Valefor was, and then beyond. "How do you keep doing that?"

"Umm... ma'am..." one of the bystanders spoke up. A bigger man, looked like he'd been in a fight or two. Looks like one of the thugs that E88 liked to employ, actually. Wait. Is it 'racist' to think that? "It's true. He's right there."

"You're telling the truth," she said to the guy. "Strange, I can't see him. What's he doing?"

"Uh... laying there bleeding?" the guy responded. "Like that guy said. He's missing his face."

"Not a threat, then," Clarice concluded. She looked down at her hands, which had blood on them—mostly from Valefor, and a little from Eligos. "I'm afraid I won't be able to help with medical treatment now. Would you mind getting one of the first responders?"

Clarice spent the next several minutes explaining some of the medical supplies we'd brought, and their use. None of it was the particularly fancy stuff, certainly not even within the same order of magnitude as Riley was capable of. And some of it, the responders refused to even use since it wasn't "approved" materials, legally. They couldn't take the liability risks.

Still, better than nothing. By the time she was done, Eki had already arrived.
"I take it the threat's been handled?"

"Sort of. Can you see Valefor?"

"Umm... yes?" Eki was confused. "Can't you?"

"I suspect a stranger effect," Aceso replied.

"Wait... that can work on you?"

"Apparently," she responded. "Since you can find him, I'd appreciate if you take him back to base. Seems I did a lot of damage. I'm waiting for someone to get here and pick up Eligos."

"Uh... sure. Is it safe?"

"His power supposedly requires eye contact. It almost certainly requires he be conscious," Aceso answered. "Inject him with this and he'll be out for at least twenty four hours."

"Got it," she replied. Moving over to Valefor, she had her hand up, ready to shoot him in the face if he moved. The injection, of course, was done into his side from behind. "Alright, that's done. You're certain about this?"

"If he wakes up, just drop him," Aceso responded.

"Uh..." Poor Crystal. She'd just discovered she'd been working alongside Bonesaw, even if she suspected it already. Taking orders from her on the field? Had to be a nightmare come true. "Okay. How long do you suspect you'll need to wait?"

"Not long. Eligos isn't any kind of threat in his current condition."

He really wasn't. Whatever drug Riley cooked up, it was clearly doing its job quite well.
Eki took off, holding Valefor facing downward. Her new suit had enough enhanced strength to carry the man easily. Some kind of magnetic system that I wasn't qualified to have opinions on. All I did was put together the organic parts that held it all together. Riley, as always, was ecstatic to tell me every possible detail as I helped fuse flesh into her machines. 'Cybernetics' tinker, indeed. I was beginning to see why Gallant spent so much time worried about how to connect with Kid Win.

At least now she had Blasto to work with and talk shop. His skills were closer to mine than hers, too, so that made for a helpful way to bridge the 'gap', as it were.

Now it was just a matter of Valefor.

==============

A/N- In all honesty, I don't like this chapter much now that I've gone back to reread all of these. Definitely weaker than most of the others in this area.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Human Decoy (Verified Cape)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.
You have twelve infractions and five warnings. You were muted on June 20th, 2011. Your public commenting privileges have been revoked until July 20th.

♦ Topic: Slaughterhouse Nine, confirmed dead.
In: Boards ▶ News ▶ Events ▶ America ▶ New England
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted on June 13th, 2011:
Yup. You heard me. The whole S9 down and out, from a couple surprising sources. Skitter, the creepy bug girl, supposedly got Siberian. Have my doubts, waiting for confirmation. What isn't in doubt- Siberian is gone, and with the living Unstoppable Force somehow stopped. The rest of the 9 weren't bullshit untouchable anymore. Picture of Crawler, turned into glass. Apologies for the crap quality. Cell phone from a distance. Apparently Mannequin and Shatterbird killed as well, and there were hero casualties. No surprise on either front- not a lot of people could last against those monsters. Except what the hell kind of crazy power turns people to glass?!
Edit:
Jack Slash and Bonesaw confirmed dead. Panacea. Yeah, the healer, took them both.

- Last edited June 15th, 2011

(Showing page 12 of 706)
▶ WorriesTooMuch (Cape wife)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Got confirmation. The PRT are sure of everyone except Jack, Bonesaw and Cherish. Jack and Bonesaw are believed dead as well. No one's sure right now. Looks like Cherish got away. With her powers, it's no surprise.

▶ Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Good. Fucking Siberian killed most of my family. Collapsed the building we were in. I hope she suffered.

▶ WorriesTooMuch (Cape Wife)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Holy shit! Condolences, man.

▶ Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Is fine. Unless you know someone that can let me see her corpse. I will shit down that bitch's throat if given the opportunity.
Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Normally, this would result in an infraction and possible mute, especially given your commenting history. However, considering the circumstances and who the subject is, I'm going to give you a pass. This time. Consider yourself warned.

Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
No. Is cool. I was willing to take the mute to say that. May her time in hell be eventful.

Pathfinder
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Seriously. The hell did they do to Crawler? I mean, fucker deserved it and worse. But he's a glass statue. Who has a power like that?

Math Geek
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Legend was in town. Maybe he had Eidolon on speed dial? Pop in. "Glass". Home in time for dinner.
That or maybe it's some poor sod who got a power so scary that they ONLY bring him out for shit like THIS. Or a new BB trigger? Powers tend to resemble those they trigger near... so... Shatterbird, maybe? No matter how you look at it, I really hope it works on Endbringers.

Pathfinder
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
The others, maybe. But Eidolon? Sure, sounds like something he *could* do. But a lot of people got hurt or killed in that fight. If Eidolon did it and caused that kind of body count... the Protectorate would censor it so hard that Brockton Bay would be on the banned words list alongside c*auldron. Off topic: are they ever gonna fix that?

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 13th, 2011:
Can't share all the details (I like you guys, but like my job better). But the "glass" thing was a Tinker weapon. That's already public knowledge. More than that will no doubt be in a press release I'll be sure to link here when it happens, if no one beats me to it. Until then, it's above my pay grade to say who gets to hear what.

(Showing page 57 of 406)

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Confirmed. Panacea is now calling herself Gaea. Turns out her powers also involve controlling plants. Showed up at the office yesterday. In battle armor made out of a tree or something (I wasn't in the building at the time). Had a partner that's probably "the villain formerly known as Skitter"- can't confirm. They asked for papers to register as indie heroes. Had a chat with Miss Militia in a private room.
Brought the missing corpses of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Still no sign of Cherish.

Pathfinder
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Indies? Well, they have power enough to make it work. Jack Slash? Fucking SIBERIAN. If they can do that, they could curb stomp basically everyone still in the city. Except maybe Legend. Is Legend still in town?
Math Geek
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Wait? Panacea showed up with bodies a day after. Her powers... think she may have faked the corpses?

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Don't think so. Can't see Panacea doing that. These assholes killed her sister. She wouldn't let them live.
Still, the bodies will be examined and verified in every possible way, forensically and with Thinkers. As was released publically elsewhere, we have confirmed proof that Bonesaw is known to capture innocent people and surgically alter them to resemble S9 members. Decoys and distractions. Remember- if you see someone who DOES have such a resemblance, contact the PRT *immediately*. They are most likely innocent and harmless victims that need help. But that doesn't mean they aren't dangerous. Bonesaw's been known to leave behind some truly horrific "surprises". Leave it to the professionals. It's what your tax dollars pay us for.
More details on this subject.

Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Think she kept them around a while for "fun"? Trust me, it doesn't take a lot to turn "healing powers" into the worst kinds of torture imaginable.

Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
I'd prefer you didn't speculate that a known and respected hero might be committing a number of crimes, many of which are serious felonies and possibly violations of the Geneva Convention.

Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
I'm not "speculating" anything. I just *really really hope*.

Mumm Ra
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Panacea has plant powers? Thought she was a healer. How does she have plant powers?

Math Geek
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
Think it was a second trigger? Her sister was killed and then all of a sudden she has crazy godlike powers. Would fit. Speaking of which, so does 'Gaea'.

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 14th, 2011:
No. Panacea's always had powers like that. She could instantly remove fungal diseases and parasites and viruses, including tinker made ones like the plague that Bonesaw released. Her power can't alter human brains- likely a Manton limit to stop her from accidentally lobotomizing herself- but other than that, if it's alive, she can change it.

A/N- Ah, the first of the PHO chapters. There are no words for how much I hated these. I like how they turned out, more or less, but they were a lot of work for not nearly enough gain.

Also: Human Decoy being verified in the login but not in the posts is *as intended*. I get so many
people pointing that out...
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Laserdream (Verified Cape)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• Private Messages
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦ Topic: Hero Team: Pantheon.
In: Boards ► Parahumans ► America ► New England ► Teams
Mumm Ra (Original Poster)
Posted on June 19th, 2011:

Photos of them, taken from my phone during their debut. Probs gonna be on the news, too. I'll archive links here as you bring them.

Actual news footage, Meet Gaea, Khepri, Minerva and Aceso
Interview with Khepri, Meet Respawn
Handing over Hookwolf, Meet Eki, confrontation between Minerva and Miss Militia
They take Purity down. HARD. Also. That's a lot of bugs.
Bombings
Someone pissed off the Khepri. Shouldn't have done that.
Holy shit, Valefor and Erigos get wrecked. Warning. NOT for the weak of stomach.

(Showing Page 2 of 107)

► Probably Stoned
Replied on June 19th, 2011:
I know it's been said before. But bug control. Fucking creepy. How did they kill Siberian with that?

► Mumm Ra
Replied on June 19th, 2011:
Dunno. She's invulnerable enough to trade punches with the Triumvirate and come out the winner. Maybe she had a different weakness? Maybe she was drowned?

► ThatDude
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Drowned? You mean forcing insects down her throat util she asphyxiated? Great. I didn't want to sleep this week anyway. What's the term for "fear of Khepri"?

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Sanity. Khepri's a badass, even if I like Aceso better.
Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 20th, 2011:

ThatDude
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Seriously? They're like fifteen at the most. Stop being creepy.

Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Hey. I'm 15. I am allowed to perv out all I want. In fact. I have a plan. First. I'm going to join their team. You guys just watch for the guy that's immune to death.

ThatDude
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Well. Alrighty then. Good luck with that. And enjoy your ban.

Human Decoy (Unverified Cape)
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
First. They're the ones dressed up in bedsheets. Greek gods are down with the freaky. Second. No Regrets!

Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 20th, 2011:
Good. Then I don't regret banning you.

Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Holy shit. Gaea's power is nuts. She just built like five city blocks worth of stuff in minutes. That's Triumvirate tier bullshit right there.

DaWizard
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
I always knew Panacea's power was badly underutilized. But this... isn't this kinda Class-S territory? I know it's just plants but I can't help but look at this. Then at Blasto. Then back to this. Then over at Nilbog. Not saying she'd ever do anything like that. there's gotta be a lot of people in the Protectorate seeing this and thinking exactly that sorta thing.

Mumm Ra
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Khepri interview. She wasn't near as scary as I expected her to be, Even if Vickory was being nice to her and I thought he was done with that 'on location' stuff and had a cush office job.

Also. You'll never guess who shows up to crash the interlude at the end.

ThatDude
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Holy shit. Is that who I think it is? Thought he was lying about being a cape. That's a weird ass power, though. Fits the owner.
Mumm Ra
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
I know, right? Did you see the part where Khepri was stunned when he disintegrated like that? I think he actually managed to make her nervous!

ThatDude
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Nah. She was probably coming up with exciting new ways to kill the unkillable. His power's not *that* good, and the owner's a moron. Grab him and throw him into a pit full of scorpions. Or man eating thorn bushes. The end of that fight.

Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Alright. That's quite enough. Namecalling and speculating on ways to disable a specific parahuman is pressing your luck in a few areas.

Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
Aaand that's their fifth member, huh? We got long range nightmare, badass action girl, the smart one, the scariest white mage in history, and now the damage soaker. Need a flyer, then it's everything you could ever want in a super team.

Mumm Ra
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
What do you think they'll do first? I'm betting they shove a tree up E88's collective asses. Minerva's jewish. As if you needed any excuses to go after those fucks.

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 21st, 2011:
I can see that. Not just Minerva, for that matter. I've seen some of their victims. Panacea's healed some. Besides, they've been talking about combat operations. Who else would they go after? E88's the only gang in town that's still standing.

Math Geek (banned)
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
She looked like she'd been punched. Do you think there's any validity to Minerva's claim?

GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Okay. Minerva was clearly deflecting attention. Did you see the way Gaea was reacting to Miss Militia's questions? She clearly was planning to keep the nazis around. Probably offer them spots on the team. She already has a history with Skitter/Khepri and Tattletale/Minerva. All respect I had for them is gone. Kudos to Miss Militia for seeing through their bullshit first.

Math Geek (banned)
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Towing the company line, huh? Standard government protocol... fling mud anyone who makes them look bad. Yeah. I'll side with the real heroes. You guys let fuckers like E88 move in and own this
town and do nothing to stop them. They come along and lays down the law, doing in two weeks what you couldn’t do it two decades. Then you have to trash their reps because nooo, can’t have anyone making you look bad.

Same shit happened to New Wave after they took down Marquis. Disgusting.

So why don’t you pack up your shit and leave BB to the real heroes. While we’re on the subject, I’d like my tax money back. Dunno what it costs to keep your magic tower up, bu I can think of better ways to spend my money.

► Celestial Orb
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Bloods in the water now, you can almost see the reporters circling.

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Normally that would result in a warning, but investigation reveals Math Geek as a dummy account for another user. Banned. And the main account gets an infraction and a two day mute. This topic is about the team itself. If anyone wants to continue discussions of the relative competence of the Protectorate in a given area. It belongs .

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Well that’s a thing. But you’re all missing the most important part. They now have a flyer! With lightning powers! See how confident she was for the camera, compared to the others? I think she’s a vet that came over from another team.

► GuyWithAGun (BB PRT)
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Edit: Sorry, mods. Removed the post. So, MG, I’d love to continue this conversation. Go ahead and PM me with your real account after you get back from vacation.

► Mumm Ra
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Yeah. She did seem like someone who’s been around a while. Dunno of any capes that have lightning and look like her. Could be someone from out west. Canada, maybe?

This is Gaea we’re talking about. Her powers? Eki could be a black dude in disguise. NOT Speculating! Just sayin we cant go by looks for a guess. Not for this team.

► Celestial Orb
Replied on June 22nd, 2011:
Black superhero with lightning powers? That’s like a shitty cliche from Earth Aleph. (Showing Page 36 of 107)

► Celestial Orb
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Damn. That is scary. Eki is a powerhouse.

► Stone Faced
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
She is. Do you think it was really necessary for her to hit Purity so hard?
Effing Tinkers  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
Nazis don't get any sympathy from me. Especially ones who incinerate people and blow up neighborhoods. I'd make a crass comparison to their historical actions, but I'm going to avoid the infraction.

Stone Faced  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
She was trying to be a hero. Then her identity was revealed and her daughter taken from her. I won't say I agree with what she did. I don't. But I can't help but think that she was backed into a corner. I can understand her lashing out.

Laserdream (Verified Cape)  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
Stone Faced: You're right. It was overkill. I'm sure it's been guessed at, but I'm also moonlighting as Eki. I'll get my cousin in here to vouch for me. The lightning was the armor I'm wearing. Biotech stuff. Super electric eel. It uses my lasers as a power source. For that and a few other tricks. Purity hit me. It caused a glitch in the armor's settings that activated the "anti brute" power levels for the attack. She was suppose to get something closer to a taser than a blast normally reserved for people like Hookwolf and Lung.

Stone Faced  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
Really? I guess that makes sense.

ThatDude  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
Awesome! Finally contact from one of the actual members! I was afraid we'd have to wait for Human Decoy to be unmuted. Speaking of which. Do you know what he said on pg 2?

Laserdream (Verified Cape)  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
... I do now...

Rebirth Flame  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
Oh god! Laserdream! I love you!

Stone Faced  
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:  
May I please PM you? It's kind of important.

A/N- Can you spot the canon characters? And sort them from the decoys? I mean, not counting the ones that actually say who they are. Or Dragon.

Also: this chapter has lots of stealth foreshadowing.

And Mushroom Riley makes a triumphant return!
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards. You are currently logged in, Rebirth Flame

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

You have three infractions and one warning.

♦ Topic: Hero Team: Pantheon.
In: Boards ➤ Parahumans ➤ America ➤ New England ➤ Teams
Mumm Ra (Original Poster)
Posted on June 19th, 2011:

Photos of them, taken from my phone during their debut. Probs gonna be on the news, too. I'll archive links here as you bring them.

Actual news footage, Meet Gaea, Khepri, Minerva and Aceso
Interview with Khepri, Meet Respawn
Handing over Hookwolf, Meet Eki, confrontation between Minerva and Miss Militia
They take Purity down. HARD. Also. That's a lot of bugs.

Bombings
Dude. That is a LOT of bugs.

Holy shit, Valefor and Erigos get wrecked. Warning. NOT for the weak of stomach.

(Showing Page 42 of 107)

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
I dunno. No more E88 or Merchants or ABB. And anyone who even looks at this town is gonna get stomped by Pantheon. No reason for the Protectorate at all.

► FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Hey guys! It's Aceso! I just got an account here.

► Zero Sum
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
You do know impersonating a cape is a good way to get banned, right?

► FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
It's true and I can prove it. I'll make Eki tell you.

► Laserdream (Verified Cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Ugh. Yeah, guys, it's her.

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Awesome! You're my favorite, Aceso. This city's been missing its badass ninja girl quota ever since Shadow Stalker left. Speaking of which, you would totally rock the crossbow look.

► FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Told you. And thanks, RF, it's good to have fans. <3
Crossbow's too bulky. I'm thinking a dart launcher. Probably based upon mantis shrimp physiology, with a nanoweave pneumatic system to step up the pressure by an order of magnitude or two.

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
No no no. You shouldn't give away information like that online. Gotta keep it mysterious to intimidate the bad guys. It's all about look and style. Hey, I got a few costume designs of my own. They were suppose to be for a different project, but you can look at them, you might like it.

► FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
That sounds like fun! I'm going on patrol now, be back around noonish.

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Don't mention it. I'd be getting ready for school right now. But Leviathan. See you when you get back.

(Showing Page 55 of 107)

► Zero Sum
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Video from Pantheon's base. It was also hit in the bombings. That cloud is NOT smoke. It's fucking bugs. Khepri's not letting ANYONE get close.

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
They'll be okay. Khepri's clearly fine. Can't imagine Osiris dying. And the Yggdrasil would die without Gaea. Eki has forcefields and power armor. And Aceso's the badass action girl. She could probably survive being decapitated or something.

► Endless Night
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Not how the Yggdrasil works. Sure, if Gaea's telling the truth, it'll 'die of illness' if she can't help keep it alive. That could take months to happen. The tree's no proof that Gaea survived. And Aceso's a "low/mid" brute. If she were shot, I'd agree with you. But if that bomb was anything like the ones used in the camps... there wouldn't be enough left of her to identify.

Let's face it. Pantheon was overconfident and stupid. They paid the price.
► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
... You are a horrible person who hates happiness. And Aceso said she was going on patrol and
would talk to me at noon. She wouldn't be back yet. So she wasn't even there when the bomb went
off. :p

► FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
We're okay. Khepri says it was the Fallen that initiated the attacks. Probably Valefor. We've
contacted the PRT and are on master/stranger lockdown. We don't have our own official website yet,
so expect updates here. I have to get back to work now. It might be a while before any of us have
time to post anything.

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
In your face, Emo!
Aceso. When you get that asshole, cut his eyes out with a rusty butter knife!

► Celestial Orb
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
wars. The fucking S9. And now the Fallen? It's like Murphy decided to out-Simugh the Simurgh.
How the blood soaked protestant hell is that town still standing?

► Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Because we are stronger than them. We're survivors. Knock us down, we get up. Push us and we
fight. The harder you hit us, the harder we hit back. That's what defines our city. And that's why
Pantheon is so great. They embody this city's spirit. The Fallen are going to learn that lesson.
Painfully.

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 25th, 2011:
Rebirth Flame. While I admire your passion. You have advocated the mutilation or worse of
criminals in this thread several times. And I'm still not sure what to say about your suggestion to
"turn all of E88 black." Your posting privileges have been revoked for a day. Please take this time to
develop some discretion.

(Showing Page 81 of 107)

► Inquisitor
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
And nothing of value was lost.
Except my lunch.
I was looking forward to digesting it. :( 

► CateatsDog
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Well, that was unnecessarily brutal. Jesus christ.
I mean, the guy deserved it. Did you see how excited he was to hear about the pain he caused?
That's fucked up. Speaking of which- that did NOT look like a 'he'. Are we sure Valefor isn't
female? Some weird Silence of the Lambs type psychosis going on there?
Also. I am now a vegetarian.
Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Aceso's power vs Valefor's. She does combat precognition, right? He ordered her to halt and then
told her not to notice he was there. But her power is the subconscious knowledge of how to defend
herself from harm and strike back. She blinded him and kept him from talking with a single move-
protecting herself from any danger his power might have on her. All without even noticing he was
there!
That is the definition of badass, right there.
Then when Khepri came down on the other one like a biblical plague. not gay, but for them, I'd
kinda like to be.

FungiRL (Unverified cape)
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Thanks. But my big sister says I'm too young to date. And she and Khepri are already destined for
each other.
Rebirth Flame seems to be right. Valefor's powers didn't interact with mine in a way he expected. I'm
glad my team told me to keep most of my traits secret. Figuring out how to fight without showing
what you're really capable of is fun. And it means you have surprises if you need them!

Shiny Ferret
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
... Well alrighty then. I'm now betting money that, with this revelation, people forget that these girls
just ripped off a man's face and then fed another's skin to bugs. The shipping wars have begun.

Khepri (unverified cape)
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Okay. I would, as one of the leaders of Pantheon (verification pending- Aceso or Eki will probably
confirm before they verify me) like to clear up a few things

1- I did not feed anyone's skin to bugs. What happened to Eligos were injuries of similar size and
depth to paper cuts. A lot of them, granted, but still only paper cuts. My power doesn't offer a lot of
options for nonlethal takedowns, and I didn't want to risk exposing him to any dangerous poisonous
insects while Gaea was not available. It was a situation where I needed to choose between protecting
an apparently disoriented Aceso, as well as potentially wounded civilians nearby, or the physical
comfort of a mass murderer that was putting them in danger. I believe anyone, if placed in the same
situation I was in, would make the same decision.

2- I am not involved with Aceso's sister. I am attracted to guys. Preferably muscular ones. Except
Osiris. Who is responsible for this stupid running joke in the first place.

3- We have a new 'silent' member. Blasto, a biotinker from Boston, has agreed to join our team. He
has skills that we believe will supplement our team's abilities greatly. Due to the nature of his powers,
and his unresolved criminal status, he'll be kept on base and certainly not involved in field operations.
His purpose is so that we can use tinker technology to improve our effectiveness. This brings us to
the next announcement.

4- This is the important one. We have already informed the Protectorate and they're sending out
announcements. At 4pm today, we will use the Yggdrasil to spread a fog throughout the city. Do not
be alarmed. It is a harmless mixture of water vapor and inert material that will cure anyone currently
under the influence of Valefor's power. The first of what we hope will ultimately be a cure for all
master/stranger related mind controls.

Rebirth Flame
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Sorry, Khepri. Love you like a sister, but if I were in your shoes, I'd have used bees. All the bees. Also, I'll be sure and scout the football team for you, 'kay? ;)

► Uber (Verified Cape)
Replied on June 26th, 2011:

► Laughing Mad
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
@ Shiny Ferret: good god, you're right. Bombings. Maimed supervillains. New recruit. Curing mind control (think Heartbreaker's next?)- this is all a huge freakin' deal- And I can't stop wondering about who the goddess of bees is dating.

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on June 26th, 2011:
Let us nip any possible romantic speculation in the bud (pun not intended) right now. Most members of this team are underage. Aceso, apparently, younger than most. If this looks like it's drifting toward a repeat of the "Vista Incident", the bans will be swift and merciless. This is your only warning.

♦ Private message from FungiRL:
Rebirth Flame: Alright. Here's the first set of pics. Kinda a veil dancer thing. You have the body to make it look good, and the powers. Probably even get away with using ribbons in combat. Swear I saw a movie like that.
Rebirth Flame: See. And another with those circus girls and the bedsheets. Bet you can do that.
Rebirth Flame: Gotta do it in dark colors, though.
Rebirth Flame: Just saw the news! Are you okay!? Please, answer as soon as you can. I'm worried. :
FungiRL: Oh thank god! Saw your post! What happened, is there anything I can do?
FungiRL: Lots of us got hurt. Including my sister. I want to make them suffer, but I'm afraid.
Rebirth Flame: Of what? Nothing should scare you.
FungiRL: If I do too much to them and get caught, it could hurt the team. I can't do that.
Rebirth Flame: Oh. You are in luck, girl. Here's my number. Call me before you start planning *anything*.

=======

A/N- In case you're wondering, all the PHO post typos are left untouched. For "realism".
Also... ah, the eventual reveal of who Rebirth Flame is. That was amongst my proudest moments.
I watched the Protectorate show up to take Valefor. Bizarrely enough, there were two woman with them that I didn't recognize. Power armor, the both of them. There was also Triumph, both Battery and Assault. I refuse to say their names in the reverse. And even the metal boy that I learned was called Weld. According to Taylor, he was nice.

We had come out in force as well. Khepri to my right. Eki and Osiris to the left. Minerva and Blasto off further to the right near the women in the power armors. I was in my Dryad armor. Mainly to hide my (lack of) injuries. I didn't know what conclusions they could come to. That was also part of why we didn't send any of our changelings to this.

"So, what's all this about?" Minerva asked. "One parahuman whose powers are disabled doesn't require half of Brockton Bay's parahuman forces. Or, for that matter, Haven's presence at all. Dragon? She makes sense, though seeing her in person is a little odd. What's the story?"

Dragon? Well, I had to assume the golden armor with the cross motif was the Haven member. Which left the one with the decidedly reptilian look to it to be Dragon. Well, makes sense.

"I'm here to see to it that Valefor doesn't influence anyone," the Haven woman stated. "I'm Rapture. I'm a tinker in anti-master/stranger techniques."

"Correction," Minerva stated. "Your specialty is actually in master/stranger effects. You may use it to counter others. But your tech is really meant to influence minds and perceptions. We're all adults here, no need to censor yourself for the public."

"... Fine. I'm a tinker who specializes in master/stranger technologies," she conceded. "We've determined Weld should be immune to almost any kind of mind control and illusion. Ideal for dealing with Valefor. Whom we were under the impression you would heal." Her voice was measuredly neutral. She seemed more annoyed than upset that we'd left Valefor more or less as he was when we captured him. A bit of Blasto's regeneration goo that would restore the skin, at least. But not much else.

"His body's both organic and inorganic, isn't it?" Lisa concluded. "Depending on whichever is more of a pain in the ass for powers to influence. He's basically immune to anything that has a Manton limit. Damn that's useful. Err, aside from all the other issues. Sorry Weld, don't mean to be insensitive."
"Hardly the worst I've had to deal with," Weld stated. "I'd trade it for being normal, but 'grass is always greener' and all that." He was strapping Valefor into something resembling a combination of a cage and an upright stretcher, and securing a special helmet to his face. "Protocol's done," he stated to the PRT soldiers.

Rapture moved over to the now fully restrained captive. "I doubt your power will work given your current injuries and restraints. But be aware that this helmet is designed to explode if it senses you trying to do anything with your power. You will not survive."

"So, the rest of your business?" I asked. "You have to be here for more than just him."

"Yes," Triumph stated. "We'd also prefer you to hand over Blasto. He's a dangerous and violent criminal."

"No," I stated. "You can have the psychopath. But we need Blasto."

"Need him?" Triumph asked. "What for? You're the most powerful biotinker on the continent."

"Am I?" I asked. I looked over at Minerva.

"They think you are," she replied. "In a way it's true. What they don't comprehend is that tinkers don't work like you work. Most tinkers come with a kind of internal mental library that lets them invent and comprehend. It's why tinkers can use each others' tech, at least to a limited degree. You don't have that. You just envision what you need and your power fills in the gaps. There's only what is and what will be, none of the myriad 'can be' stuff. You may be like a tinker, but you don't do what tinkers do. I'm sure Dragon and Rapture, at least, can back me on this."

Triumph looked toward the woman who was possibly the most powerful tinker on the planet. She nodded her agreement.

"We need Blasto," I took the opportunity to comment. "When we finished the Nine, I didn't turn over Bonesaw's equipment and research, as I'm sure you're all quite aware. We need him, so that we can use that tech."

Minerva started clapping. "Oh. I cannot believe you kept it from me THIS long. You don't have her along for Valefor. You have her here to make sure we didn't take control of Blasto!"
Triumph did not look terribly pleased at Minerva right now. But at least now I knew what the hell was going on.

"Oh," I said. "Well, what do you need to prove he's here of his own free will?"

"Give him a direct order," Rapture instructed. "An unusual one."

"Uh..." Okay, unusual? "Umm, Blasto, do a dance for us."

"I can't," he answered back. "Court order. Also, way to play up the whole Latino stereotype, boss."

Rapture waited a bit before responding. "Sleeping an average of five hours or less a day for weeks. Under the influence of caffeine,"

"I'm a tinker. What would your machine say if you pointed it at yourself?" Blasto interrupted.

Rapture continued on, ignoring Blasto. "As well as a significant amount of cannabis."

"It's for my glaucoma. Which Gaea cured."

"Which was consumed this morning," Rapture deadpanned.

"Well, I didn't want it to go to waste."

"My equipment includes a lie detector."

"Fuckin tinkers," Blasto muttered. "Well, in that case, I plead the fifth and want to see my lawyer to talk about unlawful searches."
"You're not under arrest," Rapture sighed. "We were here to make sure you weren't being mind controlled, and rescue you if we had to. Your use of illicit substances doesn't matter to us."

"Awesome," he responded. "Say, if you're not doing anything later, maybe we should get together and see if we can cross our specialties?"

"That is another part of why we're here," Dragon answered, choosing to ignore the innuendo. "We'd like to know how you achieved a cure for Valefor's power, and then managed to mass produce and distribute it. I admit we collected samples and ran every test we could. We're just not seeing it. A combination of human DNA and short lived prion-like chemicals. There are some who suspect you're lying, of course. So we are seeking confirmation, one way or the other. If it turns out it works and you can mass produce it, it might be useful in dealing with other masters. Perhaps even Simurgh encounters."

I shook my head. "Sorry. It'll work on at least some other masters." But not all. Myself, for example. "Definitely not the Simurgh. Unless there's something very strange which we don't know about her. Blasto can explain it better."

"Bonesaw," he started. "From what I've seen, her research focused very heavily on the nature of powers. I've only barely scratched the surface and I'm learning things I never even imagined before. How powers work, where they come from, how they don't work. Well, six hours of technobabble summed up in seconds: that cloud was Valefor's own genetic material. Breath it in, it soaks into your system, and suddenly you're part of the power's Manton Limit. Basically, we tricked Valefor's power into thinking everyone in the city was really him. Lasts only a few minutes, but that's enough to remove all existent master/stranger influences."

"That's... both less and more than we were hoping," Dragon acknowledged. "A drug that can protect against any master/stranger mind control. But only if we already have their genetic material.

"Live genetic material," I corrected. "Won't work with dead cells. We're hoping there's more we can do, in time. It's at least part of why we have no interest in giving up Blasto. The other part is that we promised his safety. If we were to entertain the idea of letting him go, it would require you provide him with full amnesty."

"That's sweet, boss," he said. "But contrary to the lovely lady's instruments. I really am under the influence. It's called 'I'm a tinker'. You have the best equipment and the best resources I've ever seen for my powers. If you want me to leave, you'll have to get Aceso to chase me out with a pitchfork."

"We are willing to purchase your equipment," Dragon offered. "If you feel you cannot trust a
government offer, then the Guild is an independent hero organization that I work with. We operate only to seek and destroy Class S and Kill Order threats. If you won't trust them, either, then I am willing to buy the materials myself, from my own personal wealth. We can arrange a sharing of what data I extrapolate from her notes as part of the offer."

"Not interested," Khepri replied, voice hard. "I don't know you well enough to have an opinion. But the people you choose to associate with are not the kind of people I'm willing to trust with Bonesaw's technology."

I nodded my agreement of Khepri's statement. Even if I didn't fully agree with it. Dragon was always fair and treated me well during Endbringer scenarios, which were the only times we ever actually met. Still, there was no way we'd be giving up Riley's research. It was too valuable and too important. Not just as a bargaining chip, but because my final goal, now and always, was to counter the Passengers themselves. Khepri's response was our best reason to say 'no' that we could actually use.

"We're willing to give you the anti-master technology," I offered. It was true. "It's easily replicated and, honestly, we want it to be used. You'll have a harder time using it that we do. I use my power to bridge a lot of the gaps. Shortcuts you won't be able to take."

"In exchange?" Dragon asked.

"It would be nice to have an amnesty for some of our members," I replied. "Khepri, Minerva and Blasto have all had problems with the law. I'd feel more comfortable if those weren't hanging over their heads."

"That's not how this works," Triumph insisted. "You want to be be heroes, then they can turn themselves in and actually accept punishment for their crimes. This kind of backroom dealing is a perversion of justice."

"I'll see what I can do," Dragon replied. "I have no legal authority, but a lot of people are willing to at least listen to me when I make requests."

"What?" Triumph looked at Dragon. "You can't be entertaining this."

"Triumph, buddy," Assault interrupted, whispering to him. Our equipment meant we heard every word of it, and I'm pretty sure he knew we would. "You know this shit happens. Besides, you
wanna tell me any of them are capable of getting a fair trial? After palling up with the Mayor, saving basically everyone in the city from death-by-Bonesaw? Any conviction they get is basically gonna be 'community service, keep doing what you're already doing'. Frankly, it's easier just to accept their very generous offer and walk away pretending we were the ones doing them a favor. It's what the Mayor is doing.

Triumph sighed. "Okay, I'll see if I can convince the Director to work something out," he agreed. "I do believe that's everything?" He phrased it as a question and looked toward the others.

Rapture nodded. "My part's done. I am under orders to stay with Valefor. Even if there's no real need for it at this point."

Dragon shook her head. "I want to talk to them a bit more," she stated. "You guys go on ahead, it's nothing official. I'll catch up with you later."

Triumph didn't look happy about that, either. But he still left with the others. Being Dragon had its perks, it seemed.

============

A/N- And back to chapters that make me happy inside again.
The others left as Dragon watched us and we watched back.

"I'd prefer we had some privacy. Never know who might be watching," she said.

I nodded. A brief alteration transformed the feet of my Dryad into Yggdrasil. It sank a little into the ground, and made the connections I needed to control my entire network. My power had such a bizarrely arbitrary concept of what 'touch range' meant. Then again, Taylor's power was equally arbitrary about what counted as a 'bug'. We still hadn't figured out how to make a humanoid body that she could control automatically. But our 'zergling' experiments of six limbed dog monsters was far, far more successful. Damn Passenger bullshit.

I connected. The full access to my Yggdrasil network. It was heady, linking into an entire city like this, even if only from below. My construct below the boat graveyard was almost ready. Cost more energy to manage than I'd realized.

There was the start of a fungal infection. That was getting increasingly frequent as the native flora was evolving to better deal with the alien intruder, however seemingly superior that intruder was to them. I spotted them daily, now. It was quickly subsumed into part of my organism. I also dedicated some of the "floating mass" of the Yggdrasil to the task of building walls around us, and even a ceiling. The inside was bioluminescent, and had a sort of tranquil beauty to it.

Dragon looked around. "Impressive control," she complimented.

"I've built it before," I replied. One of my personal projects. Every time I invent a new application, I stored the pattern as a seed. Sort of a genetic code database, letting the construct follow a template instead of needing my mind to contain everything. This particular room, which we already had a couple copies below ground, was meant as a sort of partial sensory deprivation lounge. Optimal comfort. Lisa had one as her own personal 'go away, migraine' room.

I also added a very minor tanning function to one, so I could work on the discoloration of having a good portion of myself surgically replaced.

"There are a number of things to talk about" Dragon informed us. "I'm not sure who knows what, or what you're comfortable letting the others know."
"They stay," Taylor responded. "There aren't any significant secrets between us."

I nodded in agreement. "After Valefor's stunt... well, nothing left for us to hide, really."

"Okay," she nodded. "First. I think you've probably already figured out that this body is just a machine."

Minerva spoke up. "Yeah. It's really good, but there's a few tells. I doubt anyone else would have figured it out. The way you're so willing to suicide attack Leviathan is also a pretty good hint that you like the remote body trick."

She nodded. "I'm under the influence of a master effect. I can't go into details, the best I can offer is a warning. I'm compelled to obey the legally recognized authority of whichever region I am currently operating in. These suits are an imperfect counter to this, giving me more options than I might otherwise have, but it's still a significant constraint."

"Meaning that if the order is given, you'll be fighting against us just as hard as anyone else," Minerva concluded.

Dragon nodded. Fuck.

"I am also under orders not to do anything to help you," she added.

Dammit.

"However, I don't have to prevent others from doing so," she added. That's helpful. "I have a friend who wants to offer an apology. That's the nature of this private meeting."

I felt Taylor tense up. "You fucking didn't," she said, her voice going cold.

"This suit's bandwidth capacities are limited. While you're talking, I won't be able to interact. Please. Just listen to him."

"Okay," I agreed, looking over at Skitter. "We can do that much."

A full three dimensional replica of a man appeared next to Dragon's suit. Holographic, I could tell because the lighting of his body didn't match the room, and it placed no pressure on the Yggdrasil. But it was incredibly detailed and fine tuned. I recognized him and immediately knew why Taylor
went into 'Skitter mode'.

"Armsmaster," Skitter's voice was ice cold.

"I'm going with 'Defiant', now," the man answered. The usual terse man I'd come to know. He lifted his arm and pulled the sleeve up, revealing the bones of a metallic skeleton. "Legally, both Armsmaster and Colin Wallis are dead. Courtesy of Mannequin."

"My condolences," Skitter said slowly and dryly.

"I believe we're both pragmatic people," Armsmaster continued. "Rational. Above social drama. That a drawn out apology, however genuine, would just be an insult to both of us. I am sorry, and I do mean that. And I'd like to prove it by helping you."

"That would be an excellent start," Skitter responded back. I could feel the agitated behavior of Taylor's relays as they interacted with the Yggdrasil.

"First," he said. "I am aware of who Aceso is."

FUCKING DAMMIT!

"My analytic technologies are quite good," he stated. "It's unlikely anyone other than Dragon and myself could make the connections."

"Thank you for the warning," I managed to utter. My mouth was dry and my heart was pounding in my ears. This is more than I'd bargained for. And I'd bargained for being remembered as the next Nilbog and hunted down as a Class S threat.

"Assuming you're correct, of course," Skitter stayed calm. I could almost feel her telepathically trying to make me shut up after my unfortunate decision to speak. I kept making mistakes like that. Stupid, stupid, Amelia. You can do better.

"Yes," Armsmaster nodded. "Assuming. Still, that's not help so much as putting us on the same page. If you can forgive her, surely I'm not an impossibility?"
"Get back to me after you've saved my best friends' lives," Skitter responded.

"Fair enough," he said. "It's obvious to everyone, including the Protectorate, that you're intending a power play against them. They're anticipating it. Building a case against you and yours."

"We already know that," Skitter snapped.

"Did you know I have approximately twelve years worth of dirt on the PRT?" The man asked. "Not just Shadow Stalker and myself and Piggot. Although a lot of it is Piggot. The woman's had an... interesting... career. Dating back as far as Nilbog."

"Nilbog? That explains so fucking much," Minerva exclaimed. "And these idiots gave her promotions just to keep her silent, I'm sure."

"Records involving them outright lying to the public on multiple occasions," Arm(sm)aster continued.

"And what of your loyalty to your former comrades?" Skitter asked. "This sounds an awful lot like betrayal."

"My loyalty is to my Country first, and the Protectorate second," Arm(sm)aster snapped. Skitter got to him. "The PRT is a poison to both, and I owe them nothing."

"You're using us," Skitter spit back. "To fight a war you can't."

He nodded. "I'm giving you the weapons to win a war that you've already started and more. I do want to help more, and so does Dragon. What you know is nothing compared to what I know. And what I know is nothing compared to what she knows. You've already started down the right path. If you can hurt the local PRT enough... play your political cards right..."

"You want us acknowledged as legal authorities in the region," Minerva responded. "Then Dragon will be able to work with us."
"As long as you don't make an enemy of the President, yes, we'd then be free to offer our assistance in every possible matter," Armsmaster confirmed. "We are taking a risk. Putting a lot of faith in the idea that, at the very least, you won't use this to betray us. You could, of course, easily. A kill order would be the least of our worries."

"I understand," I responded. No, I really didn't think I did. This was huge. This was... "Mutually Assured Destruction."

He nodded again. "It is that, I suppose. An acceptable start for showing I'm serious about my 'second chance'?"

Using our own mission statements? Fair enough.

"I think so," I offered. I looked over at Skitter.

Taylor sighed. "I suppose it'll have to do."

"For what it's worth, you would have made an excellent Ward," Armsmaster offered.

"No, I really wouldn't have," my partner sighed.
We watched Dragon leave. She was polite enough, of course, but as she had said, she couldn't help. Having Armsmaster- Defiant, now- do it instead? Sounded like the kind of loophole that should have been thought of.

Minerva spoke up. "He's sincere," she said. "After a fashion, at least. Socially inept, but well meaning enough."

Sounds like you just described more than half our team, I thought. Taylor. Respawn. Blasto. Myself.

We made our way inside.

Crystal spoke up. "So, is that it? No more psychotic assholes? No more crises? No more people randomly coming back from the dead to offer world altering information and advice? Can things go back to what passes for normal, at least for a while?"

"Uh... probably? Anyone else got any major problems that we can't put off?" I looked around, no one offered anything. "Okay, yeah. I think we have a chance to breathe now."

Suddenly, my head jerked to the side and my face stung. "THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU!" Crystal screamed at me. I brought my hand up to my cheek. She slapped me! "Recruiting a couple supervillains? That I could handle. Planning to fuck over the Protectorate? Fine, whatever. You don't grow up in New Wave without seeing that their system just doesn't work. But that!" She pointed at Clarice, who of course didn't come out to greet the heroes. "That is mother fucking BONESAW! And you didn't even WARN ME!"

She looked around. "How many of you knew!?" She demanded of the others. I was the one who was just hit, and she was the one crying.

Minerva brought up a hand, followed by Khepri. Followed by Clarice.

"Suspected, didn't know," Blasto offered. "It's hard for tinkers to hide what they are, especially from other tinkers."
"Not a clue," Respawn admitted. "Found out not long after the explosion, same as you."

"Of course. All the fucking villains on the team," Crystal scoffed. "Christ, Amy, do you have any idea what you've done? She's one of the Slaughterhouse Nine. You can't trust her."

"She can so!" Clarice insisted. "I would never hurt my big sister. Besides, she's the leader of the Nine now!"

"What?" Crystal turned back toward me. Her voice quivered. "Did you do?"

"The best way to stop the Nine," I defended myself. "Bonesaw was a living biological weapons factory. She was planning a super plague. One that would evolve faster than I could stamp it out. I... I offered to join the team... so they wouldn't have to invent a weapon that could get around my power."

"That... is possibly the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Crystal responded.

"If it helps," Khepri added. "She followed it up by challenging Jack for leadership, covering him in acid, and then disbanding the group."

"So... you're saying that Gaea 'dissolved' the Slaughterhouse Nine?" Respawn offered.

Crystal moved her hand and pointed it at Respawn, then fired a burst of light. He was struck in the face, and had been replaced before the body hit the ground.

"Okay, I probably deserved that," he replied. "But seriously, this isn't the deal you make it out to be. Yeah. Bonesaw. Who renounced the name. Clarice has been nothing but helpful and friendly. She saved the lives of half of the people in this room. And that includes you, too, Crystal. That armor you're wearing is her design. The surgery you needed? Also her. So, really, she saved you twice."

"Conductive nanowave lattice designed to work in concert with your forcefield and energy generation," a voice came. Riley's. She'd come up in person, still wearing the control suit for the construct. "87% energy transfer efficiency. Reinforced to absorb kinetic and energy attacks, distributing them across a wide area and improving forcefield effectiveness by between 212 and 263 percent depending upon attack type."
"Think about it," Respawn continued. "That explosion got through your shield when it was over three times its normal strength, and armor that's way better than bulletproof, and still had enough power to almost kill you. What would you look like without her equipment?"

"She saved my life, too," Lisa volunteered. "I went low and hid behind the table, and it still tore me apart. Hell, it took four people to save me."

"You actually died," Respawn added. "I had to reset you thirty two times before she could get Gaea stabilized enough to save you."

"I thought it was something like that," Lisa nodded. "Fuck, though, that's a lot."

"Once every three minutes at first," Respawn replied. "Losing several seconds every time I had to establish a new link. We were down to less than a minute before we got Gaea conscious. Five minutes more, and you wouldn't be here."

"And then there's me," I said. "She used her construct to shield me from the worst of the explosion. Then whatever it took to put me back together."

"Blasto was needed for that," Riley acknowledged. "I saved you, but his tech put you back together."

"That's all retrospect!" Crystal insisted. "Just because it worked doesn't mean it wasn't stupid! And you knew that, or you wouldn't have kept it a secret."

I looked down. "No. I needed her help, even from the beginning," I admitted. This drew a few looks. "There are... I know where powers come from. They're parasites. Extra dimensional parasites that are manipulating us. Doing everything in their power to make us violent and destructive. I don't know what they gain from this, or if they're aliens or demons or magic or whatever. All I know is that they're the enemy of every person on this planet. Bonesaw... Riley... knows more about these 'Passengers', as she calls them, than anyone else alive."

"That sounds truly, certifiably, insane," Crystal muttered.
"It makes sense," Minerva replied. Then she paused. "Wait, what were we talking about?"

"That's the problem!" I yelled. "Every time I try to explain this to you, you forget!"

"Forget what?" Taylor asked. "Are... are you okay?"

"She's okay," Minerva replied. "She's fine. It's the rest of us that have a problem."

"Bonesaw's influence?" Crystal asked. Of course her mind would slip back to that.

"No," Minerva answered. "None of us tripped Rapture's tech. We're clean. And it's effecting Blasto and Respawn, one hasn't given her an opportunity, and the other is functionally immune to everything she could attempt. This is beyond parahuman ability... it's..."

She almost had it. I felt my heart sink.

"I... right," she muttered. "As I was saying, Riley's no threat to us. She's loyal to Amelia on a number of levels. As long as you're no threat to her, you're... oh..."

"What, what is it?" I asked hopefully. Maybe her power DID get around it!

"Nothing," Minerva responded. She looked at Riley, who avoided both our gazes. "Thinker migraine coming in hard. Nothing you need to worry about. Riley isn't going to turn on us. If anything, she's the most loyal person in this group. As long as we don't trust her with any important judgment calls, at least."

Riley nodded and looked up, offering a smile. "I'll be sure to tell you about everything."

"Speaking of which..." Crystal replied. "Are there any other secrets? Swear to me there's nothing left that you're hiding from me."

"A few," I admitted. "We... we're basically holding a supervillain hostage. "He has an incredibly useful thinker power. Plus his civilian identity is wealthy and influential."
"And he's not going to betray us?" Crystal asked.

"Can't," I replied. "He consented to a form of mind control."

"You can't be serious," Crystal drug her fingers through her hair as she collapsed into a seat. "Christ, Amy. When I said that what you did to Victoria was an honest mistake? I meant it. But mistakes are things you're suppose to stop doing. There's a justice system for a reason. You're suppose to send criminals to prison. Or kill them if you have to. Not collect and enslave them."

"We would have had to kill him," Taylor responded. "His power is insane. He can create two realities, do different things in both, and the choose the one he likes better. He could attack us once per hour for the rest of our lives, and we'd never know about it until the one that succeeds."

"Fuck," Respawn muttered. "How did you beat that?"

"Skill, luck, planning, and liberal applications of Bonesaw brand high octane nightmare fuel," Minerva responded. "I still can't look at spaghetti."

"Is... please tell me that's all, Amy," Crystal pleaded.

"Just one more," I answered. "Before we handed over E88, I gave them a short lived, time released symbiont that'll allow them to recover from almost any poison in minutes. Plus let their skin release enzymes that digest containment foam."

Crystal started laughing. It wasn't a happy laugh. "Fucking hell. Amy. Why? You know what kinds of monsters they are."

"Would it help if I told you they weren't all selfish reasons?" I asked. "Part of it, yes, was to hurt the Protectorate. To hurt them for trying to hurt us. But I can't bring myself to hate the captives we had. Purity was trying to protect her family. Cricket and Stormtiger were in it for loyalty to their friends. Crusader... he's in love with Purity, believe it or not. And Night? We killed her husband in front of her, and thanks to all the shit from her childhood, she doesn't even have the ability to mourn."

She just stared. But she didn't speak up.
"They made mistakes. Bad ones. They did bad things. But look at us. Other than you and Respawn, we're all guilty of some really bad stuff ourselves. Arguably worse, depending on which of us we're talking about." I continued.

"Second chances," Crystal stated. "I get it. So what's their 'second chance'?

"They break out, and go underground. Purity gets her daughter back. After that, we never see or hear from them again."

"Theo, her step son, he triggered," Crystal informed me. "He was talking to me online. I'll show you the messages. I'll also show you some other messages. Because your 'little sister' has been hanging out there, too."

Oh, this won't be pretty.
I sat across from my daughter. She was wearing a very different costume this evening than when she left this morning. "You know," I said dryly. "When you said you'd go back to talk some sense into your cousin, this was not exactly the result I was expecting."

She offered a sheepish smile. "Sorry, mom. She's not going to give this up. It's not a phase. It's not even about being a hero. She's turned this into a quest. A legacy."

I sighed. I knew those. I knew what they cost. I looked over at the empty chairs, the ones meant for Neil and Eric. I could almost see them still sitting there.

"Mom?" Crystal asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sweetie, I'm fine," I replied. "Just memories. My own quests and legacies. How they've changed over time."

"I have to stick by her, mom," Crystal continued. "She's... she's hurting. Badly. The guilt over Victoria is tearing her up inside. Driving her to do some things that... Well, you saw that Yggdrasil of hers. Her new 'friends'. She's not thinking straight right now, and no one else is going to help her."

"Her choice of names? Both in and out of costume," I said. Amelia. Amelia Lavere. That stung me. I could only imagine what my sister was going through, but she refused to talk about it. And Mark was... I wasn't sure what to think of him, now. Whatever Amy had done inside his head had made him... well, aggressive wasn't the right word. Assertive, perhaps. More than he'd ever been before, certainly. More outgoing, friendly, and confident. Too outgoing, honestly.

That, one might imagine, should be a good thing. But it was damaging my sister's marriage. Mark's dependence upon Carol was no longer there, and it had been the constant for over twenty years now. Coupled with the death of one daughter and the loss of another. I worried that their relationship wouldn't survive.

"That, too," Crystal agreed, pulling me from my thoughts.. "I'll need a name of my own to work with Pantheon."

"Something pretentious and divine, huh?" I asked. "Athena?" I was in no position to argue with her.
She was an adult. She'd made up her mind. New Wave was already dead. If any of us kept being heroes, it wouldn't be together. Our team is gone, it's going to be hard enough simply to preserve our family. What remains of it, anyway.

"Don't think I can," Crystal replied. "Already have someone using the Roman version of the name. Plus, I'd rather something really obscure. Feels less weird that way."

"So, the new costume?"

"Yeah, it's kind of unbelievable. It's actually alive. Made out of something that merges with my forcefield to make it even better. Can turn nearly invisible. Uses my lasers as a power source to make lightning and EMP attacks. A battlestaff that channels my powers for close quarters combat. Strength increase using my forcefield for lifting..." she hesitated.

"Like Glory Girl's," I concluded. "Sounds like little Amy learned some impressive lessons in New Wave. You're basically running around with the best of all our powers and then some, aren't you?"

"Kinda," Crystal replied. "Are you upset?"

"A little jealous, I admit." That wasn't the part that was really eating me. Was what Amy said before true? Could she have built stuff like this years ago? Could all of us have been wearing stealth battle armor that made our powers stronger? With three years of practice, how much better could she have been? If we had encouraged her to really exercise the full extent of her powers, would my husband and son still be alive?

"Yeah," Crystal agreed. "I'm a little jealous, too. Amy's powers are insane. And the way it works alongside Skitter's... I don't know if there's anything those two couldn't accomplish if they wanted."

Except giving me back my family.

....

"... As part of our ongoing efforts to heal the wounds of our city, both fresh and old..." Khepri spoke to the audience at their first really major showing. And what a showing it was.
The stunt of making the Yggdrasil base was under reported. No surprise, all considered. A new group, in the immediate aftermath of the Slaughterhouse Nine? They barely got local attention. This time was quite different. No one was making the mistake of ignoring Pantheon again. Of being the station that had to use recycled footage from other sources. I spotted camera crews from Boston and even as far away as New York. Mayor Christner was here as well, of course, enjoying the local fame.

We were now here at the edge of the boat graveyard. Myself and a handful of others off to the side of the crowds, in a bit of a VIP section. People expected to offer quick speeches and short offerings of thanks and gratitude and praise, but not important enough to stand on stage the whole time. Or, in my case, to show support to my daughter and my niece. I had opted to come in costume. Sure, my name and face were publicly known, but the symbolism of showing in "uniform" is not to be underestimated.

"We intend to make Brockton Bay the city it once was. Not merely before Leviathan. But the revival of an era most of us on this stage are too young to remember as more than just stories. The city our parents and grandparents remember."

That got a series of applause. Locals, the older ones mostly. I didn't know who was writing their speeches, but they had this 'local heroes' approach down in a way that New Wave never quite accomplished. Whomever it was should have a career in politics. Or, at least, writing for politicians.

One of the men near the front was watching Khepri as she gave her speech with an unmistakable look on his face. He was not exactly attractive. Tall, thinning hair, clearly overworked and overstressed, but he cleaned up well enough for this event. I walked up to him. Theoretically cutting in whatever 'line' existed for speech giving. No one complained. Orders were scripted, and I wasn't meant to go on stage at all.

"You'll give it away," I said to him.

He looked over at me as if he hadn't realized I was at this event. "Oh! Sorry. I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't have to be a thinker to spot that 'look'," I said. "I feel the same way, seeing mine up there."

"Look?" He asked. He knows, now, he's just playing dumb.
"One part pride, one part nostalgia, one part loneliness, and one part fear for all the things you can no longer protect her from," I offered.

"Oh," he nodded. "That look. Was I that obvious?"

"Only slightly less than whatever crazy thing they're going to do to show off for the cameras. I'm betting you already know."

He smiled. "Yeah. Actually, it was my idea."

"Want to share with the clueless outsider?" I requested.

"And ruin your opportunity to experience all the 'shock and awe'?” He asked back.

"That's for the kids to enjoy," I countered. "I'm too old for that sort of thing. Too much excitement's bad for the blood pressure."

"It'll be a long time before you are 'too old'," he chuckled. "But you've just given me a mental image that I should really feel bad about."

"You can share that at least, right?" I offered what I've been told is a charming smile.

"Well, have you ever wondered what that tub of lard we call a Mayor's arteries looked like?"

"That is awful," I laughed.

"Speaking of which, almost my turn to play my part in this show."

"Well, good luck, Mister..." I extended my hand with the implied question.

"Danny," he replied, shaking my hand. Strong grip. "Danny Hebert."

There were a few cheers as the Mayor took the mic back from Khepri. "Introducing the architect of the new ferry plan, Daniel Hebert."

He strode up the stairs to the stage- they had a real one this time- with the same confidence I'd seen exhibited by Legend. "Thank you, Mayor," he said with a voice that was all business. As he started his speech, it wasn't hard to realize who had helped his daughter with hers.

==========

A/N- This chapter makes me smile.
Taylor's dad is actually really good at speeches, I realized. He had more stage presence than our Mayor, who tended to play the 'everyone's buddy' angle of political showmanship. He didn't quite match up to Taylor when it came to holding the crowd's attention, but the powers and the battle armor, even if she had one of the least effective armors of the current team, gave a certain intimidation factor that no normal human being could hope to achieve. At least, to the general public.

He finished smoothly enough, receiving more than polite, but not overwhelming, applause. Then handed the microphone back over to myself. "Thank you, Mister Hebert," I responded. And I felt silly, as I was already calling him 'Danny' on the occasions when we met. Now for the handful of questions.

"How do you feel about the escape of the E88 members you captured last week?" One of the reporters asked.

I frowned. It was our plan, so I felt pretty good about it in a pretty bad way. Still, not something I wanted to talk about. "Let's just say that if they return to this city we're ready. We dealt with them before, and we're stronger now than ever. But I'd prefer we focus on the current subject of this event."

"Why are you doing this now, then there's still so much damage left in the city proper? Wouldn't this time and energy be better spent on more pressing concerns?"

"As Mister Hebert explained better than I could, the ferry project brings better access to the north side of the city," I answered. "Which is the portion that, at the moment, needs help most desperately. In addition... frankly... the boat graveyard isn't much of an obstacle for us. Removing it also offers a bit of a selfish reward, in addition to the good it does for the city."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Absolutely," I replied. "My powers still obey the basic laws of physics. I cannot create things ex nihilo. Iron is one of the raw materials we need a great deal of, and we need a large reserve of it for future projects. The boat graveyard represents a lot of iron."

You guys came for the show, here's the show.
"And, as I said, it's not really much of an obstacle. Eki, mind taking your position?"

My cousin flew to her position near the center of the mess of busted ships. This part was honestly more about appearance, and implying to the Protectorate that we had far greater limits on our power than we actually did. Still, it would help having her there. Speeding the process, taking stress off of my power. Didn't want a repeat of what happened when I built our base.

The police had already cordoned off the beach, before this press show even began. A lot of people had come to watch this. We didn't want anyone too close to the fireworks. I, meanwhile, had walked over to a small Yggdrasil tendril and wound my grasp around it. Some cameras would still be focused on me. I closed my eyes. Not necessary, but again, showmanship.

At which point, the vines started coming up around the sides of one of the larger vessels in the graveyard. Eki aimed down at the vessel, and fired. A steady stream of electricity poured into the metal of the ship, bleeding out into the water. My Yggdrasil drank it up, converting to usable energy so it could truly 'flex' its muscle. The screams of the metal hull being peeled away like a wrapper reached us on the shore, and drowned out the surprised shouts of the gawkers. The ship vanished below the murky water.

Then another set of tendrils, and another ship, and more lightning. Then a third. All captured clearly on camera. All the footage the camera crews would need for at least the next week. Our sort of apology to Taylor and Danny, allowing his dream to be the more visible and exciting looking detail we covered today, because it wouldn't be the most significant.

"It'll take the better part of the day to completely clear the wreckage," I told the onlookers. "You are certainly welcome to stay to watch. However, we'd like to move on to our next announcement. Commissioner Micheals, if you will?"

The local head of police, an older gentleman who had had what was well and truly one of the worst jobs in the city for the last decade, stepped up onto the stage. Aceso brought him the control system for one of our changelings. Meanwhile, one of my Yggdrasil tendrils brought up our new 'M4' changeling models.

"This is the Model Four Police," I told the audience, gesturing at the construct. It was larger than most humans, at approximately six and a half feet, and bulkier as well. We didn't want to give anyone the impression that we could build superhuman soldiers the size of, say, a teenage girl. "Or M4P, if you prefer. It is, essentially, a scaled down variant of my Dryad armor. Not as powerful, but significantly lighter and easier to maintain."
Micheals was in the full equipment, which amounted to little more than long gloves, boots, and a helmet now. He lifted his arm up, and the changeling responded in kind.

"The M4 is operated by remote control, anywhere in the city. However, it does require specific stations for recharge and repair. Its operation time in the field is up to three days of normal exertion, or as low as seven hours at maximum ability. Capable of ignoring up to medium arms fire, and withstanding punishment that would lethal in a normal human being. Even if you do have a weapon or power capable of killing it... there is no harm to the pilot."

By now, Micheals was getting into things, testing its movement and fine dexterity.

"It's capable of any physical movement a human body is," I supplied. "Can lift up to a ton. Run at over thirty miles an hour. Scale vertical surfaces, as long as that surface can support their weight. Has an assortment of nonlethal takedown measures such as tranquilizer darts and gas, and a taser. And has several enhanced senses, such as echolocation and infrared vision. If we were using PRT guidelines, they're Mover 3, Brute 4 or 5, Thinker 3 to 5. Shaker and blaster 2. More than a match for even an army of ordinary gang members, and capable of holding their own against most parahumans. They are expendable, leaving the pilots free to make decisions without concern for the safety of themselves or other pilots."

That earned murmurs in the crowd, and a lot of smiles from the local police officers. They knew they would be the ones using these things.

"This equipment will be made available to every police station. A similar model, specialized for rescue emergencies, the M4R, will also be provided to fire departments and others for dangerous but nonviolent first responder purposes, such as bomb disposal. The M4s can be used for cross purposes, if needed. That way, our city no longer needs to force good men and women to risk their lives to protect our citizens."

I handed the mic off to the Commissioner. "Thank you, Gaea," he paused. The changeling had spoken alongside him in a deeply baritone voice. Aceso moved over and tapped the side of the helmet, then removed it.

"I can see these will take a little getting use to," he said with a chuckle. Some of the crowd joined in. "They have an excellent command voice."

I nodded. "We included loudspeaker and silent functions as well, for when they're needed."
"Well, yes, thank you again," he smiled. Genuinely. He turned back toward the crowd. "I do believe I speak for every officer on the force when I express my gratitude and appreciation for Pantheon's incredibly generous gift to the city. I have assigned a number of exemplary officers to work with Pantheon, learning the use of this equipment. When they are properly trained, they will train the rest of our city's police forces."

Another nod from me, even though it was unnecessary. "We will use this opportunity to take back the streets from the gangs and drug pushers, and make our city one of the cleanest and safest places to live in the world."

He waited for the cheers to subside. I was okay with that. The police in this town needed this kind of morale boost. Had needed it for as longer than I'd been alive. Had to be rough, living in a city where you go to bust a prostitute and Skidmark launches your squad car through the side of a building. Granted, these M4s wouldn't have helped much, before. Against trash like the Merchants? Certainly. But against powerhouses like Purity or Kaiser or Hookwolf or Lung? Less valuable.

He offered the mic back to me. "More than happy to," I replied. "Honestly, it'll be good to have more help on the street. We can do a lot, but we can't be everywhere." Except maybe Taylor, still working on that. "Knowing the police will still be out there and able to protect the city while we get a little bit of time off? Makes us all sleep a little bit easier."

More applause. And then time for more questions.

"Will you be making models for the PRT?"

"As things currently stand? No," I answered. "The function of the PRT is to support the Protectorate in dealing with parahuman opponents. In this city, that is rather meaningless, so long as Pantheon exists. It is better to dedicate the resources to the police, who deal with all crimes, and will use the equipment on a daily basis. Instead of giving it to a paramilitary force that will leave it in a garage for weeks between emergencies. If the PRT needs help from our M4s, they are certainly welcome to contact the police and request the assistance."

There. That message was sent. The civilians, or at least civilian law enforcement, would have an advantage over the PRT.

"What of Endbringer fights? Do you intend to use the M4s for those?"
"For search and rescue purposes? Absolutely." I answered, then continued explaining. "M4s are not strong enough to be valid against Endbringers. We will be dedicating much of our time and resources in the future to building weapons that can legitimately participate in Endbringer conflicts. The M4s help us move in that direction by allowing us to focus our attention away from street level concerns."

"Will you be offering similar equipment to other cities?"

Absolutely. "Possibly," I replied. "Our M4s require maintenance, and that requires either myself or the Yggdrasil. Any city that would like our M4s would, of course, need to also concede to having a Yggdrasil tree planted within their city, and then they would need to feed it regularly."

"Doesn't Yggdrasil mostly consume sewage and garbage?"

"Yes it does," I say with a smile. "I recommend landfills as an excellent place to start. It's not just good for removing garbage and providing emergency personnel with better equipment. The more raw materials we have access to, the better equipped we'll be for fighting Endbringers and similar grade threats."

The rest of the questions were much of the same. And a few gossip rag questions like our respective dating lives. They were, of course, ignored. I honestly had a hard time getting my head around why anyone cared. Revitalize city by restoring trade and travel routes? Give police officers parahuman grade capabilities? Implied offers to expand to other major cities? Promise of anti-Endbringer weaponry? Whether or not Khepri and I are dating? One of these things is not like the others.

I was glad when I could finally hand the show back over to the Mayor, and he was glad to have it back. Introducing other city initiatives, planning for a new hospital in the north end of the city (using money that'd otherwise be used on the sewer system). Hiring additional police officers. And improving the school system. That last one was demanded by Taylor, no room for negotiation.

All of this would, of course, be mentioned by the media, one way or another. Those who benefit from it would appreciate it greatly. But what would be remembered in the minds of the people is my Yggdrasil ripping apart thousands of tons of metal like it's nothing, and us promising weapons that could fight Endbringers. That's what would capture the attention and imagination of the world.

Now? Now all we have to do is deliver on those promises.
Ah, I love the parts of the story that get into the epic stuff. I do try to keep the story from OD'ing on it, but I do love it. One of my personal gripes about Worm- it spent too much time on the big stuff after a certain point, and forgot the human level.
It is nice to be exercising, at least. Chariot was taking a lot of interest in me, lately. Probably has a crush or something. Of course, I wasn't interested. First, my heart belonged to Gallant and that wasn't changing. Second, he was a spy from Coil. The fact that Coil completely fell off the map when Pantheon moved in may have left him without a job, but he still came here to betray us. I wasn't about to forget that.

Still, it was nice to have some attention. At least he didn't treat me like I was six. And he was reliable enough on the field. Not a spaz like Kid Win or a pain in the ass like Clockblocker. Flechette was nice, but always wanted to head north and spend time with that Parian girl during patrols. Then it was like when my sister had her friends or boyfriend over while she was suppose to be babysitting me. Always trying to find ways to ditch me for a while.

"Got something strange on my sensors," Chariot stated. "It's... umm... a flying horse? Plus rider. Plus accompanying flier. Profiles aren't matching anything I have on record. Just turned and is heading toward us."

"I'll call it in," I replied. No sense in being ambushed. I hit the communicator. "Vista reporting. Unknown... uh... vehicle. Possibly tinker tech. Rider and additional parahuman."

"Understood," Crucible answered back. "Miss Militia's only a couple miles away. She can be in sniper position in less than a minute."

"They're heading our way," Chariot replied. We got our look at the duo.

One really was on a flying horse. An honest to goodness Pegasus. Solid black, except for the nose and muzzle, which were white. It would have been a magnificent animal, even without the raven wings, easily spanning fifty feet from tip to tip. Although 'flying' was being generous. It was taking running jumps and gliding for roughly a hundred feet or so before landing, rooftop to rooftop. My powers let me be pretty good at estimating distance, even from far away.

The girl riding on its back was dressed up like a hybrid of a ninja and belly dancer. Full body coverage, except a veil that left her eyes visible. But the material was light and thin like silk. Loose ribbons fluttered in the wind, joining the mane and tail of her mount. The whole costume shared the same shimmering black colors as the horse itself.
Her companion was a woman with wings made of bone and a cloud of smoke following her. Not smoke. Alive. My power was telling me the cloud was alive, made of tiny living things. Insects.

I hit the com again. "Don't worry," I said. "One of them's Khepri, she got the world's most intimidating costume upgrade." Which is saying a lot considering she was scary beyond all reason in the first place. "Now she can fly."


Khepri moved in to land on a roof and stumbled, running to keep her balance and colliding with a wall. I snickered. "It's new, she doesn't know how to use it properly."

The horse was having a better time of it, angling its wings forward to slow its movement, and then spreading them out to fall gently to the roof, a couple blocks away from us.

"Should we go talk with them?" Chariot asked me. Good, at least he knows I'm the senior ward here. That gets forgotten far too often for my tastes.

I was still too busy looking at that horse. I want one. I want one so bad that it hurt. "Y-yes," I replied. "Ask them about the upgrades. Try to keep it subtle, but get whatever intel you can get. Anything they're willing to tell us, we memorize." There. Let's see the Director complain about that logic. I deserve a promotion for gathering more information on the ever-so-mysterious Pantheon.

I bridged the gap with my power. Chariot stepped through, followed by myself. I had to admit, the spy had some really good ideas. Altering space across my range by total of less than a centimeter, and sensing the 'empty' spots that don't shift gave me near a near perfect ability to detect every person in my range. And I had a lot of range. There didn't seem to be an upper limit, simply how far I could reach before the amount of interference in the area eroded my power to nothing.

Chariot built a sensor system into his armor that could allow him to see my distortions, meaning that he could react to my alterations intuitively and "piggyback" on my senses. Giving us two people who could track everyone within miles. Kid Win also had a copy, as did Triumph, Battery, and Miss Militia. More coming soon.

They said it would make me important for search and rescue during the next Endbringer battle. I told them to fuck off. In slightly more ladylike terms.
We approached the pair. Khepri had managed to take a more dignified position than faceplanted in a wall. "New recruit?" I asked the girl. It was easy to forget that this was a girl. Maybe a couple years older than me. Powers for less than six months. Her height was impressive even without this new suit she was wearing, and the eight foot long claws that formed her wings added the illusion of even greater size.

"No," Khepri replied. "We're testing out some new equipment and ideas. Aceso's trying an entirely new look."

"Interesting," I replied. "The Pegasus thing?"

"Part of it," she replied. "You'll have to talk to Aceso about the whole setup. Her theme and all."

"So... antigrav wings?" Chariot asked Khepri.

"Yeah," she said, sounding distinctly less than happy about it.

"Magnetic field maintained between the wings for stability and improved speed?"

"And to keep me from falling over backward," she muttered.

"You should put an extra set of stabilizers in the armor plating of your calves. It'll keep you from stumbling so much. In fact..."

Tinkers, I thought. I approached Aceso.

"Can... can I touch him?" I asked. The animal had folded its wings, covering Aceso's legs

"Sure," she replied. I reached out and gently brushed a wing. The animal didn't seem concerned, so I pressed a bit harder and started to pet the wing. "Her name is Bella."
"It's a pretty name," I said.

"I wanted to name her Atropa," Aceso complained. "But my big sister wouldn't let me. Said it would send the wrong message to people."

Atropa? Right, they do the whole 'divinity' thing. Maybe. Was all greek to me.

"Would you like a ride?" She asked.

"YES!" I shouted. Then caught my composure. "Uh. I mean. Can she support two people? She was having trouble flying with just you."

"Yeah," Aceso responded. "Antigravity's funny like that. It can move any amount of mass, it's just a matter of the volume of the area being influenced. We're still working on that, but this equipment's second hand. We'd need a real antigrav tinker to make her fly for real. Right now, we're just playing around with a combination of weight reduction and gliding."

I looked over at Chariot, who was currently poking at a Khepri that was far more patient about it than I would have been. He had knelt next to leg and was actually caressing her lower leg and foot while talking. Boys. Or Tinkers. I wasn't sure which rule was in effect there. Either way, he'd be distracted for a while.

"I bet I can get her the rest of the way," I said. "How do I get up?" The animal was big, its back was a bit over five foot high. Sure, there were bigger horses, but it wasn't something I could just climb.

"Here, grab on," Aceso lay back on the animal and brought her arm down. It bent almost ninety degrees backward. Right, flexibility is probably part of her powers.

I clasped her arm with my hands, and she simply lifted me off the ground. Stronger than Aegis, uses actual muscle strength like he did, not some kind of forcefield like Glory Girl. My mood darkened as I thought of those we'd lost. I was dragged across Aceso's torso, essentially laying sideways atop her. She moved me in front, sat up, and moved up against me from behind.

"He's really really well behaved," she told me. "But it's safer for you to ride in front, just in case something goes wrong."
"Okay," I said, letting the girl move her arms around me to grab the reigns. "I've been horseback riding before." Granted, not on an animal that could fly, but this seating was nothing new to me. Bella was actually far more comfortable to sit on than a horse had any right to be.

"So, you were saying you could make her fly for real?" Aceso reminded me.

"Yeah, absolutely," I replied even as I started bending space around us. "Just get her in the air, and I can keep her there."

Aceso snapped the reigns and the horse rushed forward, spreading its wings as it jumped into the abyss. Its own muscles, plus the near weightlessness we were experiencing, took us nearly fifty feet up. The descent was slow, easy to control by warping space, turning "down" into "mostly sideways". Aceso screamed in delight, and I couldn't help but join her, as we started covering miles of distance in moments.

The city looked amazing at this height. Power was finally running for most of the city. The Boat Graveyard was no longer a scar on the landscape. The pretty blue-green of Pantheon's base from above. The monolith of the Protectorate tower base. I hadn't had this much fun in a long time.

By the time we had come back down, Aceso had handed the reigns over to me and was simply a passenger, explaining how to get her to turn, or halt and descend for our landing. Which, it turned out, was to the waiting and rather annoyed looking forms of Miss Militia and Khepri. Then again, Khepri could be napping in a bed full of puppies and still look like she was half a second from murdering everyone in sight.

"So, did you girls have fun?" Miss Militia asked. I forced the smile from my face.

"Sorry, ma'am," I replied. "Aceso offered me a chance to test her new equipment. I felt it would be an excellent opportunity to further positive relations between our teams."

"Uh huh," she responded dryly. "Come on, your patrol's been over for the last twenty minutes. Piggot will be expecting an extra detailed report by tomorrow morning."

I turned back toward the other heroes. "Goodbye, Aceso. Goodbye, Bella!"

The horse whinnied at me. "Bye, Vista!" Aceso waved, smiling broadly. I smiled and waved back.

============

A/N- Yes. You did, indeed, just witness Vista and Bonesaw ride on a flying horse together.

http://elsouille.deviantart.com/art/Black-Pegasus-51158950

Also- this chapter was a really fun reread, with all the character development that happens later putting an entirely new spin on this one.

Chapter End Notes

Appx. 1/8th done, taking a break. I take no responsibility for what happens to your inbox if you ask AO3 to email you when a new chapter gets posted
My changeling knocked on the door to the house. Hard rap, then two quick ones after. It's what Crystal said I should use. The kid was a new parahuman and wanted to talk to me, specifically. Crystal wasn't entirely sure how he'd react, but he did have Aster, who was part of our deal with Purity. It'd be better to do this peacefully, but that might not be an option.

The door opened without anyone being nearby. Telekinetics?

"Come in, please," a boy's voice said. Trying to feign confidence. Or, at least, that's what the HUD was telling me. It was easier for me to be confident. After all, I wasn't actually there, I wasn't in any real danger.

"Hello," I replied. "I'm Gaea. You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. Polite. "I wanted to know why you attacked Kayden. Why you had to nearly kill her."

Ouch.

"I gave her a chance to leave," I replied. "Hurting her as badly as we did, that was an accident. But she's the one who chose to fight."

"Of course she did!" He exclaimed. I couldn't really call it 'yelling' so much as 'talking loudly and trying not to cry'. "You came to her home. Our home. And told her that she'd either have to fight you or leave that home. How is that fair?"

"It..." I paused. It wasn't that I didn't have good reasons, it's that most of my good reasons were summed up as 'she's a fucking Nazi', and I doubted the boy would care. "She's a multiple murderer, did you realize that?"

"She's my mom," he countered. "And Aster's. She's never done anything to hurt us." The boy stepped out of the shadows. He was younger than me. Looked younger than Taylor. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark rings beneath them. It made him look more like a tired, overweight old man than a moderately pudgy teen. I chose to ignore the signs that he'd been crying.
"Except live a life of violence and crime," I pointed out. I didn't hide the bitterness from my voice. "My own father made the same choice. He could have walked away. Taken the wealth he already had and retired to raise a family. Chose me. He didn't. He preferred to keep the power, instead. Take the risks, knowing that one day he might be taken from me. Either by the heroes, or by getting himself killed."

I stopped and calmed myself. "Maybe. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe Purity... Kayden... was different. But I gave her the choice, to her face. Stay and fight, and almost certainly lose. Or leave and give up this shit. She chose to fight. Decided that was more valuable to her than peace. Than family."

"You knew she couldn't," he argued. "Even as you made the offer, you knew it would be impossible for her to accept it. She was accustomed to being strong enough to win almost any fight she was forced to fight. If she'd known what you were, she might have chosen differently."

"You can't blame us for that," I replied. "I told her she really didn't stand a chance. It was true. She just didn't believe me."

"So, beat them, THEN give them the chance to leave!" He sobbed.

"Funny you should mention that," I offered a half smile.

... 

Theo was beside me as we moved toward the small farmhouse. It was pretty nice, for a place that clearly hadn't been used as a farm for decades. The land had gone from 'fallow' to 'overgrown' to 'young forest' in that time. Still, the home itself was in excellent repair, and the lawn was well kept.

"My grandma's childhood home," Theo informed me. "I've been here a couple times, when I was younger. One of the few things my father was ever nostalgic about. Kept the house in her name, even."

Well, that relieved me of some of my apprehension. I had been worried the Nazis simply came to a home in the middle of nowhere and killed or imprisoned the owners so we could do this exchange. I was already pushing an awful lot of my comfort zones just being here. I didn't need innocents on my conscience as well.
If Purity decided it was worth hurting herself to hurt us... things could get ugly. Fast. The part I hated most about this whole arrangement is that those Nazis could claim we helped them escape. It was true, after all. It wasn't really provable, although if they actually were held with containment foam, it might be. Most of them had powers that the foam wouldn't mean much to, regardless. Likely they'd just be kept drugged. Proving that Night didn't wake up just barely enough to transform and nullify said drugs would be impossible.

I let Theo lead the way, although there was no chance in hell that they wouldn't know we were here. Coil's man drove us here and waited. We walked the distance to get close. I also let Theo carry Aster. It seemed better that way.

Purity opened the door, even as several of Crusader's ghosts started to manifest.

"Can we do this inside?" I asked.

"I'd rather not," Purity replied with a hard voice, taking Aster from Theo's arms and handing her to someone inside.

"It's my property," Theo responded. "Gaea is welcome inside." He watched the Nazis that were, functionally, the only family he had. They let us in.

"You have your daughter," I said as we got in. "A chance to make something meaningful of your lives. I implore you to take it."

"And what's to stop us from simply killing you?" Stormtiger asked.

I sighed. Of course. "It helps that I'm not actually here. I'm sure you saw our Changelings on the news. This is just a puppet."

"You're in the car, then," he responded. "You have a range limit, nowhere else you can be."

"I... if you try to hurt her, I. I will stop you. S... sir," Theo responded, stepping between us.
"No offense, kid," Stormtiger scoffed. "But you're not your father. I assume you triggered. Probably even something scary, if you got a power like your father. Maybe your real mom's. Can't rule that out. So maybe you do have the ability to kill me. But you don't have the balls to take a life. Especially not someone you know by name, Theo."

I stepped back as the air around Theo started to ripple. His power was actually pretty impressive, and I wanted them to see it. Liquid metal manifested around him. It would stay fluid, allowing him complete movement. It absorbed energy directed against it, and he could use that directed energy as a touch ranged attack. We hadn't really tried to find an 'upper limit' to his armor... but our Respawn-assisted testing capped at 'everything Crystal could throw at him'.

He could see through the material, and it didn't seem to hinder his breathing. His fully established armor was mirror reflective, which made for some uncomfortable visuals. Spend too long looking at him while he moved, and it would give you a headache. Riley insisted this was not a power, simply the same kind of natural process that causes motion sickness.

"Well, that is impressive," Stormtiger admitted.

"More like your grandfather than your father, then," Crusader said with a smile. "Maybe a bit like your aunt. She could summon out of mid air the way you did. They'd be proud of you."

"Still, if we wanted to kill the dyke, you couldn't stop us." Stormtiger. What was with that guy? One more man who liked to talk shit when he knew he couldn't back it up, as Crystal succinctly put it before.

"He probably couldn't," I admitted. "But she can."

And then the air around us started to growl. Except it wasn't a growl. It was buzzing, so dense that it was impossible to separate one sound from the next. A whirlpool of noise and anger. And it could speak. "DoYoU know hOW manY bEEs arein sIx MILESof fARm? IdO." I cringed. Even being back in the second vehicle, safely four miles away, that is disturbing.

"Okay, you've made your point!" Purity exclaimed. "Now, everyone calm down. I am not going to fight you again. I'm going to take my family and move to the other side of the fucking country. Or I was. Skitter's new 'trick' makes me think Antarctica has lovely weather this time of year."

"Sorry, Kayden. Ma'am," Theo said, his metal sloughing off to the ground. It didn't vanish when he
was done with it. He could even leave it in a "solid" state, although it wasn't nearly as strong as when his power was controlling it. Barely any better than the pure iron it seemed to be made of. "I'm not going with you."

"What?" Purity asked. "Why would you want to stay?"

"To make things right," he answered. "I can be a hero. A real hero. I won't give that up, not even for you."

Kayden smiled, even as she started to cry. "I understand. We'll keep in touch. Probably won't be safe for you to write us, but I'll write to you. And make sure Aster knows her big brother's one of the good guys." Then she pulled him into a hug.

"Thank you, ma'am," Theo said. He hugged back, though looked decidedly awkward doing so.

"Stay safe," she whispered. I just watched until they broke the hold. The other Nazis had the good taste to stay out of it as well. Whether out of respect for the moment, or respect for their boss, I didn't know. Probably depended upon which one you asked.

After they seemed to be done, I spoke up. "Treat your daughter right, Kayden. Don't go play supervillain anymore. Forget the warnings I gave you about hunting you down. Look at her and remember that treating her right means leaving this life behind. She's the one that will pay the real price if you can't do that. Do not do to her what Kaiser did to Theo. What Marquis did to me."

I left. Maybe my words would make a difference.

================

A/N- I so love what this chapter establishes for the future.
"Taylor," I sighed as I held the girl's hand. "You're in here for me to heal you almost every day. There's such a thing as too much training."

"Just an accident," she rebuked. "Theo's new to his power and needs someone to give him practice."

"Let Zach handle it," I countered. "Or use your damn changeling. It's what they're made for."

"Respawn doesn't know how to fight, either," she hissed as I forced her shoulder back into place. "Have to make him train more seriously. Changelings are useful for real danger, but we have to keep our real bodies in good shape. Can't..." She paused again as my power forced her collar bone to mend itself. "Can't rely on them. Won't always be available."

I couldn't argue with that part of her logic. The things were nice, but they weren't perfect.

"You should start training, too," Taylor insisted for, possibly, the thousandth time.

"No," I said. Again. "I can heal you. I can't heal myself."

"We have Respawn for that. Riley, even, if you'd prefer. Anything she would have done to you has been done already. Lisa's pretty much certain that, other than a few details that are understandable given the circumstances, she didn't alter you."

It was true enough. The freckles were gone. Old scars, as well. Body hair was not only gone, but what came back was thinner and slower. Like I was a child again. This didn't fill me with confidence about other possible issues. But I was, hilariously enough, in better shape than I'd ever been before. Tuned on the assumption of myself, as an athlete. I had abs now. They were really nice. Sometimes I even posed for myself in the mirror.

"Whatever," I muttered, taking my mind off that thought. "Maybe I do need to start training. But stop deflecting. You're training too much. I'm being forced to use material off the Yggdrasil just to restore body fat. You know, the stuff you're suppose to have? To keep you alive. That you don't because you keep destroying tissue faster than it replenishes."
She looked almost angry at me. Usually that might even make me back down, but not this time.

"Fine. I'll stop the physical training for a while, except my jogs," she yielded. She yielded? Wait. What?

"Physical training?" I asked. "What exactly are you planning?"

"I need you to make me blind. Maybe deaf as well. And shut down the beacon network, at least for the time being."

"I... what would that accomplish?"

"I've been discussing my power with Lisa," she answered. Oh, wonderful. "I am able to do more with my insect senses than I realized. But my human senses are getting in the way. If you take them away, temporarily of course, then I could be that much stronger. The beacons... might be making it harder for me to reach that breakthrough on my own. So they have to go, at least until I'm practiced enough to handle them."

"Why are you doing all this?"

"Because we need it," she replied. "All of us need to be at the top of our game. Sure, we smacked down some two bit thugs who thought they were the top of the food chain. And we did it easily. But that's actually a problem. If we don't keep pushing, we'll get soft. We'll make mistakes. Something will happen that we weren't prepared for, and we won't be able to adapt and respond to the emergency."

"Valefor," I said. "That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"That fucker nearly killed you!" Taylor exclaimed. "And Lisa! It was nothing but luck that saved you, and the fact that Riley was expected to hide from the team. If not for her and I not actually being at that meeting, we would all be dead!"

"That was a mistake," I said. "And we learned from it. It won't happen again."
"It shouldn't-" her voice caught. "It shouldn't have happened at all. I could have stopped it."

"This isn't about us, is it?" My voice softened. Trying to convince Skitter to take care of herself required the 'command voice'. I didn't need that here.

"That fucker used my friends to get to me," her voice quivered. "Used my children as fucking bombs... not because it was smart, but because he wanted to twist the fucking knife. Fucking. Used. Them. All."

Oh god.

There were tears in her eyes, now. I pulled her into a hug. She clung back. Hard enough that it was actually a little painful. "I'm sorry," I said gently. "It's not your fault. There's no way you could have known Valefor was even in the city. Lisa didn't. You're not responsible for some psychopath with a demon complex deciding to target us."

"Yes, I am," she sobbed. "We all are. We knew this would happen. That our name, our actions, would be seen as a challenge by fuckers like the Fallen. We did it anyway, turned us and our friends into targets. We knew the risks. I just... I thought they'd be risks to us, not our families. I... I should have..." She broke down.

I held her head as she cried. "You've been bottling that up this whole time? Taylor. You have to stop blaming yourself for everything. We're not really gods. Naming conventions and powers aside, we're still human. We're allowed to make mistakes. You should have talked about this sooner."

"Would it have made a difference?" she muttered bitterly. "Talking about it doesn't make the pain go away. Knowing the bastards suffer for it permanently. And making certain it never happens again. Those are the only things that matter."

Suffer permanently? "Did you have Riley do something 'special' to them?" My voice hardened again. This was not something I wanted and she knew it.

"She wouldn't have agreed even if I'd asked," Taylor muttered.

That was a relief.
"I asked Blasto to do it," she added.

Less relieved now. Except not as much as I would have thought I'd be. Skitter was too careful to make any mistakes that would come back to us. Fucking Valefor. Using children as suicide bombers.

I sighed, still holding my general in my arms. "From now on, you talk to me. No decisions behind my back. We're partners. If it happens to you, it happens to me, too. Remember that from now on."

"Thanks," she muttered. Then she spoke up. "Oh, I know you heard that. It didn't happen and if you say otherwise, I will find a way to make you stay dead."

"Understood!" Respawn yelled from the hall. "Hey, Lisa, I am now under orders to say I don't owe you fifty bucks!"

=============

A/N- Ah, me and my mood whiplash. Spoiler: I still pull shit like that.
Toybox wouldn't deal with us directly, for some reason. Lisa's guess was that they were afraid to be associated with heroes. Not that they normally had a problem with that, but we were currently national news. Arguably international, if Canada counted. I personally had a hard time of thinking of Canada as another country, since I could drive to Montreal for a weekend.

One of Coil's drivers drove us to the meeting place. Well, Lisa's drivers. Either way, I wasn't terribly happy with using what was unquestionably illegally obtained wealth for all our basic luxuries. Or, in this case, minor essentials. We really needed to find something that we could reasonably charge for without looking like we were just in it for profit. Sure, the Yggdrasil sewer arrangement was excellent for all parties, and we were getting more out of it than the millions of dollars it'd be worth as a paid service could purchase.

The fact was that, one way or another, Coil and Lisa and Taylor currently owned more land in Brockton Bay right now than I wanted to think about, including almost everything in the docks and over half of the land within a mile of our base. They were going to profit massively simply for Pantheon's base of operations being where it was... didn't like that, either. But at least that was legitimate, though definitely not 'honest'. I rather hoped the system we'd worked out with Parian went well. That was something I could feel good about.

In any case, Khepri and I had taken a trip out into the middle of nowhere, to meet a man known as 'Marketing'. He had a thinker power that let him calculate fair value to, well, almost anything. He was a well respected neutral party, and would serve as an intermediary between us and Toybox.

The place we were at was actually very nice. I hadn't realized a restaurant whose only apparent source of customers was semi drivers could be this nice. The prices were surprisingly good, too. Sadly lacking on the vegetarian options, however, so I settled for the salad. This 'can't look at meat anymore' thing made going out to eat a real pain in the ass. Had to be worse for people who couldn't magic up a meal simply by putting a hand on the table. Taylor went with an omelet.

Marketing wasn't a particularly noteworthy man. Black hair that was just showing shades of graying. It was fake. Or, at least, the gray was. I was amazed our changeling senses could pick that out, but yes. He had gone out of his way to make himself appear a bit older. He wore durable, but perfectly normal clothing like one would see from the dockworkers and construction crews.

"First, may I ask what you are willing to offer Toybox?" He started. "I presume your refusal to part with Bonesaw's equipment and technology has not changed?"
So he knew about that. Who revealed that secret?

"We can't," I answered. "Far too great a risk that it'll be used."

"We do have Blasto trying to find a package of acceptable details for us to offer others," Khepi offered. "It's just that most of her designs are too horrible to consider handing over to anyone. She made a zombie virus."

"A zombie virus?" His eyebrow raised.

"Not hyperbole," I confirmed. "It's basically an airborne and even more aggressive variant of rabies that makes people enraged and cannibalistic. Includes some kind of pheromone system so they won't attack other infected. Near as we can tell, it's deliberately designed so approximately one tenth of a percent of the population will randomly be immune. I don't want that in the hands of anyone who'd be willing to purchase it."

"It's not even in the top ten most deadly list," Khepri added. "It seems like she made it for 'fun', not as a serious plan for ending the word."

He cleared his throat. "I see. Normally I take pride in my neutrality, as such I would have accepted your refusal at face value. On a personal level, however, I admit I'm glad for your decision. Shall we move on to the Yggdrasil?"

"Yes. I believe the costs to them in maintaining their pocket dimension is fairly significant," I replied. Marketing didn't offer an opinion. "Yggdrasil is an ideal bioenclosure organism, consuming almost any waste product, including waste heat energy from machinery they might be using, and converting it to safe, even edible, biomass and oxygen. It is a cooling system for a power plant, waste disposal, and life support all in one."

"I see," he said. "Radioactive materials?"

"Heavy metals and other elements not used for life are filtered out into a nearly pure state and stored in pods," I stated, pulling a ball of yellow metal out of my pack. "Solid gold. Only a few pounds of it, but pure."

"Worthless," Marketing dismissed the rock. "With the existence of matter creators and transmuters,
the precious metals market no longer exists."

"Yes," I agreed. "However, it's the purity that matters. It can, essentially, refine uranium if you need it to. Any tinkers that need to work with pure materials for their more delicate projects might see value in a reliable, cheap and fast alternative to centrifuges." I wasn't so happy with the 'uranium' thing. But frankly, tinkers could make better bombs than nuclear already. And 'dirty bombs' were a far more deadly use of uranium than actual nukes, in the modern world.

"That is true," he agreed. "But seems to be the crux of the issue. You have something a lot of people would have at least some use for, but no one has a true need for. It makes the value more useful to the community as a whole than to individual members, and that complicates the market values significantly."

"I understand," I replied. "Maybe we should wait until Toybox gives up on trying to cultivate their own Yggdrasil plant. I know they've taken samples to grow. It won't work."

"I know no more about the inner workings of the Toybox than I do about Pantheon," Marketing responded.

"I understand. But when you speak with them, let them know that it's completely dependent upon myself for survival. And optimized for Brockton Bay. It won't thrive in a different environment. I'll have to create an entirely different species of the stuff for their needs."

"I will relay the message," he responded with the same neutrality as I was coming to get used to. "How about we discuss what you wish to purchase."

"Cranial's technology," I responded. "It's the highest priority. A device that is fully capable of upload and download."

"She probably won't want to part with the full equipment," Marketing responded.

"Probably not, but we need it for one of our long term projects," I insisted. "You can maintain confidentiality, of course."

I got a nod.
"We are developing life extension techniques," I told him. It was our card to play, and this was the best scenario to use it. We were going to have to use it. "Ten years added to her natural lifespan, alongside the usual touchups that I provided to patients as Panacea. No negotiations. No questions. And if we believe for a second anyone else knows we have this ability, then the offer is rescinded and shall never be made available again."

He blinked. "Very well. I shall see that message delivered personally. Are there any other requests, while we're here? No sense in repeating this any more often than we need to. It's better for you to list all possible interests."

"Yes," Khepri replied. "We're in the market for some antigravity technology. Our team is sorely lacking on mover powers. I know, we don't need Toybox for such relatively common tinker tech. But it's on the list of things we need to get from somewhere. If their price is reasonable, we are interested."

"And energy manipulation technology," I added. "We are planning for direct combat against the Endbringers, as we said already. If any of Toybox is willing to help, we've got the means to meet the monsters head on and hold the line. The biggest limiting factor is concentrating enough power into a small enough area to actually hurt them. In the worst case scenario, our constructs die, instead of the parahumans who need to fight them. Even that would be one of the greatest victories ever achieved against these monsters. In the best, we send them back to whatever hell they crawled out of."

"Interesting," he responded. "I shall see what I can accomplish."

We paid for our portion of the meal, and the waitress was surprisingly okay with heroes in costume. Very polite, didn't pester us or anything. She probably figured we were pretty much obligated to leave a generous tip if she did well. If so, well, she was correct.

"Teleportation," Taylor muttered after we were outside.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Marketing must have some kind of teleportation tech. I heard him say 'door me', and then he was gone."

"Oh," I said. "Makes sense. There's only how many tinkers working for Toybox? Probably bought
something like that. We probably should look into it as well."

"Makes sense," she replied. "Still, we might want to set up anti-teleport plans for our base. Eventually someone's going to use methods like that to come after us."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'll talk to Riley about it."

=============

A/N- This was one of those "pays off in the future" chapters. And boy did it pay off.
Lisa looked at us. "You two have to start dating."

"I don't think I know anyone to date..." I started.

"No. Each other. You have to date each other."

What? "What?" Taylor and I asked simultaneously.

"It's a matter of image," Minerva explained. "You need to be more approachable to the public. Let them see you as having human needs. And romance is a fundamental need for most people. It's a bread and circuses type thing. We're providing for enough of their physical needs, sure. But we need to give them something that captures their imaginations and emotions."

"What, anti-Endbringer weapons aren't enough?" Taylor asked.

"Well, yes. And no," Minerva responded. "If they don't work as well as we hope, then no, not enough. If they do work, but work too well and maybe even kill the fuckers, then we need the 'softer side' even more desperately to maintain public support. The only thing scarier than being an Endbringer is being able to kill an Endbringer. And we don't have the 'benefit' of Scion's mental handicaps to make us seem harmless despite our power. So yes, you have to date."

"Why does it have to be us?" I asked. "Why not have you and Respawn date or something?"

"First. I named myself after a virgin goddess for a reason," Lisa answered. "I should probably go public with the whole 'asexual' thing, anyway. There's a nicely sized minority of asexuals out there, many of whom are young and in emotional turmoil over their sexuality, or lack thereof. I'm sure they would appreciate having a high profile hero as 'one of them'. Plus all the other parahumans whose powers make intimacy difficult, one way or another. I could do what Legend did for the gay community."

I couldn't think of a thing to say right to that. Every part of that was callous as all hell, yet completely true. It's not like she'd be lying. As opposed to the whole 'Jewish' thing.
"Second. There needs to be plausibility here," she continued. "The pair of you could be married to
different men and have six kids each and both be pregnant with another, and it would still be more
believable that you're in committed relationships with each other than the idea that Respawn has
managed to have a second date with anyone."

"You know, I am in the room," Respawn muttered. "Sticks and stones don't mean much to me, but
words like that cut to the bone."

"Can't Taylor just date Crystal?" I asked.

"Why do I have to?" Taylor asked. "I'm not even into girls!"

"Neither am I!" Crystal added.

"Then why'd you ask her out?" I asked my cousin.

"To make you jealous so you would!"

I just collapsed face first into the table. "Hate you. Hate you all."

"Wouldn't work anyway," Lisa replied. "You two are the leaders and partners of the group. As the
centerpoints, you need to have some kind of obvious relationship bond with each other. And
friendship just won't cut it. We might be able to play off with Amelia's adoption that you two are half
siblings. Even your powersets are similar enough in their own ways to sell the idea..."

"Not an option," I said coldly. Taylor gave a hard nod in agreement.

"No," Lisa agreed. "Too easy to disprove, regardless. There is one other option."

Fuck you, Lisa. "Okay, let's hear your other idea. But I'm leaning toward 'ignore these jackasses and
go on living our lives as normal', myself."

"Funny you should mention that," Lisa grinned that special grin that made me want to melt her face.
"Because that's the exact plan."

What? "What?" Taylor and I again asked simultaneously.

"What we do is, we make sure the two of you are close to each other during all public events. You're always seen together, supporting each other's decisions and otherwise working as a tag team whenever possible. Casual contact, such as handing microphones to each other, whenever possible. Then you can deny a relationship all you like, but everyone will see you together and believe that you're obviously together together and just don't want your personal lives out in the public view. It's perfect!"

"But... isn't that what we were already doing?" I asked. Lisa nodded.

"Fuck you, Lisa," Taylor muttered.

==========

Another Canon Omake, this time from a SBer, Mercsenary

Title: Inventory
"That's not the zombie virus."
Heads turn to stare at Riley. Taylor and I had been relaying what our meeting with Marketing had entailed.
"What?"
"Thaaaat's the rage virus."
"Then... What's the zombie virus?"
"Oh thats the rage virus combined with a modified version of necrotizing fasciitis. I made it airborne."
Silence greeted her.
"See, I thought instead of having 10% of people being immune why not make it 100% lethal. Get infected and now your flesh is rotting and you have an insatiable hunger for human flesh. What's not to like?"
Crystal was starting to turn green and out of the corner of my eye I saw that Taylor had frowned. Uh oh.
Unfortunately Riley took it as a cue to continue.
"But don't worry! I made everyone immune to it the first day they got here. The vaccine's in the air."
That, that wasn't quite what I was going to ask but okay, "What about other people?"
She pouted. Pouted! "What about other people?"

Our heads turn to Blasto, who shrugs nervously.
"Well... that's the one vial I found under 'Too much Fun'. Everything else was accounted for."
I sighed and resisted the urge to put my head in my hands. Taylor wasn't under such restraint.
"There wasn't anything else?" she asked.
"Nope."
"So what you're saying is that we may or may not be missing a vial containing an ACTUAL zombie virus."
"Um... yeah."

---

This time I didn't resist the urge to massage my forehead. Now we had a loose vial of zombie, cant believe I would ever say that. After that little bombshell everyone else had filed out of the room in a daze. Couldn't blame them for that. Only Taylor, Riley and I were left in the room and Riley was... whistling.

Wait a minute.

I looked over at Taylor. She had stopped and frowning and seemed to be squinting at Riley, who in turn, seemed to get louder at whistling.

I mentally tilted my head and something unbidden rose to mind. "You dont notice that? Bone-Riley whistles when she's trying to hide something."

... Fucking Thinkers.

I got up and walked around to Riley and held out my hand.
She looked at it and then looked up at me.
"How'd you know?"
You whistle when you're nervous or trying to hide something.

Instead I just raised an eyebrow.
She giggled and put a vial in my hand.
"Big Sis knows me too well."

She got up and skipped over to the door before turning back to us.
"Huh, Lisa was right. Big Sis and Taylor do look cute together."

A muffled bang sounded and a quick glance over my shoulder revealed that Taylor had let her head hit the table in front of her.
"They're never going to let that go, are they?" came the muffled question.
I sighed. "I think it's going to be our lot in life."
"So, check out the headline this week," Taylor said, smiling as she walked in. Already in costume. How the hell is she such a morning person? At least she brought some food. Apparently Tattletale convinced a nice doughnut and coffee shop to move in at the closest possible street corner to our base. Best. Day. Ever. Maybe we could get a pizza place, next.

Theo followed after her, looking distinctly worn out. I'd given him a few touch ups to improve his metabolism and muscle growth, but he still needed to work for it. Anything completely artificial would be destructive to him in the long run. Some on levels I could fix, like bone and joint damage. Others I couldn't, like coordination and a loose equivalent to 'phantom limb syndrome'. Better simply to come into it 'naturally'.

"Caffeine first," I muttered as I took my cup and grabbed a fresh chocolate doughnut. As I was enjoying my breakfast, Lisa walked in, lured by the smells. I didn't pay too much attention to what she picked.

"So, what's the news?" I finally asked.

"Well, the headline just called our new project 'scrap soldiers'," she said, showing me the paper. Sure enough, that was someone's idea of clever.

"Could be worse," Lisa muttered. "Last week that one called it 'poo police'."

"Still eating breakfast," I reminded her.

"Yeah, seriously Lisa, I'm already stuck with a few trillion scavengers linked up to my brain, I have a hard enough time ignoring that without you reminding me."

"Look at it this way," she said. "We just gave the police force equipment that could be used to conquer a small country. When the other alternatives read along the lines of 'teenage girls with a god complex build private army of super soldiers', I'm okay with the stupid sounding headlines."

"Oh, good, you bums are finally up!" Zach said from the doorway, sounding far too chipper. Bullshit 'don't need sleep' powers. So unfair. "We have an announcement to make."
"Please tell me you didn't violate too many laws of nature," Lisa moaned. "My head still hurts."

"Just about a dozen or so," he beamed. "Presenting to you, the Cuddle Bug!"

He reached over and pulled out a six limbed blue and white pastel colored stuffed animal. It had mothlike antennae and big, solid black eyes on a round face. The feet were large pads on short limbs. He scratched its neck and its eyes closed and it started to purr, loudly enough for me to hear it from about fifteen feet away.

"What. The hell. Is that?" I muttered.

The things antennae pointed straight at me. "Ah. Ish. Zerg!" it squeaked loudly, as it extended out all its limbs, grasping toward me.

"It's our newest line of living toys," Respawn replied. "They're lightweight, have the ability to learn phrases and training. And are basically indestructible. Watch!"

He held the thing out at arms length and drew back his leg.

"Ahh! No! Don kick da Zerg!" The creature shouted. Although said shouts were barely louder than normal human speaking volume. It was then dropped and punted across the room, screaming "Wheeeee!" the whole time. Or at least for a couple seconds before it collided with the far wall. And stuck there with its padded feet. "Ahm okay!" It announced.

Theo reached over and gently removed it from the wall. It wrapped around his arm and started nuzzling his hand with its face. Had to admit, the thing was cute for an abomination against nature that would surely earn us the ire of basically every bioethical group on the planet. Also possibly PETA.

"Did... did you waste the talents of two biotinkers all night just to create that?" Taylor muttered.

"No. Yes. Maybe kinda? Not just that!" He answered, looking a little dejected that we didn't find this monster, no matter how adorably fluffy it was, nearly as amusing as he did. "Hey, Blasto, we're losing the audience. Wanna help me out, here?"
Ray came out. "Uh, yeah," he said. "It's basically just one of my plant hybrids, coupled with the tech we just got from Cranial and some of Riley's efforts to hybridize the two into something better with her own talents."

"We are supposed to be using that equipment to cure Noelle and maybe save the people frozen by Bakuda's damn crystal bomb," I informed him angrily. "It is NOT a toy. And you shouldn't be using it to make toys."

"Prototype testing," Blasto defended. "We're working our way up the chain, testing various 'learning algorithm' programs. They're already smarter than my constructs ever were, but still functionally somewhere between an incredibly stupid cat, and a legitimately brain damaged parrot that keeps its ability to mimic human words. We're already building up to installing true, functioning instincts into the zerglings so that Khepri can control them more effectively."

"How much more effectively?" Taylor asked.

"If it works how Riley's convinced it will... no upper limit," He informed her. "The thing about your power is that it, essentially, relies on the insects to do their own thinking. Or something like that, I'm still years behind her in understanding this body-brain-power interaction stuff. Since the artificial lifeforms don't have instincts of their own, you're forced to do all the mental lifting for them instead of letting them do their own thing with only a light touch from your mind. The more things we can program into them while still keeping them registered as 'bugs' to your power, the easier it'll be. If we can 'build' the proper instincts into a genetic format, we can even give them nonstandard senses like infra-vision and echolocation. That you'll be able to use. And we could theoretically produce hundreds of the things with our existent resources. Especially now that Theo's on our team."

Taylor just sat there, mouth agape. Why does Skitter frighten me more when she's excited than when she's angry?

"Well, you sold my partner that this is worth the effort, clearly," I stated. "So that's a start."

"Aww... I didn't get to use Fluffy," I heard Riley complain.

"Who and what is 'Fluffy'?," I asked.

Riley came out, still in her apron, carrying a giant white spider. "This is Fluffy!" She announced.
"He's my Cuddle Bug! He doesn't talk, but he's got an extra pair of arms for extra hugging power. And he turns colors. Pink."

Surely enough, the white spider's fur fluffed out and turned pink. "Blue, yellow, white," she instructed, and the colors rippled through the giant spider.

"Please tell me that's all the monster pets you've made," I said.

"Well... I need to make one more..." Riley said. "We're working up the chain of lifeforms. Fluffy's the arthropod level. Zerg's the bird level. Higher mammals are next. I'm thinking of a bird horse that I could use as part of my cape persona!"

"Bird horse?" I asked. "You mean you want to create a pegasus."

"Yeah!" she agreed excitedly. "We need to test artificial instincts in advanced lifeforms. Horses are about as smart as it gets without going dolphin or great ape. Apes don't have a lot of hardwired instincts, due to how fragile their infants are, they rely more upon accelerated ability to learn outside the womb than genetically programmed ability. The exact opposite of what I need. And dolphins would be a pain to work with."

"I suppose horses are otherwise the perfect animal?"

"Well," she said. "Zebras might be a little better. But horses are easier to get DNA samples from. And I could make her into a beautiful black pony with raven wings and call her Atropa and..."

"Nope!" Lisa interjected. "No naming any of us or our things after death itself. Zach gets away with it because no one really thinks of 'death' when they think of 'Osiris'. Plus he and his powers are as nonthreatening as it gets, really."

"Aww," Riley whined. "Well, can I at least make my flying pony?"

"You'll be able to make it fly?" I asked.

"I'll be using some of the antigrav equipment. We have more than enough for the Queen of Blades"
armor. And we'll need to test the cybernetic enhancement tech and support frames if we ever want to make those flying troop carriers and stuff," she insisted.

"But you're really doing it so you can have a black pegasus named 'death'," Minerva stated. "May as well let her have the thing. She's picked up our M.O. of 'I do this because it's helpful, but it's really for me'. We can reward her for being a quick student. Also: I have an idea that'll make it work for us as well. So agree because it's nice, but it's really for us."

Riley looked at me with a smiling, hopeful face. Her arms clutched tight around the giant spider.

"Okay," I said. "You can build your pegasus. But only the one. And then we're moving on to the real reasons we picked up this technology."

"Keep the notes around for making a second," Lisa instructed.

"Okay!" Riley shouted. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" She turned and bolted toward her lab. Only to trip on her spider's legs and fall right on top of the thing. She got up and ran off, chased quickly by the oversized arachnid.

"Two questions," Taylor said. "First: Lisa, what are you plotting this time? Second: when do I get a giant spider?"

==============

A/N- Both the plushy Zerg and spider existed before I started writing this story. Took me over a month to get to them.
I went back to the lab with the samples I'd collected of Noelle's tissues, from the timeline that Coil wasn't forced to collapse. Amelia failed to fix her, and I even felt guilty about that.

"Knock, knock," came a less than pleased voice from the doorway. Minerva. Dangit! "Mind a little company, oh unholy terror?"

I hated it every time she did that. Reminded me, reminded my Sister, that I wasn't a good girl. The lurch of fear in my gut that Amelia would see that and abandon me. It hurt to think about, losing her. I can't let that happen. My hand wrapped around one of my surgical tools.

"Won't work," Minerva replied. "Kill me? Maybe. Though I doubt it. Do it without her finding out? Impossible. You've played your cards, Bonesaw. One mistake. Only one. And she'll never forgive you. She'll have to kill you herself because she can't risk anyone else trying it. She's not like us. She'll actually feel remorse over it. It'll hurt her. Is that what you're going to do? Hurt your sister?"

"Jack liked the mind tricks, too, you know," I muttered, my cheerful facade faltering for a moment.

"No doubt," she replied, unflinching. "The question is: do you consider that an insult or a compliment?"

Do I what? I almost asked, but then didn't. I expected her to feel insulted, of course. But what did I think about it? I squeezed the knife. If this was the S9 with Jack in charge, she'd already be dead and I'd simply be chided and sent to bed. Instead... she was right. One mistake, one act of disobedience, and my punishment would be fatal. And I didn't know how I felt about it.

"That's a question you can think about for later. Right now, I'm far more interested in why you sabotaged Amelia's attempts to heal Noelle," she spoke up after I couldn't give her an answer. "You knew the risks, and did it anyway. Why?"

I froze. I was caught either way. This was my mostly unmodified human body, with only the barest minimum alterations from the neck down. I didn't want to sully the gift She had given to me. Lisa would be stronger, simply based on size. An eleven year old's body against a seventeen year old? If I were using Clarice, that would be different. But I was ordinary Riley right now.
"Your only way out of this is to tell me your plan," she offered. "All of it, and you know I'll know if you're lying. You're risking your life and your new found pseudo sibling's... whatever you have going on there... over this. It must be important."

"You can't read her anymore, can you?" I asked. Interesting.

"No," she admitted. "Not the important stuff, at least. Not why she wants to keep you alive. You, however, I can still figure out. But I'm about six minutes from a migraine. So you tell me what you're planning, or I tell her what I know. Remember, I'm here for Taylor, not Amelia."


"Good, but don't waste your time on the tears," she replied. "You might fool others. You might even fool yourself. You won't fool me."

....

"A mind transfer device," I informed them.

"A... can that even be done?" Taylor asked.

"There's some limitations," I acknowledged. "You'd need a blank brain to transfer into. Using an already existent mind would either kill both participants, or result in a condition much like Butcher."

"That's fine," Minerva added. Part of her plan. "We're already looking at Blasto for mass production capabilities. He could construct human clone bodies, complete with blank brains, right?"

"I don't know," I responded. "But coupled with my own equipment, I'm fairly certain we can. We would need Cranial's technology as well."

"Would it be able to work on others? Like the ones killed when fighting Crawler?" Big Sister asked. My improved senses picked up the waver of hope in her voice, and I suppressed my pain. She was asking me if I could give Her Glory Girl back. The sister she actually wanted.
"Maybe," I answered, and the words felt like ice inside my chest. "If Bakuda's weapon was as instantaneous as it appears, then it should have captured every synapse in perfect position. The only question is if the crystal itself has fine enough articulation to represent it, and if the material itself isn't disruptive to the scanning technology. I might have to cross interface some technologies."

"I understand..." Amelia said. I wanted to run over to her and comfort her. I couldn't. She didn't want me.

I would keep being a good girl until she changed her mind.

....

"Does he suspect?" Lisa asked, after we watched Blasto leave.

"No," I answered. "He doesn't understand the technology past the most fundamental of levels. He's second tier, as far as tinkers go. Good at what he's good at, but no real talent for cross-specialties. Mannequin was the exact same way."

"Good," she replied. "We hide the next 'breakthrough' for the Endbringers, understood?"

"It should be sooner," I complained.

"Too dangerous," Lisa answered. "We are already far too powerful. They can't be allowed to know until we're a fixture. Until we cannot be removed. Before then, the risks are simply too great."

....

"Mind transfer?" Trickster asked, looking at my Clarice body.

"That's the idea," Blasto responded. "We'll transfer Noelle's mind into a cloned body. Her old body can be disposed of easily. There are some side effects," he added to clarify. "But nothing I believe you'll consider problematic."
"Such as?" Noelle's voice came from the speaker phone we were talking with.

"Well," he said. "We can't use your actual genetic material. Normally, there's a pretty good chance that you'd keep your powers if we used your tissue. Since your powers are the source of the problem... we'll want to avoid that."

"So I won't have my old body back," she recognized. "Fine. I didn't like it much to start with. As long as I'm free from this abomination."

"You'll also experience some short term memory loss," he added. "Nothing significant. Minor gaps. Confusion about your really early childhood and anything in the past month or so. It may also take a day or two for you to regain fine motor skills."

"Worth it," Noelle said. "Even if it might kill me, it's worth it."

"No worries, it can't kill," Blasto replied. Interrupting Trickster who was about to speak up. "You fall asleep and wake up in the new body a few hours later. I recommend you pick out something you'd like to look like using the CGI modeling program Coil has. It's better we have a completed body before the transfer begins. And we'll need some time to properly set up." The program was more for forensics and facial recognition than this sort of thing, but it wasn't hard to use to play design-a-body.

"There's no reason to limit yourself," I added. "Anything you like. Anything that will make you happy. There's one potential danger that we cannot control."

"What?" Trickster asked, eyes hard.

"A natural trigger," I replied. This man reminded me a lot of Mannequin in a weird way. Would he snap the same way, if his loved one was taken? Yes, I decided, he would. "There is no way of predicting natural triggers. Or what yours would look like if you had one. It might mean a relapse, and if so, we can fix you again at some point in the future."

Our work was tedium, for the most part. I entered Noelle's chamber and scaled my way up her side. Strange bodies formed near me, formed of flowers and nasty, acidic fungi. They didn't kill one another, strangely, nor did they attack Noelle. But they were quite hostile toward me. Coil told us this was commonplace in our failed attempts. They slowly spread until they formed a small garden.
around the monster girl. Meanwhile, I spent my time wrapping numerous electrodes on her scalp and neck, recording her entire physiology on a half dozen different machines.

"Alright," I informed her. "We'll just need you to stay calm for another hour. If you can do that, everything will be prepared and you'll wake up in time to enjoy the fireworks tomorrow."

She smiled. "Yeah," she said. "That sounds nice."

"Okay, gotta go get the rest of this set up," I replied, then I leapt off the side of the girl, landing several feet away from the plant and doing a roll further away. "Sorry, mutant plants! No dinner for you today!"

They hissed and spit at me in response, but I had already retreated from the room.

"Okay, Sundancer," I instructed. "Remember, after we give you the go ahead, you incinerate everything in that room."

"I... are you sure?"

"Listen," Minerva replied. "Once we do this, the only thing that'll be left in there is the monster. The proto-Endbringer. Your friend will be safe, in here."

She patted Noelle's clone body of choice. She'd taken our offer and ran with it. The body could have a career as a model or actress, easily. Slim and athletic. Almost as tall as Trickster, with a face that could be described as 'cherubic'. And luxurious black hair- natural, of course, it would never lose the coloration until old age set in.

"Okay," Sundancer said. "If... if you're wrong about this." The threat was in her voice, even if she said nothing. She lacked the confidence to make me believe she'd act on the threat.

"If they're wrong about it, you'll have to wait in line after me," Trickster replied. Him I believed. He really would hurt us. Hurt Her. I started running through ways to quietly remove him as an issue, without troubling the rest of the Travelers. There were a few- my thoughts were interrupted by a hand on my shoulder. Minerva. I changed my focus back to the task at hand. The recording was over eighty percent done. A series of command pulses, and Noelle fell asleep, as planned.
"It'll be a few minutes before the transfers are complete," Minerva lied. "We'll have to leave the tinkers to their work. You know how they get about their toys."

The Travelers clearly did not, not really, but Trickster couldn't admit that without looking ignorant. So instead he chose to actually be ignorant.

The copying itself was actually the easy part. Studying the information, I concluded that any attempts to replicate parahumans would be a dozen time more difficult, if not moreso. It could take years to produce viable clones and would require constant monitoring that whole time. But a full human mind? An hour or less. Noelle's nonhuman aspect? That was taking more time, but her power was incredible, and we had weeks of data from the sensors I had installed in her room.

That hour went by in what felt like seconds. Blasto attempted to pretend he understood the data on the screen, the streaming numbers and charts and data. If I'd given him hours, he might even have figured out the truth, but with only seconds to spare between screens as I switched through, acting as if I was monitoring the copying process that was being handled automatically while really studying the power's data.

I now knew more about Noelle's power than anyone alive. She was truly incredible. I still didn't know how she induced new triggers in her monster-clones. We hadn't let her clone any parahumans. An insane and omnicidal version of my Sister would be a true terror to behold, possibly unstoppable, and I wasn't fond of the idea of testing any of the rest of us, either. Maybe someone nice and safe. Like Uber and Leet.

I hit the button. "She's been transferred," I told the others. Instruments flared up with nonsensical data as Sundancer started the sphere of nuclear fire within Noelle's chamber. The equipment was designed to measure lifesigns, not miniature suns. I would acquire nothing of value watching it. But that didn't matter. We now had a full copy of Noelle's memories, and a stored, living, sample of her genetic structure that had already been cultured and sustained. A copy on demand, if ever we needed her power. After all, we only needed was her power, not for her to be a functional or sane being.

Trickster was in the room in moments. "She'll need time to recover while her new brain adjusts to the alterations," I instructed him. "Waking her early could be as damaging as shooting her in the head."

"I..." he moved back a little, uncertain. "I'll make sure she's not disturbed."

"She's sedated for now. Don't give her any drugs. Her body has temporary organs that will supply
nutrients and water. See to it that she sticks to the very specific diet and exercise regimens we've given you. Any deviation might cause irreparable damage," I handed him the sheets of paper I had with me. My glance at the equipment confirmed the lack of a Pollentia or Gemma, and none of the mutagenic N-cells I had identified.

Minerva backed me. "You've waited this long," she said. "Just a few more days and this nightmare is behind you forever."

He nodded. He was loyal to Noelle. I sympathized. At least she reciprocated his feelings.

I would continue to be a good girl. And make new friends, like I was asked. Hopefully, Rebirth Flame was right and Vista would love to see Bella.

======

A/N- Riley is fun in a creepy and slightly pathetic way.

Lisa's a manipulative bitch, as always, but at least she's channeling it into something constructive.

Also: wow, I forgot how impactful this chapter was, but its theme carries forward well into the story.
I stumbled into what passed for our kitchen. We still didn't have enough electricity to keep both our labs and our utilities all active at once. So no fridge. Bottled water, because I couldn't stand the taste of Yggdrasil sap. It was just wrong and unnatural and squicked me out.

I could probably ignore its slightly-sweet taste if I didn't know where it came from. However, I did know, and my power wouldn't let me forget it. I suppose for a normal person, it would be like seeing an apple tree growing in a cesspool and then eating one of the fruit.

Riley came skipping in as I sipped on the rather lukewarm, but at least very strong, coffee. She was as chipper as usual. I hated that, her fake smile and fake happiness and fake everything. I didn't direct my power at her, I couldn't afford to. I didn't need to, my reinforcement methods had become the routine between us. Pavlovian, almost. Reminding her of the guilt she knows she should feel. Reminding her that she didn't.

"So cheery, today," I spoke quietly, but her modified ears would have no problem picking it up. "Did someone start a little-miss-genocide pageant?"

And then the bounce was gone. "You can stop that, you know."

"There's a big difference between 'can' and 'should'," I replied. "Ask Amelia about it, she understands better than most."

Without my power backing me, I didn't know how well that line would work. Jack had broken her and rebuilt her into his perfect little marionette. Fixing that would require breaking her again. Hitting her with every emotion she normally programmed away. Her relationship with Amelia was the one way I had on her, the chink in the otherwise impenetrable armor around her psyche.

It would help if I could understand Amelia's feelings toward Riley. Something happened, I was certain of it. But whenever I tried to figure out what... I was beginning to think she second triggered with some kind of anti-thinker power. I had learned trying was unproductive. I wonder how happy Amelia would be to learn the suffering I went through before realizing just how futile trying to understand her has become.

Riley had stood there while I went through those thoughts. "I'll have you know," she said. "We're almost done with programming a full set of combat instincts for the zerglings. Taylor's been running
a dozen of them through the exercises, and my Sister has been constructing the genetic programming."

Ugh. I can actually hear her capitalizing 'sister'. At least her new Amelia-led interest in botany was good. Keeping her focus on plants meant keeping her away from working with meat, and Jack's 'art'. And thanks to the equipment we had, Amelia's art was provably superior.

Part of her reprogramming would require making certain she knew that her psychotic 'father figure' was flatly inferior to her neurotic 'sister figure'. And watching her cover him in acid and then have him buried alive in bugs had only started the process.

Maybe it would have been enough if not for that fucking bomb that proved Amelia was actually mortal. Being arms deep in Gaea's mutilated body during those hours of surgery had made things worse, not better. And I still don't know how Amelia's mind responded to the mess because my power falters when dealing with her.

"Good to know," I muttered. And then I dipped into my power. Insecure in position. Afraid only value is her power. Needs purpose outside work. Needs Amelia to... And then the pain lanced through my head. Too damn early. Fucking power couldn't wait until telling me what Amelia was suppose to do? Okay. Nonpowered plan... Riley being Riley instead of Plant Bonesaw... or is that just 'Saw', now? Focus, brain! "Sorry. Migraines. I have an idea to help your sister if you'd like to help."

She paused. "I'm listening," she responded.

"Well," I said, buying some time. Riley needs a vacation... "We need to get her out of the building for a little while," I said. "A chance to rest and recover. You have to see how tired she is, how much she ignores all of us except for work."

"Yeah," she agreed. She's lying, of course. She only noticed how much Amelia was ignoring her.

"She's not the only one," I continued. "We're all suffering, some worse than others. Amelia and Taylor the worst of all. So, we're going to throw a party."

"What do you need me for?"
"A few things. You're planning to meet up with Vista later, right?"

"Yeah, Missy wants to hang out and play with Bella," Riley said, suddenly cheerful again. Dammit, right back to the powers thing. We need her to make friends that don't care about the things she had or could make.

"Let her know we have something else planned, and that she should invite all the Wards and Protectorate members who want to be there. Bella will have to wait for later. And I need you to do something special."

"Okay," she agreed. She didn't sound happy.

....

"I can do that," Blasto agreed. "I'll have everything ready in a couple hours or so."

"And I'm on secret hauling duty," Respawn stated. "There's nothing better you can have me doing?"

"Honestly? No," I answered. "I wouldn't even be able to pull this off without your help. There aren't a lot of teleporters that don't need line of sight to work with, and we have to do this without alerting the two people who can potentially have absolute situational awareness over the entire region."

"Fine, I guess that makes sense," he said. "But I want my fifty back."

"I can live with that," I agreed.

....

"So, you guys know your parts?" I asked Crystal and Theo. My eyes were closed the whole time.

"Yes, ma'am," Theo agreed. "Fighting Khepri's changeling to a standstill for at least an hour." He at least, was always cooperative. Two days in and he has already made my pick for best employee. Nowhere near top of the powers list, but he had all of Riley's eagerness to please and an actual moral compass. Too moral, really. We're just lucky he didn't recognize who Riley was when she came in holding the giant f-ing spider.

"Running distraction and espionage," Crystal confirmed her part. I could hear the mischievous anticipation in her voice. "Possibly a little larceny. This'll be fun!"
And I got to work on the final production. Food needed to be ordered. Seating needed to be arranged. There wasn't any time for fireworks, but in a place that had been through the month this town had been through? That blessing wasn't well disguised. Besides, I had something better planned. It would not soon be forgotten.

Hopefully, it also meant I could defuse this powder keg for a little while and maybe buy us some breathing room.

=================

A/N- Y'know, I actually forgot a lot of what was written in this chapter. Rereading was fun.
Theo was panting heavily by the time we were done. His power, for all it made him invulnerable on a level we were beginning to suspect rivaled Alexandria, didn't come with any actual combat enhancement past the indestructible armor. It didn't even make him that much heavier, so he could be picked up and thrown out of the fight by a suitably powerful cape.

One of those powers that looks far more impressive on paper than in the field. The polar opposite of my ability. At least he seemed to have self contained life support in there. We've tried it, he can function just fine underwater. Or encased in a literal tons of cockroaches. He'd picked up tricks like creating shifting barbed spikes on the outside of his costume in order to fight his way out of that, achieving a look not entirely different than Hookwolf. It worked, although I could have packed on the insects faster than he could have tunneled through them.

The Yggdrasil had already cleaned the floor, and was busy cleaning and then digesting the discarded armor he let fall off of him.

My changeling's going to need to be replaced as well, I decided. The barbed spikes were a surprise tactic that I hadn't known he could do. I tried taking him into a submission hold, only to have my left arm mangled so thoroughly that it was nonfunctional. Were it my human body, even with my silk armor, I would probably be dead right now. As it stood, I was glad I used one of the 'generic' armor systems instead of my own custom model.

"Okay," I said. "That was a lot of improvement in a short period of time. Where'd you pick up the spike idea?"

"Thank you, ma'am," he gasped. "That was Lisa's idea. Said that since. My power makes my armor unbreakable. I could get away with very thin edges."

"And you didn't try it before, because?" I asked.

"Don't want to hurt anyone, ma'am," he replied. "Too hard to hold back with the spikes."

"Good," I replied. The kid understands how to hold back. That is important. "We should work on grappling next time. If you can grab someone and fuse your armor around them, you can neutralize most opponents."
"Thanks, ma'am," he replied.

"Uh... please stop calling me ma'am..." I requested. "We're, like, the same age. My name's Taylor. Or Khepri, in costume. And I'm only fif... err, sixteen. I'm not a 'ma'am', okay?" I stopped. Holy crap, I forgot my birthday. Almost a month ago.

"Okay... Taylor," he hesitated, but at least he used my name. That's better.

I didn't look over when Amelia entered the room. I had gotten around my need to 'see', for the most part. My ability to hear through the bugs was still mostly limited to useless static. "I finished those dragonflies," she said.

"The whats?"

"Crystal said you wanted me to build a bunch of-" she paused.

Theo was, meanwhile, edging his way slowly toward the exit. "Okay, Theo, what exactly is going on here?"

He froze. "Sorry, ma'ams, it was all Lisa's idea."

Of course it was.

"What was Lisa's idea?"

"She said to have you ask her when you figured it out," he said.

"Alright," Amelia muttered. "Let's go figure out what your errant girlfriend is up to this time."

I smiled a little. "So, which one is the errant one? You or Crystal?"
"Lisa's your girlfriend," Amelia responded. "Crystal's your stalker."

"Well, what does that make you?" I asked.

"I'm 'the one that got away', clearly," Amelia replied. "It's all here in this chart that Respawn made."

"He made a chart?" I took it. And felt the tingle as Amelia's power reactivated my natural vision. Sure enough, that was on it. "Uh... Amelia... this lists Blasto and Defiant as brothers, and has Dragon dating the M4s. All the M4s. You do realize this, right?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "But just look at the craftsmanship of it."

She was right, this is nicely done. Colored lines, easy to read, poster quality printing. Pictures of each of us near our names. He even had it laminated. "I can't help but imagine the progress we'd make if he put this kind of dedication into his job."

....

"You arranged a surprise party for us. Invited half the city. In three hours. And somehow managed to do it without either of us knowing." I was entirely flabbergasted. "How!?"

"Truly, the second greatest achievement of my career," Lisa replied. "Now give me a second."

She walked alongside me and grabbed Amelia by the arm. "Hey!"

"Come on, gotta have a private chat between love rivals," Lisa said smiling. She's seen the chart, apparently. I turned to watch them. Was I the only one who didn't know about this?

Amelia sealed the doors to one of the side rooms. I listened in anyway, as best I could with my insects.

"It's not like that!" Loud voice, probably not Lisa.

Another, unintelligible, voice. That one was probably Lisa.
"No, she's-"

They spent several minutes, and I'm pretty sure I heard the phrase 'father in front of her' in there.

Lisa was smiling when the wall finally opened. Amelia looked like she'd just seen god. And he asked her to pull his finger. Where did I even hear that phrase from? Oh, right. Thank you, Kurt.

"Are you okay?" I asked, as my partner just stared blankly forward.

"Uh... yeah... no..." she responded. "Lisa just made me realize that I had become Carol."

Still in a daze, she turned and walked toward the stairs that led to our labs.

I looked toward Lisa. "If she turns you into some kind of livestock over this, I'm not going to help you."

Lisa smiled. "I'm okay with that. Woulda been worse if I did nothing."

Below, my insects sensed Amelia approaching Riley. The girl squeaked as Amelia wrapped her arms around her from behind and squeezed. "a wonderful sister."

============

Bonus line that's totally canon, but I can't find a good place for it in the current narrative:

"What's 'Phyrexia' and why's Riley the queen of it?"

============

A/N- This chapter makes me smile so hard, and for so many reasons. Also: A chapter that's only 1k words long... jeez, I almost never go below 1500 these days.
"Okay, guests are arriving!" Lisa announced. "Everyone in costume and out amongst the locals!"

I didn't bother getting up.

"When I said 'in costume and outside', I meant you, not the meat puppets. Except Riley. She stays indoors. The rest of us go out there."

"What about security risks?" I asked.

"What risks?" Lisa asked. "They watched us get blown up and then rip the face off the guy that did it. The lead competing theories are that we're all using really convincing versions of the M4s, that we're all clones, and that Amelia transformed us into decentralized lifeforms that no longer have organ systems and can rebuild ourselves from gelatinous slime. That attack actually made people believe we are more invulnerable, not less."

The scary part is that all of those are plausible. And one is actually true, sometimes.

"So we may as well enjoy the food and company with everyone else. Besides, we have an awesome lightshow prepared and you're not going to want to see this through a filter."

"Fiiine," I groaned. I wouldn't say that this sounded fun. Honestly, I didn't really like parties. "I'll go get Amelia. She's taken a suddenly weird liking to Riley." Dear god. I stopped, and a chill went through me as I realized the implications. Lisa has the power to talk people into enjoying being around Bonesaw.

They were in the lab, of course. Working on some... something... fucking tinkers.

"Okay, I'll be using the conductive latticework." Riley looked over at me.

"Sorry to take you away from productive work that's actually useful to us," I said. "But mom says we have to go outside and have fun, now."
Both of them looked genuinely disappointed. "Sorry, sis," Amelia said. "I promise to sneak you ice
cream and something with more sugar in it than if they'd actually made it out of pure sugar." She
ruffled Riley's hair. Is Amelia actually getting into this whole 'big sister' thing?

"It's okay," she said. "Clarice is upgraded. I can taste anything she does."

"Wait..." I paused. "How is that... why would you want that?"

"Don't have time for the how," she said. "But taste and smell are incredibly versatile and accurate
chemical analysis systems. Of course I'd want the ability to be able to track by scent or smell a gas
leak or identify the specific details of biological weapons by licking them."

"Okay," I agreed. "Those are actually really good reasons. Come on, Amelia, before Respawn
accuses us of building a secret love nest in the walls. Again."

She sighed. "Yeah. Did you see the part of the chart where I installed the ghost of Elvis into a
monkey to sing me to sleep?"

"Yes. I read the whole idiotic thing," I muttered as we walked out of the lab.

"Yeah, seriously," she laughed. "It's actually Sinatra."

Suiting up was easy enough, as I opted to use my standard Khepri armor. As fun as 'Queen of
Blades' was, it would probably make children cry. So I had to take my armor off the changeling,
which looked surprisingly like me except for a thankful lack of anatomical correctness. We were the
last ones to the party, of course. And I cringed at the thought of how that would be interpreted by the
handful of people with cameras.

"Hate this as much as I do, huh?" Gaea muttered.

"Probably," I replied. "Not really a social butterfly, in case you hadn't noticed."
"Me, neither. Victoria was always the outgoing one," she replied, studiously examining her feet.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to bring up bad memories." Fucking stupid, Taylor.

"Don't be," she said. "We've been through so much shit in the last few weeks that it actually feels... I dunno, has all of this really been less than a month? Feels like a lifetime. Or yesterday. Both."

I had nothing to say to that. "Yeah," I agreed.

She managed to pull together a half hearted smile. "So, you wanna try being a literal social butterfly instead?" She was looking over at the children who were doing their best to entertain themselves away from the adults. They were mostly on the dirty side, with few toys. Playing tag.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"The new toys our supposed friends tricked me into making," she explained. "I turned our Yggdrasil Dependent butterfly and dragonfly stocks into color changers."

Part of our projects, a way around the ecological damage we were causing was to build our own masses of bugs that fed on Yggdrasil only. Now that I had miles of range, I really could break an ecosystem, so I avoided using natural insects wherever possible. I reached out to the butterflies, even as Amelia started shifting the ground, forming a fence around a select area.

"What did they say that was for?"

People murmured and turned to pay attention. Some to us, others to the fence itself. Maybe we should stop showing off every time we come out in public. I'll have to ask Lisa's thoughts on us being so casual about high level power demonstrations. The area secure, she then created the tunnel, exposing one pocket of butterflies to the fading sunlight.

"Supposedly signaling and instruction. Emergency alert lights. Anything a flashing light can be used for, I guess."

That does sound useful. Why hadn't we thought of it sooner? "Well, then, time to test your work."
The insect started flickering as I toyed with their pigmentation features.

She looked at me and smirked. "My equipment is flawless, you just have to learn to use it correctly."

"I am so glad I'm recording this," came a voice behind us. I jumped. And then blushed as I realized how what we just said could be interpreted. Then, finally, I realized it was Clarice. I didn't notice her and I don't know why. I was too stunned trying to figure out what happened to respond.

"N-not what it sounded like," Amelia stuttered out. "We were just discussing the modified butterflies, and how they are harder to use than normal bugs."

"I know!" Clarice exclaimed. "And I'm reading all the signals in real time. I can cross reference this from the data we're pulling from the butterflies later and find out all kinds of fun things about how your powers work."

My mind darkened, and with it the butterflies dimmed to dark browns and blacks. Bonesaw, cheerful as always, trying to cut through my skull. Planning to take me apart. Literally. To learn how I ticked. And that was nothing to what she did with Brian.


"Right... Right. Sorry," I muttered. The butterflies rippled as they went from black to bright red, then color after color as I tested what their instincts would let me do. Apparently, Cephalopods weren't in my control range, so it was harder for me to use the colors properly. I gave myself to the swarm, letting it be my body, leaving behind the tiny human girl that was trying not to think about the little girl behind her that once tried to vivisect her. It was calming.

I toyed with creating pictures, and decided that the problem was more my lack of artistic skill than the insects' abilities. Back at my actual body, Clarice had run off, leaving a lunchbox sized machine in Gaea's hands. I recognized why a second later, as ripples formed around my insects. Too small for a human body to recognize, but insects had greater sensitivity to their environment.

Vista's power, applied in microscopic waves. I wasn't sure why. It didn't seem to be an attack, so I resolved to mention it later. Meanwhile, the cloud of butterflies, which had attracted the crowd's attention, flowed over to the awed children, flitting about and landing on them, to a chorus of awe and giggles and laughter. I segmented the butterflies into 'squads' and assigned each of them a different color of the rainbow. As well as throwing in white and black and a few of the more popular
shades. Each child had a different color.

As a fun little game, as well as a test of control, I had their colors switch whenever two of the kids touched. Soon they had started ‘trading’ colors as part of their other games.

Just innocent children and innocent games.

============

Oh, man, so much achieved in this chapter.
Taylor and I opted to stay out of the festivities. Big surprise, right? I was aware of how conspicuous we were. Being a wallflower was much less complicated when I wasn't one half of a partnership rivaled only by Dragon for sheer potential. Of course, this turned the wall we were flowering into the single most important part of the party. As impromptu as the party was, it did mean a lack of political guests. The Mayor didn't get to make a showing, the news didn't have a chance to show in large numbers, although they'd probably be showing cellphone footage on the news by this time tomorrow.

"Wards, incoming," Taylor informed me, nodding toward the northeast end. I recognized Vista and Clockblocker's costumes. As well as a darker toned girl with an oversized crossbow. Miss Militia was there in costume. I was still a bit annoyed with her over last time we met. I got why she did what she did, trying her level best to humiliate me on television. But that didn't mean I had to like her.

Aceso bolted toward the group, using what I was pretty sure was her maximum effective movement speed, complete with doing a dive-roll under a table, to the shouts of surprise from the people who were just trying to get some punch. Glad we hinted she was so young, I thought. People tend to forgive children for stuff like that.

Osiris also turned in that direction. He was being followed by an attractive redhead. How the hell did Respawn get...? Know what? Fuck it, don't really care. He wasn't going to give away any important secrets or anything. Either way, Vista was already in the process of being dragged off by Clarice.

My attention was taken away from them when I heard Taylor whisper a name. "Dinah."

....

I watched Aceso pull Vista away. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, I have to show you the butterflies!"

"Okay, okay," my teammate agreed, stumbling to keep up with the girl who was a little taller than her, but obviously younger. Both in terms of personality and actual age.

"And then there were two," I muttered to my other teammate. Flechette was looking around for something.
"So, did you get her the ring, yet?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's the tradition," I said. "You date for a while. Then someone proposes. Then you exchange rings. I know New York thinks it's a different country..."

"Okay, smartass," she muttered. "I got the joke. I just have no idea what gives you that idea."

"Oh, I dunno, maybe-"

"HEY, Clockblocker!" Came a shout, interrupting me. "Oh god, I'm your biggest fan and you're the coolest ward and I just have to shake your hand!"

I recognized the guy, of course. Osiris. "Uh... yeah," I smiled. This would be great. I held out my hand to shake his. And, of course, I froze him. Only to realize my mistake. He'd grasped my wrist during the handshake. I wasn't able to pull myself free. Next to me, Flechette started laughing hysterically. I looked over at Miss Militia, who just watched impassively. I'd swear she was smiling, but her mouth was covered so I couldn't know.

"Dude," came a voice. I looked back and there was a second Osiris standing there. He was looking at his own frozen copy.

"That is such bullshit," we both said.

"Hey, Flechette, looks like I'll be collecting my twenty early," he said.

"You paid him to trap me?" I whimpered, putting on my best pout. "Why would you do that to me?"

"Remember when I first joined the team?" She asked. Oh fuck. "And you froze me and then drew cat whiskers on my face. That's why."

"That was harmless and funny!" I protested.
"I spent two fucking hours wondering why everyone was smirking at me before someone told me!" Flechette exclaimed.

"I said I was sorry!" I replied. "Also, I got shit duty for a week because of that."

"Speaking of which," Miss Milita cut in. "Flechette, you know pranking other Wards is a violation of the rules. Getting someone else to do it for you doesn't change your culpability in the matter. You'll be on punitive duties for at least the next couple days. I will mention this to the Director and see if she feels more is warranted."

"Sorry, ma'am," Flechette replied. She doesn't sound sorry.

Meanwhile, Osiris was laughing with his girlfriend. Who is a total freakin' babe, I had to admit. Obviously pampered red hair. Tight shirt and shorts, showing off her figure without looking trashy. "See, told you," he said. "My power works on anything and everything. Now we gotta hurry up before it wears off."

He moved over to me and put an arm over my shoulder. And another arm over... his?... shoulder. "Smile for the camera," he said, pointing at the girl, who had produced a camera from her purse.

I chuckled. "Okay, you guys definitely got me with this," I agreed. It is pretty funny, and I know how to lose gracefully. She snapped several photographs of me, and the twin copies of Respawn. I waved for the camera as Respawn gave bunny ears to his copy.

After a few dozen pictures, the girl went over to Flechette. "Here's my email, if you want a copy of the photos," she offered. Flechette smiled, giving me a devilish look.

"You'll hear from me tonight."

"Well, gotta get back to the party," Osiris said as the girls exchanged information. "Catch up to me later, I have some ideas on how to make our powers work together. I'd stick around, but, y'know, I already am."

He went around me and his clone to hug the girl from behind. "C'mon, I still have to introduce you
to the others," he said. She kissed his cheek. "You'll never guess who Blasto is dating!"

"Oh," he said as he stopped and looked back at Fletchette, "You'll find Parian over by where the kids are playing."

"Okay, thanks, see you kids later," Flechette replied as she headed over to the glittering butterfly display.

Even Miss Milita had left, choosing to mingle rather than wait around. This sucks, I thought. And then, finally, the grip on my arm slackened.

"Dude, that is such bullshit," came Osiris' voice, before the copy vanished into dust. I had to agree.

==========

A/N- Oh, come on, this was foreshadowed waaaay back in the PHO arc. :p
"That sounds like a zombie virus," my date gasped in horror.

"It is," I agreed. "And it's not even the worst thing in there. It's twisted. I imagine this is how scientists felt when they acquired all the research journals from the psychos doing experiments in the concentration camps. It's repulsive in a way that defies words, but I can't help but marvel at the sheer wealth of knowledge."

Fucking Bonesaw. If I'd known she and Aceso were the same, I'd have killed myself and set off a self destruct chain through my lab. Seeing how powerful 'Clarice' was, I wouldn't expect that to actually kill her, but it would have been enough to destroy my technology and ensure my body never got into her hands.

Every time I work with Riley, I was caught between reminding myself that the sweet little girl is one of the world's worst monsters, and trying not to think about how unbelievably easy it would be for her to end life as we knew it. Not that she was the only one on the team with that capacity. Gaea's power was also nightmare fuel, even more frightening to behold than Riley's. But Gaea was Amelia. Panacea. And Riley was f-ing Bonesaw.

I felt a hand on my arm. "Are you okay?" Ruth asked, with a worried look. She was in costume, of course, but it wasn't her battle armor.

I put my hand over hers. "Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Just lost in thought."

"Maybe we should focus on something a little happier," she offered with a concerned but hopeful smile. She had the most expressive face, even half hidden behind her mask. She glanced off to behind me. "I think we've got company."

I turned, and there was Respawn approaching, with a couple girls. One I recognized as Flechette, who seemed more interested in something else. She went toward the area that had somehow become the impromptu kids' area. The other girl seemed to be hanging off of Zach. Good, the kid deserves it. And not just because he saved me from being blown to bits. Or undid the side effects, at least.

"Ah, the infatuations of youth," I heard Ruth's smile in her voice.
"Spying with your tech? Isn't there a rule against that?"

"Just woman's intuition," she answered. "Maybe a bit of my power at work. Emotions Tinker, remember? I can turn off the machines, I can't turn off the knowledge that let me build them in the first place."

I couldn't argue with that logic. I was dating a woman who I literally could not hide my feelings from, if and when I developed any serious ones. I hadn't known her that long. As much as I enjoyed her company, and the pleasure of being able to talk with another tinker that's not Bonesaw, I was too old to fall that fast. That was game for teenagers. On the plus side, the fact that she understands this kinda stuff automatically meant she probably wouldn't expect me to talk about it much. Right?

"Hey, Zach," I said. He was one of the few of us with a public identity, alongside Crystal and Amelia.

"How's it going," he responded. "This is Emma."

"Good day, miss," I said to her. "I should introduce my date." I gestured.

"Rapture," Ruth said with the same winning smile she took everywhere. "How long have you two been dating?"

"Not long," Emma volunteered. "Only a few dates, since he's always busy with that whole 'hero' thing. But we talk whenever we can."

Zach pulled me aside and whispered. "Dude, how on earth did you talk her into a date?"

I smiled. "Catholic girls love the bad boys. Helps that I'm Catholic, too."

"You? Really?" He said with a smirk.

"Mi abuela. She would trigger from beyond the grave and hunt me down if I wasn't. I get by on not being very good at it."
I followed Taylor's hesitant approach toward Dinah. She saw us before we got close. The girl was in a well made business suit. Clearly custom fit and probably very expensive. Her straight brown hair was cut short. Not quite boyishly so, but nothing below her jaw.

I fell back. She looked healthy and I was glad to see she was okay, but Dinah was always Taylor's quest. The girl she was willing to kill to rescue. I may be oblivious, but even I knew this was not my place. Dinah's father was with her, but he seemed to hold the same thoughts that I did, and merely watched.

"H... hi, Dinah," Taylor said with a voice that I'd never heard her use in costume. "Are you okay?"

"You didn't kill Coil," was the first words spoken by the little girl to us.

Taylor froze. "No, I didn't," she said. It sounded more like an admission of guilt, like she was apologizing for failing something important. "He's no danger to you any longer, but no, he's not dead."

"Eighty seven percent chance I meet Coil again," she said. Then she paused. "Zero point one seven three percent chance he presents a danger to me at any point in the future."

Her father opted to speak up. "What did you do to him?"

Taylor flinched. She never flinched. Times like this were why, sometimes, I felt like I'd happily trade my power with Tattletale's.

"We can't answer that question," I replied. "He's dealt with, that will have to be enough."

"Dinah," Taylor said. "One question. Are the numbers better if we keep Coil as he currently is, rather than killing him?"
"Coil's power disrupts my numbers," Dinah replied. "But, yes, an average of six percent. An average of a hundred million more survivors, if things go bad. It doesn't change the likely timeframe, however."

"Is that enough of an answer?" I asked the pair. Dinah nodded. Her father seemed willing to go along with her on this one. I had to wonder what his life was like. Dinah was possibly the most powerful precog this side of the Simurgh.

"I will not join Pantheon," Dinah said before any of us asked the question. I hadn't intended to, not then at least, but eventually one of us probably would have. "I won't work for anyone else, either. Never again."

"I... I understand," Taylor replied. "I'd feel the same way. Will you at least let us help you?"

"Help?" Her father asked. He sounded skeptical.

"We are protecting and sheltering rogues and other independent capes. Parian, for example, who has no interest in being a member of the team. Anyone who comes after them will have to go through us."

"Sounds an awful lot like what the Protectorate offered," he countered.

"Probably," I answered. "The difference is, we mean it. Dinah would be a great help for the team, but we're powerful enough that we don't absolutely need it." I turned my head toward Dinah. "You'll be using your power to help us stop the apocalypse, either way, right?"

"Yes," Dinah agreed. "Sixteen percent chance the end is halted. If that occurs, fifty seven percent chance it will be Pantheon that prevents it. Otherwise, there will be five forces at the end. You'll be in one, Khepri in another. It's the best I can offer."

"Thank you for the information," Taylor replied. I thought on her words. Five factions. Only five? Another, either now or in the future, that was almost as capable of halting the apocalypse as we were? Taylor and I weren't going to be together in the end?

"I'll help you whenever it comes to my questions dedicated to halting the apocalypse," Dinah agreed. "Our partnership adds an extra three percent advantage. But that's all it is, a partnership. Any
questions you have on other subjects will result in the standard fees. If you're willing to provide security or thinker assistance, I'll pay with one additional question per week, each."

"That's better than I deserve," Taylor responded. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry." "It's okay," Dinah answered. "If this hadn't happened, we wouldn't be aware of the apocalypse at all. Everything else? I'll cope."

==============

A/N- Dinah. One of the scenes I'd been anticipating for a while. Hopefully I did it justice.

A/N/N- In retrospect, I still like how this one panned out.
"Are you okay?" I asked Taylor once Dinah had left. I could feel Taylor's power rippling through the area, thanks to my contact with the Yggdrasil. It wasn't anything so obvious as telepathy or special empathy. Taylor was better at hiding emotions in her body than anyone I've ever met before, but only in her body.

There were several thousand pounds of modified insect life that were directly connected to her, and indirectly connected to me. I could feel their agitation, and response to it. The zerglings had awakened in their den, and most others were drinking deep of the nectar feeds dedicated to them, collecting calories in anticipation of action. I couldn't figure out why her power was so agitated. Sure, it hadn't been the most cheerful of reunions, but it didn't go badly, either.

"I think so," Taylor replied. "It's just odd. I spent so much time dedicated to Dinah, and I didn't know anything about her. I still don't, not really. This right now, and that time when we took her home, that's it."

Oh.

"I don't know what I was expecting," she continued. "To be thanked for saving her was too much to hope for. I was prepared for her to be angry at me for helping imprison her in the first place. I should have known she'd know we didn't kill Coil."

"It's easy to forget she's one of the most powerful precogs I've ever heard of," I offered. I had no idea how to approach this situation. The bugs, at least, had started to calm.

"Is it?" Taylor offered a sad laugh. "Her power was all I could think of. She was so... is there even a child left in there? She acted more like Coil than a little girl. I could picture her, snake costume and all, running an empire with a calculating ruthlessness on par with any of the most dedicated supervillains."


"Mind powers altering the mind?" she finished for me. "It makes sense, of course. I just... she's so young."
"Makes even more sense, then. The brain's more elastic and pliable that way," look at Riley. "Dinah has one of the most powerful mental abilities I've even heard of, it's no surprise it would impact her."

"She's scared," Minerva stated. I jumped. I'd been so focused on the signals I was getting from Taylor that I hadn't noticed her. "I'd say sorry for eavesdropping, but we all know better. You're both a little bit right, of course. It's part power, it's part Coil, but it's mostly a little girl trying to fake confidence in front of someone she's in awe of. And trying to meet her hero as an equal, instead of as a supplicant. Doesn't help that she has a deep seated resentment of being controlled by anyone, even if that control is out of gratitude."

"So... she wants to help, but doesn't want to admit it's for anything more than pragmatism?" I asked.

"What? You didn't think it was your cheerful personalities and incredible people skills that convinced her to work with us, did you?"

Taylor actually chuckled, "No, I guess not. It's... good to know Dinah's not turned into another Coil."

"Nope," Lisa said. "No chance of that. Anyway, I came by to let Gaea know the area's getting a bit dark. Mind brightening it up a bit?"

I looked, and yes, it was getting dark. Some lights had been set up by people, but the city was on limited power to begin with, and we were a fair ways away from streetlights. I focused my power into the Yggdrasil, copying bioluminscent cells and spreading them across the area. Slowly, the ground began to glow. It wasn't bright, not enough to compare to a lightbulb, even, but it was omnipresent. Enough dim light adds up to quite a glow when it's coming from every part of the ground.

It was an alien sort of beauty, but it was beautiful.

"Very nice," Lisa praised. "Mind sending the butterflies back to refuel? They'll need the energy for the big show."

Taylor didn't respond, but the swarm of butterflies lifted off from the children, who were less disappointed than I'd have expected.
"Hey, umm, you? Have you figured out your name yet?" Clarice asked. I was currently maintaining a slide for the kids to play on, while Parian was providing a "bounce pad" for them to play with. The couple dozen odd children were having a blast.

"Maybe," I said with a smile, hopefully it translated over the metal 'mask' I was wearing. "I could go with 'Horus', perhaps?" He was a god of protection, after all. The fact that he was was from a religion of people my father would hate, just made it that much better.

"This is my friend Vista, who has to try the slide," Clarice insisted.

"No, I am not going on the slide," Vista insisted. "That's for children."

"Aww, but you haaaave to," Clarice pouted. How does one create a doll out of plants that can pout, anyway?

"It's just a little slide for little kids," Vista retorted.

"I can make it bigger if you like, miss," I offered.

Vista jumped, as if I'd startled her somehow. Then she relaxed. "Oh... uh..."

"Ooh, yeah, give her a really really big one!" Clarice encouraged.

A couple of the smaller kids picked up on Clarice's enthusiasm and started cheering and encouraging the girl. "Okay, fine," she agreed. "I'll try it just to make you guys happy. But don't you dare go easy on me."

"Wouldn't dream of it, ma'am," I replied, as I started pouring my power into the slide. It shimmered and warped as I added mass, until I'd reached the limit of what I could hold together. About a hundred feet tall. Vista looked up at it, biting her lip nervously. Then her face hardened with determination.
"I suppose that'll do," she replied. "Hey, Aceso, wanna give me a boost up?"

"Sure!" Aceso agreed, crouching down and cupping her hands at the ground for Vista to step on. Clarice thrust the girl up, and she traveled the full distance in a couple seconds, catching herself at the top of the ladder.

She hesitated, looking down the steep ramp. Then she looked at everyone watching her. I could almost hear her telling herself that there was no backing out now. She pushed herself and shot down the slide, gripping at the sides to slow herself down. Oops, we forgot to mention that my power was frictionless, at least while I was in active control. Anything left behind would return to the default nature of the material used.

We heard her shriek long before she got close to the ground. I was already collapsing the slide behind her. Something she must have felt, because she looked back and started screaming even louder. She hit the bottom going at speeds that must have been around terminal velocity, and promptly shot up the ramp I had built in front. It took her close to a minute to start sliding down again. Same ride, only backward this time.

She passed us again, still screaming. The children had started laughing with delight, and the spectacle had attracted others nearby to watch as well. Including Parian and Flechette, who I noted were holding hands. Good for them.

It took Vista a few minutes before she'd slowed to a hault. She lay there gasping for air. I offered my hand. "Are you okay?"

"Y... yeah," she gasped. She took my hand and let me pull her to her feet. I kept giving her support as her legs wobbled.

"You did make me promise not to go easy, ma'am," I said.

"I know," she replied, then she looked at the rapt faces of the kids. "Best. Ride. Ever." she declared to them.

============= 
A/N- Missy, Theo and Riley. This is the birth of one of my favorite character interaction sources in
this story.
"Hey, Ashley," I said with a smile as I danced with my wife in my arms. The music wasn't my first pick, too soft. But, hey, free food. I could sit through Shatner's Spoken Word album for that. I had before. Plus, the atmosphere was amazing. The ground was actually glowing, and this weird tree smelled wonderful. "Check out Fletchette's date."

I did a half step that put us at an angle where she could look. "Of course that's what you'd notice," she said with a disapproving voice. "She's too young for you, anyway."

"Yeah, but Ash, she's just about right for y-oof," I gasped as she punched me in the gut.

"I keep telling you I'm not into girls!" She glared at me, but there was still a smile on her face. "And your stupid ass just ruined a romantic evening that would have led to a fun night."

"Nah," I laughed. "The slave driver has me on duty."

"And you're here, instead?" she hissed. "Ugh. Know what? Nevermind. You didn't tell me anything. How the hell did I let an idiot like you talk me into marrying him?"

"Because I'm an amazing Bob," I replied.

"What's a Bob," she asked. Too easy.

"Battery Operated Boyf-oof!" I doubled over, gasping. Made all the worse because I was laughing at the same time. "Halp! I'm a victim of domestic battery!"

"My life is hell," she muttered. "Hey, wait, is that Vista?"

I looked over. "Or a really convincing cosplayer," I replied. Vista was currently dancing with a boy in a bluish steel armor. "Know who the boy is?"

"No," Battery replied. She didn't sound too happy about it. I wasn't happy about it, either. "Probably
one of Pantheon's new recruits."

"First the pony ride, now this," I said, switching into 'serious' mode. "Think they're making a play to convert Vista?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Certainly looks that way. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow, at least warn her that this boy might not be on the level. Right now, we'll just keep watch on things."

-----

"So, Theo and Vista, huh?" I smiled at Taylor. "Good, both of them could use more friends." Vista was a good kid. Too serious, sometimes, but could you blame her? Her crush on Dean was worn on her sleeve, even he figured it out. How an empath could be so damn oblivious, I couldn't even pretend to know. I always found myself hoping she'd succeed, and not just because of my own issues. Vista was just adorable, despite, and in part because of, her attempts to not be.

"Yeah," Taylor confirmed. "I'm trying not to eavesdrop, but definitely. Parian and Flechette, too."

"Oh, them I already knew about," I confided.

"Really? How did you figure that out?"

"Woman's intuition," I smirked.

"Lisa."

"That's what I said." The song switched as we were talking. "Huh, that's like the fourth song from my playlist that's come up."

"Counted five from mine," Taylor replied.

"That's not suspicious or anything," I frowned.
"Fucking Lisa," Taylor muttered.

"Is it too late to ditch her, go buy a desert, and turn it into a tropical paradise? I liked tha..." I stopped mid word as I felt her. Taylor's power poured across her swarm in a way I hadn't seen when she was in heated combat. That was a cold, calculated force of will. This. This was more like impotent rage. The zerglings had dug their claws into the flesh of the base, readying themselves to attack.

Riley's in there, I realized. I formed walls, sealing her off from portions of her own lab and pushing her out. She got the message and retreated.

I noticed Respawn headed over. Did he know what was going on? No, he just seemed to be enjoying himself with that redhead.

"Emma, these are the boss ladies," he said with a smile. "Who need no introductions. Boss ladies who need no introductions, this is my lovely date for the evening, Emma."

"Hi!" she said excitedly, offering a perfect smile. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you! Khepri, you're amazing and you pull off the 'mysterious antihero' look flawless..." her speaking came to a halt. Khepri's body language was rigid. She looked ready to physically attack the girl.

Even Respawn caught on. "Umm, guys, is there something wrong?"

Aceso managed to get to us next, alongside Eki. "What's the emergency?" Crystal asked, hovering above us, the shimmer of her shield ready to protect us from any attack. Crystal's power wasn't nearly as good when used for distance shielding like this, but it was better than nothing.

They all were glancing around, trying to spot a problem. I already knew that this 'Emma' girl was the problem, but I didn't know why.

It was, of course, Lisa who came to the rescue. "Oh, hello there, Emma," her voice was saccharine. Emma jumped, turning to look at blond. "What a surprise to see you again!"

"H-hi," she attempted a smile, her eyes darting to all of us. "I don't think I know you."
"No, you really wouldn't," Tattletale replied. "You were always too busy running around with Sophia. And... what's her name... the one that chased you two around like a lost puppy?"


"Yeah, that's right!" Tattletale said happily. "Madison. But she's not important. What's important is your quest to torture and attempt to murder an innocent girl. That is what really matters."

She withered under our glares. Sparing a pleading look at Respawn, who stood there. I couldn't read the look on his face, but it was pretty clear Emma wasn't getting help from that corner. She sure as hell wouldn't get any from the rest of us.

"I didn't..."

"Oh, but you did," I cringed, remembering when I was under the gaze of this power. And now I was watching it happen. I should do something. Instead I kept watching. "Maybe your rich lawyer daddy would be able to save you, maybe not. But you stuffed a girl into a locker full of gallons of human waste and left her there while you went to class."

"Fucking christ," Crystal muttered. None of the rest of us said anything. Tattletale knew too much, and I doubted it was from school. And then I felt the pressure of the insects surge when the locker was mentioned. Oh. Oh no. "What did the school do?"

"Nothing," Tattletale never took her eyes off Emma, who looked very much like she was trying to will herself out of the universe. "The popular girls versus one loner? One of those girls, they know is a Ward. They chose to cover it all up, to keep the funding from having a Ward in their school."

"No wonder you have such a beef with the PRT," Crystal muttered.

"One of many reasons," Tattletale agreed. She watched Emma like a wolf ready to pounce on a deer. "Right now, I want to know why you did it. You betrayed your best friend for years, and for what? What pathetic twisted part of your mind justified that?"

I had moved over to Taylor, grabbing her hand. It was shaking.
"Oh, so that's why," Tattletale grinned sadistically. "You're one of those people. You know you're so pathetic, so weak, that you desperately cling to anyone that can validate your insecurities. You came here for the sole purpose of trying to befriend us. So we could replace that Shadow Stalker shaped hole in your shattered worldview. Well, guess what? Sophia was every bit as pathetic as you are."

"I..." she couldn't look at Tattletale, she instead looked at Respawn. "Please, Zach, I do care a-"

"Emma," Respawn spoke up. It was the first time I'd ever heard him sound upset, or angry. It was cold, almost unreadable. "That part doesn't bother me."

"Really?" There was actual hope in her voice. Desperate hope, but hope nonetheless.

"Yeah," he offered a smile, it didn't reach his eyes. "You're not the first cape groupie I've ever met."

She froze. "But I..."

"Sure. You telegraphed it from, like, a mile away. But you were attractive and fun to be around, amazing arm candy. So I figured 'sure'. You used me, but that's okay because I used you back. No one was going to get hurt. But what you did to that girl? I never imagined you could torment someone like that."

"That... that's not..." Emma sobbed.

"Oh, Emma," Tattletale interrupted. "Just so we're clear. You deserved this and worse. Everyone here, including you, knows it. If you try to make an issue of this for any of us, I will come after you with all your secrets, big and small. And I'll have evidence. I'm not afraid to unmask myself and testify in court. Who do you think public opinion is going to support once the truth comes out? The only reason I don't do it right now is because you're not important enough to waste the time. Don't make me change my mind."

She nodded, the tears falling freely from her face.

"I'd strongly suggest you leave now," Respawn said. "And find a way to lose my phone and email. I don't associate with bullies."
Emma bolted, covering her face as she made her way through the crowd. I watched her leave, and I couldn't help but notice the eyes on us. Most importantly, Miss Militia.

Zach faced toward us, away from the crowd, so none of them would notice that he was crying. His body language didn't reflect it, but he didn't bother trying to hide it from us. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice hard. "I didn't know."

"Not your fault," Skitter responded. Her voice equally cold, even as I could feel the swarm screaming. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, give me a sec," he responded. And then disintegrated. "There, that's better." He smiled. The tears were gone. "Minerva, mind if I ask you to pre screen my guests, from now?"

==============

A/N- Damn. This chapter gives me goosebumps.
Taylor broke from the group right after Emma retreated. I hesitated and looked back at the others. Lisa just offered a nod and I ran after her, into the base. She wasn't hard to track. I found her sitting in one of the prefab bedrooms. Really, as much time as we spend here, I probably should just build permanent sleeping quarters. Maybe an actual kitchen so I could eat 'not takeout' at some point. This 'sleeping in the office' shit was getting old.

She was laying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She didn't look at me, didn't need to look at me. "She's so small."

"Okay?" I asked.

"Emma," Taylor clarified. "She's meaningless in the scheme of things. On the level we're worried about, she's nothing. We're locked in conspiracies with Dragon, spoken of in the same breath as the Triumvirate, building an army to slay Endbringers. We conquered a city in a week. Everyone knows it, most people thank us for it, and no one can prove it. Compared to that, what does some highschool girl who's best hope for fame was 'date Respawn' amount to?"

"Everyone matters," I answered. Fuck, I wasn't cut out for this. Why wasn't Lisa here?

She managed a sad smile. "They got away with it because I didn't matter."

I sat down next to her, placing my hand on her arm.

"I thought she didn't matter to me," she continued. "I was standing there watching her gush over me. Me. It should have felt like a victory. All I could think about how happy she was to see me. How happy I was when we were still friends. And how many ways I could have killed her right then and there. What I'd done to Eligos. What I'd done to Siberian's maker. With the things you've created, I could make her vanish in the night and no one would ever know. And I hated myself for thinking it, for wanting that. The fuck is wrong with me?"

I flopped down, laying next to her. "You're talking to the girl who spent most of the last three years lusting after her own sister," I said with a short, self deprecating scoff. "We can't help what we feel. All we can control is what we do with those feelings."
"And then I watched Tattletale tear her down," Taylor continued. "She was brought to tears in front of me, humiliated, reduced to nothing. She spent five minutes experiencing what I spent two and a half years going through. You'd think that would make me happy."

"If anything, it upset you more," I responded.

"I wanted to save her from Lisa," she offered a pained laugh. "I actually wanted to rescue Emma, the traitor that was once by best friend, the cause of my fucking Trigger Event, from the person who saved my life and showed me that it was still possible for me to have friends and happiness."

"You're a good person," I replied. "You don't want to see people suffer."


"No," I replied. "Hesitation is something you don't do. But you still hated every second of it."

She looked at me for the first time. "How could you possibly know that?"

"The Yggdrasil," I explained. "Your power telegraphs your feelings through the bugs. The relays, especially. I don't know if they're just extra sensitive because they're linked into your power in a more direct fashion, or I'm extra sensitive to them because my power is linked into them as well."

"You feel that, too?" She asked. "I thought I was imagining it. Your tree responds to your power, as well. Maybe not the same way mine does, but I can tell when you're in contact, whether you're actually using your power or not. It's not an especially clear link, but it at least hints at your emotions, and the stronger ones come in clearer. Like I'm feeling your 'pulse', or something."

"Shit," I muttered. "You know what this means, don't you?" This time, I reached for the link, spread my power through the Yggdrasil and at the relays. Improving on them, more completely melding them into the Yggdrasil, until they were functionally one organism. Taylor gasped.

"No," she cupped her face with her hands. "No, no, no, god damn it no." Even as she protested, she used her power, flexing back through the relay points, interacting her power with mine on a literal level.
"I'm afraid so," I confirmed, as I sank my hand into the living bed. "We can feel each others' emotions from anywhere in the city."

"The others must never, ever find out," she said. "If they do, we'll never hear the end of it."

"We must kill Tattletale," I agreed. Meanwhile, I was assembling some biomass around my right arm. She felt it when I added one of the relays to the neural system of the organism.

"What did you just do?"

I pulled my arm out of the bed, holding it up so she could see without either of us having to sit up. I was wearing a green wristband now, stretching the full length of my forearm. "A more comprehensive version," I answered. "It's not fair how one sided the connection is. My side borders on telepathy. Your side is little more than an EKG. I can break connection whenever I like, you have to leave the city. This changes that. A direct link that's intended for it."

I felt her emotions well up as I attempted to send my own feelings through the link. I couldn't know for sure how well they were received, only her responding emotional mix.

FearComfortReliefSafetyGratitude. She rolled over- half on top of me, and held me in a hug, sobbing. "Oh god thank you! I can't believe you'd let me... I was terrified you could..."

I had to fight back the emotional interplay. "May- maybe I should turn down the settings a bit," I said. "Until we get used to this."

"Y-yeah," she said. "This is intense."

"I could turn it all off, if you want. Alter the relays so they can't transf-" NoCan'tLose, I froze. "Okay, guess that's a 'no'."

She smiled sheepishly. "Yeah," she said. "It... it's scary... but it's nice. Knowing there's someone I can trust like this."

"There's a lot of people you can trust," I offered. "Hell, even Respawn has your back when you need
"AgreementDismissal. "I know, but nothing like this."

"We'll never be able to hide this, you know," I said.

"AnnoyanceDetermination. "Then we don't bother. We managed to find a way to telepathically interact our Passengers." She halted. ConcernApology "No! Sorry, I don't mean to make it sound so... fuck, I screwed up."

"No," I said. She had reacted to my feelings. This really is completely two way. "I get it. This is major on so many levels. I..." ReliefGratitude "This is going to take a lot of getting use to."

"AmusementComfort "Yeah,"

Riley chose that moment to walk in. "I was told to tell you two to stop making out, we're about to do the big finale and you have to be there."

"AnnoyedEmbarassedHappy "Okay," Taylor agreed, moving off me. "Guess we still have jobs to do."

----

People gave us a few 'knowing' looks when we got outside. If they only really knew, I thought.

"AmusedSecrets. I glanced over at Amelia. She must have picked up on the looks. Or my reaction to them. I was still not sure about this bond. Everything I felt, she'd know. In some weird artificial way, she'd feel as well. Just as I picked up all her emotions. What concerned me more was how much it didn't bother me. Fuck, I already trusted her with my life, my safety, even my memories considering what she could do. This... really, this was her offering me a similar level of trust. Or as close to it as could be achieved.

"ComfortConfidence. "Yeah, I know," I told her. Not that I really needed to."
Clarice came up to us. "Okay, this is the important part. I made a machine that replicates your bug signals, and I have a program for them to follow," she said. "I need Gaea to open up the ports to let them all out."

Wait, what? ConfusionConcern.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Amelia asked.

"Absolutely. It's just a competing signal. As long as Khepri doesn't try to override it, there won't be any problems. And if she does it'll just override the machine. Plus it can only control these flash bugs, I haven't taught it anything else."

ConcernReluctance. "It's fine," I offered. "If something starts to go wrong, you can just break the machine."

GratitudeRelief. "Thanks for doing this," she said. That's when I realized a lot of the emotion had been for Riley's sake as well. She is afraid I'll hurt the girl's feelings. And not just for the obvious 'pissing off Bonesaw is just not smart' reasons.

"Okay, everyone," Crystal announced via loudspeaker. "Time for the highlight and closing of the evening. Our own special brand of fireworks. You'll find the ground clean and comfortable, just lay back and enjoy the show."

Gaea put her hand on a wall, and stairs formed. "What?" She asked, looking at the others. "I want the best seats in the house."

I climbed up first, followed by Aceso. She was dragging along Vista, who was followed by Theo. Miss Militia followed next, looking slightly on the annoyed side, and not caring at all about whether she was welcome in our little gathering. Minerva and Gaea took up the rear. We spread out, somewhat. Although Vista was currently basically surrounded. My bugs found the others, of course. Osiris, inside. Crystal dropped down over next to some civilians. Parian was...

I blushed. AmusedCurious RealizationEmbarrassed. Okay, Parian was indisposed at the moment.
The bugs poured out of the ground, taking shades and as they lit up the sky with millions of dancing lights. Specifically four million, five hundred and sixty three thousand and twelve of them. Following the dance that the machine set out for them.

They whirled amongst each other and took to ever changing configurations, seeming to vanish from thought, only to reform again. They separated, forming a double helix of color and light, pieces flitting between one another. Colliding and shattering and rebuilding. And then I... then they were there again. I could tell by the other bugs that people had jumped out of place. Many of my insects were twenty or thirty feet from where they had been. What just happened? Another jump.

"It's them," I heard Miss Militia gasp.

A/N- Ah, yes, this chapter. THIS was a VERY important chapter for many reasons.
"Yeah, give me a sec," Respawn said. Then he disintegrated, replaced as usual, but without the tears or signs of stress. "There, all better." He smiled. "Minerva, I'll have you pre screen my guests, from now."

Holy shit. I just watched him commit suicide casually. As the only member of the team who knew what that felt like... oh my god I killed him, too.

Khepri turned and went inside, and was quickly followed by Amy. Those two followed each other around like they were joined at the hip. Amy using the villain to replace her sister made more and more sense, the more I learned of all the weirdness she had in that regard. Loved her? Was that really happening? Sure, we joked about the two of them being 'involved' often enough, but... for one thing, Khepri wasn't gay. Unless Amy. But that tinker, Rapture, cleared all of us.

There was a time I thought New Wave's family dynamic was fucked up.

"So, are any of you going to tell me what that was about?" Miss Militia asked, her voice stern. I hadn't even noticed her approach.

"I just found out my date's a b-" Respawn stumbled. "Bad person."

"Uh huh," the current leader of the Protectorate didn't sound impressed. "And that's why she ran away crying?"

"My fault," Minerva explained. "Cape groupies, you know how they can be. Especially when you call them out on it. I probably went a little overboard, but you know how protective I get when it comes to my friends and team mates. Feel free to talk to her, maybe you'll even find something to use against us. Depends on just how badly I pissed her off, really. Just don't be surprised if it turns out to be that we were in the right."

"I might, at that," Miss Militia stated.

"Just be sure and be thorough when questioning her," Minerva smiled. "You might find she knows more of your dirty laundry than ours."
I dropped down next to Osiris. "Hey, take a walk with me?"

"Oh, sure," he smiled that fake smile of his. "Lost one date, are you going to be my upgrade?"

"Do you really have to be like that?" I asked.

"Probably," he answered. "It's not like it's that big a deal."

"You killed yourself to stop crying," I countered.

"I needed something for a mood balancing. It's nice to be able to reset your emotional reactions," he explained. "Riley built me a kill switch. Set up to respond to a specific set of sub-vocalizations. Instant dose of sedative, enough to trip my power's auto correct. In case I ever needed a quick way out of a trap or something. Doesn't actually kill me. Any more than going to sleep does."

"I've been through it, Zach," I reminded him "Twice. It fucking hurts like hell and we both know it."

"I've gotten used to it," he replied. "Once a day at the very least, if only because you can only stay awake so many hours without getting tired. At least with Riley’s switch, I have a chance to brace myself for it better."

"You've made an artform of avoiding the actual subject of the conversation," I sighed. "I know this was a bigger deal to you than you're pretending. So start talking."

"I..." he sighed. "Fine, you got me. I knew this girl for only two weeks. Even if we spent hours talking every day. She was smart, funny, charming, sweet, insanely beautiful. And it was stupid, but I thought I could have had something that would last. Would be real. Then to find out she's a fucking bully?"

"Were..." I hesitated, but I needed to ask. "Did you have problems with bullies?"

He looked away, gazing off into nowhere. "You could say that. Nothing like what you're probably
thinking. Doesn't matter now, anyway."

"Will you be okay?"

"I always am," he replied, working back to his more cheerful persona.

....

"Hey mom, hey Mister Hebert," I said.

"You're allowed to use my first name, you know," Danny responded.

"It's a cape thing," mom explained. "In costume, we're always our cape name, and everyone else is always 'miss' or 'mister'. Better that way for everyone involved. No hinting at who we may or may not know in our personal lives."

"I see," he said.

"A bit different for New Wave," she added. "Since our identities are already public. But it's a good habit to maintain. Wouldn't want to accidentally unmask a friend or relative."

He nodded. "Makes sense. I should thank your team for the ferry. I know I've said it before, but the Mayor rejected the idea for years."

I almost rolled my eyes. The man was more than competent at the things he was good at, but so painfully clueless in other ways. At least my mom was kind enough to take pity on him. He'd have been so out of place without her here.

....

"What cell phone?" I watched Lisa ask on the screen while she held the phone in question. We were all there in the video. I didn't even remember the conversation, and here I was watching it.
"The one in your hand," Amy insisted. "Here." She took the phone away, closed it, and thrust it back into Lisa's hand.

"Hey, why did you have my phone?"

Amy's videotaped double sighed.

"What kind of prank is this?" Respawn asked, also watching the video of us failing to watch a video. "Because it's really fucking amazing. Did you, like, build clones of all of us?"

"Quiet, all of you," Lisa said with a quiet, frightened whisper. "This is too fucking important."

"Turn it on and load the video from last night," Amy's recording instructed Lisa, who obeyed. 

"Now, what do you think of the video on the cell phone?"

"I don't know, I don't have my cell with me,"

The rest of us were all looking at Amy like she was insane.

"Ugh. Alright. Let us pretend there was a crazy stranger power."

"Alright," Lisa agreed. 

"Now, it takes something and makes you forget it exists. Makes you forget it ever existed."

"Sounds an awful lot like Imp's power," Taylor offered.

"Yes! That's a great start!" that Amy exclaimed. "Now, how do you beat Imp's power?"
"Video," Lisa offered. "Or remote viewing. Imp's invisibility was a hard counter to almost every sense within her range. Didn't work on things outside her range limit. It's how we realized we left her behind at the meeting in the ship graveyard. Her range seemed to be around three to four miles. Kinda hard to test exactly."

"She stabbed me and slit my throat and I didn't realize she was there for another hour," Riley volunteered.

I cringed. Even in the cape community, this is not normal.

"Okay," the real Amy turned off the recording of her showing us the cell phone recording.

"Now," Amy started. "First, do you still remember seeing that video?"

"Yeah," Taylor stated. Then her eyes fluttered for a second. What was that?

"Sorry," Amy apologized. "It's just, that is basically what the last three weeks of my life have been like. Trying to explain this to you, and you all forgetting."

"Like the phone," Lisa said, still staring at the now blank screen. "This is beyond what powers are normally capable of, since it's beating Rapture's technology, Riley's modifications, and my powers. And for it to have such a close link to a power we've seen before."

Amy stared with desperate hope at Lisa. Taylor did the same thing. The rest of us were mostly just confused.

"Oh. Oh fuck." Lisa's horrified voice came out. "Oh fuck us all."

A/N- A lot of big events in this chapter, too.
"Alien space whale parasite gods?" I said incredulously.

"That's about the sum of it," Lisa replied.

"Okay, how the fuck is it everyone kept forgetting when I tried to say that, and you explained it in five minutes?" Amy complained.

"Because I bypassed the blocks. For example, if I-"

"See," she continued. "They already forgot. It's-"

I shook my head. So did a couple of others.

"Note that they function normally during the blackout period," Lisa told Amy. "It's retroactively induced amnesia. They can still interact, they even retain other memories created in the same timeframe, they just can't remember the taboo subject. Makes it really hard to weaponize. Or even know when you've mentioned something."

"Fuck," Zach muttered. "So is there a way for us around this?"

Lisa sighed. "No, not really, not anything that you want to happen. My power eventually found a way to build around it. You would require a psychological break that could be loosely referred to as a 'third Trigger' to get through the way Amelia did."

"I see," Riley stated. "Makes sense. A Trigger Event is the Pollentia activating and establishing restrictions in response to environmental stressors. Including the memory blocks. A Second Trigger releases more blocks, giving access to greater powers. A third trigger... can't give more power, so it removes the only restrictions remaining."

"Imperfect analogy," Lisa corrected. "But if I explain it in any greater detail, we'd be repeating this conversation, for the third time in five minutes."
Riley frowned. "No, that would be bad," she agreed.

"So, until we figure out another method," Lisa replied. "It's just Amelia and I who know the whole story."

"Not necessarily," Riley offered. "We now have a full list of subjects that will cause the memory lapse, and three of the top five biomanipulators on the planet." I'd call her arrogant, but she was right. "We could set up all kinds of brain tests-

Amy tensed so hard I was afraid she would hurt herself. Oh. Of course she'd have hangups about that.

"We'll discuss that later," Taylor interrupted. "It has been an incredibly tiring day for all of us. We need to sleep. Recover. I sent my dad home an hour ago, so I'll be crashing here tonight."

I agreed. I was dead tired, and mom had already left. "Got room for another?"

"You only wanna stay the night because Taylor is," Amy teased.

....

Morning came early, unexpected, and unpleasant. With Riley's face inches from mine. I barely had time to register that I was awake when she yelled "I need an adult!"

I screamed in surprise and stumbled back, falling out of bed and landing hard on the floor. Or, not as hard as I'd expected, actually. The floor here was amazingly pliant when it needed to be. I've slept in less comfortable beds. I thought in my half-sleep daze as I sprung up. "What's the emergency?!"

"There's a weird woman outside and she needs to talk to you," Riley replied.

Oh, this can't be good. "I'll be there in a second."
"I'll get the others," Riley said as she rushed out the door.

Putting on the Eki armor was really quite simple. Just hover above it and lower myself down into it. It would seal itself around me. Total of thirty seconds or less. I was out the door in a minute. Respawn was already there, alongside Clarice. And a rather unhappy looking middle aged woman in a suit whose black hair was fading gray.

I landed. "What's the problem?" I asked, trying to project confidence.

"Are you a legal adult associated with 'Pantheon'?" she asked.


I held out my hand. She ignored it.

"I am Janice Reed, from Child Protective Services," she replied.

My face paled. "May I ask what you're here about?"

"There have been concerns expressed that you may have minors living on premises with improper facilities," she informed me. "This is a surprise inspection to investigate this possibility."

"Why weren't we warned ahead of time," I replied back. I didn't bother hiding my suspicions. My aunt's a lawyer, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't work like this.

"It wouldn't be much of a surprise if we gave you a warning, miss Pelham," she said with a dry, humorless tone.

Clarice spoke up. "She's telling the truth, according to my senses," she informed me.

By this time, Amy and Minerva had gotten out the door. I looked at them. "Apparently, someone thinks we might not be taking proper care of our underaged members, sent an inspector." I informed them.
"Oh, really?" Lisa said with a smile, stepping forward. "So, who was it? The PRT looking for a way to sneak attack us?"

The woman regarded Lisa passively. "Regulation double blind process," she informed us. "Neither I, nor my immediate supervisor, are aware of the identity or identities of any reporters. Necessary, given the nature of many thinker abilities."

Message loud and clear, I thought.

"Alright, come this way, we have nothing to hide," Lisa smiled.

"Our records indicate you are a minor," miss Reed stated. "You are not legally able to give me permission." She looked at me sternly. "If you're worried about security, that is fine. I only need to see the parts of the facility that pertain to living conditions for minors. You could also refuse access to your facility, that is within your legal rights, however it may reflect poorly upon you in the future."

Amy nodded. "It's fine, Crystal."

"Okay, right this way," I said.

"We don't really live here," Amy informed. "I have a few sort of guest bedrooms and can create more. Khepri lives with her father. Lisa and I have our own places. Aceso stays with me."

"What of her parents?" The inspector asked.

"She was orphaned by the Slaughterhouse Nine," Lisa informed.

"It's okay," Clarice stated happily. "I have my big sister now!" She proceeded to hug Amy.

"Big sister?" the agent's face seemed to somehow be even more skeptical than before.

"Not literally," Lisa replied. "After Gaea killed Jack Slash, Aceso picked her, and to a lesser extent the rest of Pantheon, as a surrogate family. It's even there in her name. The goddess Aceso is sister to
the goddess Panacea."

"Interesting," the woman replied.

We showed her around the facility. Or at least the first basement layer which we mostly lived in. "You all opted to stay here last night? Several teenage girls and a single teenaged boy?"

"Trust me," Respawn replied. "Exponentially less fun than what you're implying."

"We had to clean up after the party," Lisa again explained. "By the time everything was dealt with, it was easier and probably safer just to stay the night."

She just nodded as we showed her around, writing notes on occasion.

By the time we led her out, we had been there for almost three hours. It was past one.

"The nonstandard nature of this facility makes judgment calls difficult," she was kind enough to inform us. It was the most she'd said at one time all day. "Given the conditions of the city as a whole, this is of less concern than it might otherwise be. I highly suggest you get in contact with the Youth Guard for approved civilian oversight. The major negative mark is that you've shown me nothing to indicate efforts to insure your underage members are getting a proper education. We will contact you to schedule a follow up meeting within three business days. See to it you've corrected this by then."

This definitely can't be good.

....

"Very well," Miss Howell, the new Principal of Arcadia said, looking at our paperwork. Just Amy, Riley through her Clarice doll, and myself sat there. For the rest of the team, their registration as students was remarkably simple. 'Clarice' was the exception. Forging paperwork and records was a bit tricky, helped along by the fact that a lot of people no longer had complete records thanks to the efforts of Leviathan and Shatterbird. Convincing the school to allow her to register as a highschool freshman was a bit more difficult. And that's after we lied and said she was thirteen.
It took some time, of course, but the claim that her powers gave her enhanced learning and memory abilities was absolutely true, and that helped. Eventually we agreed that she could be bumped back if she couldn't keep up with the classwork. With much the same special consideration that the wards got, and for that matter I got when I was attending here.

Riley was simply overjoyed to be in the same grade as her new best friend. The rest of the team were mostly juniors, or would be once 'real' classes started again for the year. This emergency summer school class schedule was hardly the standard. Lisa got to opt out for having her GED, and of course Blasto and I had already graduated.

Amy jerked up all of a sudden. "Fuck!" The principal didn't look happy with the outburst. "Sorry! Taylor's in trouble. Outside, not in costume, can't-"

I was already out the door. You don't spend as many years as a hero without learning to trust the judgment and powers of your team. Especially on a team with the sheer number of extrasensory powers as this one.

The new students reacted with shock as I flew above their heads. One of the many nice things about Arcadia is that it has a lot more emergency exit doors, and they didn't sound alarms if you used them. I was outside in a minute. Looking for the problem.

I spotted that redheaded girl from last night, rushing into the building. Taylor was sitting on one of the stone posts near the entrance.

I dropped down near her, alert for anything. Just because I didn't see it, didn't mean there wasn't a problem. Khepri's power meant that she didn't need to be anywhere nearby for a fight.

She was visibly upset, shaken and withdrawn. "Are you okay?" I asked. "I was told there was a disruption."

She jumped and looked up. She hadn't noticed me. That bored repeating in my mind. She, the girl of near omnipresence, was so distracted that she didn't notice as I made a freakin' scene in front of at least fifty people on my way to find her.

"Y-yeah," she said, nervous and embarrassed at the attention directed toward us. "It... it's nothing. Sorry to distract you from what I'm sure is a busy day." She offered a weak smile.
And that's when I realized. I'd never seen her out of costume before. Sure, I'd seen her without the full face mask plenty of times, but never actually as a civilian. That body language was learned over time. It wasn't something one could just 'act' without a lot of practice. The language of someone who was timid and afraid and just wanted the world to leave her alone. The body language of a victim. This whole time, I'd been thinking about this all wrong. She's not Victoria. She's Amy.

==============

A/N- Actually, I have no notes for this one. Except that over at SB, a lot of stupid people threw the most amusing hissy fits at the mention of the Youth Guard.
It took us time to get the full team together. Especially Ray, who had spent the night, and the rest of the day apparently, with his date.

"Dude," Respawn said. "You were on, like, one date and she brought you home?"

"Not what you're thinking, kid," Blasto replied, smiling happily. "Rapture and I stayed up tinkering until dawn. One of those things I think only Tinkers can really appreciate, working with an equal for long periods of time on things that no one else has even imagined. It's hard to find that. Err, no offense, Clarice."

"I understand," the girl replied. "I'm so far out of your league that whenever we work together it's more like I'm telling an assistant what to do."

"Ouch..." Blasto mumbled. "That's just. Ouch."

IrritationAmusement "Okay," Taylor said. "Now that all of us who are officially part of the team are here. We just got a visit from CPS today. We're deciding what to do with it."

Blasto spoke up. "More PRT bullshit?"

Lisa shook her head, "No, I really doubt it. Maybe a five percent, at best. They're not that stupid. For one, they know it'll fail entirely, especially as it's a complaint lacking any actual evidence and involving teenagers who are theoretically able to speak for themselves. A minor annoyance to us at worst. Like throwing spitballs during a knife fight. The best you can hope for is to piss someone off. Piggot's a psychotic bitch, but she's not that stupid."

"Makes sense," Khepri agreed. "We'll just assume it's not the PRT, then."

"Second most likely scene is one of our slowly growing list of enemies that mysteriously still have a pulse has decided to take a shot in the dark," Lisa continued.

"Who?" I asked. "We didn't really have that many, if we ignored the PRT."
"Purity, most likely," Lisa offered.

"Miss," Theo said. "I don't believe Kayden would do that."

"Me neither, really," she answered back. "But I could think of a lot of reasons why she would. A 'fuck you' to us. Using the same tactic that Coil used on her, more or less. A tactic she probably believes Khepri and I were partly responsible for when with the Undersiders. Or, maybe it's legitimate concern. Maybe she's worried about your wellbeing, Theo, and this was a way to make sure you are treated well."

Theo shrugged and looked down.

"More likely than all that combined," Lisa continued. "A real and honest 'concerned citizen'. Bunch of kids living in a magic treehouse with no adult supervision? We neighbor several city blocks. We only need one of those neighbors to be nosy and judgmental. The fact that someone only showed up to ask to be shown around, with no police presence or actual accusations, who admitted she'd leave if we didn't allow her in, indicates that it was an only barely credible case in their eyes. A formality."

None of us had anything to say to that. It was possible, if doubtful.

"The last possibility? The youth guard, themselves," Lisa offered.

Confused Annoyed. Yeah, me too. "I was under the impression that their jurisdiction goes nowhere near us," I said.

"It doesn't," Lisa agreed. "But on paper, it looks like it could. If you take a couple shots of vodka, bash your face through a window, tilt your head and squint really hard. If only because no one else is even close to having authority on this."

"That doesn't fill me with concern," Blasto smirked.

"It should," Lisa responded. "That same kind of tricky bullshit is the only reason we're standing here talking instead of trying to find a nice third world country to move to. We're sitting on a house of cards made entirely of half truths and technicalities. We know it, and everyone watching us knows it.
Either we cooperate, or we have no choice but to functionally declare war upon the United States. A war we'd win, given the circumstances, but not a war we want."

"No, I can safely say I don't want that," Eki replied. "If it comes down to that, I'm walking."

"Me, too," Theo replied. "I'm sorry, but that sounds like something my father would do."

"No, we're not doing that unless they physically attack first," Minerva kept smiling. "That would hurt our image and kill our false legitimacy. The Youth Guard has, essentially, positioned itself to do to us what we did to the PRT."

"When you put it that way," I muttered. I didn't bother to elaborate. Everyone here could complete the sentence.

"It's a matter of image and power. For them and us. By doing this, the Youth Guard hopes to make themselves look more significant than they really are. They're well enough liked amongst the soccer moms and other touchy-feely political demographics. It gives them some level of lobbying power. They're hoping to flex it, without actually looking like that's what they're doing. Either we contact them and start capitulating to their requests. Which will, no doubt, be entirely reasonable. Or we refuse and they can hurt our image publicly while improving their own. We're not in a position where we can afford that, even if it's a cheap shot."

I sighed. "Any way we can avoid both problems?"

"Not completely," she replied. "We'll have to comply with CPS requests. Aceso is on record as having no family outside us, meaning we're under legal obligations to see to her care and wellbeing. Failure to prove we're doing so, well, they can't force us, but they can make life uncomfortable if we don't." Lisa concluded. "Most importantly, they can make us look bad if we don't at least see to it that she and Zach are in school. The rest of us don't really have to worry about it, but..."

"But," I said dryly, "If none of the rest of us are there, that means we leave Clarice and Respawn in school alone."

"Basically," Lisa agreed. "Not such an issue given Respawn's powers, and Clarice isn't actually real. But yes, we'd be leaving those two alone in school. Hiring private teachers isn't outside the realm of possibility, but again, that comes with risks. Worse risks, really. Besides, honestly, this is kind of the perfect excuse. We know the Wards will be attending Arcadia. It works in our favor to identify and
befriend them."

ResignationAnnoyance. "I'll go," Taylor volunteered. "My grades in Winslow were shit to begin with. Even with a GED that'll look bad. I'm smart, and my multitasking abilities have to be charted in exponents. I can study every subject the whole time we're in class, keep an eye on everyone in the building, and still do almost everything I'd be doing while in the base. Frankly, all I do these days is sit around and make mutant bugs jump around. It'll be good just for the variety. Fresh school, fresh start." SadnessFear.

"It... okay," I agreed. "I'm in. I still know most of the Wards' identities, even if they were always more Victoria's friends than mine. As often as they've said they owe me, we'll see if I can collect." GratitudeWorry.

"I'll go, too, ma'am," Theo offered. "I should be in school anyway, and Immaculata won't have me due to my father. The image thing."

"I'll see what Coil's managed to pull up as far as creating a legal civilian identity for Clarice," Minerva said. "Started that project weeks ago, we'll need it soon. We might need to 'accidentally' let Aceso's identity as Clarice slip. Amelia, if you don't mind, we could exploit a few... details... about your personal life."

My blood chilled. ComfortWorry, Taylor broadcast to me. "What are you planning to do?"

"Fake Clarice being your actual sibling," Tattletale replied. "Her supposed powerset is reasonably similar to yours and Marquis. It would be entirely believable that she caries a power inherited from the same source. No one would be surprised to learn she's Marquis' offspring. We will, of course, hide it well enough that they'd have to dig to find it. But if they did, they'd also discover your own relationship. That would make you her closest relative. Trying to take her away then would prove close to impossible."

Fuck me. I sighed, even as I resigned myself to it. ComfortSupport. Thank you. "May as well," I sighed. "Jack figured it out in a couple days. Anyone who wants to look, already knows. At least this way I can get some kind of benefit from it."

"This is the best day ever!" Clarice declared. "I get to go to a real school with my sister and my friends and it's going to be like all the TV shows!"
"Then it's settled," Tattletale smiled. "I'll discretely make sure Clarice is set up to be in Vista's grade even though she's -supposedly- a year younger. The rest of you will be in pretty much perfect positions to make friends with Clockblocker, Kid Win, Weld and Flechette at the very least."

"You can skip Fletchette," Taylor stated. "I'm not saying to ignore her, but she's..." DiscomfortApprehension.

"Oh!" Tattletale smiled. "Good for Parian. Also, shame on you for eavesdropping."

Taylor buried her face in her hands. "I really didn't mean to." EmbarrassmentApologetic.

"Now we need Clarice to be upgraded so she appears to have minor changer powers, perhaps some regeneration," Lisa added.

"Can do," Clarice replied.

"While we're on the subject," Blasto volunteered. "See if you can keep as far from Kid Win and Chariot as possible. Tinkers give off lots of hints that other tinkers will notice. Not a risk we're taking if we can avoid it."

"That sounds like everything for you folk," Minerva said cheerfully. "Now I'm going to go make contact with the Youth Guard and make them feel like they won a victory right here, while milking every last drop of perceived legitimacy this offers us."

"Good," she said. "I will, of course, maintain the same considerations for you and your team as I do for the Wards that also go to this school. Are there any other concerns to address?"

I sighed. "There may need to be some extra watching when it comes to Clarice. She should be fine, but there's almost no possibility of keeping her powers secret for very long. We're not expecting you to. She's rather hyperactive sometimes, overly eager to please, and is excited about school. Just tell the teachers to remind her that her sister wants her to behave in class, and have them keep an eye out in case the wrong kinds of students take an interest. For the first couple weeks, at least, I'll probably be stopping by between classes to ask about her."

Howell nodded. "I'll pass along the message. We've dealt with similar cases in the past."

"Thanks," I smiled. "I should get to class, myself."

"Glad to have you back," she smiled.

I was given a level of attention through the halls that would have made Victoria jealous. Pity I didn't want any of it. I managed to spare a glance at Taylor. She was currently at her locker, looking at her class schedule. For myself, I basically had the same one as before. AssuranceCaution. Oh. Apparently my eyes lingered just a little too long. Now I had to wonder if anyone noticed. I spotted Clarice near the entrance to Mrs. Coulter's class. She smiled- then again, she never stopped smiling- and waved to me. I smiled back.

Good thing we really weren't trying to hide Clarice's "identity", I had a feeling it wasn't going to survive the day.

---

I waved at my Big Sister when she was done 'checking out' her girlfriend. She smiled nervously, then went on her route to class. I was sad that I couldn't be in her classes, but if I was then I wouldn't be able to go to class with Missy. I could play with Sis during lunch or on our way home.

So I stayed near the door and watched as all the students came into our English class. They were all older than me, of course. About the same age as my doll looked. I kept watch until I saw Missy. She smiled, then stopped, looking around. Oh, right, this whole 'secret identity' thing. Stupid school. Oh well.
I went in and found a place to sit, near the door. Amelia told me that's where the Wards usually stay, so I wasn't surprised at all when Missy took the seat next to mine. I smiled. My Big Sister was so smart.

The first class was English. My first impression of our teacher, Miss Coulter, was that she should be in Christmas movies as Mrs. Claus. Sadly, Santa wasn't real, and Jack never let me build one. *Maybe my Sister would like the idea better?*

She made us all say our names and say hello to the class, and gave us these really thick books with all kinds of little poems and short stories.

"Clarice?" The teacher asked. "Are you paying attention?"

A couple students chuckled. I replayed the last minute. We were suppose to turn to page twelve. "Oh, I read that already," I answered.

"You've only had the book for five minutes," the teacher replied. I could tell she didn't believe me.

"I know, I'm only up to page forty," I replied.

"Then you wouldn't mind telling the class what's on page twelve," she smiled.

I smiled back and started reciting. "Mending Wall by Robert Frost. Something there is that..." and so I went for the whole poem. One of the earliest upgrades I made to myself was a nearly photographic memory, after all.

Using Clarice's perfectly modulated voice, I read smoothly and beautifully. Her voice was based upon Canary's vocal patterns, after all. I couldn't imitate her mind influence, but if you have to invent your own voice, it's just good sense to use one designed by the Passengers to be as close to perfect as possible.

"That is very impressive, Clarice," the teacher praised. None of the other students were laughing, now. "Now do you want to tell us what he meant?"

*What?" What?"

"Poems have secret meanings in them," Mrs Coulter said with a smile. "About using one thing to mean another, and trusting the readers to find the secrets like a puzzle. When you read poems, you
should always look for the meanings." She looked at the rest of the class. "As Clarice was kind enough to read the poem aloud for us, let's move right into learning what Frost meant by it."

*School is the best thing ever.*

----

School sucks. My first period class was math, which at least I was good at. I was late to my second period because my locker was frozen shut by Clockblocker's power. Along with a post-it that read 'now we're even'. *That bastard. And I didn't even have those pictures. Fuck.*

At least the second class was gym, which I could probably have claimed I was exempt from entirely, being a parahuman, but it was more fun than any of the other classes options. If only to see the girls. *Oh fuck me sideways. Emma. Christ, I'd almost managed to forget how beautiful she was. Even, maybe especially, in gym clothes. I tore my eyes away from her and pushed down the emotions. Fuck. Couldn't be easy, could it? I resolved to look into changing to another class. Get one of those 'power exemption' forms.*

No, that felt too much like before I got my powers. I'd just have to tough it out. Besides, my powers were too reliant on my physical abilities, so I needed the workout time. There were plenty of other girls out in class I could find to ogle instead. *None of them looked like her, though.*

The teacher was an older man. Like, way older. I couldn't figure out how he wasn't in a wheelchair. Or a grave. "You're late!" He shouted. As if I didn't already know.

"Sorry," I yelled back. Mostly because we were too far away for him to hear me otherwise. "Business distraction, you know how it is." *After all, you remember going off to the war and invading Boston.*

I jogged up to him. Seems everyone was jogging, anyway. He looked up at me. I wasn't that tall, really. I just had him beat. "Get running, I wanna see how lazy you got in the off season," he said. *Did he realize who he was talking to? Not in a 'I'm a hero, why don't you know that' sense. But in a 'maybe he thinks I'm Billy, his quarterback great grandson' sense.*

"Sure," I replied. I pulled a couple sets of weights out of my back. Total of thirty extra pounds for me to strap to my wrists and ankles, and I took off at a dead sprint.

That's the thing about my power, I have unlimited stamina. Every time I'm regenerated, it's at peak health. The problem is, that gets in the way of good exercise. So I had to do what others would consider a brutal form of workout just to get what others got out of a bit of moderate exercise. *Of course, it also means I can watch my improvement in real time. Especially now, with this watch Riley gave me.* The important part was in my bag, sending and receiving signals from the watch I
wore that was, for all intents, just a display device.

She was also working on something that Blasto and I had taken to calling the "roid ray" - a deep penetrating energy field that would just trick the muscles into believing they've been through a stressful workout so that they grew. The problem was inventing a version that didn't cause cancer or make your crotch burst into flames or something. I was bad enough at normal technobabble, let alone Tinker bullshit.

I disintegrated and kept moving, to the shock of those students who did not yet know who I was. Well, now they did. I looked at the clock. Hundred meters in 13.97 seconds, and I lasted 22.44 seconds before dusting. I faltered for a second as the sensation of being reborn washed over me. It didn't hurt as much as Crystal made it sound. Maybe a little worse than a hard slap. Granted, it felt that way over the whole body, but it didn't hurt more in areas that were normally extra sensitive.

Pain was breaking your own foot by jumping too hard. Pain was drugs and needles and being warned not to go outside. That was pain. Losing her, that was agony. This just stung a little. Dust again. 13.66 for the hundred meter. 22.8 seconds. The first jump in performance was always the best, as it didn't have the efforts of the day to get in the way.

Then I just kept pushing. And pushing. And pushing. Eventually people had just stopped to watch, to see how long I could make this work, but I simply did not get tired. Bored, maybe, but not really. This isn't pain. This is freedom. This is making death itself into my bitch. Eventually the bell rang and I stopped after my next dust. 13.65, 22.8. Well, that was a little something at least.

=================

A/N- Ah, one of the chapters I did with three different character perspectives. In retrospect, these were a mistake. But at the same time, there was no way I was going to pad enough material to make each of these perspectives take up a whole chapter on their own.

Plus a good early peak into Zach's mind. I'm proud of this chapter for that. Don't get me wrong, the Riley section was great, they always are. But I think I really did Zach a great deal of justice with this one.
Arcadia was different than Immaculata. But then, I suspected Arcadia was different than Arcadia before Leviathan. I found myself being threatened on a couple occasions, due to some slight I didn't pretend to understand. In my old school, no one picked on me despite my being heavier set and fairly quiet.

No one dared pick on anyone there, really.

Wealth, power and privilege created its own breed of bullies, ones that didn't sink to violence or even teasing. No, we played politics where every friendship was a calculation, and every party was potentially a snub to someone. That was how the rich bullied.

This was a different world.

By the time I'd arrived at the lunch room, most of the students had already found their seats. The first thing I noticed, and it was an easy thing to notice, were the kids who stayed behind. Most of them were thin, with hard faces and harder eyes, tanned and alert. They all sat near the walls, formed into clusters that made it plainly clear they weren't interested in letting others join their groups.

In the front, were the popular kids. Or the newly evolving popular clique, at least. I could almost see the games they were playing. Most of them were the kids that had left in the aftermath of Leviathan.

They hadn't learned the new rules of the city, the ones where they might be stabbed for insulting someone. The ones where the... there needed to be a term for the rest of us... Survivors, that would have to do. The survivors would only hate them and they wouldn't be afraid to do something about it.

Then the table with all the younger kids, who hadn't made any friends outside their classes and had all huddled together thanks to unfamiliarity. That would change. Seems Missy and Clarice aren't in this lunch period. I ignored my disappointment.

Near the back, as usual, the geeks and loners. I spotted Taylor there. That would, of course, also be my table. I mostly preferred it that way. She was having a conversation with a smaller kid with brown hair that I'd met during our shared computer class. I simply sat down next to her.

"Hi, Chris," I said, smiling.

"Hey," he said back, then looked back to Taylor, who'd spared me a glance as well.
"We can finish this up later, if you like," she offered the boy.

"Nah, it's cool if you don't mind," he said.

"Yeah, it's pretty nice, even if I need to get my dad to drive me all the time. And then he asks every possible question. Who I met, what they were like, if he's ever going to meet any of them, if they actually exist and I'm not just making them up," she continued.

"I wish my mother was more like that. She's never really been supportive of me at all. I mean, I know she loves me, but, she doesn't really know how to relate, y'know."

*Did I ever.* I simply nodded.

"Mine doesn't, either," Taylor admitted. "He tries to pretend he does, though, so that's pretty nice." She looked toward me. "So, Theo, what are your parents like?"

Taylor knew that answer better than most, so she was only asking for Chris' benefit. "I don't really remember my mom," I said. It was true, I had vague memories that might have simply been made up in my head, but that was about it. "And my father... well, promise not to spread it around too much?"

Chris nodded. Taylor did as well, but I wasn't concerned about that. "My father was Max Anders. Better known as Kaiser."

Chris didn't seem to know what kind of reaction to have. He was probably wondering if I was another Nazi. I wasn't sure how to just proceed, either.

"That's kind of fucked up," Taylor offered.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I know, he wasn't exactly a good person. Or a good father. Always treated me like something between a minor burden, and a disappointment. Definitely a worse person, however."

"Shit," Chris muttered. "I mean, it's not like I'm surprised he doesn't have any redeeming features that make him seem like he might be able to pretend he's a human being. But you'd think he'd have at least one thing about him that wasn't awful. Law of averages or something. Are you sure there's nothing about him that was human?"

I spent a few seconds in silence. "He... umm... seemed to be fond of his mother? I think?"
Chris chuckled. "Fuck. That's sad. Better than if he wasn't, I suppose, but still pretty sad. At least he showed up to fight Leviathan. Maybe that should count for something. Not many people have what it takes to go out there and actually fight those monsters."

"That was more about rep, y'know. He wouldn't be able to exist as a supervillain in this city if he just hid away like a coward."

Taylor's head shot up. "Umm, I forgot something, I should take care of that before class. Don't worry, nothing big."

She got up and rushed out of the lunch room.

"So," Chris said, as I was taking a bite of the fruit that I'd been working on. "You're the one who's trying to seduce Vista, right?"

I choked, coughing and sputtering as I covered my mouth. He did that on purpose.

"I... I don't..."

"Please," Chris replied, ranting as I struggled to get my breath back. "I'm not stupid. None of the rest of us are, either. You guys are about as subtle as that giant tree house in the middle of the city. Amy comes back to school. Taylor makes friends with me during computer class. She's good at hiding her personality behind that timid-girl act. But she has that creepy thousand yard stare that comes from being the kind of thinker that doesn't need to use their eyes to see. My money's on her being Khepri, what with the whole 'leggy brunette' thing. But with Amy on your team, for all I know, you're Khepri."

"She's not an act," I managed to speak, eyes still watering. "Taylor. That's who she really is. And I'm not trying to 'seduce' anyone."

"So... giving rides to Vista wasn't some ploy to turn her over to your side? Or that dance? Complete with romantic mood music? Pure coincidence?"

"Most of that's Aceso's thing," I admitted. No reason to deny it. "She's lonely. Just her and her sister. You can't blame her for wanting friends her own age."

"You mean Amy," he said dryly. "They're not really sisters, right?"

"Doubt it," I said. "But they seem to have adopted each other. You can see it if you just watch them together. It's how I am with my little sister, although not quite the same since she's an infant. But they care about each other. They're family. Anyone who says otherwise is wrong."
"So, the music?"

"Coincidence, kinda," I said. "At least, nothing to do with me. They stole Amy's playlist for all the songs anyway."

"Okay, I can see that. Amy does seem like that type," he admitted. "And your feelings?"

"They're good people," I said. "I'm sorta the new guy, not as close to them as they are to each other."

"Good to know," he said. "But I mean your feelings for my team mate, not yours."

"Oh," I looked down. "She seemed sad. You know her better than I do, of course. But I've gotten pretty good at reading moods. You don't live around my father and his people without learning how to pay attention to stuff like that. When was the last time you heard her laugh without it sounding forced? When was the last time she smiled for no reason at all? I bet it was a while ago, right?"

He didn't answer, and that was answer enough.

"I wanted to make her feel better," I continued. "I want to be a hero. Heroes help people. Right?"

Chris chuckled. "No wonder..."

============= 

A/N- All the foreshadowing. All of it.

Also. Theo continues to be one of the characters I'm most glad to have in the story.
Social Sciences was the one class I shared with Taylor. We couldn't do it often without it becoming suspicious and risking her identity. Of course, Lisa was already certain that the PRT had all our identities on record, so it's not like we really had to worry that much. Damage done long ago, before Pantheon was founded, and the PRT wasn't about to out us due the political shitstorm. Making us look like innocent victims of an unfair system was not high on their 'to do' list. The real risk was more along the lines of civilians putting things together.

"So," I muttered, while we were supposed to be studying a chapter on parahuman law as it applied to secret identities and court cases. We, of course, had hidden in the back. A practice both of us did in most of our classes, shared by the other students who'd stayed through the lawless period in the city. "What happened this morning?"

"Only after you tell me what happened in the hall," she said. "That was some weird emotions."

Of course she'd want that story. "Some girl decided to get in my face and ask really personal questions about my sex life. Apparently I'm intimate with every female member of the group."

"Uh... eww..."

"Yeah. That was bad enough," I agreed. "The part where she offered to let me feel her boobs to 'give them a tune up' just took it to an entirely new level of weird."

*ShockDiscomfort.* "Well, that tops my story," Taylor muttered.

"That you still have to dish."

"Emma," Taylor replied. That bitch. "She... I'm not sure. She came up and tried to say something. And now seems to be studiously avoiding even looking at me. Which is fine by me, at least."


"Apparently," Taylor agreed. "Like this whole 'school' scheme."

Right. "Why did you agree to this? I know why the others went. But you, all I've been getting off you is dread and determination."
She looked down. "To make my mother proud. She was a teacher, she believed in education. Dropping out wouldn't be fair to me or her. Especially considering what my grades looked like after the bullshit in Winslow. And you know how much I like running away from my problems. I won't let them control the choices I make for the rest of my life. And if I didn't come back, that's exactly what I'd be doing."

"I can't see you losing or giving up at anything," I admitted.

"That, and I'm fucking bored," she added. "Making bugs jump has been the sum of my activities the last week. I need more to do. Worst case, if things get too busy, I can always drop out again. I'm old enough to qualify for a GED."

"Speaking of boredom, we should probably get back to the books. I've gotta be flawless. Could you imagine the scandal if Gaea couldn't pass a highschool class?"

AmusementAgreement.

....

Taylor and I split up before going to lunch. It was part of the plan. We'd need to wait until there was a really good reason for us to be friends as civilians, before we were seen together often. Thanks to her changeling, she could appear in other locations. Wouldn't fool the PRT for a heartbeat, but at the very least it was another layer of plausible deniability. And they already knew I'd upgraded Khepri's power to city range, so that wasn't a reveal, either.

Honestly, the fact was she didn't need the changelings. They were nothing but a cover for what she could really do. One of our biggest secrets was that she could hear through her bugs. Or use basically every other sense but vision. If they thought she was limited to my humanoid constructs to have humanoid senses, so much the better for us all.

Topographical city map in real time was scary enough, but nothing that Vista didn't already have. Admitting to borderline omniscience? It would be a great way to chase the PRT out, as they'd be unable to discuss anything important within the city. But it would scare the shit out of everyone.

Besides, we all had our missions. Taylor had already made contact with Chris. They'd get along well. Maybe they could even start dating and then those assholes that called themselves my friends would shut up about us getting together. I was going to talk to Dennis. Aaand no, I was not.

He was already at a table, talking to Emma. Lovely. Still couldn't talk to Taylor, and Theo had went over to sit at that group anyway. Chubby kid at the 'geek table', surely that was a shocking turn of events. I looked around, spotting the cluster of 'popular girls'. Some of whom were friends of Crystal when she went here, more were friends of Victoria as well. I felt my mood sour at the memory that
my sister was no longer here. *ComfortCalm.* I sighed. *Thank you.*

*Was our link really that sensitive, or was I broadcasting that loudly?* Either way, it made me feel better. *I am not alone. I can not be alone.* I approached the girls with my head held high. *Strange, I was never this confident before.* Then again, *I wasn't a goddess, before. I didn't have real friends, before.*

It was Ana that spotted me first. "Amy!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I heard about Victoria. I'm so sorry." At least she had the good taste to not start the conversation about Pantheon like I was expecting. Not that her other choice was that much better.

I offered a smile. "Yeah," I replied. "It's hard, but she wouldn't have wanted me spending my time hiding and moping. So, well, here I am." *That sounded so lame.*

"She spent enough time trying to break you of that," Ana agreed. "She'd be happy to see you now." *She was right,* I realized.

The conversation then drifted over to Victoria. Her antics, and habits, and epic shopping sprees, and how nice she was to everyone. All the things that were true, only exaggerated and cleaned. Skipping over the brashness and poor judgment and obliviousness to the feelings of those around her. Many of the girls in this group had never stepped foot in Arcadia before today. They'd never known my sister, but now they'd remember her as a legend.

I couldn't help but smile. *She'd have loved every second of this.*

*ConcernAlert.* I was snapped instantly out of my daydream. Three flies landed on my hand and formed an arrow, pointing at the exit. Taylor was leaving. I ducked off as well.

The flies led me into a nearby bathroom. I heard buzzing in the next stall. *Oh god, I hate this part.* *RegretCalm.*


"Got it," I replied. Then bolted. The vehicle was already waiting by the time I got out of the door. The security didn't try to stop me, and I wondered just what the PRT would think about all this. My cell phone rang as soon as we were out of the school's parking lot. It was Tattletale.

"Sorry. Turns out, they have a jammer of some sort around the school. Hopefully we didn't give anything important away to the PRT by using Khepri, but this is huge. She'll wrangle the rest of the cat herd. I'll fill you in on the way."
A/N- Hehe. Taylor and Chris were obviously meant to be together.
"This was easier than last time," I said to the gentleman in the suit.

"Your request was easier, this time," he replied. *I guess I have to take that as an answer.*

"You're not asking for an upfront payment?" I asked.

"No need," he responded. "We have your information, and you have been an upstanding customer in the past."

The first part was the unspoken threat. Not terribly different than the last time, really. They could find me, and they could ruin me. Maybe ask someone else who owes them their powers to smack me around a bit. My abilities were useful, awesome even, but I wasn't exactly a top tier parahuman.

When the roof started to drop on us, I lunged forward. At the man, and far more importantly, at the suitcase. I needed to save it. I used my momentum as I picked him up, blasting a hole for us before we went flying out the window. I landed in a roll and came up on my feet, but the man himself was injured. Hopefully not too badly. *At least I still have the case. That's what mattered. That, and getting away from whomever just attacked us.*

Then I realized I could not. The property, an abandoned orange orchard, was miles from anywhere. And now completely surrounded by foreboding iron gates, topped with spikes that looked more like clawed fingers than realistically designed security measures. It didn't matter, I couldn't climb it and I couldn't squeeze through the bars, which menaced with nasty looking dark spikes.

I bolted, seeking to find somewhere that wasn't enclosed. I heard the attack before it reached me, and rolled to the side. A burst of fire traveled past me. Another juke, another attack. Water this time. *Some kind of 'elemental' cape?* I didn't bother to stop and look.

A strange reptilian leapt out at me. *Superhuman speed and probably other abilities.* "Fall," I commanded, and the reptile stumbled. I shoved the shard of glass I had taken into his shoulder. It shattered. *Armor?* It took me a moment to realize it, but he was indeed covered in some kind of thin carapace. Whether part of his monster-cape powers, or actual equipment, I couldn't guess.

I swore. "Shit!"

The reptile's eyes widened. And I tried not to feel bad for him as I punched him hard in the face. He stumbled back and went down. I dived for cover through some bushes. More bursts of fire. It was good to know they cared enough about each other to worry about friendly fire. Still, they were
skilled. That last trick would have worked easily, if I didn't have enhanced senses.

The area was getting worse for me by the second, as the ground was replaced by something resembling cobblestone. It bled from the walls toward the collapsed barn. I dived back into the building, reaching down and grabbing a shovel that had been abandoned with the property. It wasn't much, but it was better than being bare handed. I dropped the case into a large rain barrel. Good, it was heavy enough to sink. Hopefully the heavy wood and the water would protect the case, and most importantly the miracle inside it.

I flipped back as a series of projectiles came out of nowhere, embedding themselves in the wooden wall, as well as more streams of flame. The lizard man was up again. He didn't look happy with me. I also got a good look at the pyrokinetic. She wasn't half bad looking, honestly, but I was more concerned about keeping her from stopping me. I waited for her to get ready to fire again, and yelled. "Look left!"

They did, just in time for her to spit the flame onto the back of the lizard's head. She yelled in surprise and went to tend to her team mate. Good. If nothing else, I could keep this up. They would have to decide I wasn't worth the fight eventually. I rolled along the ground as another stream of fluid—this time far more viscous—shot above me. It stuck hard to the support beam. Some kind of adhesive, I'd bet.

They want me alive, I realized. Things just got a lot easier for me.

I got a look at the source of the liquid. Another monster cape—this one large and misshapen. He was generating the fluid out of some growth in his hand. I'd bet he could generate almost any liquid that way.

"Turn right!" I shouted, and his goo coated half the inside of the barn, catching both the lizard and the pyrokinetic. I didn't know what that gunk was, but you probably couldn't breathe it. The big cape moved toward his friends as I bolted toward another possible exit.

I got out without any further hassle, and was almost ready to hope I'd gotten them all, when a string of light hit me. I was shocked. Normally, my power sensed even energy fast enough to at least warn me that it was coming. Which made no sense as my power relied on sonics, but I was okay with that. This time, there was no warning at all. Luckily, there was none of the whole searing pain and possibly death that occurs when lasers smack you in the face. I was okay with that, as well.

Then my shirt came open and my pants started to fall. Dammit. I tripped.

"Surrender," the woman instructed. "I really don't want to have to hurt you."

I held my pants. Too damaged to be any good. I pulled my feet out of my shoes. "For what it's
worth, I'm sorry." I said. Then I followed it up with the one working word that I hated most. "Suffer."

She fell screaming. I got up and rushed over to her. Followed by bringing my foot down on her leg, breaking it. One down for real, unless they also have a healer.

It gave me the time I needed. Now nude from the waist down, I went back to running. My shovel had been cut, giving me a very sharp, if short, wooden spear.

As it turns out, pants are useful. Not just for the whole 'modesty' thing, but because grass is incredibly uncomfortable when it comes up high enough to hit you in the dangly parts. I'd have to call that my penance for what I did to laser-girl. They weren't trying to kill me, so I'd rather not kill them. But that case was more important to me than that. If I had to, I'd kill them to protect it. My grip tightened on my makeshift weapon.

All around me, the terrain got more and more foreign and unfriendly. Grass replaced by stone, the walls growing higher and more foreboding. I felt lizard man come at me again. Moving down the stone wall I had taken to hiding behind as I tried to figure out a strategy. I caught him in the face with the spear, and moved back. The water cannon shot out as well, again ignoring the walls.

Were they illusions? It would make sense, but I felt them, my power felt them. They were real to me at least. Such bullshit. They were herding me toward a corner, I could see that now. But by now I didn't have much choice. The construct had become a prison, encasing me on all sides with no hope of escape. There has to be a power at work. Maybe more than one.

If someone was doing all this terrain changing, he'd probably need to be in the middle of the terrain. And by 'probably' I mean 'fuck I hope so, because the alternative is searching this whole place, and he might not even be inside'.

I bolted for what seemed to be the center of this bizarre cathedral like design. I didn't bother hiding, if these people could move through, then they could probably see through it as well. I wove through statues of gargoyles and monsters, posed to strike. It was objectively both beautiful and terrible, this gothic world that was building around us. Under other circumstances, I might have liked to just look around the place. This was not 'other circumstances'.

I ducked under an archway only a few feet high, adding even more to my impression that this place was designed out of a fantasy, not some weird transposition of another area. Or, possibly just as likely, that the farm itself was teleported, us along with it.

I found a child sitting next to a fountain of blood. No, not blood, it was too light, and it flowed like water. So just colored water, then. Probably. "Are you the cause of this?" I demanded.
The girl didn't respond, didn't look at me.

"Listen," I said sternly. "I want you to turn this off." I kept moving closer. She still didn't respond. She just kept staring into the red water.

"Get the fuck away from her!" A woman shouted. I didn't need to look, the pyrokinetic. She didn't fire, which told me all I needed to know. The child was basically helpless, here. They cared about her. She had to be the source of this matter transmutation. *The question was, would it vanish if she were no longer powering it?*

"I just want to go home," I insisted, pointing the sharp tip of the spear at the girl's unnoticing eye. "Tell her to stop doing... whatever this place is... and I'll have no reason to harm her." I was conspicuously aware that I was half naked, right now. And it was the 'business half' of nudity.

The large misshapen man appeared from a different path out of this courtyard. He was carrying laser-girl, who had the suitcase. My blood froze. "Surrender, or we destroy the vial," she insisted.

"Looks like I lost it already," I shouted. "You've figured out I have boosted senses by now. If any of you make a move, I will skewer her. I don't want to hurt anyone, but I cannot let you take me. There's always another chance to get a vial. But only if I'm free and clear."

I stared down laser girl, who I was fairly convinced was the ringleader of the operation. The others? I had already beaten the reptile, and none of the rest were really much of a match for my power. I looked at the girl who didn't even seem to know I was there. None of them had a chance to react before I drew back the spear and spun it, smacking her across the head and rendering her unconscious.

The ground around us erupted, replacing cobblestone with obsidian black and adding ugly looking spines across the area.

"Elle!" The pyrokinetic shouted, and a stream of fire poured toward me. I ducked and rolled. Over a spike strip that wasn't there when I started my movement. *One bad call is all it takes.* I gave in to the darkness.

==============

A/N- Man, I tortured Newter for this one, didn't I?
The driver stopped outside the south of the city, in the edge of a state park. Not one of the ones where campers and hikers went. One of the 'conservation' parks where they just wanted the trees. I got out amidst Faultline's crew. I had to wonder why they never came up with a name for themselves, but that wasn't really the point. Newter looked to be in the worst shape, with an eye missing. Faultline herself was in a makeshift cast around her right leg. And Labyrinth had a nasty looking bruise on her forehead. What did this?

"Us later," Faultline said when I moved toward her. I had of course intended to heal her first, since I couldn't touch Newter. "You need to worry about the fucker in the van. Do something to make sure he doesn't wake up if you remove Newter's poison. He's a pain in the ass to fight."

One guy did all this?

I moved to the van to look at my patient. He was wrapped in bandages that were covered in drying blood. I made contact with his foot. Multiple punctures along left side and arm. Lung punctured, stomach punctured, damage to upper intestine. Other minor injuries.

This is gonna take work. I pulled out one of Riley's syringes. It contained a variant fungal organism that could consume almost any waste product in the body. Also, the body itself if you weren't careful. A simple injection into the bloodstream and it went on its way, constantly monitored by my power. It went into his lung, consuming all the blood and fluid. I began remaking it into lung tissue and repairing that. It got into the intestine and left me with that to mend. It even spread out of the wound and began eating the bandages.

I'd need to talk to Riley about making it slightly less voracious. This stuff could be a nightmare if it got into the wild. That, and I couldn't help but shake the feeling that this stuff had been used before. Not a pleasant thought. ComfortWorryCuriosity. Oh, right. I'm fine. She'll understand, in some form.

Newter approached. "Hey, umm, how much would it cost to get you to leave a little 'extra' for him? I'm thinking 'incontinence'."

Really? I just looked at him.

"Fine, sorry. Forget I asked," he backed away.

"He'll recover," I told them. "Be weak until his body replenished the lost raw materials, but nothing lasting."
"Good," Faultine stated. "We need to get back to your base, anyway, for this. Elle and I will ride back with you so you can patch us up. The others will take our vehicle and keep an eye on Sleeping Asshole, there."

"Okay," I agreed. The driver didn't voice any opinions. Say what you will about Coil, he knows how to hire real professionals.

....

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Lisa said after we'd all assembled. And I do mean 'all'. Almost every cape we had as immediate and obvious allies were here. We had brought in the Travelers. Coil was listening in, and we'd probably send a recording to Dragon and Defiant. Faultline and crew, of course. Taylor and one Clarice doll were currently being driven by her father, but another Clarice and Taylor's QoB changeling were here.

Damn. That armor looks really, really good. Especially in those heels. ShockConfusionEmbarrassment. Oh god, what did I just transmit?!

"I present to you, Word," she gestured at the unconscious man in our holding pod. He wasn't bad looking. In excellent physical shape, a kind of 'surfer' look, blond hair. "No, really, that's what he chose to call himself." Minerva added dryly.

"He's a Protectorate cape from Florida. Either the world's weakest Master, or a moderately annoying blaster, depending on how you look at it. He can give one or two word commands that fit a really narrow spread of options. All of which are summed up as 'automatic behaviors that a human being can fake'. Like, say, yawning or sneezing or tripping. Nothing complex. He can tell you to jump. He can't tell you to dance, or even walk for that matter, unless he narrates every step individually. We can wake him up just fine, he can't say 'release me'. Well, he can, but it won't work."

She gestured to the pod next to Word. "This is some guy in a suit," she supplied. "He works for Cauldron. Aka, the assholes who sell powers in a bottle and make Case 53s."

"Gaea, if you would kindly do the honors of waking these nice gentlemen from their slumber?"

_Fucking Lisa. AmusedAgreement._ I put my hand on the wall and corrected their altered biochemistry. I had purged Newter's poison when I healed them the first time.

Word started waking up first. "Uhh... wha..." he snapped to attention and was about to say something when Minerva put her hand over his mouth.

"The Surgeon General requires that I warn you. The girl next to you is Aceso. Side effects of
attempting to Master Aceso will almost certainly include immediate regret of recent life decisions. The last time anyone attempted it, she ripped his face off. Quite literally. There's videos of it online."

"Okay," he coughed. "I get it."

"We have questions to ask you and the Cauldron guy," Minerva smiled. "And you will answer them, one way or another. Let's start with a bit of a story. Like, say, why you expect us to believe such an obvious bait and switch."

"Excuse me?" the Cauldron guy said. "I'm afraid you're mistaken."

"Actually, you are more afraid that I'm telling the truth," she said with a smile. "We have a vial here, and I read through all the details and compared it to what we know about them. I'm not buying it. More to the point, I'm wondering why someone else would buy such a shitty vial. Untested, no known power results, likely to only rank at most a two on the PRT's rankings."

"It's for my niece," Word admitted. "She's sick. ALS. Something healers can't really fix. The vials have healing properties. I don't care what powers she gets, or if she gets any at all. I just want her well."

"True," Aceso said. I nodded, my own lie detection agreed.

"Fits with what we ran into," Noelle spoke up. Since her restoration, she'd taken leadership of the Travelers. And they all seemed the happier for it. Even Krouse, who I had thought would chafe being under someone else's command. "The paperwork on the vials we found suggested as much."

"And Cauldron is where you got your powers from," Tattletale spoke to the captive hero. "What did they expect from you?"

"A pretty heavy price tag," he answered. "Almost a quarter mil. And I had to do them a few favors. But I wanted one of the more fun sounding power types. Sonic control and related powers was mentioned as the most likely results. I didn't quite get what I was hoping for, but that's the luck of the draw."

"Is that true, mister Cauldron guy?" Tattletale asked.

"I... I don't know," he admitted. "I would have to know which vial he took, and even then I haven't exactly memorized them. I can confirm that there is a high degree of seeming randomness in the results of a formula. We are still perfecting the process, and with it the expected results."
Aceso and I just watched. Lisa would know that we didn't find any lies. The subtle combination of drugs in their system were supposed to make them compliant, eager to speak. It couldn't force them to be honest, not without making it obvious we were using drugs on them, but they would keep talking forever like this.

"What about the Case 53s?" Faultline asked. "Did you create them?"

"Not on purpose," the man answered. "All the vials carry a risk of mutations. Some minor, others... incredibly major. We've improved the process, so it's very rare to have new Case 53s. You can probably find ways to confirm this yourselves. There's been no major mutations in over a year, now. And we do more business now than ever before."

"Improved," Faultline said the word like she was tasting it. "You mean human experimentation."

"No!" the man exclaimed.

"Lie," Aceso responded.

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's true. We gave these drugs to people to test them. They work by inducing trigger events, so only human testing can function. But it was always volunteers. We went to hospitals to find the sick and dying. Warzones to pick up the wounded. We always asked before we gave a vial. It may not be strictly legal, but we have our ethical standard. No one has ever been forced to take a vial."

"The memory loss?" Newter asked.

"A side effect, sometimes," the man answered. "Happens to the Case 53s. Sometimes happens to other, otherwise normal seeming serums."

"So you're saying we volunteered for this," Newter responded angrily.

"Yes," he replied. "We always got permission. Let our patients know what was coming, that there were risks and it might even kill them trying. Whether you were a cancer patient, or a wounded soldier, or a paying customer... I wouldn't be able to know. But all of you knew the risks before you took the serum."

"By 'risks' and 'choice' you mean you found people too desperate to say 'no', of course," Faultline replied. The man didn't have an answer to that.

The conversation took a couple hours. We learned that they had found what they believed to be a
collection of dead passengers- or, as they called them, Agents. And they were for all intents "mining" the things. That the Travelers got a batch of some of the most powerful serums they'd ever developed. But, of course, the Simurgh got involved and that changes all the rules. Our captive didn't know anything about the inner workings of the organization except that they had a pocket dimension of their own, similar to Toybox. Apparently they were trying to add to the number of heroes out there, while avoiding the pitfalls of being controlled by any particular government.

I was also beginning to believe we needed to get a pocket dimension simply to keep up with all the other shadowy powerhouse organizations out there that already had one.

"We do have to release them," Tattletale admitted, after we'd interrogated them thoroughly. "What proof we have isn't even illegal. If only because there are no laws on the subject."

"We're not done with Cauldron," Faultline insisted.

"No, we're not," Minerva agreed. "But these two have nothing more of value for us, and one of them actually is a hero."

Aceso smiled. "Think Word would trade this vial of his for us fixing up his niece? She doesn't have anything that's actually hard for us to fix, and I really want to see how they put this together."

I had to admit I did, too.

"Also," she said. "I bet I can fix the memory loss. Or at least a good portion of it. The source is from power mutations, right? That should be repairable."

"I can agree to that," Faultline replied. "Neither of them is important. Cauldron's leadership is what I want."

AgreementDeterminationEager. Seems Taylor wanted in on this as well.

"Yes," I agreed. "We'll need to talk to them. Or someone more closely associated with them, at least."

But for right now, this lead had provided everything we could get from it.

=============

A/N- So. Much. Foreshadowing!
Eventually, we managed to get everyone out of the building.

Word accepted our promise that I'd heal his niece. ALS wasn't something I normally healed, too much of it was involved with the brain for my old inhibitions to let me work with, and under the current circumstances I couldn't afford to let anyone know that brains were only slightly more difficult than a paper cut for me.

Blasto, however, assured me that his and Riley's tech could easily cure almost any disorder, up to and including some levels of brain death, with the upgrades from Cranial's technology. One of the many designs we'd be including in the "sanitized" Bonesaw tech.

"So, has anyone given any thought about what we do about school tomorrow?" I asked. "I mean, it's getting late and we're missing the Clarice doll."

"I took it home with me," Taylor replied. "Weirded my dad out a bit, but he's already seen my changeling. He'll take us to school in the morning."

"I'm in Taylor's closet!" Riley said cheerfully.

Respawn started snickering.

"Speaking of which," Tattletale smiled. "Don't think I haven't figured out what's going on between you two."

"For the last time," I sighed. "There is nothing going on between us."

"Really," she didn't stop smiling. "So you mean you girls haven't managed to figure out how to telepathically talk to each other via weird power bullshit?"

That got everyone's attention. Before, it was just the good natured joking. Now they weren't laughing. "How the hell did you pull that off?" Blasto finally asked.

"I realized that Taylor's emotions sort of 'offload' into her insects," I started.

"Yeah, noticed that as well," Lisa agreed. "Part of how she stays so calm all the time. She lets the bugs do the 'feeling' for her."
"Turns out," I continued. "My power works the same way. Or similar, at least. I just never noticed it..."

"Because you were never in contact with a given organism long enough," Lisa interrupted.

"And maybe because nothing else has been simple enough to respond to such subtle effects as my emotions, before," I added. "Taylor pointed out that occasionally her relays I built into the Yggdrasil felt signals off of me."

"Oooh!" Riley clapped happily. "That is just the coolest thing. Direct Passenger on Passenger communication, fed forward and backward in real time!"

"So... I... kinda," I looked down. "I kinda built something designed to make the signals about a thousand times clearer for her."

"You gave her the ability to read your thoughts?" Crystal said incredulously.

"It didn't seem right not to," I said, studying the lines in the table. A table I made. I couldn't help but notice that the imitation oak patterns were distinctly more uniform and patterned than real tree rings could ever be.

"More like feel her feelings," Taylor added. "Words don't work. Only emotions. It's telempathy, not telepathy."

"Taylor can't shut off her power, and we're not giving up her range increase," Taylor nodded. Almost half our current strength was owed to Taylor's functional omnipresence, and the weapons she could deploy because of it. "I already had access to her emotions. All I did was create an organism that does the same in reverse and lets her tune in to me."

Tattletale smiled so wide I was beginning to wonder if the top of her head would fall off. "So you're telling us that your first impulse was to link yourselves together even further? I'd say you were basically married, now, except no marriage has ever been half as intimate as you currently are. You two might as well just admit Riley has a new sister in law and be done with it."

I blushed. EmbarrassedDefensiveProtective. Riley's face was radiating barely contained excitement.

"What?" Taylor interrupted her friend. "You'd rather she didn't at least keep our partnership a partnership, instead of having that kind of control over me?"
"No," Tattletale smiled. "I'm just pointing out that she could have easily changed it so it was no longer doing direct communication, and given you your privacy. Instead she surrenders her own." Her head turned toward me. "You could just break the link, without sacrificing Taylor's range enhancements, right? Wouldn't be that much more difficult, would it?"

"It'd be easier, actually," I admitted. And then I was hit by the rush of emotion from Taylor. FearNegationTrappedNo. It felt like a physical blow.

"I thought so," Tattletale replied, even more smug than usual.

"Did we just..." Crystal started.

"See Taylor's emotions on Amelia's face?" Tattletale offered. "Yes, that is indeed what you just witnessed. Wanna see it again?"

"Don't you fucking dare," Taylor responded.

"What? I was just going to ask you why you're in high heels right now," she pointed at the feet of Taylor's QoB changeling.

"They're not heels," Taylor insisted. "They're stabilizer struts for my antigrav. It was Chariot's idea. Ask Riley." DefensiveEmbarrassedRetreat.

Riley was staring at me, still, with that smile she smiles when she tinkers. I found myself getting uncomfortable. "It's true. They focus the gravity field in the legs so all the stress is on the armor instead of the body inside it. Improved center of balance and everything. Once we upgrade the tech, it'll allow her to walk on walls and ceilings if she wanted. But ceilings usually aren't durable enough."

"The part where they show off your already great legs?" Tattletale continued.

"Not mine, this is my changeling,"

"Which looks exactly like you. Down to the centimeter."

Taylor froze. WorrySelfConscious.

"That is part of the power armor system, so you can wear it yourself instead of using a changeling at
"All," she added. "Means that you don't even have that flimsy excuse. Just admit you like showing off legs and be done with it."

_SelfConsciousApprehensionSadness._ "I... don't really like any part of my body," Taylor managed to mutter.

"That's just tragic," Tattletale replied. "You have plenty of great features. Your legs are one of them. Ask anyone here. Show of hands, who agrees that they either want, or want, Taylor's legs?"

Everyone lifted their hands up except me and Blasto. He looked around. "Umm, no offense or anything, but I try my best not to have opinions about how attractive someone half my age is."

"You really are a bad catholic," Respawn joked.

_EmbarrassmentReliefWorry._ Then I felt Taylor's attention on me, and my conspicuously hidden hands.

"Oh, don't worry," Tattletale said, to my growing realization and horror. "Amelia likes your legs. She really likes your legs. I know you felt her checking them out earlier. I bet that's a sensation that carries over from your link as well."

The floodgates opened. My own humiliation. Taylor's. Our reaction to each other's emotions. It was like getting hit by a truck. Taylor's changeling collapsed, even as the ground beneath me warped and pulled me under, encasing me in the warm safety of my Yggdrasil. I could feel the movement of the others as they walked on my sk- no, on the Yggdrasil. It wasn't 'me'. I gave in to oblivion.

=================

_A/N- The Tattletale school of therapy. Slapping you in the face with your issues until you unsubscribe._
My head was screaming at me when I woke up. My senses worked their way outward, noting the conditions of the Yggdrasil, and my place within. I was in one of the medbay pods. They didn't really work on me, thanks to my blanket immunity to pathogens and most organic influences. Including the helpful ones, unfortunately. *Fuck. What happened?* My memories of the previous night came back to me piece by piece. *Lisa. Comments about Taylor's legs. The changeling. Taylor!*

My eyes shot open and I immediately regretted it. I quickly shut them and covered my face. *Shock*Worry*Relief.*

"Welcome back to the waking world," came Lisa's voice. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to cut someone out of a floor that keeps growing back?"

"Your fucking fault," I moaned.

"I'm not the one who buried myself alive," I could almost hear her smile.

I flexed my power through the tree, and she dropped into a floor that had been reduced to liquid. I solidified it almost immediately. "If anything happened to Taylor..."

"She's fine," Lisa answered, though she was having trouble breathing, being stuck in the floor. "At school right now, otherwise it would look too suspicious. Would you mind skipping past the death threats? I've already done that three times over this. It'd be nice to go to the part where I explain myself."

"Three?"

"Crystal was pissed. Taylor was absolutely livid. And Riley just smiled and left the room," she informed me. "I managed to talk the others down, but I think your Slaughterhouse Sister is currently designing a retrovirus that'll cause my digestive system to reverse directions."

"You better not be expecting me to talk her out of it," I muttered. "So, mind telling me what the fuck made you do something that stupid?"

"Easier for you to see it for yourself," she answered. "You know that link you have with Taylor. Look at it. I mean, really really pay attention to what it's saying right now."

I followed her request. There was so much anger in it. I could feel the damage that had been done to
the Yggdrasil, where our more aggressive monsters had attacked their own storage rooms. Even each other in a couple cases. I made a note to talk to Riley and Blasto about maybe being a little bit too enthusiastic about their programmed instincts.

"Yeah, that," she confirmed. "You created a connection with unknown, unknowable, properties. A connection that relies upon the emotional wellbeing of two people who are so fucked up in the head that a psychology professor could base his entire career around analyzing either of them. Do you have an idea how insane that is?"

"Doesn't mean you had-"

"Yes, it does!" Lisa insisted. "Maybe I could have talked to you alone, and maybe you would have even listened to me. But you wouldn't have believed me. You are mucking about with things that no one understands. You're toying with my best friend's emotions on every possible level, both figurative and literal. And if anything. Any. Fucking. Thing. Goes wrong? You're the only person on the planet who can fix it! And you're just as vulnerable as she is if something goes wrong!" ConcernWorryProtective.

"It isn't the risk you're implying it is."

"Is that so?" she scoffed. "You might believe that, and Taylor's okay with it regardless of the risks. I know you haven't realized it, yet, but she doesn't care about her own wellbeing in the slightest. And she trusts you more than you have any right at all to be trusted. Because of who you are and who she is, that trust will be broken, one way or another. You're going to hurt her. Probably worse than how you hurt Glory Girl."

"You started me down that path," I hissed. The Yggdrasil pressed in on her.

She gasped. "What's fucked up? You could do it right now. But if you did, you and Taylor would never be able to know if it was your feelings or hers that killed me. Go ahead, look. Are you doing this for because of your feelings, or because of hers?"

I dipped back into our link. Taylor's emotions were a seething mess. Mine were, too. I relaxed my power and tried to force myself to be calm. Anger flooded back at me.

"It won't work like that," Lisa informed me. "You're still offloading into your power. Calming yourself by forcing Taylor to be angry. And because it's Taylor, whose ability to deal with her own feelings might actually be worse than yours, she's doing the exact same. You can't solve this that easily, all you're doing is making it worse. Last time you passed out and nearly died by accident. And that was just because you were embarrassed. What might you do if it happened right now, while you're pissed off?"
That caught me. *What could I do right now? A thought or two and I could kill everything in this city, my friends included.* A flush of dread washed over me at the sheer devastation that I could unleash.

"Not the prettiest emotion in the world," Tattletale gasped. "But a better choice. Hold on to that, if nothing else. The awareness of how you're not just a danger to yourself if something goes wrong. You're a danger to every living thing on the planet. Now would you mind letting me out?"

One more flex of my power, and she was spat out of the hole. She landed on her side. Maybe I was putting away the rage, but I still had a vindictive streak right now.

"Fuck," she muttered holding her side. "Pretty sure your cousin broke one of my ribs last night, and that didn't exactly do it any favors."

I wasn't in a mood to feel sympathetic. *ConcernIrritation.* "So, now that you've proven your point, what do you suggest I do about it?"

"Oh, sure, ask me the question I don't have an answer for," she moaned as she got up. "The best choice would be to shut off the link, but Taylor's never going to accept that. Which should give you an idea of how unequal all this is, since I don't think you'd be bothered that much by it." *FearTrappedDesperation.*

She was right, I probably wouldn't be. It was comforting, not something I wanted to lose, but I didn't cling to it like Taylor did.

"See what I mean about you hurting her?" she asked. I saw. *Fuck.* "There's also sitting you two down and making you talk about your feelings, on an honest level. But even ignoring the part where it'd take better gods than ourselves to get Taylor to do that? It'd probably cause more problems than it solves right now. And no, I won't be saying why."

I dipped back into our link. Looked like Taylor had calmed down. I tried to send a soothing emotion. *WorryHappySadness* was her response. "I can probably guess anyway, if I tried hard enough."

Lisa didn't bother weighing in on the assumption. "I'd suggest finding some more 'constructive' outlet for your emotions. By which I mean something to break the face of. The fucking Passengers and their mindfucks mean we all feel the need to take risks. To get that 'conflict' they desire so much. We're not getting much of that right now, and it's starting to show. You going back to school helps with it a little bit, if only because schoolwork makes for some kind of distraction."

"Better than even odds that's why you were so fucking stupid about this whole thing," I replied. "You could have found a safer way and we both know it." *AgreementIrritation*
"Safer, maybe," she agreed. "But I didn't need 'safe'. I needed 'fast'. And I needed it to be proof so ironclad that Taylor would actually believe me when I said how bad this was for her."

"And was it?"

"A bit of both," Lisa replied. "She believes me now, at least. She just doesn't care. Her exact words were 'this is the best thing I've had in my life since my mom died'. She won't be giving it up. Not even if it manages to kill her."

I frowned, and my worry must have been picked up upon. ConcernHappyFear.

"She's been listening to the whole conversation," Lisa replied.

"I know," I replied. "I'll talk to her." WorryFearPanic. "But the link's remaining. It means too much." The look on Lisa's face couldn't be more opposite from the feelings through my bond with Taylor. If only my own feelings were so clear.

=================

A/N- Ah loves this chapter. Also. More foreshadowing!
Riley was waiting for me when I came out of the medical room. I'd left Lisa in there, injuries and all. I'd probably fix her eventually, but for right now I just didn't want to do anything that could be construed as helping her. Fuck, I had enough problems on my plate without Lisa's so-called help.

Riley hugged me. "I'm in class, so I can't spend too long. Missy's teaching me geometry. She's really really good at it. It's because her power lets her cheat. So I made her take chemistry with me. So can I go over to her house after school?"

She smiled broadly as I ruffled her hair. *It's good for her to be making more friends. Real friends.* "Sure," I answered. "Clarice has enough power left, right?"

"Oh, sure," she agreed. "It's my civilian model, remember? Can't do the best stuff, but it can run for days if I want it to. Oops, bathroom break time's over, gotta go."

She ran off to her bedroom. She and Missy were good for each other. I tapped into my link with Taylor. Simply for the reassurance. It wasn't the usual impulse of emotions, this was a softer effect. Maybe if you condensed the word 'hug' into a sensation. *PeaceComfort. Yeah, that's probably close to what I'd sent her with that one.* I felt a wave of sorrow. My own. *Was Lisa right? Was this addictive? Hurting Taylor? Messing with her feelings...* I froze. *ConcernWorryConfused.*

Then I turned right around and opened the door to the med room. "You fucking knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?" Lisa said, looking at me from where she was resting in one of the pods. "Oh. The aura? Yeah."

"How long?"

"Suspected it even as far back as the bank," she admitted. "Being on the receiving end of her power was enough to make me a little curious, so to speak. But I wasn't certain until the party."

"Why then?"

"That's when it wore off," she explained. "You couldn't tell?"

"I was kinda busy with other things," I defended myself. "Like I'd just realized how much Taylor's emotions carried across the... oh." I just stood their dumbfounded. *WorryInsecureFearofLoss.*
"It's okay, Taylor," I spoke to her insects. "I'll tell you about it later. For now, I really need to sit
down and think. Maybe ask Rey if I can dip into his stash." Fuck. And here I thought finding out I
was acting like Carol was a shock.

"Now you know part of the real problem," Lisa stated.

I didn't answer. Nor did I visit Rey. He wasn't even here right now, instead spending time with his
girlfriend. With Riley distracted by school, the labwork had come to a relative crawl. Riley had blood
samples from the Travelers that she was putting through a number of tests that I wouldn't pretend I
understood. They weren't of the sort my power could assist with. We were a long way from any real
results, and what was happening now was mostly a matter of time. Even Riley and I couldn't
completely violate that requirement.

I could feel Lisa through my connection with the Yggdrasil. Making phone calls, though my power
wasn't precise enough to determine words. Not yet, at least. Much like Taylor's recent breakthrough
to using bugs for hearing and even speech, I suspected my power could be made better.

Recently, for example, I determined that my power assumes that anything living inside another thing
is "part of" that thing, and therefore it's all one organism. A rule that didn't really make logical sense.
But I knew my Passenger was capable of nearly infinitely more. Its purpose was so much grander. It
was the shaper. The architect. Building and remaking the body of the space whale itself, allowing to
transform itself as needed, for functions I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

Then there was Taylor's. Which I was pretty sure regulated the communication of the being. Its
ability to coordinate mentally from one Passenger to the next, allowing them to temporarily access
one another's abilities where needed. No wonder our empathic link worked so well. Our Passengers
were functionally two halves of the same incomprehensibly vast whole.

Even with Lisa having broken through the blocks, we were no closer to making progress. We still
did not know the source. Lisa believed they probably claimed a handful of dimensions and blocked
them off so only another whale could make its way through. A quarantine to protect them from
discovery.

I stared at the ceiling until the others returned. I still had no answers.

Taylor's body made its way into my senses. I could feel her intentions, so I simply opened the way
for her to reach me, through the walls. Nervous Apprehension Small.

She walked through the passageway nonetheless, looking as uncomfortable as her link suggested.
"That's kind of creepy," she said as she sat down on a chair I provided in my room.
"What is?" I asked.

"Having walls open themselves up for you. It's disturbing, knowing you basically are the base itself, that I'm currently inside." She paused. "And we must never let anyone know I just said that or anything like it."

"Yeah, that does sound kind of dirty," I agreed. ConfusionRealizationshock. She blushed.

"Uh... I meant the part where I just realized that's probably exactly what everyone else thinks about my bugs," she corrected.

It was my turn to blush, covering my face with both my hands. AmusedHappy. "Pity I already used the 'being swallowed by the ground' trick. It would come in handy right about now."

"So, what was it you figured out?" she asked.

"Glory Girl," I answered. No point in hiding it. Not around her. "Her power."

"The aura," my parter stated. "I... sorta eavesdropped on you. Basically all day, actually. I know, sounds a little weird, but I was worried."

"Bonesaw lives in my basement," I replied. "Weird is something I've come to expect. Like my attraction to my own sister. I just discovered that it was her power's fault."

Taylor paused. ThoughtRealizationHorrorWorry.

"Is that what I felt like earlier?" I asked and she answered with a nod. "No wonder you were worried. Yeah. Years of exposure turned me into something of an addict. Probably explains a good portion of a lot of things about me. But that's not the problem. The problem is, our link, it's doing the same thing to you."

PanicCrushingDespair. I shuddered under the effect. Taylor said nothing, her face neutral even as her power pressed against me.

"It... it's doing the same to me..." I managed to gasp while fighting the urge, not even my own urge, to cry. WorryFearRegretShame.

"It's not your fault," I insisted. "Really, it's mine. I should have realized. I'm more resistant than you because I've spent the last three years living with it constantly. And pretty much the first day it's
gone, my power finds a way to replace it. It... it's a drug and it needs to be..." FearNegationNotAgain.

She tackled me into a hug and was crying. Not a normal cry. This was the desperate pain that I'd seen too often in the hospitals, when I came across the few sick that I could not or, in the cases of some, would not save. Not from them, but from their loved ones. "No. You can't. I can't."

I held her. I didn't have much choice, did I?

"I can't go back to being alone again," she insisted.

What? I didn't have to voice the question.

"Ever since my mom died... it's been... I've been alone." she elaborated. "A part of me that never got over losing her. Never got over how my dad never got over it. Either. Both. I don't know and it really doesn't change anything. This is the first time since then that I really felt that someone was there for me. Understood me and cared for me."

"What about Lisa?" I asked.

"I know," she said, "I know she cares. Even if she has the worst ways of showing it sometimes. I get it, mentally, but I don't feel it. I care for her. I respect her. I even trust her. But she doesn't make me feel safe. You. This. Makes me feel safe. For the first time in years. I refuse to give that up. I'll die without it."

I... I had no idea what to say. I simply clung back to her. She was right. There was safety, here, in our bond. It felt... natural. Perfect. Like coming home. I wouldn't give it up, I could not.

We fell asleep in each others' arms.

-------------

A/N- Broken, broken girls.
"Okay, ladies, open up!" Came a voice from outside the door. I already knew it was Lisa, of course. Anyone else would have knocked instead of waiting a few minutes and then yelling at us.

I looked down. Amelia was starting to wake up from her spot on my shoulder. The door opened at her mental command, to reveal Minerva in full costume.

She paused and looked at us. "Damn it, Taylor! Damn it, Amelia!" She moved her hands up in exasperation, and then immediately pulled them back down. Right, the injuries from before. Sure, they were Crystal's fault, but I still felt bad. Amelia was so humiliated that she sucked herself into the tree to escape. I, on the other hand, had escaped by dropping my connection to my changeling. A cute little feature that Riley installed to let me at least select between the ones I wanted to use, since I couldn't control more than one humanoid body.

We'd all been afraid that Amelia was going to die thanks to Lisa's fucking stunt. Took six of the zerglings to break through the Yggdrasil and pull it back enough to get her out, and by the time we'd gotten to her, she'd suffered some hypoxia. She buried herself alive out of humiliation. Crystal forgot the strength amplification in her armor, and the rest was an accident.

Minerva just stood there, watching us, as neither Amelia nor I spoke for a bit. Worry/Apologetic/Upset.

"I tried," Amelia responded, sitting.

"It's not going to happen," I stood, using my 'command voice'. "I convinced her it stays." Relief/Gratitude/Safe

She looked back and forth between us, and smiled. "I see. I bet Amelia really enjoyed being convinced." Dammit, Lisa, leave well enough alone. I prepared myself for the emotional rush of the feedback. It didn't come. Annoyed/Happy/Proud. A strong emotion, sure, but not self feeding. There was no feedback loop unless we resisted the feelings. Don't fight, embrace. Acceptance/Confidence.

I smiled. "Well, looks like we've found a solution to the feedback loops." It would be a little weird for me. I'd spent the last few years of my life repressing my every emotion I could think to name. Now I had to do the exact opposite. Probably should have done that, anyway, if everything pop culture pretended to know about psychology was right. I doubt I ever would have... but now, for her, I have to.

For the first time since I've known her, Lisa looked sad when she smiled. "Yeah, looks like you have." I started to speak, but she kept going. "Well, I have unrelated news. Remember how I said
Vista was our top priority recruit?"

*ConfusedCurious.* I nodded, Amelia spoke. "Of course," she said. "Her power's insane. A match for ours in terms of sheer potential. Did they get a new recruit?"

"Nope," Lisa said. "I just got into Flechette's files. And I have so many ideas."

"She's not in the school, so that kind of makes it hard for us to meet her in civies," I informed Lisa.

"I know," Lisa replied. "My money is that she's already eighteen and they're faking her younger, but they keep those records separate, and I'm not snooping for identities, just powers. We do have at least one 'in', however."

"You mean Parian," I said dryly. "I am not going to use their relationship as a tool." *AgreementDistaste.*

"How about using the shitty nature of the PRT as a tool? Parian's happy with us, after all. Flechette is not happy in the Wards. Plus, I have this!" She held up a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

"Lisa... did you hack Piggot's email?" *ShockExcitementWorry. Well, looks like Amelia approves. Kinda. "Okay... they're transferring her to Florida?"

"That's what it looks like," Lisa agreed. "Seems there are other directors who see us as a good excuse for poaching. Sure, they have excuses like 'needed elsewhere' and 'risk of compromise by Pantheon', but it all ultimately boils down to a half dozen heroes that they could claim for themselves. Coil and I... might also have had something to do with it..."

"Assault and Battery" *AnnoyanceDisgust* "have already agreed to a transfer, they're just figuring out 'where'. Miss Militia and Triumph are going to be it for Protectorate members until they find someone that's a proper combination of 'powerful' and 'loyal' to trust around us. The Wards are going to be sending Weld to Chicago, Flechette to Florida, and they're sending Crucible to New York. The other heroes they were planning to send this way to help with the Leviathan aftermath have been canceled. They might still send Clay, but he's kinda meh."

"No idea who that is," Amelia replied.

"Shaker," she answered. "Basically does a shitty version of what you can do, but the opposite side of the Manton Effect. They'd be using him for construction efforts. It'll take him all of five minutes to completely rebuild about a mile of streets."
"So, the Protectorate is imitating us, now?" I concluded.

"Yup," Lisa all but sang. "Turns out, they've learned that repair efforts are a really good way to drum up massive amounts of PR. He won't be staying permanently, of course, but it'll speed up the city's recovery by years and gives the PRT a chance to claim 'in part thanks to our efforts' when talking about BB's rapid recovery from Leviathan."

"That's fine," Amelia replied. "We started this to fix the city, not take credit for it." I sent a wash of pride and confirmation into the link. It rebounded with her affirmation.

"I know," Lisa confirmed. "But we're digressing. What's important is that we need to get Flechette out, and we need to do it right now. I have a plan, and it will be every kind of epic."

"What about Vista?"

"She's local, her family would need to move. This might help with as with our efforts to recruit her as well. Now you girls get dressed, they'll be here in five minutes." Lisa turned and rushed from the room.

"Giggity!" Zach shouted from the other room.

"Shut up Za-" AnnoyedEmbarrassedDesire. I stumbled on my words. Then looked toward Amelia. ShockShameRegretFear. She moved to run from the room, but she didn't have my reflexes. I grabbed her hand. "It's fine," I insisted. "I'm not bothered." I pushed assurances into the link.EmbarrassedGratefulNervous.

I smiled. That was better. To my surprise, it really didn't bother me. Knowing someone found me attractive was nice. Something that Brian never-ConcernCaution.

"Sorry," I said. "My mind started to wander. We should suit up now. Still have to pretend this 'secret identity' stuff has any actual meaning."

She didn't say anything as I left to find my costume, once again on one of my dolls. Mine was one of the harder outfits to put on, since I insisted on staying true to 'Skitter' when designing my costume. Sure, this one had brighter colors and was much higher in quality than my earliest designs. I took my time, used it to think. I could feel Amelia through the link. Trepidation sang through both sides of the connection, even as we mixed it with more calming and pleasant feelings.

Lisa was wrong. Maybe it was, in a way, 'addictive'. But it was a good kind of addiction. It was trust. It was friendship. It was the ability to actually be close to another human being. This wasn't a drug. It was an oasis, a shelter. For both of us. Now that we understood the pitfalls of the emotional
overload, we could counter that. The only problem is that it would make it harder for me to put on my 'intimidation' act, since I could no longer use the swarm to offload my emotions.

I would have to agree that sometimes it was a little uncomfortable. Right now, for example. Amelia's attraction to me was an elephant in the room and would need to be addressed with better than 'it doesn't bother me'. It was difficult enough figuring out my own feelings most of the time. Trying to figure out hers as well was just that much harder. Maybe it would be better to break the link, at least for the time being.

No. No, that was not an option. I was happy, now. Maybe for the first time in years. I might have to give up on Skitter's persona, but that was fine. I didn't need to hide behind it anymore. I knew for a fact that the person who knew me best in the world still trusted and respected and accepted me. She didn't see a victim like Emma. She didn't see a pity case like Lisa. She saw an ally and a protector. I was her friend, her General, her partner.

=========

A/N- They're still broken girls. But don't all the pieces fit so nicely together? In a disturbing, disturbing way that I'm quite proud to have achieved.
I watched Taylor rush out to find her costume, while avoiding actually looking at her. It helped that her choice of day to day clothing was dark and baggy, leaving no real figure for me to observe. Though every time I made physical contact with her, I got a pretty thorough idea of her body. Then again, I've used my power on thousands by now, and even with Victoria it never crossed my mind to think of it as sexual. Maybe because of how it wasn't so much 'me' as it was my Passenger.

My outfit was far easier to put on than Khepri's. I simply stepped on the mass left in a pile in the corner to my room, and it wrapped its way around me. I managed to exit the room only a few seconds after Taylor.

I'd thoroughly humiliated myself and I didn't even have the excuse of Tattletale for this one. If Taylor hadn't stopped me, calmed us, it could have been another feedback loop. Now I was reading a complex mess of concern, apprehension, doubts, and offers of reassurances directed toward me. She believed it when she said it didn't bother her, but that didn't stop her from feeling all kinds of things that worried me.


"Is breaking your link with Taylor on the table as an apology?"

I frowned. "There's more to it than you're letting on, isn't there?"

"Yes," Lisa admitted. "Maybe. I'm not sure. The biggest problem is that if you found out, it would only encourage you that much more."

"Not really selling your argument here, Lisa. You know that, right?" I put my hand on hers, then expanded my power into her. Patching up the damage. Light fracture of one floating rib, plenty of bruising. Nothing that took a lot of effort. Based on my guess, she was shoved. Shoved very hard, mind, but that was the limit. She didn't thank me, but then I didn't expect her to. She didn't pull away at least.

"I suppose not," she replied, looking down. "Hopefully it won't come to that. Hopefully, our guests might just solve the problem another way."

SadnessResolutionWorryDeterminationApprehension. I almost gasped at that one. What was going through my partner's head right now? I have to find out later.

....
I was shocked to discover it was already evening outside. Had Taylor and I really spent that long asleep? Together? In my bed? ConfusedWorryAssurance.

Flechette and Parian arrived together, from the direction of the refugee camps where Parian lived. The pair's relationship was secret to exactly no one in the camps or online. That news was currently the single most active thread in Pantheon's sub board.

Both girls were in costume. Flechette in her ninja-like outfit, Parian with her new high tech costume. Some kind of nanoweave that Riley designed. Tougher than Skitter's armor by three, though only slightly heavier. It was the same material used in most of our armors, but Parian's was special. It interacted with her power better than any standard cloth could. Her current costume would let her fight most of Pantheon to a standstill.

It would require the acid moths to get through. Maybe the new 'microwave cannon' built into Crystal's armor could bypass it well enough. That's what it was meant for, after all. A way to basically ignore armor and hit the person beneath.

Meanwhile, we fanned ourselves out. Khepri and I in the middle, with Eki and Aceso to my left. On Taylor's side we had Osiris and Theo. Still needed to get him an official name. As nice as he was, it would be a really good idea to put him out there as one of the spokespeople for the group. At least Blasto finally picked one. Yum Kaax, a god of wild plants and animals. Worked well enough for me. Minerva was in front of all of us. This was her show, we were just watching for now.

Flechette spoke first. "Okay, what's the emergency. You've got Sa- Parian scared half to death. I know she owes you for a lot of things, but that doesn't give you the right to screw with either of us. If this isn't worth it, I can and will shoot you."

Parian didn't speak up. I didn't know her all that well, but you'd think she was the youngest person here instead of the oldest.

"Oh, I know," Minerva replied, holding out a sheet of paper. "It's what I'm counting on."

Flechette's eyes narrowed as she grabbed and read it. "How did you get this?"

"Not by doing anything legal, I assure you," Tattletale responded. "And to answer your next questions: Yes it's real, yes we're trying to convert the Protectorate and Wards over to us, yes I would do it dishonestly if they'd let me, and no they won't let me."

"What is it, Flechette?" Parian asked. She was handed the paper.
"If it's true, then I've already resigned, don't worry about it," Flechette responded.

Parian nodded, then looked at us. "If this is fake, then you can consider our business relationship over."

"It's true," Lisa insisted. "But please at least give it a bit of time before you try to prove it, one way or the other. If you ask them, then it puts us at risk, and they could just lie and say they never had any intention of transferring you, despite everyone else they're shuffling around. You can give us that much benefit of the doubt, can't you?"

Flechette looked over at Parian, who nodded. "I suppose," she agreed. "Now, is that all?"

"Not quite," Lisa admitted. "We've been examining your power. I think it's more a lot more valuable than anyone realizes."

Flechette didn't say anything. Lisa continued. "You enhance weapons, making them far more lethal than they have any right to be."

"That's not exactly news," Flechette responded.

"Yes. But the question is 'how'," Tattletale smiled. "If it works how I think it works... then you are Triumvirate tier. Maybe better."

She scoffed. "Wow, didn't think Pantheon offered ass kissing in its recruitment package."

"Fine, example time," she said. "Theo, mind creating a metal staff and giving it to Osiris?"

"No problem, ma'am," Theo replied, and formed the weapon. Zach took it.

"You've seen how his power works, right? Restoring something to a saved point in time. Go ahead and cut it in half. You can easily make your bolts pass through just about anything, right?"

She drew a bolt from her arbalest. "This isn't exactly new, either," she said. But she did comply and cut the staff in half.

Lisa rubbed her finger on the edge of the now severed pole. "Just as I thought," she smiled. "Can I look at the bolt, too?" Flechette handed it over. "Not even a scratch on it, or any bits of metal left behind."
"And?"

"And that means your power can insulate an object from damage and make it melt through other things. A hole in reality" RealizationShock "which denies all opposition. We've seen a power like that before: The Siberian."

That, finally, stunned Flechette.

"That's right," Lisa smiled. "Oh, Osiris, would you mind restoring the staff for us now?"

The staff flickered and reformed in his hand, then the bottom half dropped to the ground. "The fuck!?" Respawn exclaimed.

"Not only does your power cut through things. It cuts through all possible iterations of that thing. Every reality, every dimension, simultaneously. Also not too different from The Siberian. Look at Alexandria, whose eye was never able to be healed despite her being one of the most famous and respected heroes in the world. If nothing else, she could ask Eidolon to do it. What's more likely: she wanted to keep a mutilated face that could never be shown again in public... or the wounds simply could not be healed by powers?"

Flechette just continued to be stunned. "Fuck," she offered a short laugh. "You're actually starting to sell me on this."

"Here's a question," Lisa continued. "What happens if you really want to kill someone. Like, say, the Slaughterhouse Nine if they were still walking around. What if you just used your power on the ground under their feet."

Flechette stopped for a moment. "My power doesn't work that well at range. But if I could, they'd look like they fell into the ground like it was water, and there'd be nothing left of them."

"Exactly," Lisa replied. "And that's just the beginning. I have a couple more tricks up your sleeve, if you wanna wait a bit."

==============

A/N- Spoiler alert: there's foreshadowing in this chapter.
"For your next trick," Lisa smiled, and I could imagine the combination of annoyance and curiosity in Flechette's mind. *Or was it Taylor imagining it and me picking up on that? This bond is still so new.* "We need to test your power against a defensive ability that actually exceeds Endbringer flesh. Theo's power allows him to create a sort of multidimensional super metal, existing simultaneously both 'here' and 'everywhere' and 'nowhere', not unlike weapons influenced by your power."

"Okay?" she asked.

"I want to see if your powers will combine," Lisa replied. "Can you augment his weaponry?"

Theo formed a long spear, about eight feet. In theory, given that it was entirely metal, it should be pretty heavy, but Theo's power meant they had no weight. To him, at least. His main limitation was conceptual- lacking the multitasking powers of Taylor, or even Lisa and myself. He could only 'pay attention' to a finite amount of material at one time.

Flechette made contact, and then frowned. "Nope," she said immediately. "I need to actually touch something to influence it, and I can't make contact long enough. It's like it vanishes and replaces itself faster than I can react."

"Not so different than what happens when Osiris and Gaea's powers interact," Lisa concludes.

"So you're showing off that my power's not quite so perfect, now?" Flechette didn't hide the scorn in her voice. "Kind of a cult tactic, the whole break down, build up thing."

"No, though I guess that might be a side effect," Lisa replied. "I'm hoping to achieve something specific, and if it works with you and Theo, that makes my life about a hundred times less complicated. One last test. Theo, I need you to deactivate your power except for the spear."

'Yes ma'am," Theo excitedly replied. We'd all gotten sucked up in Tattletale's game now. Even, perhaps especially, Flechette. Most of Theo's armor simply melted off, except his helmet of course, which went from a shimmering mirror silver to a still metallic silver, but without the visual tricks. The spear, of course, remained reflective.

Fletchette cut through it with her bolt like it wasn't even there. And about a foot in either direction of the bolt simply dissolved and vanished.

Lisa sighed. "Damn. So close. I actually was right, but it didn't hold together. Too many permutations in one place, or too small a hole, I can't decide which. But we're not done yet! The next
set of guests are arriving. And with it, the source of my migraines for at least the next month."

She was right. I felt them before I saw them, the cars driving onto the Yggdrasil paths that had been
established for vehicles. They were more like exoskeleton growths than anything a standard road
might be, but they did the job. The vehicle came to a stop not far from us. Faultline stepped out,
along with Gregor, Newter, Labyrinth and Spitfire. The whole crew, it seems. And another vehicle-
this one I recognized as one of Coil's. *She invited the Travelers as well?*

"Glad you could make it on such short notice," Lisa smiled.

Faultline just raised her eyebrow. "Okay, could you not do your impression of a poorly written
detective novel today? I know you have a plan. I know it's going to wow the metaphorical pants off
of everyone here, and I know you're going to talk me into going along with it simply to see if it
works. So let's say all that already happened so we can move on to the part where I accuse you of
not paying me enough and then go home to punish my liver until I forget this ever happened? Is that
acceptable?"

"Aww," Tattletale pouted, complete with puppy dog eyes. "Fiiine. I know how much you hate 'fun',
after all."

"Lady," Flechette said. "I have no idea who you are, but you just made my list of top five favorite
people ever."

*AnnoyedRelievedAmused.* I smiled. *Yeah, me too.*

The Travelers had arrived in time to hear the end of that. Noelle was polite enough to not say
anything about it, but she probably agreed as well. Tattletale was a very hard person to like. *Still
haven't figured out how Taylor manages it.*

"Fine, now that everyone's here... we're going to punch a hole through reality itself!" Minerva
announced.


"You heard me. We're already standing in the perfect spot for it, just in case it turns out the door can't
be closed."

"Okay, Gaea, what are the odds I can talk you into hooking me up with a new liver or three? I'm
going to need them," Faultline muttered.
"We'll need Labyrinth to build a construct. Preferably one that's just a large wall. Two dimensional as possible, maybe about thirty feet tall and the same width would be ideal."

I gaped. *This... this is insane...*

"Do it," Khepri instructed. "We can send the Travelers home like we promised. We can establish colonies on other worlds. If necessary, we can even evacuate Bet entirely. Abandon it to the Endbringers if we have to and maybe make a fresh start."

Flechette spoke. "She's right. This can save millions of lives. We do it."

Labyrinth looked at Faultline. "You can do it, right Elle?" The girl nodded. Faultline looked back toward us. "One rule: no inhabited worlds. Only realities where humans either never evolved, or are already extinct. I will not be responsible for Endbringers finding their way to billions of new victims or help start an interdimensional war."

"Good points all around," Taylor agreed. "No worlds with people on them, after a brief stop in Aleph."


"We'll really be able to go home?" Sundancer asked.

"If you want," Lisa stated. "You're welcome to stay here, we'd be more than happy to keep you. And you don't have to decide right now. You can go home, pack your things, maybe trade off any currency you have here for things to take with you. I highly recommend a vehicle and some new clothes. Maybe some samples of replicable tinker tech to sell off. A few patents, life of luxury."

"Not me, however," Noelle spoke. She sounded sad. "I can't go back. Everything I've seen. Everything I've done. The risk that I might relapse. I won't make the rest of you stay with me. I don't want you to. You've done that too long, already. You deserve to go home. Have normal lives. Have everything that the Simurgh tried to steal from us. It's the best thing you can do for me, now."

*SympathyApproval*. Note to self: hire her to write some of our speeches, she has a talent for it. Meanwhile, I reshaped the matter under the space Labyrinth was reshaping. Reinforcing the tree to handle the sudden increase in weight of her manifestations.

"I'm staying," Trickster said with certainty. "Noelle, you said you wanted us to live our lives? Well, in case you hadn't noticed, you are my life. My home is wherever you are."
"Consider going home to be my final order as your commander," Noelle told the others. Trickster put his arm around her, and she looked at him. "Wherever that home might be."

"I'm going home," Oliver stated. I hadn't dealt with him much. Riley took the standard blood same and questions about his powers. Which, it turned out, would barely rate a one as a changer. Did the PRT ratings go down to zero? He was shy, intimidated by us.

Noelle moved to him and gave him a hug. "Would you mind doing me a favor when you get back? Deliver a message to my parents."

"I can do that," Oliver agreed.

Genesis and Sundancer stood aside in the exchange thus far. "I don't know," Sundancer replied. "I... somewhere along the way, I stopped thinking of Aleph as 'home'. It feels like it was so long ago when we came here. I wouldn't know how to live a normal life, anymore."

"You don't have to decide right now," Taylor reminded them. "Like Minerva said... if this works, we can do it again whenever we like in the future. Just because a door is closed doesn't mean we can't open it again later."

"I'll stay for now," Oliver replied. "You're right, it can't hurt to take care of the loose ends and maybe pack a few things."

We watched the wall finish its development. It would have been great dramatic timing if their conversation ended with the wall's completion. But no, we had to wait several more minutes.

"Okay, everyone away from the target," Minerva instructed. We complied. "Flechette, it's your show now!"

The girl raised her arbalet, and fired at the wall. Then there was no wall. There was no anything. A blank place where there was only 'nothing'. Air started rushing inward toward the hole. It wasn't incredibly windy, no more than a gusty day. No risk of any of us.

AweTerrorWonder. "My bugs are being destroyed as they touch the boundary," Taylor informed us. "There's nothing there, no 'other side'. It's an empty place and everything which contacts it simply ceases to be."

"It's shrinking at a rate of approximately two centimeters a minute, growing in speed exponentially," Aceso spoke. "It'll collapse in less than an hour." She looked at us. "Missy's been teaching me geometry," she stated as if that explained everything.
"At least we know they can be closed!" Lisa declared happily. "Okay, Labyrinth. Can you still alter the empty spot."

"I... I can!" Labyrinth said with surprise. "There are places there. Ones I didn't create myself. Countless, endless worlds."

"Good. Look at the closer ones. You should be able to see that it's been crossed over before, recently."

"There are two like that," the girl informed us.

_WorryRealization._ I figured it out as well. _Someone else also has dimension crossing abilities._

"Try the most recent one," Lisa suggested. The blank spot became a window, looking over a primitive world. A village of wood, clay and brick. Dirt roads. Little by way of metal construction. A cart pulled by a small buffalo. People in clothing that looked to be wool and leather. Some pointed at us. We couldn't hear what they said.

"Not that one, I'm sure," Faultline stated. "Change it, Elle."

"Okay," the girl answered. The scene shifted to a city not unlike Brockton Bay. Or, at least, a Brockton Bay that wasn't torn assunder and patched back together repeatedly. A healthy city. _DesireNostalgia._

I could see ships in the ports from here. I could see why the others would want to go back. I wanted to go there. To see what a world without Endbringers looked like._CertaintyDetermination._

"We'll make our Brockton Bay look like that, some day," Taylor stated. I smiled and clasped her hand, adding my support to her resolve and letting hers feed mine. _This is a feedback I can enjoy._

"Look for an empty world, now," Lisa instructed Labyrinth. "One without people."

On impulse, I interrupted. "One without any life at all."

They looked at me, and I suddenly felt very self conscious. _SupportProtectTrust._ I drew strength from the link. "I want a planet that's truly empty. A place I can use my power to its fullest."

Minerva smiled. "I see... yes, that's perfect! No one can object to us claiming a wasteland as our
The portal shifted, and I saw the world that Labyrinth had found. Red and brown dust covered the landscape. A desert world. I noted that the sun seemed larger than ours. The ocean was still visible from our position, although the shoreline was more distant.

"There's oxygen," Taylor spoke up. "Not a lot... or there's also a poison. Something is making the insects tired. The weakest are already starting to die."

"On it!" Aceso sang, and then hopped through the portal. "Oxygen levels around twelve percent. Unusually high carbon dioxide. Nothing immediately deadly, but can't support human life." She knelt down and picking up some dirt beneath her. That she then licked. "Radioactive residue. Water. No complex hydrocarbons."

"A nuclear war?" Faultline asked, no doubt responding to the 'radiation' part.

"Not unless it was between really enthusiastic dinosaurs," Aceso responded. "This is old damage and too complete to be artificial. I'd say a celestial event, powerful enough to strike the entire planet. A pulsar or the like, occurring millions of years ago."

"Why did that earth get such a thing, and no others?" Faultline asked.

"How am I suppose to know that?" Aceso asked.


==============

A/N- A certain part of this chapter makes me sad.
Also- they have that planet for a long time before ever getting around to naming it. I note that's a pattern in my writing. But it's a pattern I kinda like.
I'd covered the portal in an Yggdrasil construct, of course. In part because we really didn't want people to know we just cut a hole through dimensions until we were ready to let them find out. And in part because there was still an unhealthy amount of radioactivity in that world.

Nothing that could be considered a threat to the Yggdrasil, though not good for people by any stretch of the imagination. Riley estimated that it would be lethal within six years for the vast majority, even before having too little oxygen for human tolerance. So, yeah, when I asked for a dead world, I got a dead world. On the plus side, it actually made that Earth more ideal for Yggdrasil than anywhere on Bet.

Minerva was still negotiating terms with/between Faultline and Flechette when I went inside. For a while there, it was looking like Faultline was going to recruit Flechette and hold the monopoly on the dimension-access insanity that we'd seen today.

It turns out, Flechette was sold, not on money, but on the opportunity to really cut loose in a fight. A promise of a bioaugment armor that would improve on her powers. Not terribly different than the ones we gave Crystal, Parian and most of Faultline's crew. Contingent upon an attempt from the PRT to transfer Flechette, she would be a permanent, though 'reserve', member of Pantheon.

We really need to work out an official model for how we were handling our peripheral members, like Parian and Dinah. They might be part of the organization, but weren't really part of the "team" like we were. We were collecting them, would collect many more, as time went on. An option for rogues and independent heroes alike that didn't involve surrendering autonomy to the government. We were pushing that appeal.

Lisa was supposed to handle that, but she had too much to do already. Maybe I should go easier on her. We did learn a lot from her about the nature of our empathic link, after all. Even if she was a bitch about it and wouldn't even tell us why it really bothered her so much.

I was beginning to suspect she was jealous. Did she have romantic feelings for Taylor? And what would I do if she did? Turn off the empathy when they went out on dates, at the very least.

"Penny for your thoughts," Taylor said from her place on the couch in what amounted to our living room. Zach and Theo were playing some game on the TV. "I'm being absolutely serious here, I will pay you money to explain what I'm reading from you right now."

"I guess I already owe you a house. Or at least rent," I smiled, plopping down next to her. "I was just thinking about the most horrible thing imaginable. I might have to apologize to Lisa."
"Ah," she smiled back. "Well, it's that or your homework. I picked it up for you after classes, by the way."

"You mean the homework I could have gone to school and handled myself if she didn't feel the need to fuck with us," I replied.

"One and the same."

"Suddenly, I'm not in the mood to apologize."

"C'mon, I'll help you study," Taylor said, sitting up.

"Study, huh? Is that what you old folks call it?" Respawn joked.

"Yes, I suppose actually passing a class would be a new-" ApprehensionWorryDetermination. I stopped speaking and looked at Taylor, who had stood up by now. "Know what? Doesn't even matter. After Tattletale's stunt last night, there's nothing you can say that's going to get to me."

"Once again, Lisa spoils my fun," Respawn moaned. Then the sound of an explosion came from the television. "Dude! That is so not fair!"

"Are you going to study in your costume?" I asked as we left for the area where I'd built my bedroom. It was more or less right next to the kitchen. I probably should sit down and design an actual 'floor plan' or make more rooms. We had access to a couple square miles worth of overall space under here, we might as well use it.

"It's comfortable," she answered. "So much nicer on the skin than the old Skitter costume. Why, don't you like it?"

"No, it's not that, it's just..." How in the hell could I tell her that she was essentially wearing a silk body stocking? Eh, may as well just dive right into it. "Pretty much the exact opposite, actually."

HappyNervousCertain. "Oh, don't worry about that," she insisted. "I told you, I don't mind."

"It's... kinda distracting, though," I smiled.

"Really?" she smiled back. "Guess I'll have to change, then."
"Oh, could you ask Blasto to bring up those memory restoration devices Riley worked out?" Taylor asked me. "I'd tell him myself, but your tree keeps eating my bugs down there."

"It's a sterilization function," I replied. "The lab needs to stay clean for their sensitive experiments. You'll just have to cope with having exactly one blind spot in an entire city."

"And you'll just have to deal with delivering messages for me while I'm changing," she countered.

The labs were actually the furthest trip from the rest of the building. For everyone other than me. I simply reshaped the floor and sank down into one of the pillars in the lab. I stuck my head out of the wall. "Hey, Rey."

"Gah!" he jumped. "Why the hell can't you use the stairs!"

"That's for mortals," I replied. "I'm supposed to have you take the memory restorer up to Faultline."

"Why me?" he asked.

"Because you're the only Tinker we can admit to having."

"Yeah, I know," he agreed. "Mind giving me the elevator up?"

"Sure," I agreed, leaving the hollow structure in the wall when I went back up. I could sense when he stepped in, and moved him to the surface. The memory repair equipment was a new one. It could basically be called an intelligence booster as well, since what it did was encourage the brain to rapidly build new neural pathways.

I had hoped we might use it to cure the others of this whole "passenger block", but Lisa said it wouldn't. Apparently they could sabotage Riley and the other tinkers so they couldn't even build something that might undo the block.

In fact, she insisted we didn't so much as touch it. That it might undo whatever 'damage' we did to the controls that blocked our memories.

Minor mission accomplished, I went back to my room, where Taylor was waiting. I paused. Turns out, she looked really good in the form fitting blue t-shirt she had selected. I didn't even know she owned such a thing. "Are you wearing a shirt that's not black?"
"What?" she responded. "I'm allowed to wear other colors!" AnnoyedAmusedPleased.

"I'm not so sure you are," I responded. "Dear diary. Today I watched two teenage girls punch a hole through the side of reality. Today I considered actually apologizing to Tattletale. Today I witnessed Taylor Hebert wearing bright colors. We're lucky we have a new universe now, because this one's clearly broken."

"Would you kindly make some pillows so I can chuck them at your head?" Taylor asked with exaggerated, sarcastic sweetness.

I leaned against the wall. "Why would I do that?"

"Because I need to throw something at your face right now, and I don't want to break my school books."

For the next hour, we spent our time studying. Computer science was never really my strong subject, and that didn't appear to have changed in the last couple months.

It didn't help that I kept sneaking peeks at Taylor, and I was now entirely convinced she was actively encouraging me to do so. Even I wasn't quite that oblivious. Or, more likely, I was that oblivious, but having a direct window into her psyche removed any ambiguity. I resolved to ask her about it this weekend.

=============

A/N- Man. I love knowing what comes next. Especially for THIS part of the story.
I opted to play dress up for school that morning. My experiment with the shirt had proven a thrilling success, Amelia couldn't take her eyes off me, and I luxuriated in it. Today I was hoping for more of the same. I picked out an outfit that Lisa had sworn up and down would be amazing on me, and forced me to buy.

I didn't believe her then, and I really didn't now. The jeans clung too tightly to my legs, and the shirt I would have been happier with if it were three sizes larger. But she was right about the blue shirt that I used yesterday, so I trusted her on this as well.

I was conspicuously aware of the eyes upon me as I opened my locker in the morning. I found myself torn between being slightly annoyed at the disrespect of them checking me out, slightly annoyed that more people weren’t, and slightly annoyed that I even cared. All factions decided upon a truce in order to be extremely annoyed that Emma was getting more attention than I was. Not that I expected she wouldn't, but it would have been really, really nice.

I felt it when Amelia saw me. The rush of attraction and nervousness, her trying not to look at me and failing. It was wonderful. I wore this outfit for exactly one person, and she only had eyes for me. Literally, she was watching so intently that she walked face first into one of the other students, knocking both their sets of books from their hands. I immediately moved over to help her and the boy. I was pretty sure he was one of the new kids that had just started today. I certainly didn't recognize him.

"I'm so sorry!" Amelia said. "I should have been paying better attention."

"Nah, it's cool," the boy insisted. "I wasn't looking at where I was going. Trying to find the art class," he held up one of those shitty paper maps of the school.

"I'll show you," I volunteered. "Pretty much next door to my first class anyway. See you in third period, Amelia."

"Right," she replied. GratitudeHumiliation. Didn't stop her from staring at me as I walked away.

Emma was watching as I left. Near as I could tell, she was still doing everything possible to avoid me. Something that mattered less to me than how I was quite certain she was dating Clockblocker, now. Not a real shocker, as far as surprise revelations go, but it would make it more difficult if we ever tried to recruit him. And we really did want to recruit him. However, he wasn't a priority the way Vista and, as we recently learned, Flechette were.

I pointed the boy off to the art class, and was still smiling when I made it to my spot in the computer.
lab. Theo was already there, sitting next to Chris. The pair of them seemed to get along really well, actually. It also saved me the effort of needing to focus on small talk. Something that it would surprise no one to learn I really sucked at. Instead, I focused on everything. Everyone.

Amelia was in Algebra, I'd pass her on the way there for my next class. I was still smiling lightly. Amelia was still on edge due to the incident in the hallway. For amusement sake, I landed a ladybug on top of the page she was studying. She stopped for a second, as I had it look right at her. Bug vision is crap, so it couldn't even actually see her, and I sure as hell couldn't, but it was a message sent.

*ComfortEmbarrassment*. I sent back some signals of comfort. We were getting very good at using this bond. *Maybe with time we can actually work out a language with it.*

I sent the ladybug on its way.

....

I shared my algebra class with Dennis, although we really didn't interact at all. I still kept my eye on the others. Missy and Clarice were busy in their chemistry class. Near as I could tell, the pair had managed to line up their entire class schedule to be identical, with an exception for gym.

We put in the minor effort to get Clarice an exception from that class. We were at least pretending we didn't want her identity blown. I was starting to worry that when it was, and it was 'when', not 'if', Vista's identity would follow almost immediately. I'd have to mention that to Theo or Chris during lunch.

....

Social Sciences was the one I got to spend with Amy. Weld was there, as well. I'd have to make an effort to recruit him as well, his power put him on the top notch for durability, and he was really popular in the general public. The way they were shunting Wards away from the city meant if we didn't get him soon, we probably never would. I looked at Amelia and felt her disappointment as she realized what I had planned. I was disappointed as well, when I sat down next to him. I sent assurances through the link. *SadAgreement*.

He looked over at me. "Me, too, huh?"

I almost fell back on Skitter at that. *Or is this the usual Taylor' routine of hiding away?* Instead, I fell back on my link with Amelia. Her confidence and trust in me. *I don't need to hide, and I don't need to be feared in order to be strong.*
"Pretty much," I admitted. "We seem to have a real hero complex, trying to help everyone we can."

"Help, huh?" he didn't see to buy it. "And you think I need help?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Okay, Taylor, dial it back. Vague answers only work when you want to be annoying. "But yes, we have a few things we're working on that might help you. Or you might be able to help us with. I'm sorry I have to be so vague. The best I can tell you right now is that we're finding ways to undo what's happened to the Case 53s."

He froze, clearly sorting through potential responses. "I'll make contact."

He didn't say anything about how or when, and I didn't press him for it. Class began, and I put my efforts into actually paying attention, this time. Along with studying all my other school books. Pain in the ass finding copies of all of them in braille. For that matter, it was a pain in the ass to use braille, which I'd only barely started to learn, but it didn't take me any more mental effort than sitting and listening in class already took.

At the moment I was also having six distinct conversations, and running the test routine of the next wave of zerglings. They were a lot better than before, at least. Still not something I could comfortably control in large batches, but significantly easier to handle a dozen of them than even one humanoid puppet. A fact I told Rey and Riley about with my changeling, which was currently spending most of its time slumped in one of the chairs in the lab just so I could talk to them. Stupid Yggdrasil always eating my bugs.

....

After class, we headed for lunch. Weld ignored me, and I couldn't just wait and walk alongside Amelia without it being suspicious, much as I'd have liked to. I did manage to stay just a little bit in front of her. I could feel her eyes on me the whole way. Wistful Desire.

It brought a smile, and a bit of a blush, to my face. And yet, I still couldn't spend time with her. She had her group amongst the popular girls, and I had mine amongst the geeks and loners. Even though she was more of the loner type, herself. Victoria's legacy and all.

I spent my time hanging out with Theo and Chris. They were mainly complaining about math. A class that neither of them seem to enjoy. I finally interjected about halfway through the period. "I think we should have a conversation with Missy and Clarice."

"What's wrong," Theo asked.

"Well... at this rate, their identities are going to be exposed," I answered. "I don't think it'll happen
soon, but it's a real risk. Clarice has already shown off her thinker abilities in basically every class. She attracts attention for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is how she's openly friendly with Amelia. She's going to be found out. If she hasn't, already, and that might put eyes on her other friends.

"Does she even have friends at school except Missy and Amelia?" Theo asked.

"No, she really doesn't," I replied. "She seems to be trusting Missy to be in charge during school, and Amelia with everything else. It's fine, not like she's lacking in a support base."

"But it makes anyone around her look extra conspicuous," Chris concluded. "Are you going to tell her the bad news? Because she wouldn't listen to me if I tried."

I figured as much. It was smart of him, really. If they had to be the deliverers of the news that took Missy away from her new friend, it could hurt their team on a number of levels. Even if they didn't see it as us finding yet another angle to try to break Vista away for ourselves. Of course, they weren't wrong, it was what we were doing.

"I'll do it," Theo volunteered. "She'll probably listen to me better, anyway. I have the same last class as Amelia, so I'll mention it to her first. That way Clarice doesn't argue with me."

"Good idea," I agreed.

Chris didn't say anything to agree or disagree, and eventually the conversation changed to movies.

... 

With a minor tip to Riley via my changeling, Theo managed to catch up with Clarice and Missy at the end of classes. I trusted him to handle the situation about as well as anyone. I, on the other hand, had snuck about a block away from school, to be picked up by one of our drivers outside of visual of the school. Zach and Amy were already in the vehicle.

Apology. Resignation. I didn't need to question that emotion. It was disappointing for me as well.

"Sorry I didn't get to work with you in class," I said as I sat next to Amelia.

"It's okay," she said. "Probably smart if we're a little less obvious. Don't want your identity being revealed like that."
"Obvious is a word for what happened in the hallway," Zach interrupted with a smile.

_Don't worry about it," I replied. "It wasn't that big a deal."

"Thanks," she replied. "I'd feel terrible if..." she trailed off.

"If you want, I can bribe kids to just step out in front of you at random," Zach offered. "I'm already known for playing pranks on people. Speaking of which, you have class with Clockblocker first thing tomorrow morning, right?"

"Yeah," Amelia answered. "Why?"

Zach lifted up a math book that wasn't there before. "Tell him that next time, it'll be his pants."

_A/N- In retrospect, I kinda wish I stayed on the "school" arc longer. There was lots of goodies to be used here that I just never did._
Music class is boring. I thought it was suppose to be fun with singing and instruments and stuff, but instead we were learning about dead musicians. I didn't even get to play school with Missy because she had a gym class. So I was stuck with dumb boys who snickered every time the teacher said 'pianist'. And dumb girls who pretended to find that funny because their dumb hormones wanted them to make dumb babies with the dumb boys.

I assigned one of my peripheral brain enhancements to half pay attention to the class, while I was analyzing the sample we indirectly took from Cauldron.

"It's human cells, as if they were made from the ground up by Amelia with no frame of reference," I muttered as I examined the material. We had already cloned the tissue. I didn't wait for a response from Rey. Tinker fugue was in full effect for him. "No genetic code for reproduction, no separate genetics for the mitochondria, no useless genetic material from countless mutations both obsolete and never functional in the first place. No chromosomes because there's not enough actual DNA to need them. It's not much different from the Yggdrasil or the base zerglings before the selective rebreeding program. Artificial. Too perfectly efficient to exist in nature."

I continued my analysis on a more fundamental level. "In many ways, it resembles the N-1 and N-3 tissue samples we extracted from Noelle. It appears identical to the c-cells we acquired from the Travelers and Word. That, more than anything, is confusing. There is no difference between the active ingredient in this vial, and the residue from what gave them their powers, and it works simply by drinking? There is an agency behind this that I do not comprehend. If my Big Sister is correct about the Taboo theory, then I cannot comprehend it because the power that grants my power will not allow it."

"Save recording, CV twelve."

"Error, CV twelve already exists. Recorded twenty seven minutes ago," my computer responded.

Darn it! Must have happened again. "Save new recording as CV thirteen. Identify CV twelve as Taboo nine." I would have Minerva screen the other and tell me if I missed anything important.

Since she and my Big Sister are the only ones who can comprehend what our group had taken to shorthanding as 'Taboo', after some game Rey remembered from his childhood. The idea that I was constantly losing the most important piece of data imaginable was incredibly frustrating to me as a scientist.

Meanwhile, class had come to an end. I managed to remember not to flip over my desk this time. I still don't get why, but the teachers and Missy and my Sister all told me not to do that. Maybe it's because my skirt fell during the handstand and everyone saw my underwear last time? Stupid boys,
I rushed to the entrance, to meet up with Missy and Theo. I didn't know exactly why he wanted to meet up, but I bet it was so he could spend more time with Missy. *Good, they're so perfect together.*

Missy was there first, of course. The underclassmen got out a bit earlier, after all. I saw her and waved. She rolled her eyes and smiled as she walked. I noted that she was subtly using her power to move faster, indicating how eager she really was. She always acted so proper. She reminded me a lot of Shatterbird, actually.

Jack always said that her serious act just meant she didn't want to admit how lonely she was. My Sister didn't like me talking about Jack, but he was smart and we were trying to recruit Vista almost the same way as he recruited her, after all.

"How was gym?" I asked, even as I analyzed everything her biosignature was giving off. Minor and full body exercise, no real muscle damage.

"Dodgeball would be more fun if I could cheat," she complained.

"I wish I could play," I responded. "My Sister wouldn't let me take gym."

She laughed. "That's because we could put the entire school up against you and you'd win. Unless I was allowed to cheat."

"That's true," I agreed. "Oh, we have to wait for Theo. He has to talk to us about something."

Missy hid her reaction well, but it was a combination of enthusiasm and distrust. "Why?"

"I dunno," I answered. "Probably kinda important, or they wouldn't bother like this. But not too important, or they'd tell me right away."

"Huh," she said. I could almost hear her wondering if this was some kind of ploy.

Theo was finally out of the school and approached us. "Hi Theo!" I yelled and waved. He smiled and waved back. He had a really good smile, and I wanted to be sure Missy saw it.

"Hey, Clarice," he said once he got close. "Hello, Missy."
"Maybe we should walk and talk," he said, looking at the others who had started to pour out of the school.

"Okay!" I agreed. "There's gotta be an icecream place somewhere nearby, right?" I smiled broadly.

"Umm, sure," Theo agreed.

Missy managed to work up a smile and nod. I could see the bit of blush and shyness she had toward the boy. Subtle, she was good at hiding her autonomic responses, but she couldn't make them lie. I was an expert on that subject, amongst my many others. I could tell she liked him and really didn't want to show it or admit it.

"Okay!" I said, as we started on our walk. The icecream place was new, and already pretty popular, so we had to cover the 'work' on the walk. "So, what's the news?"

"Umm..." he looked down. "I... I wanted to warn you to be careful," he said.

"With what?" I asked.

"Well," he said. "We're pretty sure Clarice's identity as Aceso's been compromised. It hasn't come out yet, but it probably will in a week or so."

"Oh," I said. "I don't mind that at all! In fact, wasn't that supposed to be the plan?"

"I know," he said. "We're worried about Missy. When your identity goes public, people are going to look at your friends. Everyone already knows Amelia is Gaea. So that leaves only Missy left over."

"What about Taylor?" Missy asked. Drat. "She's at risk, being around Amelia."

Theo shrugged. "I have my own ideas about that," he admitted. "But I can't share them. It's not that I don't trust you, it's that it's not right to talk about people behind their backs. Especially my friends and teammates. Any more than you'd talk about yours."

She nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It was stupid of me to ask."

"Not stupid," he said. "Just being alert and cautious. It's a sign of a good hero."

And Theo wins all the relationship points, I thought happily. He wouldn't make pianist jokes.
"I... I owe you an apology, then," she said, looking down. *Ooh, heartfelt confession time! Like the best romantic movies! Only better because it was real life!* There was a bit of a blush. A nervousness and expectation of anger. I didn't even need the dozen odd exotic senses built into Clarice to see this. I did, however, turn off the recording function. "After our... after the party last week, I sorta told them about everything that happened."

"I figured that would happen," Theo replied without losing a beat. "It's not like we did anything to be ashamed of. Err... maybe I should have found a better way to phrase that. Sorry."

"It's fine," Missy replied. "Just don't repeat it around Clockblocker and we'll be good."

"Or Zach," Theo added.

"He stole Clockblocker's math book, by the way," I said.

"Why would he do that?" Theo asked.

"Umm..." Missy started. "I think he might be getting revenge for a bathroom door being frozen with him trapped inside. Clock's gonna get in a lot of trouble for that one if Piggot finds out."

"Oh, wow..." Theo laughed. "She won't hear anything from us. Be sure and let her know that Zach is almost certainly equally at fault for anything that's going on. If she needs punishment suggestions, I recommend we lock them both in the same cell overnight."

Missy chuckled. "Yeah," she agreed. "With orders that they kiss and make up. Literally."

We were still laughing when we got to the icecream place.

"Okay, Theo, I want a banana split!" I was looking forward to see if the upgraded taste system was fully functional. I was annoyed that the combat model was still in detox from the radioactive materials, since it had all my best features installed.

"Why am I paying for your icecream?" he asked, still smiling. "Doesn't Amelia give you an allowance?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "But you're the boy. It's in the rules. Especially when you're out with two pretty girls. Also, you're a billionaire."
Theo looked around, then whispered. "Clarice, you're not suppose to blurt stuff like that out in public."

"Oh," I said. "Why not? Is it because of your dad?"

"It's just not polite," he said. "When you talk about money, it upsets some people. It's like bragging."

I didn't really get the problem, but whatever. "Okay, I'll not bring it up anymore."

He looked over at Missy. "Sorry. I suppose Chris told you about my family."

"No, not really," Missy replied.

"Well, I'm sure your bosses already know," he said. "My father was the CEO of Medhall. After his death, well, most of the assets were unfrozen and are in trusts for my sister and I."

"You're kidding," she whispered, her eyes growing wide. "You're Kaiser's son?"

"Not something I'm exactly pleased about," he said. "I take pride saying that if you asked most of his men, they'd voice doubts about my parentage."

"Yeah," she offered a smile. "It's fine, I get it. My home life isn't exactly amazing, either."

"You can't help where you come from," Theo agreed. "Only where you go."

I smiled and nodded. That's what my Big Sister keeps telling me. Nothing can change what I've done, only what I do from now on. And now I'd set the perfect stage for Missy to have the perfect boyfriend to satisfy all her reproductive evolutionary needs. Powerful, dependable, physically attractive, quite intelligent for someone without powers to improve upon it, able to provide for offspring, and intimidating to potential threats. That was simple, why do adults make it sound so complicated?

============= 
A/N- All the foreshadowing. All of it. Ever. Of all time.
Too sycophantic, rephrase. 'Appreciation', 'dedication to'.

I made the edits to the letter. It was hard to say 'we're already doing more than everything you're asking' without sounding like arrogant jackasses. I needed them to be able to say they achieved something without making it look like we gave anything up.

A flagged file popped up on the screen. Ah, another of Riley's Taboos. I will need to review that immediately. If she was obeying protocol on the subject, she'd switch to a different research project while waiting for me to review the data. No sense in accidentally repeating the exact same experiment more than necessary. Damn, both recordings were twenty minutes long. I'd need to talk to her about remembering to stick to ten minute intervals. Rey as well, although he did it less because his research rarely crossed into the subject of the Passengers themselves.

I was still writing up the report on the Taboo file, turns out Riley made a breakthrough on cloning the c-cells. No way of knowing if that would allow us to replicate Cauldron's power-formula. But if we could... the possibilities were almost incalculable. The Taboo was her speculation that the opposite of Noelle was occurring. That a Passenger had attempted to construct its own human body. Then, of course, she forgot the train of thought. I'd mention it to Amelia.

Human hosts, no evolutionary purpose as Passengers are not natural parasites. Side function. Using humans as proxies for their experimentation. Human form avatar for Passenger. Nonhuman avatar for Passengers? Endbringers. No. Endbringers are something different. Experiment to better bond with host species? Unnecessary. Precognitive abilities render practice wasteful. Need avatar to actively interact with humans. Perhaps to...

I lost the train of thought. Damn. Even though my mind had broken around the main barricade, my power was still held back by certain roadblocks. At least now I knew they existed, I didn't forget, I just didn't progress. I included the point up until I went blank for Amelia to look at. She was truly unfettered, not the twilight state I was in.

I still had not made progress on actually tracking Cauldron down, myself. Even Dinah wasn't any help. Meaning that either Cauldron had an incredibly powerful Trump on their side, or a precog just shy of the Simurgh in bullshit. I had even made allusions to payment and alliances to entice them. Any more than this would be overly aggressive and might prompt a retaliation. They had dozens of high level political and military leaders in their pockets, plus similar influence throughout Europe. We would lose any confrontation, direct or otherwise.

I set the Cauldron Project aside as a dead end for now. If they wanted to speak with us, they'd have to initiate it.
I looked at the clock. It wouldn't be long before the kids got home from school. The biocameras, which Rey and Riley somehow made in a way that they could vat-clone, confirmed that was indeed the case. *Hmm, no Theo or Clarice.*


*Well, shit.* I added that to the note for Amelia. Riley sure as hell wouldn't listen to me. Seems like no one did, these days.

"Hey, Lisa!" Taylor exclaimed when she got inside. "Enough work, I need your help shopping."

*Nervous, feigning confidence. Feigning confidence well enough to trick herself? No, insecure and and actively seeking... affirmation... using the link with Amelia. Using Amelia's attraction. Dependent upon Amelia's approval for developing sense of attractiveness to others.*

I focused my attentions on Amelia herself, now.

*Worried about Taylor's new behavior. Enjoying new behavior, but confused over what it means. Well, that's both good and bad, their minds are still independent of one another. Needs to feel safe and protected, dependent upon Taylor to defend her. Not willing to confront Taylor, for fear of losing that protection.*

Nothing I didn't already know. Ever since Amelia asked Taylor to be her 'General', that was plain for anyone to see. They had both put a lot of the basis of their relationship on clearly defined and highly important roles. It was a negotiation of sorts. Combining and sharing of power. They really would have made a great couple, if nature had allowed it.

"Okay," I agreed, forcing a smile. "I'll get my things."

"Me, too," Amelia agreed. Then froze. "Oh."

*Responding to link. Taylor doesn't want her to come with. Planning something.*

Taylor hugged her from behind, "Sorry. I promise I won't be gone too long." She whispered something that I couldn't hear. "Besides, you still have studying to do."

"And a Riley to have a chat with," I informed Amelia.
"Okay," she reluctantly agreed. "Bring back something nice for Riley, too."

"It's a promise," Taylor said, still draped around Amelia. Both their eyes fluttered.

Responding to link and shared sensations. Intentionally generating mild feedback loops. Worse than I thought. Don't mind showing affection in front of others. Shared confidence emotion loop.

"Well, I'm basically ready right now," I said, interrupting them. "Just gotta grab my purse."

"Me, too," Crystal exclaimed.

I went back in my office, trying to figure out how to approach this. They, specifically Taylor, now willing to show affection in full public. In front of both Zach and Crystal.

Act of defiance. Daring us to say something. Equates relationship with Amelia as act of rebellion against teasing. Equates teasing with previous experiences as a victim of bullying. Only made that psychological connection recently. Sees relationship with Amelia as source of happiness. Sees teasing as bullying as attempt to take away that happiness. Sees my disapproval as possible betrayal. Sees me as possible bully. Sees my attack on Emma as an act of unnecessary cruelty.

I froze. Shit. Coulda used that information a week ago. Association did not exist at that point.

....

Fortunately, we were easy walking distance from downtown. Technically, we were in downtown, only a few miles from basically everywhere important. Although the nature of repairs, the establishment of the ferry, and changing economies was redefining what constituted the shape of our town.

We did an awful lot of window shopping, making small talk as Taylor bought pretty much everything I promised look good on her.

She stopped at one place, looking at a dark blue evening dress on one of the mannequins. "Do you think Amelia would like that?" she asked. It was the first time she openly admitted she was doing this for Amelia.

"I think she'd probably rather die than be caught dead in something like that," Crystal replied.
Taylor sighed. "You know what I mean. Would she like it if I wore it for her?"

"Then she'd die for completely different reasons," Crystal responded. "The poor girl's not going to know what hit her."

"Good," she said cheerfully as we entered the shop.

Taylor went straight for her dress of choice, while Crystal browsed. She found a somewhat more conservative green number. "Amy's going to love this one," Crystal insisted.

"Can't Amelia just make her own dress with her power?" Taylor asked.

"Just means we don't need to worry about the sizes and can buy this one for her to copy," Crystal replied. "It wouldn't be right to steal the design. As good shoppers, if we're going to build our own copies, we still have to own an original. Besides, you guys could buy this whole store, don't act like you can't afford one dress."

"Technically, I already have," I admitted.

"Really?" Crystal laughed. "Now you have no choice."

We left the store with both dresses. And a cute little pink and white sun dress for Riley.

....

We arrived at an outdoor fast food joint and had ourselves a distinctly unhealthy combination of foods. Crystal didn't strike me as the chili cheese fries type, but that was her pick. The rest of us had burgers and fries.

"So, why the sudden interest in my cousin?" Crystal asked. "You were constantly on about how you're not into girls before."

"I... I'm not... I just..." Taylor muttered, looking away.

"It's their whole psychic bond," I stated, glad for the excuse. "She really likes the thoughts she's getting from Amelia."
"I'm not giving this up," Taylor insisted. My power confirmed her words. "Nothing you say will make me. Why do you keep trying?"

Crystal nodded. "Yeah, I get it. But that isn't..."

Taylor shook her head. "She cares about me, and I care about her, and I'm allowed to like knowing that there's finally someone out there that cares about me."

Crystal frowned. "How can you say that? You're one of the most famous heroes on the east coast right now. You..."

"That's Khepri," Taylor interrupted. "Or Skitter or a target or a charity case or a battlefield asset. You've been a cape long enough that I know you know the difference."

*Charity case. Is aware of, and resents, my attempt to save her from her issues. Views it as pity. Sees my awareness of her emotional vulnerabilities as a power I have over her. Resents that imbalance in power. Sees it as a personal weakness. Hates the idea of being weak. Sees relationship to Amelia as truly equal. Sees Amelia's willingness to make herself vulnerable as a sign of trust and love. Exaggerates significance due to her own issues with being vulnerable.*

"Fuck, you people teased so much and tried so hard to get us together..." she sighed.

"You're right," I said. "I wanted you two in a relationship. Maybe not romantic, per se, but yes. You were both hurting over so many things. Both ready to..." I paused. How to approach this?

Crystal watched. Taylor waited.

*Be direct. Will view honesty as a sign of respect. Needs to feel respected, sees the lack thereof as one of the worst possible insults.*

"Remember when this started? The pair of you were ready to storm the Protectorate and flay Piggot alive, along with everything that got in the way. That was the sum total of your plan. Why Amelia let Riley live."

Crystal gasped. I wondered how she felt, learning her 'Amy' was ready to go that far. I didn't bother sending my power that way. Crystal was in too deep to act on any second thoughts, and so the fallout would be a minor thing at worst.
"I wanted you to build a relationship with her, yes. Because you needed it. You needed someone else to care about, because neither of you care about yourselves. I wasn't joking when I said I was there to keep you from getting yourselves killed by Eidolon. What I didn't say is that it's because I knew you were planning a suicide mission."

Crystal chuckled. It wasn't a happy sound. "Jesus Christ," she muttered. "First I figure out that you're just like Amy," she gestured at Taylor.

"And you," she gestured at me. "Are basically me."

"I think I'm missing a context, here," Taylor said.

"She loves you," Crystal said. "Not like that! She's watching you do something she thinks is going to destroy you... and she's staying. Knowing the risks. Knowing where this can end. Knowing that she might drive you to hate her while trying to save you. That's not a friend, Taylor. That's family."

Taylor looked at me. "Why?"

_Fuck. Well, now or never._ "Which part?" I asked. "Why would I want to save you? Crystal's right, you are family, the only family I have. Why do I think you're family? You saved me more times than I care to count, from fates that range from death to horrible death to worse than death. I trust you, I respect you, I admire you. And, yes, I even love you. Would it kill you to let me be the one to save you for once?"

"Save me from what?" Taylor asked.

"Taboo," I replied.

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "It's the bond. You know something."

"I... suspect... a lot of things," I reluctantly admitted. "You have a connection you can't begin to understand. It's going to change you. It's already changed you."

"So what?" Taylor countered. "You know better than anyone how little I liked myself. Like you said, we were prepared to destroy ourselves and take a lot of people with us. Compared to that... let's be melodramatic as fuck for a minute. Consider this me saying goodbye to who I was. A symbolic suicide in lieu of a real one."

"What a weighted choice of words," I sighed. "Taken to its final conclusion... I can't stand to lose you." _Time for the final step._ "Not like I lost Rex."
A/N- Oh, yes, this chapter. I is warm and fuzzy inside from it.

Also: it's horrifying.
I listened to Lisa's story in silence, and once again was grateful that I had parents who loved me. *Fuck, what kind of people looked at their own children as tools to be exploited?* I would have repressed the emotions that brought up, but the link made that dangerous. *Don't fight, accept and push through.*

Her brother's suicide... *well, that explained me, at least.* I tried not to be insulted by the comparison. The part where Lisa saved me as a stand-in for a loved one she could not. I thought back to Amelia. *Was I a replacement for what she she lost?* No... I was nothing like Glory Girl at all. I didn't have her looks, I didn't have her powers, and I sure as hell didn't have her personality.

Amelia and Victoria were sisters. I wasn't Amelia's sister. If anyone was the stand-in-sibling, then it was Riley. I was Amelia's partner. She was mine. Neither of us had an equivalent relationship to compare it to.

I sent a pulse of emotion, just to let her know I was thinking of her. She was in the lab area, which limited my senses solely to her bracelet. Which had no senses beyond its attunement to her, and function as a portable relay. *Probably spending time with Riley. ContentCalmFocus. She must be actively using her power on something, judging by all of that.*

Lisa sighed when she was done. "After that? Well, spent some time on the streets using my power to be a petty thief. Then Coil found me. Gang-pressed supervillain and all that jazz. Which you saved me from, just like you saved Dinah."

"Amelia had more to do with that than I did," I replied.

"Nah," Lisa denied. "Sure, her powers did the heavy lifting. But she wouldn't have known, much less done anything, without you. And if she hadn't been there to help, we would have figured out some other way to stop him. Might not have been as easy, but it would have happened."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"Uh..." Crystal started. "I just wanted to apologize. I didn't realize..."

"I know," Lisa offered a small smile. "The biosuit. Responds to your emotional system, what your body's telling it, not your mind or some kind of real control system. You were pissed, it thought 'combat', and suddenly a light shove turns into trip across the room. Not the first time running my mouth has landed me in trouble. Won't be the last, either."
"You really should work on that," I told her. "Speaking as a friend."

"There's a lot of things we should really do," Lisa smiled. "At least my consequences can be easily fixed by our resident miracle worker."

I grabbed her and pulled her into a hug. She went rigid. I didn't let go. "There, now you're trapped and I'm not letting go," I squeezed. "How do you fix this one?" I asked.

"I have to pee," she replied. I let go.

....

We had a couple hours of daylight when we got back, if only thanks to it being mid summer. I put on one of the new outfits I'd picked out and headed toward Amelia's room. The door opened before I could knock.

She looked toward me as I walked in. "Hey Tay-" she paused. ShockDesire. "Taylor, is that a skirt?"

"Is this going to be a repeat of yesterday?" I asked, smiling. "Or can we skip to the part where you tell me I look amazing and then I'll help you pass your computer homework, since that's your first class in the morning." AmusedHappyDesire. I didn't need our link to see how much she liked it. It was quite conservative, as far as skirts went, covering as far down as the knees. And I'd never be caught wearing it outside. But none of that mattered here.

"It should be," she smiled. "But I really do need help with that homework. You look amazing."

Neither of us stopped smiling until I retired to my bedroom.

....

School the next day started normally, with Amelia showing proper appreciation for my new outfit, this time without colliding with any random students. It was Friday, which meant no one was paying any kind of attention to the teachers. Except Clarice of course, who sat in rapt attention absorbing every bit of information she could.

I managed to get to third period without anything eventful happening, and was busy spying upon Amelia and Clarice. The latter because I had to, the former because I wanted to. Why Amelia chose to take AP biology... well, easy credit, I guess. We had wisely forbade Riley from taking any bio classes. Frankly, her chem class was pushing it.
Speaking of which, the girl was rapidly earning herself a reputation as, well... insane, basically. I envied her, actually. It seems the key to being both weird and popular is to embrace it so thoroughly no one can make up anything that beats reality. Everyone wanted to be around her just to see what she did or said, and speculate on how much of it was serious, and how much was her just messing with people.

She was at the most crowded table in the lunchroom, right next to Missy, who had apparently decided that she didn't care about her close association with the girl, and the suspicion that might result in. I didn't care, either. We gave her a fair warning, the rest was her choice. Honestly, Vista's identity being compromised would probably work in our favor, and couldn't really work against us in any way.

I frowned as there was shouting in the lunch room. Another fight. We'd had an average of two or three a day thus far. Security handled most, and I'd interrupted more than one with a swarm-clone. Shit, this is one of the bad ones. A weapon. One boy had pinned the other against a table, pressing the tip of a knife against his throat.

I had a handful of the tranq mosquitoes available, but if I used one of those... well, the fact that they exist at all would be revealed to the world, and that would be a pain in the ass. More importantly, however, he'd fall on top of the other boy knife first.

I couldn't hear anything. Or, more specifically, I heard too much. All the noise did not help the bugs, who couldn't distinguish one set of terrified shouts from another.

Clarice walked up to the kid. Strange... he didn't seem to react... Oh. She used the stealth function. Wait? She used the stealth function? That was built into the skin. She'd have to be...

I gathered together my bugs.

The boy screamed in shock, not pain, when Clarice grabbed the hand with the knife, pulling it back. The strength gap between an obsolete changeling and Valefor was enough to be insurmountable. Some fourteen or fifteen year old boy didn't have much hope at all against a new model. No one quite knew what to make of the kid suddenly raising his arm up and dropping the weapon, only for it to be caught mid air, but the other boy had the presence of mind to scramble away.

Clarice walked him over to one of the security officers and set the knife on the table. People were following her with their heads, now. Ah, she still has socks on. She went back over to her table and got dressed in full view of everyone before turning off the invisibility.

The other students started clapping, cheering and hooting at her. She waited a moment, then curtsied and sat down to finish her meal like nothing happened. So much for keeping her identity under wraps.
"Y'know, you're suppose to at least pretend you care about keeping your identity secret," Amelia said as we went home. AnnoyedConcern.

I was riding with Theo in a different vehicle, but I could listen in to pretty much anyone in the city right now. Speaking of, I made a phone call to the Commissioner. "Hello, Khepri," the man said. He sounded cheerful. He should, when talking to me. After all, we'd basically eliminated most forms of organized crime in the last few weeks, while he got to enjoy much of the credit. "Got another one?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "Condemned warehouse. Current inhabitants are out. I'd say it's mostly cocaine based on how the bugs are reacting."

Due to Pantheon's association with police, I should need a warrant simply to look for drugs. Warrants I couldn't get. Which meant no real arrests could be made since any half competent lawyer would get it thrown out in minutes. But that was fine. It's amazing how quickly the suppliers decide to abandon ship when the police get to every stash in under six hours. Just because they couldn't arrest anyone, didn't mean they couldn't walk away with the product.

"Thank you for your service, miss," he said after I'd given him all the basics.

"Just happy to keep that stuff off the street," I replied before hanging up. I'd have to ask, confidentially of course, just how much we were getting off the street. The busts were so common at this point that they'd stopped making it on the news. We still kept the fact that I could do more than just 'touch' with my bugs a secret, of course. But we'd stopped bothering to hide my range.

I hugged Amelia once I got inside. ComfortSafeHappy. She smiled. "So, anything interesting happen today?" It was the first time we really got to talk today.

"No, not really," I said. "TGIF is in full effect, however."

"Yeah," she agreed. "So, I know you're planning something. Dish."

"Sure," I said. "Time for me to show you your present."

"Okay?" she smiled. AnticipationAmusement.
I handed her the package, complete with wrapping paper. "Go ahead, try it on."

"Alright," she said as she went to her bedroom. I went to mine to change as well. **SurpriseAnticipation. And that's my partner opening her gift.**

My dress was really nice. Went down to my ankles, but had one of those leg slits on the side. Dark blue contrasting with my pale skin. Something that I really used to hate about myself, actually, but Lisa and Crystal assured me that it was a good feature to have.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said. I rushed to her door, if only to avoid anyone else seeing me. Not that I really needed to worry, I could tell where they were. Crystal was at her late college class. Lisa in the office. Theo on the phone. Zach on his computer. Riley and Blasto in the lab. No one else actually ever stayed in the building.

I peeked my head in. She did look nice in the green dress. Elegant, even. Turns out Crystal did know Amelia's size. "It's lovely," she said, smiling at me. **GratitudeNervousness. "Thank you. Uh oh."**

I smiled. "Yeah, you caught me," I said, as I stepped into her room, letting her see me. "Your dress isn't the real present."

**DesireShockJoy.** I let the feelings wash over me, boosting my confidence for the next part. "I was thinking, since we didn't actually get to enjoy the dance last week, thanks to all kinds of reasons, we should try it again. Can you do the floor lighting in here?"

"Uh... umm... sure," she said, stammering the words. **AnticipationFocus.** The floor started to glow subtly as the harsher light faded out. "N-now what?"

"Well, you can turn on some music," I suggested. "It's even the same music."

"Yeah, we still have to 'thank' our nosy friends for that, don't we?" Amelia laughed, then went over to her computer and started the music. A sweet, soft song that I didn't recognize. Amelia seemed to have a taste for softer music. She did, in fact, actually have Sinatra in the mix. I wasn't complaining.

"You still haven't made any taser bees for me," I reminded her. "We could test drive those."

"Sorry," she said. "Still haven't worked out how to pack enough power into something so small and still let it function as a bee."
"Oh well," I fake pouted. "Our revenge is foiled yet again." I moved over and put my arms around her.

*Elated*Nervous. That's all I needed. We danced through several songs. Talking about nothing important, like classwork and Riley's antics. And even a few serious things like new ideas for the Zerglings, and how we finally had space to start our Ultralisk tests, once we established legal rights to our dead world. And speculating on names for it. I was leaning toward 'Elysia', myself. None of that really stuck in my memory, though.

What I focused on was the girl I was holding. She smiled radiantly, and her feelings radiated through our link in waves. It was wonderful. It gave me the strength and confidence I needed to take the next step. I moved a hand up, brushing the hair away from her face and cupping her cheek. Then I leaned in and kissed her.

================

A/N- In addition to Sinatra, Amelia has the original version of Killing Me Softly, and Time After Time in the mix.

... She keeps the Tatu songs carefully hidden in a different folder...
Taylor held me as we danced, and it was wonderful. The taller girl was confident and self assured, but still gentle. Neither of us were exactly good dancers, but we really didn't need to be. The music and the atmosphere were perfect. I suppose I should think that, since it was all designed to perfectly match my own tastes. In short, I was having a wonderful time.

**CertaintyResolve.** Hmm, what was that? I looked up, and Taylor brushed my cheek. I melted into her as she leaned forward and kissed me. My first real kiss, and with someone I...**DiscomfortResolve.**

I ignored the feeling for a couple more seconds. Please don't take this away from me. It was her idea, maybe she'll... but the mood was already ruined. I pushed away from her, stepping back. A quick mental impulse activated the normal lighting of my room.

**ConfusionWorry.**

"I... I'm sorry, we... I can't." **HurtRejectionFearAlone.**

I didn't need the link, I could see everything in the look on her face. "Why... what did I do wrong?" she asked. **PainFearInadequate.**

I rushed in and pulled her into a hug. "I'm so sorry!" I wept. **ConfusionWorry.** "It's not right."

She hesitated, but put her arm around me anyway. "I thought it's what you wanted," she said. **HurtConfused.**

"It is," I agreed. "I do!"

"Then why?"

"Because you don't," I managed to blurt out.

"That's not..." she hesitated. "That's not important."

**Oh. Oh wow.** "Taylor... I..."

"I already said I was okay with it," Taylor insisted, her wet eyes looking into
"Our bond goes both ways," I countered. "You know that feeling coming off me right now, while telling you 'no'?"

"You mean a mix of quiet despair and grim resolve?" she replied. "Well, at least I know you really don't want to stop this."

"That's basically what I was getting from the bond the whole time we were kissing," I sighed, then offered what I hoped was a good smile. "Well, except maybe the 'despair' part. It didn't upset or disgust you or anything."

"It doesn't," Taylor insisted.

"If it had been any other reason," I continued. "Love, desire, maybe even simple curiosity... I might have accepted 'nothing better to do' if you phrased it in a way that didn't feel like an insult. But it reads like you're doing a chore. Out of a sense of obligation. It's really not something that puts me in 'the mood', you might imagine."

She offered a half smile. "Okay," she agreed. "If you want to try again, we could cut the link for an hour or two."

My eyes went wide and my stomach... and the rest of my lower abdomen... tingled. I hugged her just a little tighter for a second. "An hour or..." I managed to gasp. "Taylor... what did you expect we were going to do tonight?"

"I..." she mumbled, her face turning beat red. I wanted to kiss her so badly.

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't hear that."

"Anything you wanted us to do," she admitted. "Anything you wanted us to do,″ she admitted. So hot. No! Focus on something else.

"On a first date?" was the first thing my brain stumbled across that didn't involve thinking about how good her skin felt on mine. Or, for that matter, how nice the dresses felt where they rubbed together.

"When you put it that way, it sounds really bad, doesn't it?"

"Kinda, yeah," I agreed. "But you already know it's not like I don't want to..."
"But you're not going to," she finished for me.

"No, I'm not," I confirmed. I broke our hug, but didn't let go of her hand, leading her over to the bed where I sat. She took the implied invite and sat next to me. "Seriously, Taylor. Even if you were, well, interested. I..."

I hesitated. ConcernTenderSupport.

"I'm not exactly ready for a relationship, either," I admitted. "In my entire life, there are exactly two people I've ever been attracted to. I don't even know if I'm suppose to be gay or what."

WorrySadness. She offered a small laugh. "Well, if it turns out you're not, please don't tell me. I have problems with my body image already. I'm not sure how I'd handle finding out the girl who I've basically been seducing is really into guys."

"I don't like it when you insult yourself," I insisted.

"Sorry," she looked away. "You were saying?"

"We know it was Victoria's power that made me fixate on her," I replied. "If it wasn't for that, there's no way to know what my natural tendencies would be. Or if I'd even have any at all."

"Why wouldn't you?" ConcernConfusionEmpathy.

"I'm still a bio-Thinker, even when not using my powers actively," I explained. "When we kissed... you felt the kiss, and my emotional state through our bond."

"Which was really nice, for a moment or two," she insisted. CertaintyConvictionFearRejection.

"It was..." I agreed. "But I also felt everything else. The hundred trillion or so bacterial cells living inside you. I could imagine that, if left for nature to run its course, my power would get in the way of sex, like Lisa's does."

"Hundred trillion?"

"It's all really tiny," I said. "In total, rarely more than three pounds in any given person. But it's something I'm constantly aware of, when touching someone."
"I'm aware of about that many bugs," Taylor insisted. "And I'm still capable of... well..." she blushed.

"Yeah," I agreed. "And maybe I'd have worked the same way. Nature, nurture, and the blurry lines between. There's no way of knowing what I would have been. Or what I will become as I recover from the aftermath of years of mind altering powers. I'd ask Riley to run a few tests, but..."

"Bonesaw poking around in your brain," Taylor muttered. *FearRevulsionHate. Another subject between us that can't be easily approached.*

"I was thinking more along the lines of 'she's ten', myself," I admitted.

"Oh, sorry," she said. *RegretWorryIndecision.*

"It's fine," I sighed, then leaned my head onto her shoulder, snuggling a bit closer. *CalmingSafe.* "I know it's asking a lot for you to tolerate her presence."

She wrapped an arm around me. "It's fine. You were right to keep her. I can't pretend I'd have turned out any less of a monster if I got my powers that young, and then a psycho like Jack spent the next half decade making me his protege. It's not like I'm free of sin. If nothing else, she saved your life. That's worth an awful lot to me."

I smiled, nuzzling against her. "Thanks," I pushed the gratitude into our link. I opened my eyes and realized I was in a perfect angle to see down her dress. I blushed and looked away.

She was kind enough to not admit she noticed, although the link sang her part of the reaction. *HappyAmusedProtectiveAnxious.*

"So..." she said. "What does this make us, then?" *ConcernHope.*

"Friends," I said, looking up at her. "Partners. Close ones, clearly. We're just not romantically involved."

"Really close," Taylor agreed. She smiled down at me. "I should probably stop teasing you, then." *RegretDisappointment.*

"Hey," I smiled back, "Let's not talk crazy, here. We've already established that we both like that. And the talks. And the cuddling. We can keep doing that."
"Really?" She asked. *HappyConcerned.* "What about, well, if one of us maybe finds someone to date. This might be a bit much for someone to accept."

I shrugged, still gazing up at her. "Did you have someone in mind?"

*FlusteredFoolish.* "Okay, you have a point," she admitted.

"Like Lisa and the others have made painfully clear: everyone's already under the impression that we're together," I stated. *AnnoyanceAgreement.* "I'm not interested in romance with anyone right now. And, frankly, this would probably be a selling point for your preferred demographic."

"Okay, you have a lot of points," she agreed. "So I can keep playing dressup?"

"I'd be disappointed if you stopped," I stated. I knew the link would back me up. *RelievedHappyApprehensive.*

"So, the question becomes," she continued. "What exactly are you okay with doing?"

"To throw your own words back at you," I smiled impishly. "Anything you want us to do."

*SheepishThrilledProtective.* She hugged me tight, even kissing my forehead. And this time, she did it because *she wanted to.*

=============

*A/N- To quote one of my favorite webcomics: "Once again, personal growth and maturity have gotten in the way of a good time."*
For two people who aren't dating, I thought while looking at the sleeping girl beside me. I didn't bother actually completing the mental sentence. Taylor's dress had shifted in a way that basically exposed her entire leg to me. *She has really really nice legs. Must be all that running.* I'd probably have to start exercising more, myself. Not looking forward to that.*Then again... more eye candy.*

I nudged Taylor's shoulder. "Hey, I think it's time for you to wake up."

"Huh?" *ConfusionRecognitionRealizationEmbarrassment.* "What time is it?"

"Around sunrise," I said. "I can feel it through the tree."

She smiled. "Since when do you wake up before noon?"

"Probably something to do with not wanting to wake you up after you fell asleep," I said. *HappyConcern.* Knowing Taylor's responses gave me a level of confidence. Otherwise, I never would have followed that line up. "I should have you stay in bed with me more often."

*EmbarrassedDelighted.* She turned scarlet at the suggestion. "I... uh..."

"You're adorable when you're flustered," I informed her. More of the same series of feelings.

"That was cruel," she managed to stutter out.

"Would you like me to stop?" *Rhetorical Questions for a thousand, Alex.*

"No," she reluctantly admitted. "I... uh... should probably go get changed. I don't think these dresses were really meant to be used as nightgowns."

"Probably not," I agreed.

She got out of the bed and straightened out her dress, looking kissably shy the whole time. She looked at me, eyes half shut as we just enjoyed the various flavors of the empathic bond.

I signaled the door to open for her. Still hadn't worked out an auto open-close for them that didn't have a dozen or more flaws. Everyone else had to push a button.
She walked out, and immediately clapping and even a couple 'whoops' came from the living room. All from one person. Taylor offered a death glare in that direction. "No, not the bees!" Respawn shouted, scrambling behind the couch and collapsing into a fit of laughter. *I'm getting pretty good at sensing where people are on the Yggdrasil.*

Taylor hadn't actually called on her power, except the usual stuff I was coming to think of as background noise. *DefiancePride*. That floored me. *Pride. She was proud of this. Of us.* I fed on that strength and sent it right back to her. *This is an emotion we'd be getting a lot of mileage of, I can tell.* Taylor simply walked to her room, not letting Zach's antics get to her.

....

No one else had anything to say about it the rest of the day. As far as everyone else was concerned, we were now officially a couple. As far as we were concerned, it didn't matter what they thought. What we did or did not do with our time together was our concern and no others. *Don't fight, accept and push through.*

Our weekend went back to a productive routine. Taylor, Zach, Theo, and Clarice spent much of their time training with and teaching our first batch of police officers how to operate the M4s. Lisa did... whatever it was Lisa did. Plotting, mostly. Consulting Dinah occasionally. *All superheroes should have their own pet evil mastermind. Life is infinitely more simple this way.*

Crystal, Rey and I worked on the first ever hostile environment variant of my Yggdrasil. Rey piloted one of the modified M4s through the other side of the gate. The goal was to go in, take analysis and samples, and bring them to a segregated variant of the Yggdrasil. Followed by what was essentially a million years of forced evolution condensed into mere hours.

Crystal was doing scouting flights around the area, in the best bioarmor suit we'd built thus far. She was our flagship fighter, after all. The first suit we'd given an actual name: "Radiant". Technically 'V1Radiant'. V2 was the standard for Eki at the moment, with more combat options and a stronger forcefield. We didn't use it in scouting because we didn't want to have it irradiated.

V3 would be ready in time for Behemoth, Riley insisted. She was currently more interested in obsessing over the new 'Azrael' model meant for Flechette. To use Riley's own words: 'she could solo the Triumvirate with this'. I didn't know if I believed her, but she was very clearly enthusiastic about the idea.

By the time Sunday night came around, we'd done everything we could do. The M4P project had progressed to primarily 'self' training. These were trained professionals, after all. They were merely learning new equipment, not being retrained into something else. We had them on a week of playing various physical sports. Mainly Basketball, since Riley considered that the most perfect choice for learning the nuanced fine controls of the system and updating the automatic reactions of the M4s.
Her prediction was they'd be ready by next Monday.

My hostile adaptation Yggdrasil had already started spreading. The entire planet would be completely terraformed in two years, left to its own devices. With active help, and you could be damn sure we were going to actively help, less than six months.

Our priority, now that Flechette was functionally a 'sure thing', was back on Vista. Using her power on this basically dead world would be huge.

....

I rode to school with Clarice and Zach. Those of us supposedly without a secret identity. Clarice was busy admiring a handkerchief. It was an astonishing combination of woven fabrics, with a blue lace pattern that met with a deep red heart in the middle.

"That's really pretty," I told her. "Where'd you get it?"

"I had Parian make it for me," she answered. "Don't worry, I paid for it from my share of her profits."

Much of the tech in Parian's workshop was designed by Riley, she was given a cut for it. "Okay," I said. "So what's it for?"

"My boyfriends," Riley said. ShockConcern. Ah, right, Taylor was still listening in, even if she couldn't be here. I sent the loose emotional equivalent of a 'hug' through.

Zach coughed. For real.

"First," I said sternly. "You're not allowed to date. Second, even if you were allowed to date, you're not allowed to have plural boyfriends."

"Third," Zach interrupted, having recovered by disintegrating himself. "The kind of boys that would appreciate silk handkerchiefs are already dating each other."

"I know," Riley agreed. "I kept telling them and they wouldn't listen. So I made it a challenge. Anyone who takes this from me gets a date." She tucked it into her shirt pocket, half dangling out.

"Where did you get an idea like that?" I exclaimed.
"Zach," she answered with the same smile as always. \textit{AnnoyanceResignation.}

I glared in his direction. "What?" he laughed. "I said I saw something like that in a show, not that I thought she should do it."

"Why am I not surprised?" I muttered. "Remember rule number six?"

"If it's Zach's idea, it's probably a bad one?"

"Yeah, that," I confirmed.

"But this is actually a really good idea," Riley insisted. "It's good practice for controlling the automatic responses of the doll that I can apply to future models. Plus, anyone who succeeds is either a parahuman or insanely capable. People we might want to recruit. It also draws attention to Clarice, which is sort of one of our goals."

\textit{She had a point. A lot of points, actually. RealizationAgreement. Didn't quite like the way it was being implemented, but it's not like I really needed to worry about protecting Clarice from anything.} "Okay," I finally agreed. "Play your game, but if it causes problems in class, it's over."

"Okay," she agreed. "Now, when are you getting married?"

I sighed. Zach smiled. I focused on the link, taking refuge in the strength. \textit{PrideComfortCertainty.} "Not any time soon," I replied. "We have more important things to worry about. Like the Endbringers. I'll worry about getting married when cities aren't being destroyed every three months. Not before."

Clarice nodded. "Okay," she said in the voice of someone with a mission. Her smile was that of someone inordinately pleased with herself. \textit{Oh god, what did I just promise? WorryAmusementResignation.}

Zach chuckled. "To be fair, it would be the most badass wedding ever. Of all time. I can see it now... we can hold the ceremony inside Behemoth's corpse. Wedding dresses made of Simurgh feathers. Alexandria will be one of the bridesmaids and would have to settle for a tacky blue Leviathan hide dress. Endbringer teeth tied to the back of the car. Party of the fucking Eon."

"Language!" Clarice smacked him.

"Ow! Sorry!" Then he paused. "The fuck?" Another smack. "OWW! That actually hurts! How did
you do that without tripping my restore?"

"World's best biotinker," Clarice responded.

"Fucking bul- OW!" Zach ducked back, bringing his arms up to defend himself. "Okay, I get it!"

=============

A/N- That's right. They've started naming the bioarmor. That's clearly the most important piece of information in this chapter. Seriously, though. Radiant and Azrael are going to be fun.

Also: they've weaponized the power of Riley's platonic Yandere toward Endbringer slaying.
As it turns out, it wasn't even Clarice who got outed first. It was Taylor. We managed a full week, at least. A week of living a normal enough school life. Spending lunch together, sometimes with Chris or Theo or both. I introduced her to Victoria's friend group, and they were suitably understanding of her less than outgoing nature. Much as she was far more confident, now, she still wasn't the type to enjoy socializing. Another way in which we were alike.

It was Thursday afternoon, in Social Sciences, that things started coming apart. The teacher set up our group project assignment for the week, due next Friday. A political map of how the world would look today if it were Asia, instead of Europe, which colonized the Americas. Complete with citations of historical points and why we believed the lines would be drawn in which areas.

"You should ask Weld over," Taylor suggested.

"Why can't you?"

"Better if you do it," she answered. "Less suspicious for the cape to ask the other cape."

I sighed. "Fine," I agreed, getting up and heading over to the boy. Seriously, Taylor, I have no idea how to approach people.

"Another recruit attempt?" Weld asked.

"We're supposed to be in groups of three," I answered. "At least this way you won't have to deal with stupid questions about life as a cape."

He smiled. "Sure," he replied, getting up. He took one of the desks abandoned in the shuffle, sliding it up next to ours. "So, I was thinking a focus on the Oirats, and frame the premise around Oirat expansion eastward. Prompting a land grab between them and China..."

"We need a discovery in the New World worth the fight," Taylor answered. "A gold rush, perhaps? The Rockies are full of the stuff."

I felt a flicker through our link. My eyes when where Taylor's took hers. She was looking at Weld's arm. InterestDesire. Oh. Oh! I didn't listen as intently as I might have, instead focusing on the sensation. Was this what Taylor felt whenever I 'looked' at her? No wonder she doesn't mind. I couldn't blame her for checking out Weld, either. The boy's was pretty much the statue of a god.
She'll never look at me that way, a traitorous part of myself thought.

Taylor's head snapped toward me. *ConcernFearWorry.* "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," I answered. *DoubtConcern.* "At least, nothing that matters right now."

Taylor reached over and grabbed my hand. It was comforting, in its way. Weld said nothing, and instead went back to focusing on the assignment. Eventually class ended, as it is want to do. Taylor and I went to lunch. There was no pretense, anymore. She kept hold of my hand the entire way, except when we had to break off to put our books away, and then we met up before going to the lunch room. *PrideSupport.*

We opted to go outside for lunch, finding a shady corner. "So, wanna share what that was about?" she asked.

"Just something stupid," I replied.

"Jealousy?" Taylor asked.

"More like envy," I answered. "Someone else who has something I want. Like I said, it's stupid."

"Okay," she answered, leaning against me a little. The bond made it clear she wanted me to explain further. I didn't. We spent a little while like that before Taylor muttered. "Oh god damn it. Smile for the cameras."

She pointed at an area across the parking lot from the school. A blue car, I wasn't enough of a car expert to know one model from another. Sure enough, I saw the camera pointed at us. "Are you going to stop them?" I asked.

"Nope," she answered. "There are four others waiting around for their opportunity. Probably ready to ambush students for interviews the moment school is out. The secret is officially dead, we may as well accept it. Honestly, I'm shocked it stayed secret this long."

"Don't fight, accept and push through?" I smiled. It seemed to have become our mantra. How we handled our mood swings, whether bond or natural. How we dealt with problems like the PRT and the various power plays. *We don't need to be untouchable, merely unstoppable.*

"Exactly," she said with a smile. *CalmRelief.* "I thought I'd feel worse about my identity being revealed. Helps that everyone who matters enough for me to even pretend to care what they think already knows. Besides, you've been doing it for years."
I shrugged. "True," I agreed. "Before I got my powers, even. The assumption was always 'when', not 'if', I became a cape."

"I just told Blasto what happened," Taylor informed me. "Lisa will know in a minute. Are you certain you can't build a better way for me to communicate. Or at least not let the Yggdrasil eat most of my bugs?"

"They're bugs, Taylor," I replied. "I would rather they not be in my home."

"Fiiine," she whined. "Can we get more of those hugbugs and make them so I can control their speech?"

"That might work," I said. "But then everyone would be hugging you all the time instead of just me."

AmusedMischievous.

"Uh... Taylor... what are you planning?" I asked.

"To butter you up and either make Minerva happy or give her ulcers," she smiled broadly as she wrapped an arm around me.

"Oh, this'll good," I said, smiling back.

She leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Aww," I fake pouted. "Is that all?"

"Well, I didn't want to force you to turn off the link," she replied. "Besides, I think this school might have some kind of PDA policy. Wouldn't wanna get caught breaking any rules." She paused for a second and then started chuckling, then laughing.

"Okay, what's so funny," I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Just remembering this classmate of mine. Next time I see him I'll have to tell him that my pretend girlfriend is better than his."
"Oh, is that all I am to you?" I acted offended. "Someone to show off in front of the cameras?"

"Yup," she chirped. "There's absolutely no one I'd rather be caught cuddling with by the paparazzi."

I leaned in and nuzzled into her neck, giving her a tight hug. "Me, too."

The bell rang not long after, and we went to our respective final classes. At the very least, our normalcy would last until school was out.

=========

A/N- I liked this chapter.
"No, not a problem," Lisa said on the phone. "You've gotta do your job. A tip, though... send your investigators after Winslow."

"Yeah, that's the one," she nodded despite it not being any kind of video call. "Names of interest: Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, Gladys Knott. Take a real, hard look at Hess. She's got some powerful associates that covered up the near homicide of a fifteen year old girl."

"Got it in one," she confirmed. "Are you sure you're not a thinker?"

"Then you'd better think carefully on who you give this one to."

Lisa's really going all out on this one, I realized. Not that it surprised me for a second. She was preparing for this ever since we started going back to school. Meanwhile, the rest of us were watching the news.

"She was a nice girl," Greg said. "Quiet and shy. Really smart. Always thought she and I would, y'know, end up together. Though she never really seemed interested in me, or anyone else really."

He shrugged and smiled whistfully. "Oh well, guess I know why, now. Congratulations, Amelia, you got one of the good ones."

AnnoyanceDisgust. "Yeah, Greg, because a girl would have to be gay to not be interested in you," Taylor scoffed at the television.

"Don't be too hard on the weirdo," Minerva smiled. "He just accidentally handed us a PR jackpot. Pretty soon all your former classmates are going to color everything they remember about you with this. I assume your bullies went with the old cliché of questioning your sexuality, at least occasionally."

DisgustPainImpotence. "Yeah," Taylor admitted, looking down. I reached over and gripped her hand. "When they didn't have anything more 'creative' available."
I put my arm around her and offered what compassion and support I could through our link. It worked some, at least. She looked at me and smiled. I heard a quiet happy sigh from Riley as she looked at us. AmusementResignation.

"Perfect," Tattletale smiled. "Your classmates will remember those comments, and they'll think up other bits of 'evidence' that fits this new worldview. Retroactive memory, confirmation bias, whatever the fuck it they call it. Now the trio don't just look like evil bitches. They look like evil bitches that commit hate crimes."

"Leaving me to die in a locker full of human waste wasn't enough 'hate', already? There is so much wrong with that..." Taylor muttered. She had a point. Why should it be 'more bad' because of her supposed sexual orientation?

"Don't mean to be insensitive, but you did agree to this plan," Tattletale reminded her.

"...big sister," Clarice stated for the reporter lady.

"And how do you feel about her dating Taylor?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about secret identities," Clarice said emphatically. "Amelia and Zach and Crystal are okay because they don't have one."

"Okay," the woman doing the interview agreed. "How do you feel about her dating Khepri?"

"It's wonderful!" Clarice insisted. "She's smart and nice and has cool powers and we're going to kill all the Endbringers so they can get married."

AnnoyedMortifiedDefiantPride. Exactly, I thought, as I buried my face in my hands. I looked over at Riley, who was smiling away at the television. I have to talk to her later.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," the woman offered a nice, if somewhat condescending and confused, smile. "What does them getting married have to do with Endbringers?"

"That's what my big sister said," Clarice explained. "They won't get married while cities were still
being destroyed every three months. So the Endbringers have to go. And then they can get married and have lots of babies and I'll be the cool auntie that they all love the most."

"They're both girls, how do you think they'll have babies together?" Okay, note to self, don't invite that particular condescending bitch to any press conferences.

"Oh, that's really simple," Clarice started. "All you have to do is introduce a-

"There you are!" Zach interrupted, running into the camera's view. "What did we tell you about talking to strangers?"

"Try not to rip any more faces off?"

"Not power strangers," Zach clarified. "People you don't know strangers."

"Oh," Clarice nodded. "Don't talk to them unless someone I know says it's okay. And if they try to touch me, I'm not allowed to break their limbs more than twice each."

"It's okay," the woman assured them. "We're not strangers, we're reporters."

"Lady," Zach looked right into the camera with a deadpan voice. "No one is stranger than the press. Not even that one dude at the park who talks to himself while feeding the pigeons."

He paused for a beat. "To his cats."

Then he put a hand on Clarice's shoulder. "Now come on, ya little mushroom, it's time to go back to the magic tree fort. Your flying pony needs her exercise."

"Riley," Tattletale muttered after the scene swapped over to a couple of Glory Girl's friends who were talking about Taylor being really nice, if a bit quiet. "You are an absolute fucking genius and I would hug you right now, if not for those PTSD flashbacks I still get."

Riley glared at Tattletale, and neither Taylor nor I were feeling especially generous right now. If for
"It's absolutely perfect," she insisted. "We have the Endbringer fights and Clarice in the realm of public speculation. They can't really do much investigating of our top secret weaponry and all that, but they can certainly poke around into her history, which leads up to the almost certain exposure of Amelia's actual parentage. Operation: Pork Roast is well on its way to completion!"

"I still say we should have called it Operation: FTP- Ow!" Zach looked over at Clarice. "I didn't do anything wrong that time!"

"I am aware of what the 'F' stands for," Riley stated with a disapproving glare.

"Why don't you ever slap Lisa around?" Zach gestured at her. "She swears more than the rest of us combined!"

"Riley and I have an understanding," Lisa stated.

"How the fu-udge did you pull that off?" UncertaintyCuriosity. No one bothered to answer him. I made a note to ask Taylor about it later, she might be able to figure it out. Or I'd just to ask Riley, that would probably be simplest.

Sometimes, I did not like the kinds of secrets that Lisa kept. I didn't doubt her loyalty, if only to Taylor. And Taylor was a certainty in my mind, so Lisa would be loyal to Pantheon. Even without the threat of the Passengers and Dinah's Prophecy hanging over our heads. But still, this was something I should take the time to focus on.

"Fine," Zach muttered. "So, in slightly different news, who do you think spilled the beans?"

"Coulda been anyone," I supplied. "We weren't subtle. We didn't even want to be subtle." SuspicionAnger. "Of course, Taylor already has an idea."

"Emma didn't come to school today," she pointed out.

"I don't think she'd do this," Zach responded. "Much as she's a bitch, she's not stupid. This?
would be stupid. This would be the kind of stupid that normally follows 'hey, bubba, watch this'. I don't see it. Not unless she wants to get lynched."

"Neither do I," Minerva agreed. "She'd have to know that she and Sophia would be exposed during this. Legitimate coincidence. More likely it was some kid who mentioned it to a parent or someone else who thought they could make a few bucks selling us out to the press."

"Or Greg," Taylor admitted. "He gets attention, gets to imply we were 'friends' in a way I can't really refute without looking like a bitch. Maybe even a kind of revenge on me never showing him any interest. And it's not like he was Emma's biggest fan to begin with. Lots to gain, nothing to lose."

"It really doesn't matter," Minerva dismissed the speculation. "What's important is that it wasn't us and it can't be traced back to us. What comes next needs to be started by other people."

================

A/N- Riley continues to be adorrifying. No, seriously. Love Riley in this chapter.

Zach gets some great lines, too. Can't forget those.
I made the phone call to Minerva, she picked up on the first ring. "So, you guys got the info, too?"

"Second hand," I reluctantly admitted. She'd have figured it out and mocked me for it if I had tried to hide it. "The tipster informed a handful of stations."

The word spread quickly, of course, but 'quickly' usually meant 'the other guys got all the good stuff already'. The news industry was funny like that, a constant balancing act between bragging about your every success, and jealously hiding every secret.

"Pity, I'd have loved to guess who it was," I could picture her foxlike grin.

"I've already made a habit of not learning who sources are until after we've hung up," I retorted. This had become something of a game between us. Thirty years of experience versus one of the most capable thinkers I've ever heard of.

"Aww," she let a pouty whine into her voice. "You're going to make me cry."

"Crocodile tears for your crocodile grin?" I smiled as I heard a chuckle out of her. "We do, of course, have to air the story. The implication in us doing so without having bothered showing up to gather information from the source of course meant a certain trust and expectation of an inside story from her."

"No, not a problem," she agreed, as we both knew she would. She danced this dance as well as the veterans. "You've gotta do your job. A tip, though... send your investigators after Winslow."

I smiled broadly. This is the part of our game where things paid off. The jokes were a pleasant diversion, but ultimately we were both here to handle business. "Crapsack school, prime recruiting zone for the Merchants and ABB?"

"Yeah, that's the one," she agreed readily. "Names of interest: Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, Gladys Knott. Take a real, hard look at Hess. She's got some powerful associates that covered up the near homicide of a fifteen year old girl."

Oh. This was going to be good. "She's a Ward, isn't she?" It didn't take a lot to extrapolate. The ability to make a police investigation vanish meant either Government or E88 corruption. The latter would be something Pantheon would reveal personally instead of through proxy. Clearly a female name. Hess... German? Vista? Nah, there are reports of an association that might be friendship between Vista and Aceso, Minerva wouldn't give me her name. "Shadow Stalker?"
"Got it in one," she confirmed.

"This is going to tie into the 'other' information you've been holding back on the PRT, isn't it?"

"Are you sure you're not a thinker?" she asked. I smiled. Not an answer, but not a denial. Part of our game. An outsider might call it seduction, and in many ways it was. The teasing and positioning. Myself playing the 'male' role and seeking out something I clearly want but cannot simply come out and demand. Her playing the 'female' role, withholding something she clearly wishes to offer me, but waiting to gauge that I'm suitably worthy and appreciative of her gifts. Making me earn it.

"I hope not," I chuckled. "Hate to think it was anything other than my brains, good looks, winning personality and hard work that contributed to my success in life. If this is as valuable as you're implying, it could make the careers of whomever I assign."

"Then you'd better think carefully on who you give this one to."

"It's been a delight as always, Minerva," I replied with absolute honesty, before hanging up. We didn't bother with 'goodbyes', we never did, and I was already dialing the next number.

"Hayes," I said the moment the phone picked up. "It's Vickery. Yup. I have some names for you. Rush job, tonight if possible. I'll pay you triple if you get it done by seven."

....

"Commissioner Micheals speaking," the older man's voice came through clearly.

"Yes, this is Stan Vickery," I answered. "Sorry for such a late call, but I need to ask an important favor." I already knew I had it in the bag, though I was loathe to do this without knowing for certain the value I'd get for it.

"Go on," he replied, not hiding his suspicion. Pity, that. It was so much easier for everyone involved when there was trust in these mutually beneficial arrangements.

"We're looking into details relating to a cold case from Winslow," I informed him. That wouldn't cause anyone to blink an eye. If anything, police loved giving away info on cold cases. "It relates to minors, both victim and almost certainly the perps." That was the 'favor' part.

"I'm afraid I'd need to know more details, first," he replied, still cautious.
"Closed for lack of evidence. Evidence that my team recently came into possession of. And I believe there was political corruption from well above your department's influence that would have made it impossible for your men to solve," I stated.

That would probably be enough to convince him to cooperate. Offering a solved case and someone else was to blame for the failure is about as sweet a deal as anyone could hope for, but I had one more incentive. "The victim was a Miss Taylor Hebert, AKA: Khepri."

....

"Winslow is a hotbed of gang activity, increasing the difficulties of any investigation," the officer informed Erin, my interviewer for this part of the investigation. "It's an unfortunate reality that being seen speaking to police could invite violence against them. This understandably makes witnesses unwilling to come forward."

"What would you normally do in a situation such as that?" Erin asked. Miss Vaught was one of my preferred interviewers for relaxed situations, where everyone wants to cooperate fully and there's no need for maneuvering. She was too 'nice' to handle the more cutthroat aspects of field investigation or hard journalism, but she might one day make for an excellent talkshow host for minor celebrities and the like. Which was fine, I'd treat her as well as I could and wish her luck in her future career when she made that step away from human interest stories to morning shows.

"Typically, we might make calls to parents to see if they could convince their children to provide statements privately," he answered. "However, the principal of the school refused to give names of students that had lockers near the scene of the attack. We were unable to conduct a full investigation due to this and other interference. For example, the teachers neglected to informed us that this was the latest and most egregious example of a pattern of bullying that had extended for over a year even at that point."

"I see," Erin nodded, accepting his claim without hesitation.

As I said, too nice. A real reporter would have torn him to shreds on sheer failure to do the job right. On another day, for another case, I might have been in that interview box, making a suitably meaty story of this and costing a cop or two his badge.

No doubt, others would come along later and teach the police proper chagrin for their incompetence shown here. However, the police could always be counted upon to screw something up eventually. A low hanging fruit that was easy to pluck, lacking in any real value.

....
"It's okay, Mrs. Knotts," I offered her my best comforting smile, and I had very good smiles. "We promise your complete confidentiality. No one will be able to identify you. We just want to know how such a complete abuse of power could occur, and to see to it that those who covered up this crime are exposed. We already know who Sophia Hess is, how she tormented Taylor. We already know that Blackwell was willing to interfere with a police investigation to protect her. We know she threatened your jobs." Actually, we really knew less than half of that. I was giving her outs, plausible excuses for her failures.

She looked at me, then away. The woman probably wasn't used to talking to attractive men in general, especially ones as understanding as I was being. Still, it wasn't quite enough to convince her on its own. Time to play to her guilt. "We're trying to help Taylor," I insisted. "The system already let her down once. Now's your chance to make things right for her. Surely it's time for her to have justice and closure?"


....

Speaking with parents of a victim is always a crapshoot. So many possible things could go wrong, so many personalities just didn't belong on television. The usual costs of all interviews, with only those rare exceptions that make all the others worth the effort.

Daniel Hebert was one of those exceptions. It helped that I asked Minerva to get him on board ahead of time. Whether she handled it herself, or had his daughter do so, I didn't ask.

He described with a clear confidence the combination of negligences that allowed his daughter's abuse to continue as long as it had. The school's offer to pay for Taylor's medical expenses was a mistake. Granted, the Heberts accepting the offer was a greater mistake, but I glossed that over easily enough. What the public would see is that the school was admitting a failure on their part. It wasn't that valuable alone, but coupled with the rest of the material I had, it looked like bribery.

Then I moved on to the more personal questions. He wasn't as businesslike during that portion of the interview. He came across as a supportive and caring father who was quite proud of Taylor's accomplishments, but not afraid to admit that he was out of his depth dealing with her power and fame. The audience would love every minute of it.

....

Speaking with the parents of an attacker, on the other hand, is incredibly predictable: you don't. They almost never cooperate, and it's better that way. Someone willing to admit to their crimes in a candid and apologetic manner is what I assign Erin to handle. A swift and clean resolution better left to feel good talkshows. It kills a news story. There's no drama, there's no excitement, there's no hooks or
speculation to allow you to take fifteen minutes of facts and use it to fill a week of air time.

Fortunately, that didn't happen here. Barnes was filmed threatening to file a lawsuit if we so much as looked at his daughter. An empty threat, but a great clip. We had no interest in harassing a teenage girl. Whatever she might be guilty of, it would just make us look bad. Putting her father in the public eye was more than enough. A face to go with the name, a pressure on her and her family that might yield something more later. Or it might not, but we were hardly suffering for a lack of sound bites.

Hess was more interesting. Screaming and profanity and a flying beer bottle that managed to break the news van's window. I've seen better on air ranting breakdowns over the years, but the cameraman handled himself admirably and it was all clear enough for all the viewers to see. I made a note for my secretary to get his name for me, and give him a small bonus. Most of them didn't get paid nearly enough, and he (or she, for that matter) was one of the ones with talent.

A bit of inquiry revealed Mrs. Hess had a long, long history of less than successful relationships with men. None of her three children had the same father. No less than five of her former live in boyfriends were serving time in prison for crimes ranging from robbery to assault to drug trafficking. A real piece of work that left plenty of possible pop psych bullshit excuses for why the girl turned out psychotic.

I didn't really care. That was yet another hook for smaller fish to nibble upon. At most, I'd use the obviously unstable home life as further evidence of the PRT's failures.

Political corruption and coverups of criminal abuse by Protectorate members? That was, as I had told Minerva some days prior, the kind of thing that could make careers. And it was the only thing I cared about. This story was going to be huge and it was going to be my team that broke it to the nation. That was no exaggeration. With the proper work, this story could easily go nation wide.

I noticed a message in my private email that I didn't recognize. It slipped past the spam filters and identified itself as an 'anonymous whistle blower'. I started the video. And then I started laughing.

=============  

A/N- Rereading this chapter, I feel like Vickery is one of the characters that deserves his own spinoff series.
So, Khepri's identity was compromised, I thought to myself. It wasn't a major concern, really. At worst, it gives her an opportunity to play the 'home grown hero' angle. Nothing they didn't already have via the Dallon and Pelham girls. Yet another wouldn't be of much use to them. If we were lucky, it might give us an extortion angle, or something to spin into an attack on her character. *I'll have someone look into that.*

I pressed a couple buttons on the intercom. "Yes, Director?" the man spoke.

"Jones," I instructed. "I need you to dig up everything you can on Taylor Hebert." I observed the photographs they had of her at Arcadia. She wasn't a particularly noteworthy girl. Her height, if it were on someone who knew how to leverage it, could give her a great deal of presence. Her relationship with Miss Dallon would, of course, be used as a tool by their resident thinker for considerable effect on the populace level... but that was a transient kind of popularity. And a vulnerable one. I doubted they'd rely upon it, and there was nothing for me to fear if they did.

I could hear him typing through the com. "Understood, ma-" he froze. "Pardon me, Director," he said. "It appears we already ran an investigation on her, a few months ago."

"What for?" I asked.

"It's... related to the Shadow Stalker incident," he answered. "Seems Taylor Hebert was the girl that Shadow Stalker systematically bullied and abused for close to two years before Hijack revealed her crimes."

I fought to keep from gasping as my gut clenched, sending hot pain through my side from old injuries. "I want everything you can find out about Taylor Hebert."

*This is a disaster.*

....

I offered a somewhat forced, but amiable smile for the interviewer. One of our more sympathetic news stations, of course. I was tired, and had been giving interviews and press conferences almost daily for the last two weeks.

"Yes, it is unfortunate what happened to Miss Hebert," I agreed with the host. An older and portly man who we used when we wanted to present a friendlier and more harmless image forward. It wasn't without some distaste that I knew we used him so that my own less than photogenic
appearance wouldn't seen so bad in comparison.

"We entrusted the school to monitor Miss Hess and ensure she was upholding her duties as a Ward," I explained. "And, quite frankly, as a human being. Clearly, our faith was misplaced." I let the anger and frustration of the last few days bleed into the last sentence.

"What of Sophia's personal life?" the man asked. "There are allegations she may have been abused by her guardians."

I tried to soften my tone, as much as possible. "The Wards exist to provide a safe and sympathetic environment for adolescent parahumans coming to terms with their powers, and the responsibilities of both that and their approaching adulthood," I answered. "We cannot, nor should we, spy into the homes of children. We offer support, and would not hesitate to protect our Wards- or any other child, for that matter- from abuse. If Sophia was being abused, and I remind you that is merely speculation at this point, then she chose not to tell us or her therapist."

....

"Pantheon's allegations that the PRT conspired to kill villains during the conflict with the Slaughterhouse Nine are entirely untrue," I stated for the press conference. "The PRT knows the necessity of being united against Class S threats."

"What of their claims that you refused to assist the Undersiders and other groups aligned against the Nine?"

"Misconstrued," I stated. "The Protectorate and PRT had a carefully planned operation ready to use against the Nine. A plan that, I remind you, was successful in eliminating Crawler and would no doubt have worked against all other members. We took every reasonable measure to dissuade the villains from taking any action against the Nine, for fear of disrupting our plan before it could be implemented. They were responsible for their own actions, and their deaths a result of their failure to cooperate with us."

....

Some woman of some morning news show I didn't know the name of, was on the screen. Miss Militia insisted I needed to see this, and I trusted her judgment.

"Our guest today is Doctor Eric Dale. Respected developmental psychologist and professor of parahuman studies at Berkely University."
"Happy to be here, Janet," their guest spoke. *Damn shrinks.* "Although I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Perhaps we should start by playing the recording," she offered.

"The Wards exist to provide a safe and sympathetic environment for adolescent parahumans coming to terms with their powers, and the responsibilities of both that and their approaching adulthood."

A clip from an interview I only half remembered. *Had it only been three days? Nothing there of import.*

"Ma'am," a woman's voice- Miss Militia- spoke. Clearly from a different recording entirely. "We need to discuss Shadow Stalker. I don't believe she is fit for the Wards."

"I saw your report," my voice was stern and unfriendly. In the comfort of my chair, I squirmed, feeling a wave of dread. "It doesn't matter. We need bodies on the street to deter threats like Kaiser and Lung."

"We've had her for barely over a month," Miss Militia insisted. "And already [VISTA] is refusing to go on patrols with her." Vista’s name was clearly edited in over an erasure of the actual name spoken.

"Kindly explain to [VISTA] what 'insubordination is," I instructed Miss Militia. "[SHADOW STALKER] may be abrasive, but that's no excuse to disobey orders. Unless [VISTA] wants to file a formal complaint with justifiable concerns, she can cope."
The clip ended, and the news anchor spoke. "We apologize for the editing. Rest assured, there was no alteration to the content, other than to protect the civilian identities of the parahumans involved. The complete recording, as well as other physical evidence, is in police custody."

*Where did they get this recording?* I gaped at the screen.

"It might just be me," she said with that practiced false neutrality hammered into anchors. "But that doesn't sound like a 'safe and sympathetic environment' to me."

"I agree fully, Janet," the damn shrink agreed all too happily. "What I find most troubling is the implications of Wards being mentioned as a possible deterrent against gangs of powerful parahumans. The use of children to supplement police action has been a constant and unfortunate pattern..."

I suppressed an urge to scream at the screen. *Why couldn't people understand that it's a fucking war out there?!*

....

Vista, Flechette and Chariot barged into my office. "We quit," Vista opened, tossing her costume on my desk.

"What do you mean you quit?" I growled.

"Just what it sounds like," Flechette responded. "I don't really like being treated like... oh, what was that one headline?"

"Kiddie Cannon Fodder?" Chariot suggestion.

"Yeah," Flechette agreed dryly. "That."

I looked at the three of them. Vista didn't seem to want to meet my gaze. She still did, just like the other two children, but she wasn't as confident. A *link that could be broken. I'd start with weakening it. Was this your idea, mister Medina?*"
"Nope," he said with a confident smile. "Oh, and I know what you're about to say. That I'm a spy from Coil? It's true. I confessed to the others a couple days ago. I admit I was a little surprised that they weren't at all surprised."

"Vista..." I started.

"Stuff it, pig," she finally spoke. Where Flechette was a kind of hot anger, and Chariot was a smug rebelliousness. Vista's the one that shook me. That was the voice of barely contained rage and disgust. I'd heard it often enough to know.

I saw the telltale bending of light, like heat waves off a road in the summer, as she activated her power. My chair disintegrated beneath me, shattered by tidal pressure. She's been training in secret, I realized before my thoughts were interrupted by my scream of pain. My bulk and my old injuries did not take well to slamming to the ground.

I gasped for air, keeping my face from betraying too much of my thoughts.

"Remind me to never get on your bad side," Chariot laughed. "That looked uncomfortable."

Vista didn't look away from me. "She can cope."

Then they vanished from the room.

....

The video phone alerted me that I had a call. I read the ID. Costa-Brown. I frowned at my no doubt unpleasant appearance. The last two weeks had certainly not been kind to me. I had occasionally delayed my dialysis, and I hadn't gotten more than five hours of sleep per night since the day after Khepri was exposed. The constant stress was taking a harsh toll. No part of me doubted that Pantheon was responsible for this. There was nothing I could do to prove it.

I pressed the button nonetheless. "Chief Director," I acknowledged.

"Director Piggot," she responded. Cold and clearly displeased. "I trust you know the reason for this call."

"I do," I agreed. "It's unfortunate, but I promise it'll blow over."

She frowned. "No, I don't think it will, Director. You clearly haven't heard the latest news."
I paled. Somehow even more than my usual sickly color of late. "What?" I managed to ask, my hands trembling visibly. My stomach sank. I had thought, had deluded myself into believing, that this was everything they had. That Pantheon had fired their salvos, and all I had to do was keep going and stay strong until the storm blew over. Looking into Costa-Brown's hard face, I knew better.

This is how Pantheon operates. Their pattern, what every thinker we pointed in their direction said to expect from them.

First they gather their forces on one target. Then they scout and learn the terrain, whether literal or metaphorical, it didn't matter. Then they establish complete control of the field. Without their opponents even knowing they're there, when at all possible. And finally, they struck so swiftly and decisively that by the time anyone else even knew what was happening, they'd already won. Securing the objective and making sure there was nothing left standing that could try to stop them.

In a way, it as an elegantly simple system. In practice, it was anything but. The biggest flaw with such a method is that you had to do it perfectly, every time. A single flaw, a single mistake, one moment of vulnerability, and it all comes apart at the seams. Ruling by strength and will, ruling as if a god from on high, none of this was a new idea. Sometimes done well, sometimes poorly. Sometimes by idealists, and sometimes by despots. The one thing all comers shared was that they always failed, in the end. A lesson learned by the Romans and the Mongols and plenty of others.

That's why Democracy and Law was so important. To create a real, lasting, peace. A peace that would survive the death of the leaders and the dreamers that birthed it in the first place. Pantheon would fall, one way or another, since it was built on the desires of a few people of power. The PRT would endure, because it was built on the desires of the people of the United States of America.

Or, at least, that's what I told myself. I already knew my career was over. Whatever it the Chief Director had to say, it would be worse than everything that came before.

A/N- Sucks to be Piggot.

Vista is badass. Vista will always be a badass.

And Pantheon really is not subtle, like, at all.
"Tell us," the woman asked my dad, "What do you think about your daughter's girlfriend?"

I didn't blink at the assumption, nor did my father. Dad had asked me a while ago if the rumors of Amelia and I being 'together' was true or not. I told him 'no', then. After the pictures of us sitting together at school came out, my answer became 'it's hard to explain'. He laughed and claimed that he understood. All attempts to convince him that he did not in fact understand had proven fruitless.

Dad smiled. "You mean aside from her reputation as Panacea?"

Panacea might not have been legitimately famous, but she was well known and liked within Brockton Bay at the very least, a local celebrity to be sure. When Pantheon attracted national attention, Amelia's years of being a healer was definitely a strong positive for us. Enough to smooth over my rep, and Lisa's. Wouldn't have been enough to sell the public on Bonesaw, however.

"What I can say is that I very much approve of the effect Amelia's had on her. After Annette, Taylor's mother, died... Taylor became withdrawn. Something that became much worse after her best friend betrayed her and targeted her for bullying."

I fought back the tears. *ComfortSupport.* It hurt to watch this. My secrets, my pain, being lain bare for the world to see. *I agreed to this,* I reminded myself.

"She still believed in doing the right thing," dad continued. "I don't think that ever changed. But she was so unhappy, and, well, my wife was always the one who was good with kids. What am I suppose to know about teenaged girls?"

The woman smiled and nodded. "I have a boy, myself," she agreed. "Thank god for my husband."

He smiled back. "Amelia has been amazing for Taylor," he added. "I've seen such a wonderful change lately. She's less sullen, more expressive of her emotions. For all her power healing bodies, her healing Taylor's heart is the real miracle."

I cringed. *Really, dad? Did you really have to say that? I can never be seen in public again.*
I felt a hand on my shoulder. *AmusementAffection*. "I think it's sweet," Amelia said.

"You would," I laughed. "You're the one with magical heart healing powers. Next thing you're going to do is make Bella fire magical happiness beams."

"They've done a lot of good for this city as well," the interviewer prompted. "The ferry project was reported as your idea?"

"Yes," he agreed. Others wouldn't really spot it, but this made him more animate. Talking about feelings was never really a 'strength' for us Heberts. Talking about projects, on the other hand, that we could do forever. "It's a plan I've been developing for quite some time now. It's exciting to see it put into place and helping the city's recovery."

He probably wanted to rant, again, on how the Mayor was a moron for holding it back all these years. I had my doubts, personally. The ferry wasn't a bad idea by any stretch of the imagination. It would make commuting easier, and it certainly paid for itself with some room to spare, which made it better than the vast majority of city projects everywhere, but it wouldn't have magicked up jobs that didn't exist, and the Brockton Bay of before did not have those jobs. Not that I saw a reason to explain that to him.

"If I recall correctly, that would also be where you met Sarah Pelham?"

That question caught dad off guard. He paused for a second.

"Oh, yes," he said, sliding back to the conversation. He was clearly annoyed at not being able to talk about his project more. "Mrs. Pelham is an amazing woman. She's been a great help for me, offering a lot of advice on how to deal with the 'superpowered teenager' thing, and capes in general. It takes a lot of character to help someone like that."

"It does," the interviewer agreed. "Especially when she's dealing with so much tragedy in her own life."

....

The camera view panned across the area, showing dozens of heroes. Including Legend, Miss Militia, many of the Undersiders. "You want to look down on me!? I tried to save this city, I got closer to killing the fucking Endbringer than Scion! That girl is the person you should be mocking, spitting
on! A wannabe hero without the balls to do anything heroic! Planning from the start to betray teammates for fame!"

"Lisa," I said with slowly dawning horror. "Please tell me you didn't do this, and then convince me it's true."

Lisa looked at me, looked at the rest of us. She walked forward and grabbed Amelia's hand.

"I had nothing to do with giving this video to the press," she said. "I didn't even know this video existed. This hurts us. It makes people wonder if we did this, and it means the next Endbringer battle will be that much worse. A battle we need to go extraordinarily well. Nothing we could possibly gain from this is worth the costs. When I find out which asshole did it, I'm recommending we give the fucktard to Riley as a stress toy. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to call Coil and Dinah and write up a speech about how we kept silent about Armsmaster for a fucking reason."

She let go of Amelia and walked quickly toward her office. Amelia nodded to the rest of us.

....

The clip was already world famous, and it had gone public only a couple hours ago. Armsmaster's deranged rant made for a wonderful series of sound bites, I had to admit. And now that I could view it from a more distant position, it really was deranged. Outing me as a hero. Hints of a huge coverup within the Protectorate. Violating the Endbringer truce. It did me a lot of favors. 'Undercover operative' sounds a whole lot better than 'turncoat former villain'. It didn't help with Lisa as much, but people were understandably more concerned with me than with her.

The already badly humiliated Piggot didn't even have a chance to deny knowledge of it. Not that she would have been believed after Sophia. Her career was over. Criminal charges ranging from 'conspiracy after the fact' to 'endangerment of a minor' were being speculated upon by various news organizations. All of that was expected.

What came next was the surprise.

Legend stood at a podium next to Costa-Brown. "Yes, it is true that I played a role in enabling Director Piggot's actions," he admitted openly before a press conference. "I, like others, chose not tell the public of Armsmaster's crimes. Choosing to protect the reputation of the Protectorate and PRT. I feared that revealing one of the more respected heroes would commit such an unforgivable crime might endanger future Endbringer battles."

"I still believe that," he said. "The Endbringer Truce is a top priority, and one we should all fight to
protect. Armsmaster violated it, and he was arrested and placed under the watchful eye of both the Protectorate and Dragon, until we had examined all the evidence and conducted a fair trial. The Slaughterhouse Nine killed him before that became a possibility."

I found myself nodding. He was a great speaker, and he used it to full effect here.

"However, there is something I must apologize for," he stated. "Not for Armsmaster's crimes, and the decision to keep it in house. But for my complicity in the deaths of members of the Undersiders and Travelers."

"Lisa!" I shouted. "Channel six. Right now!"

"I was aware of Director Piggot's plans," he stated. "Her claim of giving the villains a fair warning is untrue. She, too, violated the truce. They offered to help, and asked us for help. They made every effort, and the Director rebuffed them. I advocated in favor of accepting their aid, but when she refused, I did nothing. I could have argued harder. I could have taken my concerns over her head to Chief Director Costa-Brown. I failed to do either of those things. Instead, I followed orders."

He gave everyone a second to take that in, before continuing. "A hollow excuse, one I expect no one to accept. As such, I am resigning from my position in the Protectorate. I shall continue volunteering for all Endbringer battles, as I have always done. I failed to take responsibility, and it cost lives. I could not live with myself if I did it again. But I do not deserve to call myself a leader after everything I failed to do."

He handed the microphone to Costa-Brown.

"I regretfully accept your resignation," she stated clearly. "Your service over these years has been exemplary, and the world owes you a debt of gratitude. I am sorry it has to end like this."

"Thank you, ma'am," Legend said contritely. "So am I."

"We will, of course, look for your replacement immediately," she stated. "In light of this and other information, I must also announce the suspension of Director Emily Piggot, pending a full investigation. I emphatically request that everyone withhold their judgment until the completion of the investigation. Director Piggot's career had been more than satisfactory until very recently. This suggests the possibility of master involvement."
"Or a long line of corruption and incompetence that's been well concealed, I thought at the television."

"In the interim, control of the Brockton Bay PRT will be transferred to Commander Thomas Calvert," she continued. "Who, unfortunately, could not be here on such short notice. Commander Calvert was a decorated PRT field agent and has served well as a field commander for the PRT and as an independent consultant on parahuman affairs. I have every confidence in his ability to handle this delicate situation."

I was astonished. *We'd won.* The local Protectorate's reputation was so badly damaged that I doubted they could oppose us if we wanted them to. Piggot was on her way to a cell. We controlled what amounted to a 'puppet government' over every remotely important aspect of Brockton Bay. *We owned a fucking city.* Why couldn't I shake this feeling of dread?

==============

A/N- So how's that for a way to conquer a city?

Also. This site REALLY doesn't cooperate well with indenting and double spacing.
At least I didn't have to go to school in a different vehicle, now. I thought. Of course, that came with a price.

We drove through the hoard paparazzi type reporters. Less literally than I'd have liked, if we were being honest. AnnoyanceExasperation.

The media storm would die, eventually. They would decide they had enough photos of Amelia and I together. Everything would go back to whatever passed for 'normal' in our lives. Or, at least, that's what I kept telling myself.

Amelia and I got out of the small limo that we now went to school in. With exception to Theo, all our identities were in the open. Naturally, Emma never came back. As Zach so eloquently put it, she'd have been lynched. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, honestly. A bit of satisfaction, I suppose. She turned a school against me, and I endured it for years. Same thing happens to her and she runs immediately.

Amelia got out first, and then offered me her hand. "Now look who's showing off," I joked as I accepted it and got out of the car.

"Hey," she joked back. "Gotta send the proper 'back off, she's mine' message to all the other girls."

Our summer school would be over soon. I hadn't quite decided if I'd be going back in the month and a half or so when the new year started. Zach, Theo and Clarice all would, of course. Clarice had friends now, even if Missy was the only one who was a legitimate friend, and enough experience that we didn't need to watch her the whole time. I still would, of course, but my range meant I didn't need to be here to do it. Thus far, Clarice's scarf had gone unclaimed by the few people dumb enough to try.

Amelia's locker was in a different section, since she was a senior and I was still a sophomore. Even if most of the classes I took were meant for juniors and seniors. We split at the doors and wouldn't see each other again today until lunch. But we always had our link.

....

Classes were peaceful enough, as always. These teachers had dealt with parahumans for years, usually, and they seemed to like the fact that I was one of the quiet ones that wanted to be left alone. Lunch was, as always, the pain in the ass.
"Taylor!" a girl shouted. I sighed, being rude would only hurt us in the long run. I turned. One of Amelia's 'friends' through Victoria, flanked by a couple others. They were nice enough people, I suppose. Reminded me uncomfortably of Emma and her friends, and that colored my interactions with them. If I wasn't famous, would they even look my way? Doubtful. Certainly they wouldn't have come to my aid if I were still being bullied.

"We just heard," she said. "Did you really stab Leviathan in the ass?"

Who the fuck did they interview this time? "Uh... I don't think Endbringers have asses," I said. It was the first thing I could think of. "Just sort of an area where their legs meet their backs."

She laughed an exaggeratedly happy laugh. "You did!" she exclaimed. "You totally did!"

Another girl cut in. "Ohmygod! Weren't you scared? You don't even have powers that could help you against him."

"Terrified," I answered. It was the truth. "And pissed. Mostly pissed." Well, that cements my reputation for life, I thought to myself. No matter what the future holds, I will always be known as the girl who stabbed Leviathan in the ass.

The girls escorted me to lunch, asking all kinds of other questions. "Were you really undercover as a villain?"

"Yes," I stated. I opted to leave out the part where I changed my mind about that.

"Did you really decapitate Mannequin?"

"Yes, but it really didn't matter since he kept his brain in his chest cavity."

"How does that even work?"

"He rebuilt himself as a cyborg."

"No, that makes a weird kinda sense," she responded. "How did he remove his own brain? Shouldn't that have killed him?"

I paused. "That's a really good question," I admitted. For that matter, Riley did the same thing with her whole head. "I never thought to ask."
Amelia pushed her way through. "There you are," she said, smiling. "Were you avoiding me?"

"Not at all," I replied, all the while trying my best to convey 'help me get out of here' via my expression and our bond.

"Sorry, Ana," she smiled at the leader of this particular gaggle. "Gotta talk business, y'know."

*Thank you so much,* I thought at Amelia.

"That's code for 'makeout session', isn't it?" Ana laughed. A couple of the other girls giggled.

"We can do both," I responded. *HappyDesire.* Amelia grabbed my hand and started walking away.

"Try not to do anything that gets you suspended!" Ana shouted at us. *EmbarrassedPleased.* "Not when there's only three days left!"

"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you so much."

"I was telling the truth," Amelia stated. "Dragon's about to make her move."

"So soon?" I asked. "I thought they were waiting for the weekend."

"Last minute consultation with Dinah," Amelia informed me.

I nodded. That was explanation enough for me.

"So," she smiled, putting her head against my shoulder. "About that makeout session?" I blushed.

....

Amelia had made a new room in the Yggdrasil for us to use as a sort of meeting hall so we could watch this news together. And by 'we', I mean 'almost all of Pantheon and its peripherals'.

Vista and the other Wards we'd recently acquired clustered together, along with Clarice, Theo and Zach. Except Flechette, who was with Parian in their own corner.
Yum Kaax, and I was finally getting used to thinking of him as that instead of Blasto, was with Rapture. Amelia and I together. Everyone else scattered about.

"The scene in Montreal this afternoon as a white fog descended upon the city," the unseen reporter spoke. They showed a video clip of what looked like cropdusting. Several small planes, obviously tinker designed, flew across the city and surrounding areas. Most of us in Pantheon already knew that similar dustings would be taking place across many cities southeastern Canada.

The scene, and narration, switched. "The Guild raided the mansion of Niko Vasil, also known as Heartbreaker, at 2:58 eastern time." The home in question was badly damaged, alongside everything around it.

We were treated to watching Heartbreaker, wearing nothing more than boxer shorts, being escorted by a tall man in full body armor. Defiant, I knew. His armor had changed to be a deep bronze color, instead of the silver of before. He had what was no doubt a flight system, and his halberd had been replaced by a pair of spearlike weapons that crossed his back.

They had Dragon, Narwhal and Legend there to be interviewed at the mansion. Whomever was in charge opted to blur Narwhal's figure in some areas, apparently deciding her forcefields weren't a valid enough outfit for their news station.

"Up until now, the Guild has been hesitant to target Heartbreaker," the reporter stated. "Why the sudden change of policy?"

"Heartbreaker has always been a priority target," Narwal stated. "We were only held back by what was, functionally, a mass hostage situation. That has recently changed. Dragon, would you mind explaining the details?"

I remembered that. Once during my childhood, before they realized how powerful he was, he was arrested. A massacre followed. Over fifty highly public terror attacks across dozens of Canadian cities, all from people who'd been mentally influenced by Heartbreaker over the years. The message was sent, quite clearly. Going after him meant costing hundreds of people their lives. No one liked letting him live, but he was good at not pressing his luck enough to make himself worth what would undoubtedly be a staggering price.

"We've recently acquired a new technology, which I personally thank the hero groups of Pantheon and Haven for developing and perfecting," Dragon informed the camera. "The exact inner workings must, of course, be kept classified for fear of others developing a counter for it. The important detail is that it removes the influence of Master powers, and grants temporary immunity to them."
"That is remarkable," the reporter commented. "Will this work on victims of the Simurgh?"

"We hope that one day it might," Dragon stated. "We are still refining and improving the technology."

"A bit of a lie, that," Rapture stated. She was right, of course. We couldn't apply the drug to the Simurgh's power.

"Unless Dragon knows something we don't," Missy suggested hopefully.

"We should be expecting a public ass-kissing from the Prime Minister of Canada shortly," Lisa informed us.

"Halo's going to love every second of it," Rapture chuckled. "Thanks for having them use group names instead of individuals. I'm not really that... comfortable... with fame."

"Me, neither," I agreed. "I just wasn't given much of a choice in the matter."

"As I said during my resignation," Legend was busy talking to the reporter now. "I have no intentions of just sitting on my hands. I don't belong in the Protectorate, and I don't deserve to be a leader. That doesn't mean I can shirk my duties. If anything, I must work that much harder to atone for past failures. Working for heroes such as Narwhal and Dragon, stopping unrepentant monsters like Heartbreaker, and preparing for the next Endbringer battle. That is how I'll prove that my apology is more than just words."

My attention to the television was interrupted by the approach of a parahuman. Specifically, I felt my bugs dying around her. *Cold based powers.*

"We've got company," I told them. "Doesn't seem hostile. Doing the swarm voice."

"I'll take point," Zach volunteered, moving toward the entrance, going through the first couple of our security layers. If anyone broke through, they'd have to fight him, and a complex layer of traps designed by our resident biomanipulators. Coupled with everyone else in this room right now? Whomever it was had better hope for her sake that she was friendly.

Lisa switched the camera over. The girl was solid blue and crystalline. Fog came off of her like she was made of dry ice. She wore those extra large sunglasses, and they too had frosted over. "Case 53? Breaker state?" I asked.
"Not sure," she answered. "Both, neither."

Meanwhile, I formed a bug decoy near the unknown woman. "Normally, our guests call first," I informed her. It was probably less friendly sounding than I meant it.

"Sorry," she said. "You probably wouldn't accept my calls anyway."

I froze. I'd gotten fairly good at distinguishing voices through the swarm. I was certain I recognized this one.

I stood and moved, walking briskly toward the door. Fighting down my anger. ConcernAlertDanger?

Fuck, that was stupid, I thought. Don't repress, accept. "Sorry," I said. "I'm going up to talk to her." I left our meeting room and ran up the stairs.

Zach looked at me, puzzled, as I stormed toward him at the entrance. "I've got it," I told him. I didn't bother hiding the outrage in my voice.

She was shorter than me, with a much fuller figure. The ice had started to 'melt' off her, revealing red hair that faded to frosted blue around halfway down. I stood there, staring at her, unable to come up with the proper words to express my incredulity. "Emma?"

"Fuck!" Zach exclaimed. He did not sound happy.

She managed to smile slightly, causing flakes of snow to fall away from her face as she took off her glasses. Her eyes had changed. They lacked pupils or other distinguishing features. Solid sheets of ice blue. They even glowed faintly of blue light.

ComfortAid?Worry. My hands were clenched into fists so tightly that my arms were shaking. Don't resist. Accept and push through.

"Hey, Taylor," she said. "It's been a wh-"


Also. Say hello to Emma. Her return didn't invoke NEARLY as much fanrage as I had anticipated.
I walked toward Pantheon's base. My skin shifted, radiating cold as my eyes adjusted. Dancing patterns, reaching out from a layer of reality that my senses could not follow. Her signal, Taylor's power. It was omnipresent. Awe inspiring, really. Gaea's Yggdrasil carrying the waveform across the entire city. Strong enough to shatter a continent. No, I was wrong. That... it's... at least two or three quantum powers. More. What are they doing in there? I turned off that sense, before I started experiencing the headaches. I was strong, now. They were stronger still.

I was already in full 'frost' mode, at least. It would start melting almost immediately, but I had a couple minutes before the warm summer afternoon got through the water and carbon dioxide that solidified on my skin. The blue tone to my eyes, skin and hair would stay until I changed states again.

A swarm of bugs pulled itself together and spoke. "Normally, our guests call first." It was magnificent. I longed to see it at work through my new eyes.

"Sorry," I replied. "You probably wouldn't accept my calls anyway."

I waited at their door. I didn't mind that, I'd know if they activated the Yggdrasil. It might be nice to be inside before the ice completely came off, though. I wasn't one of the capes who could have a secret identity, really, but I'd like to keep a bit of anonymity right now.

The door opened. Khepri, full costume. It, too, was beautiful. Designed by two biotinkers and assembled on the genetic level. "Emma?" She still recognizes me? I'm glad.


"Hello, Taylor," I said as I took off the glasses that would hide the most obviously unnatural part of me. Let her see what I've become. "It's been a wh-"

Her fist interrupted me. I was off my feet before I knew what happened, and hit the ground hard. The waveform pulsed, and I was buried in living muck. My nose is broken, I thought idly. Maybe even the cheek bone.

I was dropped into an empty, dark, room. Taylor's voice spoke through the walls. "Explain. Everything."

....
"Oh, and Emma?" Minerva said, her voice full of malice and condescending certainty. "You deserved this." Those words rang in my ears as I ran crying from Pantheon.

They were powerful, and smart, and strong. I'd convinced myself that they'd want me, the way Sophia wanted me. That I could be useful to them. I wasn't. Minerva was one of the girls from Winslow. Probably someone I treated like shit. Which was pretty much everyone except a few of the other popular girls. *Fuck, she was right, I do deserve this, for being weak and stupid.*

I fell to the ground. Running in heels, what was I thinking?

"Are you okay?"

*Who?* I looked up. *Clockblocker.* "Uh... umm... yeah." I answered. I didn't really believe it.

"Doesn't seem like you are," he replied. "Here, let me help you up."

He held out a hand, and I accepted. He was nice enough to not freeze me in place. "So, wanna tell me why you ran off like that?"

I looked away. "I did something really bad and they knew about it," I admitted. "Minerva..."

"Is kind of a colossal bitch," Clockblocker responded. "She kinda has a history of making people cry."

*She's not the only one.* "I deserved it," I answered. *Someone as strong as they are think I deserve it. That means I deserve it.*

....

"Why didn't you come to our party?" Aceso asked me over the phone. "I wanted to see you."

My stomach dipped and I fought back the tears. What Minerva said, how Zach abandoned me. I still had trouble breathing if I thought of it. *If I revealed who I am to Aceso, now, she'll never speak to me again.* I didn't have many friends left, certainly no real friends that actually cared about anything more than my looks or popularity. Aceso was stronger and smarter than me on every level. She was stronger than Sophia had ever been. I couldn't let her know I didn't deserve to even speak with her.

"I... I was there," I said. I didn't want to lie to her. I was pretty sure she'd know. "You were so busy
having fun with Vista and all your other friends." *Like Zach.* "I didn't want to bother you."

"I wouldn't have been bothered," she insisted. "I could have introduced you to everyone and you could have met Bella."

"Sorry," I apologized. "Maybe we'll be able to meet some other time. Not for a little while, though. So what were you saying about Cauldron?" *Change of topic, that'll help.*

"They're a great big conspiracy that makes monster capes and manipulates governments and can even sell people powers," the girl said excitedly.

"That's... kinda scary," I admitted.

"I know!" she was way too excited about this. "I wish I could see it in action. How the serum works on people!"

My heart jumped. *This is the chance I needed. I can make myself worthy. I can be strong. I can matter.* "What..." I swallowed. "What if you had someone who was willing to test it for you?"

....

The first day of school. I already had a few friends picked out for my entourage for the day, along with Dennis. He was a nice guy. Bit of a smartass, but he treated me well enough. A lot like Zach, actually.

I froze. Taylor. *Of course she'd be here, in school. Why wouldn't I think she was?*

"Umm, guys?" I said. "Go on ahead, I have to take care of something."

Dennis looked concerned. "Do you want me to-"

"No!" I exclaimed. "Sorry. No. This is something I have to take care of on my own."

He eyed me warily. "If you're certain."

"I am," I said. And I was. I turned and walked back. Taylor noticed me and froze. Not her usual way of ducking back and hiding. The opposite, really. Tall, focused, ready for a fight. I got within a few feet.
Then I recognized her. *The real her.* Spending as much time as I had with Shadow Stalker, I'd gotten used to reading people through masks. Or reading masks through people. *The slender, almost runway-model figure, the rich dark hair, the height. Taylor is Khepri.*

*Taylor was Skitter.*

*I'd been bullying Skitter.*

"The fuck do you want, Emma?" Taylor asked. *The cold voice... yeah, that was the voice of one of the scariest fucking supervillains I'd ever heard of. The one that destroyed Sophia on every level, turned her into a weakling. The one that killed Siberian. The only reason I am still alive right now is because she hadn't bothered to kill me.*

*I'm sorry I was such a bitch, Taylor.* I tried to speak. I failed. I choked. I couldn't look at her, I couldn't speak to her. I turned and ran. *I always fucking run. Because I'm weak.*

....

"What do you want, Emma?" Terry asked. I frowned, I thought he'd be less impolite about it.

"I need a favor, Terry," I said, batting my eyes. I felt cheap and a little dirty. "It's really important."

"After the shit with Sophia?" he said. "Why shouldn't I tell you to go jump in a fire?"

*Oh well, looks like flirting's not going to work. I could try harder, but eww, no.* "Five hundred dollars," I stated, my voice firm and businesslike.

"For what?" his eyes narrowed.

"Need you to drive me somewhere," I said. "About two hours, round trip. Another hour or two there, while you go off and find something else to do until I call you. Hundred to take me, four hundred to bring me back. Deal?"

....

"Very well, Sophia," the woman said, leading me through the sterile halls. "Tell me, why do you want powers?"
"Does it matter?" I asked.

"It does," the woman replied. "We've learned that the second most important factor in how powers manifest themselves, beyond the purity and stability of the formula itself, is the mental state of the recipient when they take it."

*I'll have to remember to tell Clarice about that,* I thought. "I... I f-messed something up," I answered. "A lot of somethings. I need to be able to fix my mistakes."

"I see," she answered. "Now, let's talk about costs."

I nodded. I knew all about the costs.

....

I entered the abandoned warehouse near the docks. I wasn't afraid walking the street at night. Thanks to Pantheon, our city was the safest place with more than three people in the same zipcode. What I'd actually find in the warehouse, that's what terrified me. I was smiling my best model smile.

*Remember, whatever you do, don't stop smiling,* Clarice had instructed me earlier. It was the only chance I had of surviving this.

I noticed the smell, first. Rancid enough to bring water to my eyes. It was too dark for me to see, thankfully. No matter what horror my imagination came up with, the truth was so much worse.

I walked calmly, slowly, deeper into the warehouse. *No sudden movements. Never stop smiling. Don't turn your head toward the sounds of metal scraping concrete. Don't speak, don't scream, don't cry, don't look, don't turn, don't run. For the love of god don't stop smiling.*

The thing moved out into my view. It was... somehow smaller than I'd expected. Only coming up to a little above my knees. Its ten robotic limbs scuttling like an insect as it moved toward me. I didn't look away, however much I desperately wanted to. I didn't turn my eyes from the bits of flesh covering it. The pieces of clothing that dangled from its limbs, as if only there to make certain I couldn't pretend away what kind of flesh it was covered with.

Clarice never said anything about pissing my pants. But even through that humiliation, I did not stop smiling.
"Hello, Kitten," I said in the softest, most soothing voice I could muster. "Mamma's busy and sent me to take care of you."

It tilted its head. I sighed in relief. Its head snapped back forward and it started moving toward me. I almost screamed. Instead I kept smiling. "Hello, Kitten," I said again. Hysteria creeping into my voice. "Mamma's busy and sent me to take care of you."

It stopped, and its head tilted again. I reached for the thing slowly, my hand shaking and my vision blurred with tears. I put my hand on its head. It was sticky with blood, and I could feel things moving in that rancid fluid. I stroked my fingers through the rotted mess, stirring up angry flies. Three hard strokes, just behind what would be its left ear, if it had ears. I knelt to the ground in front of it.

It made a low, metallic and wet, rumbling noise, moving its body as if to lean into my hand. I reached under the thing's neck with my other hand. That hand bumped into a dangling piece of wetness wrapped around something hard and sharp. Bone. I ignored it. I found the spot. A switch. I pushed it. It didn't budge. Why? I felt around in the gunk that was once a person, maybe more than one person.

Something was clogging the switch. I kept petting the thing, even as I tugged on the mass. It was stringy and tough, like the gristly part of a steak.

I will never eat steak again in my life.

I kept smiling.

I yanked, hard, and it popped out. Fluid filled with living things spattered all over my hand. I almost, just almost, stopped smiling. But I forced myself to reach up and push on the switch again. It resisted, but with a sickening crunch, it moved.

The robot spider's eyes slowly closed, and it curled up in a ball. It was asleep now.

I finally stopped smiling. I started to scream, but was interrupted as the contents of my stomach came out. All over the robot, my hands, my arms, my hair, my lap. It didn't matter. It was cleaner than I was, right now. It even made the air smell better.

============

A/N- That adorifying little girl hanging out in the basement? The one that calls Amelia her Big Sister and is just the darlingest little thing? She builds things like that!!!

Seriously, though. Coming back to this chapter however many months later? Is intense. I love it.
"How about I trade you one of Bonesaw's spider-robots?" I asked.

"Sorry," she said. "While Cauldron is often willing to purchase property, I'm afraid-

"It's still alive," I interrupted her.

"Pardon?"

"I've looked into their value," I informed her. "The dead ones are worth millions, if you got one that was destroyed before it self destructed, just so someone can cut them open and guess how they might have worked. This one is still alive and fully functional. Loaded up with whatever Bonesaw puts in them."

"Where did you manage to-"

"Does it matter?" I interrupted again. I had to fake confidence, of course. But I was always good at faking it, and after my last few days there wasn't much left that could scare me.

"No," the woman agreed. "I suppose not."

....

"So I have to choose between price, power level, reliability, and side effects," I summarized.

"Succinctly put," the Doctor agreed.

"Don't care about the side effects," I stated. "If it turns me into a freak of nature, as long as I can still move around and talk, I'm good."

She looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

"When I said I fucked up, I meant it," I replied. "Power level first, reliability second. The rest doesn't matter."
"There is a certain risk that you'll lose your memories, if the formula goes wrong in your brain."

I paused. That was frightening. This was worth it. "Can you make sure I get found by a specific person? She'll know what to do."

The woman simply nodded.

....

"Y'know," I said to Clarice. "Taylor's going to be exposed as Khepri if she and Amelia don't hide their relationship better. They're acting like lovestruck children." Dammit, Taylor, why couldn't you be that strong years ago? This wouldn't have happened in the first place.

"I know," she said cheerfully as always. "Isn't it romantic?"

"But... her secret identity?"

"They don't care about that," the girl laughed. "We're starting to worry that it's taking too long."

"Taking too long?"

"Yeah, for them to be discovered," she answered. "Why hasn't anyone spoken up, yet?"

"Maybe... maybe they think they're not suppose to?" I suggested. It was true. Most of the people in the school were one of two groups. The wealthier families, like mine, who could afford to move out either before or during the nightmare months. And the poorer students who had stayed through that hell. The poorer ones won the culture war.

Kids who had left were learning to shut their mouths or risk being attacked. Khepri had saved at least two students' lives, already. Clarice saved one. And Amelia had to fix a broken arm. Every student saved: one of the rich kids who didn't realize that they couldn't get away with running their mouths anymore.

The rest of us? We learned not to cause trouble. That you minded your own business, and you brought weapons to school.

"I..." I hesitated. *If this happens, I can never go back to that school.* Khepri was a hero to those kids. Not some famous cape like the Protectorate. But a straight up, personal, hero. One of the people who brought food to their families. One of the ones that saved them or someone they loved from being raped or murdered or dragged off to god only knows what fate. Someone they owed personally. *When they learn who she is, and what I did to her...*

Then again, that would probably happen anyway, sooner or later. *At least this way it's my decision.* "I'll do it."

"Really? That's awesome!" she said happily.

"Anything you need me for," I replied, smiling for the first time since the spider. *She is grateful. To me. I am important.* "Speaking of, I learned a few things about Cauldron from that first meeting."

....

"So, we finally meet," I said, looking at Clarice. "Are you worried about who I really am?"

"No, I figured that out a while ago," she said, opening up a small briefcase. "Voice recognition software and perfect memory."

"Yeah," I chuckled nervously. *Software? Must have a wire or something.* "So how did you know about that spider bot and how to turn it off?"

"You mean Kitten?" she asked. "I built her."

My heart stopped. "Oh my fucking god, you're Bonesaw."

"I don't use that name anymore," She said with a cheerful smile. "I told you that you were smart. Are you going to tell anyone?"

*This is Bonesaw. Aceso. Clarice. Bonesaw. Was Clarice even her real name? Why was I thinking about that? I coughed a little. Was I going to tell anyone? Could I tell anyone? Who'd even believe me, after what I'd done? "Do... do you still need my help?" I asked.*

"Yes," she answered, reaching around in her bag.

I smiled, if shakily. I still mattered. "Like I said before. Anything you need me for."
"Yay!" she clapped happily. She then handed me a CD in a jewel case. It had one word on it: Taboo. "I want you to study this every day. There's two and a half hours of information, most of it in ten minute or less bits. Every file, every day. Since you can't go to school anymore, this is your homework."

"O-okay," I agreed. "What's this for?"

"It's everything we aren't suppose to know about powers," she answered. "I'm hoping that if it's part of your memories before you get them, you'll still remember everything after. If not, maybe this will help." She pulled out a helmet.

"What's that do?"

"It's a memory copying device," she replied. "If your memories are lost, this should let us restore them to full. Well, up until the last update, of course. I'll want you to do another scan right before you go to get your vial."

I hesitated before asking the question. "Can... can you remove a memory?"

"From the recording? Sure," she answered. "You'll just have to concentrate really hard on it while I work. From you? Not without pretty extensive brain surgery, and my Big Sister doesn't want me doing that anymore."

"I... I see." There goes that idea. I wouldn't mind them being gone, but having to relive that. Being weak, being helpless, seeing my father helpless... it was easier just to not think about. "Nevermind, then."

"Now, I need you to strip," she instructed. "I want to record every detail. And you're still ready for the 'prep' treatment, right?"

"Yes," I agreed without hesitation, as I started shedding my clothes. It isn't weird if it's for a doctor, right? And Clarice's power means she is the best doctor the world has ever seen. If she believed she had a way to boost the formula even further, I believed her, and I was more than willing to participate.

"This is a retroviral reactant," she said as she handed me a small inhaler. "You need to take one dose a day, right before going to bed. You'll wake up sore, but otherwise there will be no side effects. It has exactly ten doses. One for the next five days. The rest? Take it all two hours before using the power drug. The closer to exactly that mark you can achieve, the more it should help counter the negative effects of the vial."
"Okay," I nodded. "Once per day, the rest two hours before the vial." Whatever the hell a 'retroviral reactant' means.

"And now for the real power booster part," she smiled, holding up a large metal chamber connected to a thinner metal tube. "We're going to have to get you pregnant."

"What!?" I shouted, jumping back.

"Not for real," she replied. "This is an imitation trigger event. And trigger events respond to other nearby parahumans. The more, the better your powers will be. It'll also serve to guide your powers to manifest exactly the type we want them to. I've got genetic material from the seven parahumans that best fit our end goal, grown into cell sacks that resembles and mimics the corona pollentia."

"I... I'm afraid I don't really know what that is," I said nervously.

"The part of the brain that gives powers," she answered. "Basically, when you trigger, it'll be with a massive head start."

"I... I see," I said as I got into the chair. I've already been through way worse than this. A little bit more pain, a little bit more power. It was an easy decision. "Will this have any side effects?"

"Just the early effects of pregnancy," she said dismissively. "Morning sickness, possible swelling and soreness you won't be able to distinguish from the retrovirus. After about a month, your body will reject the pseudo-fetuses, you'll experience minor pain and an unusually difficult menstrual cycle, and everything will go back to normal."

"I... I can deal with that," I agreed, spreading my legs for the child-doctor-supervillain.

The next couple hours were uncomfortable at best.

....

"Have you experienced any illness recently?" the doctor asked, handing me the vial.

"Umm... not really," I answered. "A bit sore from my new exercise routine. Will that be a problem?" I opted not to mention the other sources of soreness. At this moment, pretty much my entire body ached. Even my teeth and hair seemed to hurt. I glanced at the clock. An hour and twenty minutes from the final dose of the drug.
"None at all," he answered. "If anything, it's beneficial. The serum has minor rejuvenative effects."

"Oh, okay," I agreed. I held the serum. This was the key to everything. How I could fix my mistakes. How I could matter. What would make the hell of the last month of my life worth it.

"Most people seem to think the fluid is extremely unpleasant tasting," the doctor told me. "As you've surely been informed of before, and I will make sure you know now, you must drink the whole vial all at once. Not doing so can cause potentially lethal side effects. The faster you finish, the more pleasant the process will be."

I nodded, looking at the vial. *This is my chance*. I waited. *The closer I get to two hours, the better.*

"Is there a problem?" The doctor asked.

"Just a little nervous," I dismissed.

"If you're having second thoughts, I'm afraid you can't get a refund. Each vial is specially formulated to the customer's request. The resources to make the drug cannot be reclaimed."

"No... no," I responded. "I want it, I just. It's hard to fathom, y'know?"

"I'm afraid not," he responded, sounding a little impatient. "I was selected for this job specifically because I'm not interested in becoming a parahuman."

"Yeah, I can see where that' be an asset," I smiled. I need a way to buy another half hour. What could I do that'd convince the doctor to let me wait that long? I couldn't think of anything that was likely to work.

He didn't deign to answer the comment, simply watching me. I finally uncorked the vial, and after a deep sigh I chugged the whole thing.

Pain immediately lanced through my body as I stared up at a sky that was no longer there. The idea of sky no longer existed, dwarfed by possibility itself. Two monolithic beings, ancient and powerful beyond all human comprehension danced through dimensions as a human might switch between channels on a television. *No, not that. That was mechanical and separate. This is... this is a singer changing pitch.*

They spiraled and they split, raining fragments down upon a world. Many worlds. A million million copies of earth seeded.
One slipped, somehow, and collided with the worlds. Six earths died instantly in the impact. Another three damaged. They... they were...

I awoke on the floor. I retained the vision! *The taboo*. I know what the Passengers are!

....

"I got my powers from Cauldron," I informed them. "You know who they are, right?"

"We're aware," Taylor said. "Also, you can stop hiding it. Minerva's power still works on you."

"Then she already knows what I did," I said. "And why I did it. I can help you. I still know about 'Taboo', because I knew before I had powers."

"You... fuck!" Minerva cursed. "You know everything. Cauldron. The Entities. Fucking Riley."

*Riley? Oh, that must be her real name.* I nodded even though I wasn't sure if they could see me. "I know. I knew. And I have powers that can help."

"What," Taylor said, her voice dripping with anger. "Exactly are your your powers?"

"I can see energy," I answered. "Can kinda see some powers the same way. It doesn't tell me that it's a power at work, or what that power does exactly, that's stuff I have to guess at. Some powers are more obvious than others that way. Turn things cold... but that's more of like a side effect. Something that just happens when I'm really using my energy sense at high levels. I'm probably immune to a lot of energy attacks, too. I think." I paused for a second. Dramatic effect and all.

"All those are kinda secondary. My real power is that I'm a Tinker. Specialized in energy manipulation and transfer. And, most importantly, I know how to work 'wet'." I smiled.*Maybe I wasn't able to be strong on my own. But I could make others stronger. I mattered.*

==========

A/N- Cauldron: "We're halping!"
Pantheon: "STOP HELPING!"

And Emma is seriously fucked up in the head, isn't she?
I was shaking when we were done hearing Emma's story, just thanks to the waves of emotion coming off Taylor. Zach was sitting in the corner muttering 'fuck' over and over again. Riley- actual Riley, not the Clarice doll- was on the other side of the room looking for all intents like a puppy that knew it was about to get kicked, but didn't understand why. Lisa was just staring at the screen we'd used to talk through. I turned off the feed.

"Every kind of fuck," Zach concluded. Riley looked over at him, then her eyes darted to me before going back to the floor.

Lisa was the first one to say anything useful. "Okay," she sighed. "We do this one step at a time. The easy stuff first. We have to go back out to where the rest of our guests are waiting, and give them the really really sanitized version of what just happened. No Cauldron. No Bonesaw."

Riley flinched at the way Lisa spit the word.

I nodded, reaching over and putting my hand on Taylor's shoulder. "Okay," I said. "You guys go out and start the ball rolling. We'll be out in a moment."

Everyone else left. Except Riley, who sat quietly in the corner. "Are you going to be okay?" I asked Taylor, pushing every positive emotion I could into the link. I couldn't come up with many.

"Yeah," she said. **FocusDetermination.** She stood up and grabbed my hand. "Yeah. It helps to focus on a goal. Right now, that goal is letting the others know everything's okay."

The others looked at us as we came out.

"Alright, now that everyone's gathered up," Minerva said. "First... that was Emma. Yes, that Emma. Now she has powers and wants to join the team."

"Fuck," Kid Win muttered. "And she came right up to your door? You'd think she'd at least have a sense of self preservation."

"Well, that explains why you hit her," Rapture replied. "Halo would probably say something about turning the other cheek and all that... but, honestly, after what she put you through, I can't say I blame you. So, what are you going to do about this?"

I didn't have an answer to that question. Neither did Taylor.
"I know I may be a junior member or whatever," Flechette spoke up. "But I don't think I'm comfortable working with a bigot. If there's a vote in this, I'm voting we kick her to the curb. And if there's not a vote? Well, I left the Protectorate specifically because I didn't appreciate being treated like a tool without any concern for who I am and what I want."

"She's not a bigot," Taylor responded. "For what little credit it adds up to. I don't know why she did everything she did, but me being gay wasn't a part of it."

"How can you be so sure?" Flechette asked.

"Because she's not a lesbian, or even bisexual," Rapture answered. We all looked toward her. "Sorry, it's something my powers can't help but notice. And you were going to tell them, anyway."

AnnoyanceRelief. "Yeah, pretty much all of that," Taylor agreed.

"But... you and Amelia?" Parian spoke up.

"Are complicated," I responded, putting my arm around Taylor and drawing her close. AppreciationSafe. It's times like this I wish I were taller. It's tough being the protective one when the other person is taller than you by at least a few inches. "It's hard to explain, and no one's business but ours."

Flechette looked at Parian, and then at us. "Well, whatever works for you," she finally concluded.

"We should sleep on it," Crystal suggested. "It's getting late, already. Everyone goes home, goes to bed, and we worry about the crazy shit in the morning."

"You're not planning to keep Emma here overnight, are you?" Rapture asked. There was an edge of warning in her voice. "I like you kids, but considering what your powers are, and your history with this girl. You see where I'm coming from, right? We have to make sure she's unharmed, and getting a certain level of treatment after her trigger event."

"She's fine," Missy stated. "Or at least alive and upright and walking around."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"A trick with my power," she answered. "I can sense my own spacial distortions. And my power can't distort people or animals, or within a half inch or so of them. Your plants may as well be
Rapture coughed. "She didn't have a trigger event?"

_AlarmWorry. Vista knows Clarice is a fake. Rapture just figured out... fuck!_

Zach laughed. The first sound he'd made since leaving the ad-hoc interrogation room. "Is there anyone in this city with powers that aren't complete bullshit?" No one bothered answering.

"Where did she get her powers?" Rapture asked. The others were looking at me and Taylor and Lisa expectantly. _God damn it._

"This can't leave this room," I told them. "There's a group we're investigating. Have been for a while. They've found a way to make a serum that we think forces trigger events. We do know it grants powers."

"That... you're certain?" Rapture asked.

"How does that even work?" Kid Win, that time.

"We're not sure," Minerva responded. "We have sort of taken a 'wait and see' with the group. We know they're responsible for the Case 53s. That's what happens when a batch goes wrong. For whatever definition of 'batch' applies. Part of their testing and refinement process."

"And you haven't reported this to the whole world?" Rapture asked.

"It would do more harm than good," Minerva insisted. "They seem mostly benign. The experiments, the Case 53s, they seem to have been volunteers. I'm sure their process wasn't all that moral... they probably went up to terminal cancer patients and said something along the lines of the drug being able to save their lives and giving them powers. At the cost that, if they were unlucky, they'd wind up looking like Gregor the Snail. But if they were lucky, they'd be the next Alexandria or something. Either way, they'd no longer be dying.

"Not filling me with confidence," Rapture responded.

"I've done some investigating," she continued. "There are at least thirty heroes that got their powers from Cauldron in New England. If we reveal this, it means we lose those heroes and however many others are across the world. Probably thousands of them. What does the Protectorate look like after that? What do the Endbringer battles look like? They're not on the side of the angels, certainly. But everything I've been able to divine about them says they're trying to help hold this world together.
Even if only out of enlightened self interest."

Rapture was frowning. "So trying to stop them is basically us shooting ourselves in the foot?"

"Pretty much," Minerva agreed. "For now, at least. We're still digging."

"And this girl, she got her powers from them?"

"Complete with Case-53 mutations," Minerva confirmed. "If relatively minor ones."

"I'll want to be there when we ask her about all this," she said, her voice hard.

"So that's taken care of for now?" Minerva asked, looking throughout the room at our new recruits, and the old ones that weren't in the know. There were nods all around, even if most of them were reluctant.

"Okay, let's go give Emma a checkup," I relented.

"I'll sit this one out," Zach replied.

"Me, too," Taylor agreed. "Minerva... save breaking her mind in half for the time being. It didn't work so well last time you did it." AnnoyanceDistaste.

....

I opened the passage to where I'd put Emma. Flanked by Rapture, Blasto and Minerva, we entered the room.

"First thing's first," Rapture stated. "Are you under the influence of any mind altering substances?"

"I don't think so," she answered.

"How long have you had your powers?"

"About six hours," she replied. She seemed to be trying to look past us into the hall. A pulse of thought and I sealed the passage.
"Cauldron sold you them?"

"Yes," Emma answered. Short, terse answers. Enough to be honest, not enough to give away anything.

"I'm going to check on your health," I answered.

"Uh, okay," she agreed, reaching out her hand to me. I touched it.

Mending her broken nose was the easy part, and I undid much of the bruising. She'd still have a black eye, but not as bad as it could have been. "Oh! I'm... I'm sorry."

"About?" She asked, fidgeting.

"It seems your insides are more different than your outsides," I answered. "I'm having trouble making sense of it. Your power's interfering with mine."

"Oh, yeah," she responded. "I noticed some of that already. I don't feel pain anymore, or even have much of a sense of touch at all." Emma's body started shifting slightly as I continued to maintain contact. The blue tones changed over to earthy brown tones. She could almost pass for a normal, if unusually dark skinned black girl this way. But for the solid black eyes that now radiated darkness. "My reproductive system's disabled and my physiology has been reoptimized for neurological efficiency..."

"Fucking hell," Minerva laughed. "You have different powers based on different breaker states. You're a fucking Trump."

"Does that mean I'm on the team?" she asked hopefully. More than that. I was still in contact and even with the interference, I was getting very good at reading people with my power thanks to my link with Taylor. This isn't hope. This is desperation. This is... there are no words for what this was. This is a lot like what Riley feels like.

"Do your parents know about this?" Rapture asked.

"No," she admitted.

"Then that gets taken care of, first," she replied with a voice that reminded me very much of Carol. "I am going to take you home. We are going to talk to your parents. And we'll sort out everything else tomorrow. Like exactly what your powers are, and who's going to do what with you."
Emma looked at me, as if seeking an answer. I nodded. "Umm, okay ma'am," she answered. I opened the series of paths that would take them outside, and then left the room. I needed to talk to Taylor.

=================

A/N- Oh wow. This chapter has more foreshadowing in it than I ever realized. About Lily. About Taylor. Rapture. Emma. More Lily. I can see so much of what chapters ~300 are from this one here.

Also: I got a lot of people raging over Rapture here, taking steps to protect Emma and keep the situation from getting ugly.
"Fuck. My. Life." Taylor groaned aloud as she collapsed onto the bed.

-ComfortIrritationDesire-

"Sorry," Amelia blushed as she sat down next to her...girlfriend? In practically every way that mattered, she supposed.

Despite the fact that she was blushing as well, Taylor shrugged off the errant comment and, wrapping her arms around Amelia's waist, pulled her down to lie next to her. "I told you," Taylor remonstrated lightly, burying her face into Amelia's neck, "I don't mind."

Amelia sighed, taking in the scent of her...partner. Her partner. The strong associations the human brain built into the olfactory sense was already equating the scent of Taylor's shampoo with 'safe.' "We need to talk about it," Amelia eventually broached, sighing as she did so. It was a decision made from obligation, not her choice in the matter.

Taylor groaned again, cuddling up against Amelia in a way that was definitely meant to distract the older girl. "Please? Can't I have this one thing? Just this once? Can't I stay angry at her? I'm allowed that much, aren't I?"

"'Fraid not."

Amelia admirably refrained from cursing as Lisa stepped into what was rapidly becoming 'their' room, that was, hers and Taylor's.

"Oh, don't get up on my account," Lisa grinned, dropping into a chair and setting a bag on the table. "I'll just have to eat all this triple fudge, rocky road ice cream all by myself."

There was a moment of silence.

Lisa's grin faded slightly. "Oh, come on. I'm trying to be 'nice' here. You know how hard that is for me. Either we talk it out now or I'll just go off and get some overcomplicated plan in order that you two will bitch at me for later. Can we get the bitching out of the way first, for once? Then I can give myself a migraine untangling this clusterfuck and go straight to bed."

"Fine," Taylor and Amelia chorused, slowly moving off the bed and towards the large, organic sofa opposite the chair and table Lisa had taken.

As the ice cream was dispensed, Taylor sighed. "Why would someone do something like that? I mean, Jesus Fuck, Emma went to disable one of Bonesaw's spider-bots. She knew what she was getting into! How crazy do you have to be to agree to a plan where that is 'step one.'?"

"Pretty crazy," Lisa agreed. "It's almost like she was trying to commit suicide."

Taylor's spoon dropped to the floor with a clatter before all was abruptly silent.

"What?" Lisa asked, licking her spoon clean. "You think she was honestly expecting to get out of all of this alive? Well, hoping maybe. She wasn't actively planning to kill herself, but then
again...neither were you."

"Fuck," Amelia spat quietly, pouring support through the bond to wash away the blank shock that covered Taylor's emotions at the moment. "Why would...but she outed herself as Taylor's bully! She had to know what would happen!"

"She did," Lisa confirmed with practiced blase. "See, the thing is? Remember what Flechette said about cults and brainwashing? We kind of, accidentally, mind you, did that on Emma."

Taylor worked at her eyes tiredly, "Damnit. Yeah, I can see it. Sophia left, she fixated on Zach as a 'boyfriend' and Aceso through the PHO forums. They talked to her, built her back up when she needed it the most...and then the party."

"Yep," Lisa nodded, popping the 'p' in a way which would have had Accord cutting out her tongue. "So, when I put bitch-mode into overdrive, I tore her down, yeah...but, because of the way her mind works, since we're 'strong' she thinks she is, or was, obviously weak enough to deserve what I, we, did to her and since we did it, we're the only ones who can teach her to be 'strong' again. I think she tried getting her fix from Clockblocker, but with the way the Protectorate's rep was just gutted and the fact that...well, Emma's always been fixated on Taylor, from what I can tell, at least to a certain extent. When she found out Taylor was Kephri was Skitter? Well, I learned most of my psycho-babble from daytime tv and 100-level college courses. I don't know the term for it, but 'obsession' doesn't quite do it justice."

"So she took advice from an obviously mentally unstable ten-year-old on how to disable a biomechanical spider-bot from the darkest nightmares of a serial killer...then she let said aforementioned serial killer, who is, again, ten years old and mentally unstable operate on her, prescribe her drugs she didn't even understand the descriptions of, made contact with a shadowy conspiracy that controls entire governments, again on the advice of said ten-year-old mentally unstable parahuman supervillain, and took a vial of an unknown substance almost guaranteed to have horrible side-effects beyond granting her powers in conjunction with interacting with the unknown drugs and implants that the ten-year-old supervillain had put inside her?" Taylor looked at Lisa in vacant disbelief. "She did all of that just so...what?"

"She wants you to accept her," Lisa explained, rubbing at her temples. "She doesn't know exactly what she wants, but, her ideal scenario ends you acknowledging her as a strong person and...maaaybe becoming friends again?"

Taylor blinked, her eyes dilating as they fixed themselves on some far-off point of understanding that was just dawning.

"She did all that, so we could be friends again?" Taylor asked the ceiling vacantly. "I can't-I mean, that's...that's horrifying, terrible, and makes me so angry I-"

"-want to hate her, but you can't, because the fact that she's that desperate for your approval would be pathetic and adorable if that kind of responsibility didn't scare the living fuck out you," Amelia finished quietly.

A beat of silence echoed loudly.

"I guess that's why the mix of emotions seemed so familiar," Taylor mumbled. Turning to her partner, she frowned, "That's really how you feel about-"
"-about Riley? Pretty much," Amelia sighed, leaning her head on Taylor's shoulder. "Fuck, this is messed up."

"You think that's bad?" Lisa sighed. "We still haven't gotten to whether or not we're accepting her on the team."

Taylor groaned again, an aggravated sound that rose from the back of her throat and sounded like a wounded animal. "Please?" She asked desperately. "Lisa, isn't there any way we can just-"

"No," Lisa cut her off. Amelia frowned in shared irritation. "Putting aside your moral dilemma of condemning Emma to the same type of persecution you had to go through as most of the rest of us aren't really good enough people for that to bother us, there's also the fact that Emma quite literally knows every. single. fucking. detail. about Pantheon that matters at this point. If we cut her loose, she'll be squealing to the Protectorate in a week, dead or taken captive for her tinker abilities in that same time, or she'll try to go it alone. In case you don't understand, by the way, that's possibly the worst of any of these options given what she knows and the damage she could do without her powers."

"Shit." Taylor groaned. "There's no good choice to this, is there?"

"Think of it this way," Amelia offered. "We're getting a new cape, one who should be extremely useful, all for the low price of an extra basement room that you never have to go near."

"Sorry," Lisa shook her head. "Emma is fixated on Taylor. Zach would be a good distraction, if he was willing, but Emma is going to follow you around like the little sociopathic puppy Sophia trained her to be. Keep her on a short leash and don't leave her and Riley alone together too long."

Taylor froze.

-TrepidationPanic-

Amelia froze.

Lisa cursed, "I told Crystal to watch them!"

==============

Reader's Note- Slayer Anderson is awesome.

The last few lines aren't actually canon, however. But they are hilarious.
I observed the teen girl riding in my car. It was relatively easy to do so while still watching the streets. Her eyes were darting back and forth, with a sense of confusion and dissonance. "Emma? Is something bothering you?" I asked. Using names was a low level trick, as far as social manipulation went, but sometimes, it's a classic because it works. Besides, I wasn't comfortable with what I could really do here, to someone as damaged as this girl.

"Oh!" she answered. "Sorry, it's just... kinda weird, y'know." I did, of course, know. Tinkers, they telegraph their fugues so hard that almost anyone can spot it.

"Which part?" I asked. Again, the most generic of psychological tactics. You can get away with almost anything if you just ask the right questions.

"I was just thinking," she hesitated. She was clearly afraid of angering me. Submissive posture, as had been her behavior all night, but faking confidence at a level that made me believe she had years of practice at it. Almost any ordinary person would be fooled. Someone like Minerva or myself? I'd known her for a sum total of ten minutes, and there were so many ways I could break her down and rebuild her into anything I wanted. Her desperate need to be valued would be so easy to exploit.

....

"Sorry, pumpkin, I have to go."

"But Daddy!"

"Someone has to put food on the table," he smiled, ruffling my hair.

Mommy let out an exasperated sigh and walked out of the room.

They were fighting again. They were using me in their fights again.

....

"Yes?"

She was continuing to look for a way to phrase it that would make her sound knowledgeable and capable, without insulting me. "It's kinda funny to see a Tinker with armor like yours driving a
I chuckled. *It's not offensive if the person you say it to laughs.* "Oh, that," I smiled. *Rey always appreciates how I wear my heart on my sleeve. Most people did. That's why I did it.* "I didn't really read the rental agreement that well, but I think rebuilding their vehicles is frowned upon."

"Oh, sorry," she smiled back. Still nervous. Her eyes and skin shifted from the brown she'd been in to yellow. "Your armor is beautiful, by the way. Every system interlocks, nothing is wasted. It's flawless."

"Thanks," I replied. *She can really see the inner workings of my equipment? Of course, she's wrong. The armor's actually rather inefficient. Dozens of backup systems, second rate flight system that was cannibalized from another project. Young tinker, she'd learn.* "A lot of it's actually Dragon's technology."

Her eyes widened. *Of course they would, Dragon was a celebrity even in the non-cape world. A newly minted Tinker wouldn't be able to help but be impressed.*

"Do you think I'll ever be able to work with Dragon?" she asked, not bothering to hide the awe.

"Probably," I answered. "She's really very friendly."

"So how did you meet?"

"Oh, that's not much of a story," I lied expertly. "I wish I could say it was something cool like an Endbringer battle, but it wasn't all that special."

....

"Hegemon," the machine intoned. "You've already lost."

I ran down my list of options. Dragon didn't kill, as near as I could tell she couldn't kill. Or, at least, the robots she sent after me couldn't. They were autonomous AI, that I knew for certain, because nothing human thought like they thought. Even a remote controlled puppet was still reliant on a person, still left the behavioral cues I could pick up on. Dragon's suits were insanely advanced, but not alive, not human. *Not something I can influence.* My standard method was a bust, but I had other options.

A white hot lance of energy struck the suit in the side, shattering whatever shields the thing had, and then melting through chunks of armor. The equipment dropped. And then exploded into a pulse of
magnetic energy. The city went dark.

Something collided with me, knocking me to the ground. My slaves turned to protect me, but they were as lost and confused as I was. My tech had been improved significantly from the early days, but it was still technology that kept them bound to me. And that technology had just been disabled. In a minute, they'd 'wake up' and realize what I'd done to them. Didn't need my powers to know what would follow. I closed my eyes and waited for my life to end a second time.

....

"So, you bought your powers?"

"Uh..." she hesitated. "I'm not suppose to talk about that. They like their privacy."

I smiled. "Oh, I'm sure they do," I agreed. "But I already know about Cauldron." I didn't a few minutes ago, but she doesn't need to know that. "Where did you get the money for something like that?"

"I... I really can't talk about that..." she said, looking away. *Dial back, you're losing your connection.* She stared out the window. She was deeply disturbed by what she did. Yet, somehow, proud. It was like a rite of passage to her. Painful, terrifying, horrifically disgusting. Even vaguely sexual, but only vaguely. There was no shame or anger or sense of being cheapened by the experience. I ruled out prostitution easily enough. She was too psychologically connected to the idea of social value. She wouldn't be able to ignore that psychological stigma, not enough to hide it from me at least. That, and the extreme unlikelihood of making the kind of money needed to purchase superpowers through sex.

....

"Becky!" Mommy shouted, pulling the blanket up to cover her.

"Mom?!" I gasped. "Mister Reynolds?" I turned and ran, tears streaming from my eyes.

....

"It's not your secret to share," I concluded. Her reaction said it all. *Someone helped her. Someone probably risked a great deal to help her.* I didn't know how, or who, or why, or even what happened. But it bound Emma to the other party. This would be someone she considered a protector. A savior. I would not be able to get her to speak on the subject.

"It's not," she answered with the certainty I was expecting. And a gratitude that I had said it so she
wouldn't have to. She didn't want to turn me against her.

"What are you planning to do with your powers?" I asked. That's a safer subject. She was less afraid of her own secrets.

"I fu- messed up," she answered, covering the almost-profanity. I chuckled. The whole 'golden cross' thing made people think I was a prude. Oh well. "I messed up a lot of things, really badly. I'm going to use my powers to fix everything. To prove I'm worthy."

....

I screamed, clinging to my father. "No! You can't go! You can't!"

Mom didn't say a thing, simply glaring at him. He glared back, ignoring me.

"I don't have a choice, pumpkin," he pulled me tight. Didn't have a choice. Mom's fault.

"Then take me with you!"

"That's not an option, sweetheart," he said. "I promise I'll call."

"No!" I screamed. "You can't! I'll fix it, I'll make it better, I promise!"

"Rebecca," he consoled. "You can't fix this. No one can."

Something broke inside me. I collapsed. By the time I was coming to, my parents were both holding me again. Worried about me. They were together again, but it wouldn't last. Not unless I force them to. I know how to force them.

....

"That's why you bought powers?" I said, forming it as a question.

"Yes," she said, that same look of pride and pain. I'd seen that look on more than a few natural triggers. Myself included. Whatever else was going on in her life, she felt that she earned her abilities. She didn't see herself as having purchased them. She saw herself as having suffered for them.
"And the... changes... to your body? You're okay with that?"

She shrugged. "Worth it," she answered. "The old me was weak, stupid and useless. The new me is smart and powerful. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat." She offered a smile. "But I'd wear gloves next time."

I smiled back. I didn't know why she felt gloves were significant, but that was fine. "So, it's a way of reinventing yourself?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "I hadn't thought of it like that, before, but yes. I've been reinvented."

....

"Given any thought to your new name?" Halo asked.

"I'm thinking 'Ruth'," I answered.

"That's a lovely name," he agreed. "Symbolic. It suits you. But I was thinking of your name in costume."

"Oh," I looked away, and felt bad for doing so. Pretending to be bashful was a stupid habit I'd picked up, and it never seemed to fool him anyway. "Rapture."

He smiled. "I see," he agreed. "That suits you as well."

"It does," I agreed.

....

I was already certain her parents were not in any way involved in this mess, but still I had to ask about them as I pulled into her driveway. There was the possibility, if slight, of abuse. "So, have you thought about how to tell your mom and dad? Would you like me to come in and help? Haven may not have any real influence this far north, but we're still pretty well known and mostly respected. I could help smooth things over."

"No," she answered. "It won't be bad. Mom and dad are pretty cool. Supportive of whatever I want to do, really. I'm not going to say how I got my powers, of course. Accident, just like everyone else, right?"
They're 'cool', but that's a problem. She loves them, and they've not hurt her. But they're a disappointment. They failed her at a time when she needed them most. She's picked other outlets to seek validation. Clearly not healthy outlets, based on her actions toward Taylor. I'd seen this enough times in my life.

"Don't call powers an 'accident' in front of others," I advised. "People have to go through hell to get powers. Some will be a lot more upset than others. And don't mention how you got yours in front of others. Capes, and those who deal with capes, will accept 'I don't talk about it' as an answer."

"Thanks," she said, looking away again. She was once again in her submissive state, afraid that she'd said something to upset me. Blaming herself for her perceived 'mistake'. What happened to this girl?

"You'll be there, tomorrow morning?" I asked.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," she answered as she got out of my vehicle.

....

"How long are you going to keep me here?" I snapped, slamming against the bars of my prison. I hissed in pain, reminded of the broken rib and shoulder I'd briefly forgotten.

"As long as necessary," Halo answered. "You need time to heal."

He doesn't just mean physically, I realized. He's bought the same tripe he's been selling.

"Oh, is that what it is?" I countered. "Or do you just have a kick for keeping beautiful women in your basement? Start a harem of your own? Lots of those guys you pretend are somehow holy are pretty fond of that sorta thing."

He shrugged. "I was told you had a mean streak," he answered. "You're also not someone who can be lied to." The man sat down on one of those fold out metal chairs.

"We all have our crosses to bear," he continued. "Yours must be worse than most. Knowing everyone's secrets. Their lusts and their shames. Their failures and their fears. Every flaw and every fault. In a way, you know more about what God experiences than most people ever will."

"Oh, is that your plan?" I asked, even though I knew it wasn't. At least, it wasn't on a conscious level. Subconscious motivations were more difficult to gauge. "Talk about how divine my power is?"
"Divine?" he asked. "Oh, no. It is quite the opposite of divine. Adam and Eve took one bite of the fruit of knowledge, and while they gained knowledge, they lost peace and safety and innocence. You, through no fault of your own, have been given a second helping, and with it lost your ability to see the good in people. I can't pretend to know what that's like."

"Yet here you are pretending," I replied.

He offered a sad smile. "Maybe," he agreed. "I'm only human, after all. Still, even if I can't understand, I want to help you at least see there's better out there. If you won't accept that it's for your own sake, then at least believe I want to protect others."

"You want to convince me to undo some of the more permanent effects of my technology," I laughed. "Of course you do."

He sighed. "Okay, fine," he started. "Full honesty, everything out in the open. I haven't told a lie, of any sort, to any one, since my junior year of highschool. Yes, I do think you're physically attractive. No, that's not why I'm doing this, and I swear on my honor before God that I will never act on that attraction. I do want to save everyone you've influenced. I want you to want to save them. I want to save you. I want to save everyone. I know I can't. That's arrogance speaking. You can use that to manipulate me, no doubt. Or, you can use that remarkable power of yours and realize that everything I've said is genuine. That I'm someone who actually cares about you, for no other reason than because you're a human being and it's the right thing to do."

*He means every word of it,* I realized.

A/N- This particular chapter earned me some honest to goodness hate (as opposed to the usual dislike of a given character/chapter) from silly, silly people who feel I portrayed Christianity too positively in this chapter.

... Yeah, you heard me...
I woke up with hair covering my face. *Oh, right, Taylor stayed the night again.* I smiled, even as I pushed the tangles away from my eyes and mouth. She mumbled in her sleep. Nothing I could understand. "Think it's time to wake up," I whispered in her ear.

She moaned and pressed back against me. Our link was vague and muted, as it always was when one of us was asleep, but offered indications of pleasure. I closed my eyes and fought off that particular temptation. I scooted back from her, in part for that reason. In part to wake her up.

"Huh," she said, waking up. "How late is it, this time?"

"Pretty early," I answered. "We've still got school, and the alarm hasn't gone off."

"Oh, joy," she muttered. "Wanna join me on a jog?"

I smiled, not even bothering to hide my thoughts on watching Taylor going through her exercise routine in the already warm summer morning.*ShyPleased.* "I could be convinced," I answered.

"I'll go get changed," she replied. "No, you can't watch."

"Can I watch after we're done?"

"Only if you can keep up," she offered. *Oh, I am so going to keep up.*

Fifteen minutes later, it was abundantly clear that I could not keep up. I gasped and wheezed as I sat down on a chair outside. That I created, of course.

"Come on," Taylor encouraged, still jogging in place. "You haven't even broken a sweat yet."

"Lungs burn," I croaked.

"They're suppose to," she answered. "You'll be fine. Just gotta keep moving. Another five minutes won't be that bad, right?"
"Sadist," I complained.

"Look at it this way," she teased. "If I don't break a sweat, I won't need to take a shower."

"You're a horrible person," I moaned, forcing myself to my feet. Of course I knew she'd need to take a shower anyway. Hair like hers didn't leave much choice in that matter, especially since I probably drooled into it. **Must remember to ask Riley about the progress with the Roid Ray.**

We got back, eventually. Taylor was still smiling. "Not bad," she said.

"You're a terrible liar," I groaned.

"No, really," she insisted. "Much better than my first time out. You'll do better next time."

"What makes you think there's going to be a next time?" I asked.

"Because I know how much you like the view," she smiled, then she gave me a peck on the cheek.

I blushed. **Okay, there was definitely going to be a next time.**

....

By the time we'd gotten home from school, they were ready for us. Rey, Rapture, and Lisa. The ones who had run Emma's tests. **DreadResolve.** I gripped Taylor's hand. The message was clear, link or no link. **Whatever came of this, we did it together.**

Zach was with us, and Clarice was off with Vista. While having Riley's input on Emma's powers was something I would have liked, we really didn't need to risk her around Rapture too much. The woman had near Tattletale levels of perception, sometimes, and was a lot better at hiding what she knew than Lisa was. Even I wasn't so oblivious to miss the security risk.

We went straight for our meeting room.

Minerva, for once, didn't have a smile. "Alright, we'll start with the less complicated part. Her powers."

I nodded, sitting down with Taylor. "Okay," my partner agreed. "What, exactly, is she capable of?"
Rey spoke up. "Based on our analysis? She's either a Tinker three, thinker two, breaker and striker two. Or she's up to a Tinker and Thinker five to seven."

*AnnoyanceDread. And this is the simple part?*

"It's hard to quantify," Rapture supplied. "She has breaker states. Once she enters one, she doesn't leave it until she chooses another. Basically, she no longer has a 'default human' mode. Red is for thermodynamics, letting her sense and tinker with heat and cold. Yellow state is much the same for a sense and a tinker ability directed toward electricity and magnetism. Orange state for light, maybe the whole radiation spectrum. White for sonic. Black works for bioanalysis. Blue is a hybrid state of sorts, letting her harness all her powers at once."

"That form seems to use up a lot of energy," Minerva supplied. "All her powersets at once, she can keep it going for a maximum of maybe five minutes in an hour before she starts seeing serious health risks."

"She stayed in that form most of the time she was here last time," Taylor pointed out.

"Only cosmetically," Minerva responded. "Once the ice started melting, her power was off."

"And why does that mess with her ratings so much?" I asked.

"She's a grab-bag cape," Minerva explained. "Like Circus, maybe a little like Flechette. Only a tinker. Lots of minor powers that add up to something better than the sum of its parts."

"She's a low end tinker," Rapture supplied. "But she's a low end tinker in a number of disciplines, and it's a wide enough distribution that she can work with and improve upon almost any other tinker's technology. Simply by having so many different possible options that they don't have. But, individually, she's not that good. If she built using just one of her specialties, she'd only rank a two, maybe a three. If she builds using all of her specialties, she's closer to a six or seven. A six or seven that you'd think was was actually three or four people."

"Her effective specialty, if you want something that's easy to explain quickly," Minerva said. "Is more like an integration tinker. One whose main advantage lies in making other tinker tech work well together. Plus she's still a middling tier energy tinker in her own right."

*DreadResignation. In short," Taylor muttered. "The more tinkers you have, or the more varied their specialties are, the more effective she is."
"Basically," Minerva answered.

"And we have a pretty wide variety of tinkers and tinker tech," she muttered, rubbing her hand over her eyes. I put my arm around her. "Especially now that Chariot's official, and Kid Win's at least considering joining."

"God damn it," Zach muttered. "If she had a shitty power..."

"Oh, no, we haven't even gotten to the bad part yet," Minerva chuckled. "Rapture's got a lot to say about the psych exam. Some of it, we already know. Borderline suicidal behavior is just the tip of this particular iceberg."

"Not my place to share all the details," Rapture stated. "The fact that she gave me permission to is hardly a strong justification, given that her psychological state is so fragile that she's not truly competent to give that permission. Due to... something in her past. Yes, I know. No, I won't share." She gave a rather unfriendly look at Minerva.

Tattletale raised her hands up. "Hey, this is all you. I can keep a secret."


"Right," Rapture said dryly. "Thanks to that, Emma's worldview was broken, destructively. A belief that she was betrayed by those she trusted most."AngerDisgust. "More specifically, she feels she was failed by those who were suppose to protect her and help her, and sees that failure as abandonment. Not the most rational of reactions, but you can hardly expect young teens to be rational in the face of extremely traumatic events."

"So she," Taylor's voice dripped malice. "She turns on me to do what? Revenge by proxy?"

"Not uncommon for victims to turn around and victimize," Rapture didn't meet any of our gazes. "But that's not quite Emma's story. She felt alone and abandoned, all sense of self worth and faith in others broken. And then she met someone who gave her a... different... set of values to follow."

"Basically," Tattletale summarized. "She got traumatized. Then met some complete fucking psychopath who filled her head with crazy bullshit. Think Junior Jack Slash."

RealizationNausea. It took me a second to realize part of that was my own reaction. I've been on the receiving end of that kind of attention.

"Arguably, worse," Rapture replied. "This was someone who protected her at her most vulnerable.
Gave her a new sense of purpose."

"Even better," Minerva added. "Someone that the Protectorate, in its infinite bullshit, made into a hero. At least when Jack came along, everyone knew he was a fucking monster."

"Someone that we removed from the picture," Taylor muttered.

"Exactly," Rapture replied. "If not for a few events. Zach being one of them. Knowledge of Cauldron being another. I have little doubt she'd have attempted suicide in the near future. As it stands... that's functionally what she's done. Attempted suicide, but without the goodbyes."

FearConcern. I looked at Taylor. No, that wasn't directed at Emma. It was for Lisa. She looked at me. PatientDiscretion. Ah, she wanted me to keep that quiet for now. I could do that.

"Yeah," Minerva agreed. "Already covered that a bit last night. The powers, the shit she went through to get them. That's not something a person who wants to live does."

"She's fixated on Pantheon, on being what she thinks a 'real hero' is, in order to provide herself a sense of self worth," Rapture explained.

"Are you trying to say we should let her join?" Zach asked, sounding very much against that idea.

"God, no," Rapture corrected. "What you should do is force her into therapy. Let actual professionals try to break her of this obsession with power and give her a sense of purpose that doesn't involve her building a sense of self worth based on violence."

"But," Taylor supplied.

"But that's not going to happen," she confirmed. "She knows some important secrets about your team, and everything my power is telling me screams that you can't afford to reveal them. You have to either keep her here of her own free will, or you would have to kill her." There was an unspoken 'and me' at the end of that sentence.

She continued after that brief pause. "All of that is before starting the quagmire that is parahuman psychology. Parahumans universally have exaggerated responses to emotional stimuli. Highs are higher, lows are lower. Therapy guided toward normal people is only barely effective, and shows diminishing results with time. If anything, parahumans have an opposite response toward aggression and violence than the baseline human norm. It's often a calming mechanism that fosters pleasurable emotions."
"We're stuck with her because we can't give her to anyone else," Minerva stated. "And we have to put her abilities to use or it'll just drive her even more insane. And that's not even the most fucked up part."

"She volunteered to let me use my specialty," Rapture finished. "No surprise she figured it out. She was willing to let me rewrite her memories and personality to be, as she put it, 'more useful'."

RealizationDiscomfort. My eyes meant Taylor's. Her hand moved over and gripped mine. We were both conspicuously aware of the bracer on my arm.

===============

A/N- Seriously though, Emma's fucked in the head.

Chapter End Notes

Less than 1/4 of the way through and this story is the biggest Worm fic on A03 by around 20,000 words. That is all
"So, we're keeping her? No choice in the matter?" Zach muttered. *Fuck, and he's suppose to be the untouchable one.* "Brain rewrite is still off the table?"

_HorrorDisgust._ "No." It was a single word that allowed no argument. Taylor's stance was absolute, and I agreed with her. "We are not unmaking someone just so we can keep a puppet with their face. A minor alteration, maybe, and then only if it was essential. But we're not rewriting three years of her memories just to... what would it even accomplish? We'd still remember everything she's done, and she wouldn't even know what or why we hated her for it."

"She's right," I agreed. "Sounds like a Twilight Zone episode. And those never end well for anyone."

"It really does," Taylor nodded. "She gets to undo all the shit she's been through. Then her new, innocent, copy gets to live with the aftermath. It's more a punishment for us than her. No. Emma lives with what she's done. Hopefully remorsefully."

"That's a bit much to hope for," Minerva stated. "She knows what she's done was wrong, in the same way a puppy knows it's in trouble. She doesn't get the 'why'. Too caught up in her own personal problems to stop and consider the problems of others."

"Fine," Taylor muttered. _AngerVindictiveDistaste._ "Not like I'd have believed her even if she was sincere."

"Satisfied that they're not going to go all revenge fest the moment you leave?" Minerva asked _Rapture_.

She nodded. "I am now," she agreed. "Them, at least. As long as they promise to keep you from doing anything. You're one of those people who takes it more personally when someone you care about is hurt than when you're hurt. It makes you a much bigger problem than they are, in some situations."

"Pretty sure everyone here knows that," Tattletale responded back. _ResignationAnnoyance_. I nodded in agreement.

"They do," she countered. "You don't. Not really."

"Pointing your power at me?" Tattletale smiled. "We can both play that game, you know."
"There was a time..." She sighed, standing. "But that's not important. When was the last time you used your power on yourself?"

Lisa just stared, disbelievingly, at Rapture's back as she walked away.

"I... uh... probably don't need to be there for when you talk to Emma," Rey said, looking between us and Rapture. "I just work here and all that, y'know."

"It's fine," I said, not sensing any disagreement from Taylor. And not caring what Lisa thought, if she was thinking anything at all right now. "But if she just broke our thinker, I'm going to have to ask her to get us a new one of equal or greater value."

He rushed after her, and I looked over at the eerily quiet blond. *Holy shit, someone actually shut Tattletale up.*

_WorryConfusion_ "Lisa?" Taylor asked. "Are you still in there?"

"Uh... yeah," she muttered. "Yeah. She wasn't bluffing. She actually does use her power on herself."

"That probably means more to you than us," I said. A bit dismissive, probably, but we had other things to worry about. "Taylor and I are going to go deal with our errant tinkers."

"Yeah," Lisa muttered. "You guys go do that. If you need me, I'm gonna be in my room."

....

"Okay," I sighed. _FocusResolve._ "They're waiting." I clasped Taylor's hand and made the room open. They were currently shoulder to shoulder over a workbench, covered in gunk.

"Or not," Taylor muttered.

"You're suppose to be in trouble, Riley," I told her. "Not playing with your new project."

"But we're making some really cool breakthroughs!" Emma insisted, turning to face us. She was so covered in gunk that I identified her 'mode' by eyes radiating black. "I solved your energy transfer needs for the ultralisks. Even improved on the zerglings. And we've almost completed an organic copy of Chariot's antigrav tech. In a couple more weeks, we can build living things that do antigravity."
"It's true," Riley agreed. "Emma's helped me with so many things. We might even be able to build a way around the Taboo."

I froze. *Oh god damn it. That would solve so many problems, and yet this precedent was a bad one.* "Riley," I said. "You are not going to bribe us into forgetting what's happened here. I set down rules when you first got here. About using your powers without my permission. Emma may have volunteered, but that's beside the point. You made a promise. You broke that promise. You lied to me. And you know what that means."

Riley stood there, also covered in goo. Her eyes started watering. "You... I..."

"It was my idea!" Emma interrupted. "I wanted powers. I needed them. All she did was make sure it went as well as possible. Punish me for it, if you have to."

"She gave you money," Taylor said dryly. "Plus that fucking spider bot. God only knows what they can do with that thing. She's as responsible for it as anyone."

"Do you even know what I was going to do?" I asked. "What I told her the first day. That I'd take away her powers for something like this."

Emma froze. "Y-you can do that?" she asked.

"Not even difficult," I answered. "Might not work on you, but it'll work on any natural parahuman."

"But you need her! You need both of us!" she insisted. "I know what the Passengers are. How they work. I might even be able to figure out how to find them, if you give me a chance. You have to! We worked so hard for this! She did it because she loves you." *IncredulityAngerBetrayal.*

I looked at the little girl. The monster that happily impaled Mark and drove me to the brink of insanity. Looking up at me with desperation and fear. Every so often, I even forgot that about her. What she was, what she'd done. I'd even come to think of her as a kind of family. But I never thought there was love between us.

Taylor's arm wrapped around me. *ConcernSupport.*

*Emma's right. Riley does love me.* The feeling was not any kind of mutual, at best I was concerned about her and terrified of her, but I didn't love her.
Taylor spoke, taking command. I felt the emotional backlash as she fell back on 'Skitter', pushing negative emotions into our bond. I focused on pushing through. If she needed to use me as a crutch right now, then that's what I'd be. "You want to be a part of this? Fine. Your conditions are as follows. Everything you do that involves people goes through us for approval. That rule goes for both of you." They nodded.

"Riley, you keep in mind that you're suppose to be a good girl. Emma is not a good person, and listening to her ideas is only going to get you in trouble." Riley nodded, Emma looked away.

"And Emma?" She looked back. "You give a full confession and apology." Emma went to start speaking. "Not to me. I honestly don't care that much, even if I believed you in the first place. Your confession will be public. Spontaneous if you like, or write a speech, get help with it, whatever you need to do. I don't even care if you mean a single word of it. You manipulated people against me for years. You manipulated Riley against Amelia. Now use that skill for something useful for a change."

"Okay," she nodded. "I can do that, Taylor."

"And then it's the last time," she continued. "You want to convince me you've changed? Then you might want to actually feel bad about what you've done. And stop doing it. That goes for both of you."

Taylor turned and left the room. I looked at them both, even as I could finally relax thanks to the emotional pressure Taylor was putting out started to fade a little. She anger and sadness was still there, but Taylor was accepting it instead of hiding it in our link.

"She's right, Riley," I said. "You need to learn to be better than this. You should have told me what you were doing. Lying to me and hurting Taylor are things Bonesaw would do. You can't be someone who does those things anymore."

I turned and chased after Taylor. *Hopefully some of that would get through to them.*

===================

A/N- No one ever noted that I had Emma use Rapture's little empathy manipulation here.
My mind wasn't really on the antigravity project. I was still replaying earlier in the evening. Big Sister and Taylor. I disappointed her. I disappointed both of them. I hurt them and it made me hurt. I had to work extra hard on this so they knew I was sorry, but I couldn't concentrate.

"Are you okay?" Emma asked me.

"Are you okay?" Missy asked Clarice. "You're kinda zoning out again."

"Yes," I answered them both. "I just have a lot to think about."

"It's about the real you, isn't it?" Missy asked. The real me? I wonder. To Lisa, the real me is one of the most terrifying things that hasn't actually managed to destroy a city. And even then, not for lack of trying. Missy doesn't know the real me, she only knows Clarice. I want to be Clarice. For her. For Amelia. I don't want to be Bonesaw.

"It is," I answered. Clarice was still standing, the automated systems I'd built into her allowed her to be almost completely independent, except the lack of any brain function. We'd finished our homework and were now simply stretching our legs. Missy's exercise program, which I kept her company on. "You knew from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Ever since I first saw you on Bella," she confirmed. "It wasn't the real Taylor, either. That's how Chariot was able to spot the pair of you before I did. Kind of a weakness of my power, not being able to sense nonhumans. It's a different version of the M4s you showed off on the news, right?"

"Different model," I answered. "This current version is M7C." I had Clarice gesture over the body.

Meanwhile, I was looking over the newest design with Emma. We hadn't quite perfected the antigravity tech. Part of the problem was that Chariot and Kid Win, the tinkers that actually understood this stuff, couldn't be allowed to work in this lab. Too likely to discover me. Emma made a fine bridge, of course, explaining the details in a way I could use properly. More importantly, she could use it. My skill was in augmenting biology with technology. It was a broad spectrum of talents, to be certain. But building new life, the way Rey and Amelia and Emma could do, or understanding the intrinsic way brains function the way Cranial and Rapture did, these were not talents of mine. To say nothing of the frustrating Taboo barrier.

"You're going to show me who you really are, sometime, right?" Missy asked. "It's hard knowing a friend is keeping such a huge secret from me."
"Big Sister doesn't want me to," I admitted to her. "She wants me to keep that a secret from you, but she's upset because I kept a different secret from her."

Missy frowned. A few sensors in Clarice tripped off their alerts. Her heart rate went up, her pupils dilated. A sign of strong negative memories. "That's how parents act, sometimes. They can be dumb about things. You'll learn that as you get older."

I frowned, and Clarice mimicked it.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Emma asked. I nodded, Clarice did not.

"I kept a pretty bad secret from her," I said. "And now she hates me. So I'm going to make her something really nice so she wants me back. Then we'll be friends again."

"That's not how it works," Missy said, looking at me. "You don't become friends just because the other person is useful to you. You become friends because you treat each other good."

"But what about the pegasus I promised you?" I asked. "That's how we became friends."

She sighed. "Is that what you think?" I didn't need Clarice to tell me that was rhetorical. "I'm friends with you because you're funny and smart and nice to be around. Sure, having a flying horse would be awesome, but that isn't necessary. Did you give Theo any cool stuff?"

I stopped and thought about it. "Well, Amelia gave him a tune up so he could get into shape faster," I answered. "But other than that, his power doesn't really work in a way that we can improve."

Missy frowned. "Okay, nevermind. He's never done anything 'useful' for me. He's nice to me and doesn't expect anything other than that I'm nice to him."

"Reproductive imperative," I answered. "He's a strong candidate as a viable mate for-'"

"Eww!" Missy shouted. "Just. No. First, I'm thirteen. Second, I don't expect to live long enough to have children. Third, I don't even want kids."

"Oh," I said. "Is this why Amelia said they wouldn't get married until all the Endbringers are gone?"

"I have no idea," she answered. "Before last night I thought they were, y'know, lesbians. Now I think they're just weird. But let's get back on track. I like Theo because he's a good person. Just like I like Jenny because she's nice. She doesn't have any powers or anything 'useful', she's just nice."
"She says her brother's got a crush on me," I told her.

"Her brother, most of the other boys in the school, and probably a lot of the girls," Missy added. "You're like the second coming of Glory Girl. Only I think you're nicer than her, even if you don't realize it."

"Really?" I asked "Why?"

"Well," she smiled. "You did basically throw Theo at me. Don't think I didn't realize that you were over there playing 'matchmaker'. I'm pretty sure Theo figured it out, too. So, here's a question, miss 'reproductive imperative'... why would you do that for me? If he's such a catch, wouldn't you be better off keeping him for yourself? Or is there someone else you think's better?"

I paused. That was a really good question. Sure, my body hadn't matured to that point yet, but it was only a matter of time. I had no interest in halting my biological development. "Because I wanted you to be happy," I finally said.

"Exactly," Missy replied. "That's what friends are, people who want you to be happy, and who you also want to be happy. Sure, you can build teams off of 'useful' and 'not useful', and probably should. We'd be pretty bad friends if we tried to make Jenny fight supervillains."

I laughed, and with me Clarice. Emma just looked at me funny, and went back to explaining an electromagnetic coil system that was needed to divert gravitons, creating a bubble in which gravity didn't exist, or at least was greatly diminished. We'd start there and then work on more complex gravity channeling technologies over the course of potentially weeks. It wouldn't be ready by the time the next Endbringer battle occurred, but the one after we'd be ready.

"That doesn't mean we can't be friends with her, that just means we can't have her on a team with us, for her own safety and ours," Missy explained.

Clarice nodded. It made sense. Jenny wasn't really my friend, not like Missy was. But I wouldn't want her to be hurt. I hurt a lot of people that had friends. Emma was suppose to be Taylor's friend, and hurt her. Missy would never do that to me. I... I couldn't do that to Missy. "I'm not a good person," I finally told Missy. "I've done bad things. I still do bad things."

Missy just looked at me. "What did you do?"

"I can't say," I answered. My memories went back to my projects, my art. There were too many for me to remember, even if I had bothered to learn their names in the first place. They were meat, not
people. Not anymore. Working on Emma was one thing, she volunteered. The ones before. I'd almost taken apart Taylor, who later became the only person who made my Big Sister happy. How many others had I stolen happiness from for my projects?

"I can't tell you without breaking my promise to my Sister," I told Missy. "I already broke my promise not to hurt more people. I broke my promise to my mommy to be a good girl."

"They said your mother was killed by the Slaughterhouse Nine?" Missy asked.

"Yes," I answered. And my father, and Drew, and Muffles. And a lot of other people. A lot of them I killed.

"Okay," Missy said. "You don't have to talk about it. Amelia saved you from them."

Saved? Did she? "Yes."

"Then I don't need to know," Missy said. "You can tell me later, but Amy saved you and now you're my friend. That's enough." She put her hand on Clarice's arm. I couldn't feel it, because I couldn't run the sensory overlay while still doing other stuff in the lab, but the gesture was appreciated. It would be nice to be able to hug my friend with my own arms for once.

"She's still mad at me," I said. "How do I make her not be anymore?"

Missy shrugged. "I don't know. Amy has always tried being nice to everyone, even if her bedside manner left a lot to be desired. Have you tried apologizing? Not bribing her. Just. Admit you made a mistake and tell her you feel bad."

Would that work? "I'll try it," I agreed. "You're really smart at this stuff."

She patted Clarice's head. "As smart as you are, it's easy to forget you're so young sometimes."

"I have to go home now," I told her. "The changeling still needs time to heal, and I have my chores to do."

"Oh, okay," she agreed. "Thanks for helping me with my homework."

"What are friends for?" I asked. I guided Clarice outside and it wasn't long before she was speeding home on autopilot. Sure, Missy could have made it faster, but she still had a secret identity to worry about. Besides, it was good to let people know we were still around doing our thing. Just because
everyone knew robbing someone now meant getting buried in cockroaches and centipedes, that didn't mean the rest of us couldn't show off once in a while.

Meanwhile, I set down the device I was working on. Emma looked at me. "We're not going to finish?"

"It's getting late," I said. "Besides, Vista told me this wouldn't help make Big Sister love me again."

"Shadow Stalker said Vista was-"

"She's my best friend," I interrupted. "And she says that friends are friends because they want each other to be happy, not because they're useful. I want Amelia to be happy, and I have to let her know. We'll get back to work tomorrow."

"Okay," Emma said quickly. "I frightened her. Good."

"Okay, you go ahead. I'll finish here and then head home."

I went to my shower room. The one that no one else wanted to use, even though it was so much faster and more efficient. They used normal, stupid, showers instead. Dropping the lab outfit in the trash, where it would quickly be digested, I climbed in, letting the system clean me thoroughly before I put on my normal clothes.

I found Amelia in her room, with Taylor. They already knew I was coming, of course. Taylor's power was easy enough to fool thanks to there being so much she was tracking, and how much of her perception was centered on that empathic bond. I wished I could study it further, but the Taboo got in the way. There was so much we could learn about how the Passengers worked with one another, if not for the that.

"What is it?" Big Sister asked.

"I..." I started, then I went up and hugged her. Part so she was in contact, and part because I really wanted to. "I'm sorry. I wanted to help you because we needed better energy tech and we didn't have anyone and Emma wanted to help. I didn't think about how it might hurt you."

I was good at reading people, and I could tell the point where Taylor realized, through Amelia, that I was telling the truth. She didn't really like me, and I knew that. It didn't really matter to me before now. But she made Big Sister happy. I moved my arm and hugged Taylor as well. "I'm sorry for everything I did to you, too."

Taylor put a hand on my shoulder. It wasn't quite a hug, but it was the closest she'd ever come. I thought back to what I'd done to her, and with it what I'd done to others. I would have another
nightmare, tonight. I could already tell. "Can I stay in your room tonight?"

Amelia froze. She was reading my emotions, much as she did with Taylor, only not quite so directly. She couldn't share my feelings, but she would know what they were. She knew I was sorry, and she knew I was scared. She was going to say yes. She looked at Taylor for permission.

"It's okay," Taylor said. "I should go home anyway. I think my dad might be getting the wrong idea about us."

Amelia laughed, and I was glad. Even if I didn't get the joke.

============= 

A/N- Man. You can just carve the forshadowing in this chapter with a knife.
The last day of school was a formality. Class, such as it was, existed only to give us an ad-hoc report card that was more or less to pretend we'd learned anything. Three weeks of classes we were graded as if it were an entire year. Sure, I suppose a few classes mattered. A refresher on math probably helped for next year. If there even was a next year. A chance to say goodbye to friends, swap numbers if we hadn't already. Schools were being reopened elsewhere soon enough that everything would be back to as close to normal as could be expected in a post-Leviathan city.

"So," I said slowly as I leaned against Taylor under what we had basically claimed as 'our tree'. "Given any thought about school next year? Or month, as the case may be?"

"Kinda," she admitted. "It's nice to have things be normal again. I was always good at school, and now I'm like a dozen times better."

"Cheaty powers," I smiled up at her. "So unfair."

"Well," she smiled back. "I can't turn a dead world green in a matter of weeks, so I have to get by any way I can."

"It's only most of North America so far. And you're as essential to the terraforming project as any of us," I nuzzled against her. "After all, you're the one who sets the spore birds on their way."

"Schoolgirl by day, superhero by night, world's worst girlfriend in the evening, and glorified cropduster pilot once every couple days," she joked.

"Oh, that's not true," I laughed. "There's gotta be, like, at least three girlfriends out there worse than you."

"Speaking of which," she said. "We're not going to stop the exercise routine just because school's out. I expect you up at the same time tomorrow for our jog."


"Don't complain," she laughed. "You're getting better at an incredible rate. We almost hit a mile today, and we started less than a week ago." Realization Worry Regret. "Umm... must be all the fresh air you get in that tree."

I'm in such good shape because my lower half was blown off and replaced, I thought. "No sense in
letting it go to waste," I agreed, avoiding the topic. Something we could avoid thinking about, so we did.

Instead, I changed the subject. "So, any thoughts on our first meeting with the new PRT director? Or our response to Emma's apology when it finally goes up. They still haven't dug all the way into mine and Clarice's backgrounds."

She offered a bit of a smile. "That's mostly Lisa's job. I prefer to wing it. More natural that way. The Director's going to be with PRT and Protectorate capes, not the general public. I doubt I'll be wowed speechless by Emma, when we get around to that. And I already know about you and Clarice. I still think you should announce that last one yourself. Girls go crazy for that whole 'dark past' thing."

"Speaking from personal experience, huh?"

*EmbarrassedNostalgia.* "Seems to work on you," she answered. "Also Missy. She's been spending a lot of time with Theo."

"Easily the most adorable couple ever," I agreed.

"Oh, and in other news, I think my dad's dating your aunt," she told me.

My mind went blank for a moment. "You're not kidding."

"Nope," she looked up. "I don't think either of them have figured it out, either."

"How does that even work?"

"My dad's pretty oblivious in general," she answered. "And I think Sarah isn't quite ready to look for a new relationship. I mean, sure, the 'cape' life forces you to cope with some really fucked up shit, but it hasn't even been three months. For right now, though, they seem to enjoy each others' company."

"Just don't mention this to Clarice," I warned. "After us, and Theo and Missy, I think she's come to the conclusion that she's an expert matchmaker and might try to 'speed things along'." *DreadDisturbed.*

"Yeah. We'll put that on the list of things that can never be allowed to happen," Taylor agreed. "Right alongside the chicken flavored crickets idea."
I shuddered.

"Looks like Dennis wants something," she said, pointing out the redhead that was Clockblocker. He looked a bit sheepish.

"Hey, umm," he said after approaching us. "Do you know where Zach-"

"Girls locker room," Taylor answered. AmusementSympathy. "You're better off just writing them off as a lost cause."

"Fuck," he muttered, leaving.

"So, do I even want to know?" I asked.

"Zach stole his underwear," she answered.

I buried my face in my hands. "Okay," I muttered. "New plan based on the chicken crickets. We forcefeed Zach some normal flavored crickets. How's that sound?"

"How about grasshoppers?" she asked. "Those fly and it'll be easier to catch him off guard."

....

"Why'd she have to go?" Zach asked.

"Other work to do," Rey sighed. "I knew she couldn't stay forever. We're going to stay in touch, see each other when we can. It's only a few hours away from Montreal."

"What's she doing up there?" Crystal asked.

"Heartbreaker's children," Lisa answered. UnderstandingWorry. "Lots of them have already triggered, almost all with master powers of one sort or another. Others probably will. They've all been exposed to varying degrees of master effects for pretty much their entire lives. There's literally no one more qualified on the planet to deal with this kind of thing than Rapture, and the second place belongs to Dragon. Who, being Dragon, is already inhumanly busy."

"That's it in a nutshell," Rey answered. "She stayed around about as long as she could get away with."
"But, we're not a priority," Taylor replied. "We've settled down into a 'known element'. Powerful, but not a threat. Haven's had its look at us, and doesn't have enough of an issue to consider it necessary to keep her here watching us."

"It helped that Rapture's been convinced we're not taking the whole 'divinity' thing seriously," he supplied. "They were worried about that. So we're in the realm of 'bad taste', instead of 'dangerous egomaniacs with way too much power'."

"I'll remember to try harder next time," Lisa commented.

"And when Dragon personally requested her help," Rey continued. "Well, it's kinda hard for anyone, especially a tinker, to turn down Dragon."

"So we're back to playing without the adult supervision?" Zach smiled. "I'll go find out what kegs cost these days."

"Do it, and I'll ask Vista and Riley to find a way to stuff you inside it," Crystal threatened.

"Yes mom," Zach whined.

"Also, why does your breath smell like grasshopper?" Surprise-Amusement-Shock. I smiled. My cousin always did know how to go along with a joke.

==============

A/N- The grasshoppers become a running joke for a while. But that tapers off eventually. Kinda like pranks in real life.
"Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice," I said politely to the members that Pantheon had chosen to be their representatives. Minerva, Gaea, Khepri and their newest recruit, the supervillain Blasto.

I, meanwhile, had Triumph and Miss Militia flanking me. Truly a pity, honestly, that the rest of the PRT was trying to remove our members. A logical move, but one that merely put me in charge of PRT soldiers, instead of in control of proper parahumans. Now that Assault and Battery were moving to New York to make up for Legend's absence, this left me with two Protectorate heroes and four Wards. Granted, it also left me with nothing to use them for.

"We should be the ones thanking you," Minerva responded expertly. "I empathize with how difficult it must be, cleaning up your predecessor's mistakes."

"Yes," I said with a practiced neutral demeanor, breaking timelines. There was no real purpose in using different lines. We were both going off of a script, if a somewhat ad-libbed one. We would be polite, negotiating without making any promises or concessions. Something of critical value that I could present to the other Directors. "I apologize on behalf of the PRT for your troubles. I worked with Director Piggot many times over the years, without realizing how unstable she was."

"I must apologize as well," Miss Militia interjected. I had suggested she should, when we had the opportunity. Putting more blame on Piggot, and of course allowing Pantheon to be suitably gracious.

"It's really not your fault," Gaea answered. "Either of you. It's just good to have everything in the open so something like this doesn't happen in the future."

"I really shouldn't have underestimated Tattletale when I had her under my control. Or Skitter, for that matter. Truly, my first real mistake was being so forceful in my recruiting practices. Followed by letting them know about Dinah. Some days, I wondered if I should have kept the other path that day. In which the Travelers and Undersiders all survived, at the expense of Jack Slash, Bonesaw, and Siberian escaping. I wasn't even certain what differences I caused that created such a massive divergence. To call it frustrating would be an understatement.

"It's really not your fault," Gaea answered. "Either of you. It's just good to have everything in the open so something like this doesn't happen in the future."

"It may yet prove to be a master effect," Minerva responded, though we all knew better. "And thus not truly Director Piggot's fault. Still, I feel it highlights a flaw in the PRT's regulations that a single unhinged individual could cause such trouble. And that the parahumans that worked closest to her didn't feel comfortable reporting their concerns. If Legend or any member of the Protectorate under her command had someone to go to with their misgiving, we might have avoided this disaster outright."

"I'll mention your thoughts to the other Directors," I offered. Again, part of the plan.
"They want us to grant more autonomy to the Protectorate?" Tagg scoffed. "Dictating terms to us."

I remained my usual passive self. My other self started with the possibility of M4s for our own forces, and this one with their request first and then leading into the offer. Psychologically, the responses would be significantly different despite containing all of the same information. Conventional wisdom was often split on whether to lead with the bad or the good in a negotiation, and both had merit. I had the advantage of testing both.

"As I understood it," Costa-Brown mused. "They didn't dictate a thing. They simply stated a source of trouble and their opinions on how to fix it. I must say, Director Calvert, you've managed to repair relations with Pantheon and the rest of Brockton Bay in record time. I had feared it would take years to regain goodwill in the region. At this rate, it may only take months."

"Thank you, Chief Director," I said. With a modicum of surprise. "More than that, Minerva's suggestion is for the heads of the Protectorate to have functionally equal rank to the PRT Director of a region."

"That defies the whole function of having a Protectorate," Tagg countered. "I am aware of that," I answered. "I've also seen their remote control soldiers in action."

"Did they impress you enough to believe it's worth the loss of control over the Protectorate?" Armstrong asked. "More," I answered. "It is my belief that a mere two hundred per major city would be enough to render the Protectorate nearly redundant."

"Excuse me?" Costa-Brown asked. "Our intel didn't indicate they had that kind of ability. In terms of the effectiveness of the M4s, or their ability to mass produce them."

"Their current M4s do not," I confirmed. "They've acquired a new tinker, she has helped design an upgrade they're calling the 'M6'. Their capabilities are significantly better, to the point that they are individually superior to many parahumans. If we had them during Elisburg, we would have won the encounter."

....
"This is Emma," Minerva supplied, gesturing to the new girl. Solid red coloration, including glowing eyes. *A case 53? I had no knowledge of her. Tattletale didn't brief me, wanted to disrupt me, for nothing more than her own amusement. That frustrating b-. It was actually not a bad tactic. I didn't have to feign surprise if I actually was surprised, and there's no reason I should know about this girl. I must have stood there not saying anything for too long, because Minerva spoke up again. "Yes, that Emma, from the news."

*Ah, her.* That gave me a basis to respond. "And you accepted her into your organization?" The question was directed mainly at Khepri, of course.

"She wants to atone for her mistakes," Khepri stated. "She'll be issuing a formal, public apology at some point in the near future. For now, she's our foremost expert in upgrading our biotechnology to anti-Endbringer status. Go ahead, Emma, explain the new designs."

"First," the girl said in an energetic, teenager voice. "The power system has been greatly improved. Allowing us to add greater customization to the armor. Stealth systems, superior sensory abilities, even flight capability in the near future. That advancement is why we scrapped the M5s and moved onto the M6 without releasing the prior design."

"We've also designed portable suit building systems," Khepri added. "Right now, you can take them anywhere, set them up, and they'll grow M4s as matter is fed into them. Once the M6 is designed, we'll be able to distribute seeds that the growth pods will absorb and start growing the new designs. An average landfill should be able to provide at least a hundred of them. More as you supply heavier elements. If any are damaged, simply throw them back into the feed system and they'll be digested and replaced."

....

"They allowed one of the individuals who tortured Khepri into a Trigger Event on the team?" Gutierrez asked incredulously. "Are we sure the Emma story isn't a fabrication? Some kind of media stunt?"

"Unlikely," I answered. I was aware of some of Skitter's school history before the information became public. "It appears Miss Barnes triggered due to stress from the story coming out. She's locked in a permanent breaker state of a sort, which my analysts believe might be a psychological fear of being seen in her natural form. I find it unlikely they have the wherewithal to fabricate that."

"Fits their psych profiles," Costa-Brown agreed. "Pantheon has a predictable pattern. They treat their enemies with merciless brutality, and their allies with what might be considered excessive generosity. A similar pattern to what was shown by the Undersiders. The most obvious conclusion is that this is Khepri's influence."
"Much like the divinity they took as their theme," Armstrong agreed. "As long as people are complying with their desires, they're magnanimous. When not, they range from actively hostile, to a kind of passive aggressiveness that might even be more devastating than a straightforward attack."

I frowned. It was, essentially, what they'd done to me. I opposed them. They destroyed me. Then they recruited me and gave me almost everything I wanted, as long as I promoted their goals. It had cost me my grip on the underworld of Brockton Bay, if only because there no longer was an underworld. It cost me Dinah Alcott. But, indeed, I was in position as a PRT Director. With my power and Pantheon's support, I could easily become one of the most influential Directors. So long as I was subor-partnered with them.

"Speaking of passive aggressive attacks," Niles frowned. "They have us over a metaphorical barrel."

Tagg's voice didn't hide a small amount of scorn, which everyone chose to ignore. "Care to share your thoughts?"

"These new machines, if they're a match for even moderate ranked parahumans, could render the PRT entirely obsolete. A city typically has an active police officer per four hundred to one thousand people, depending on a number of factors. The largest cities can easily have over ten thousand police. If they can provide enough M6s to give every officer their own."

"It would render us obsolete," Costa-Brown concluded. "Even the M4s are valid in combat against most capes, with enough numbers. A large city could potentially field thousands of them."

"And police officers face fewer restrictions than the PRT," Tagg concluded. "They can enforce standard crime and if they happen to encounter a cape in the process, even one out of costume, then there's no repercussions beyond what that parahuman can inflict. Which is, at worst, the destruction of something that's grown out of compost and scrap metal."

"Or respond with lethal force against villains without need for a kill order," Niles added. "Resisting arrest during a crime is all it truly requires to justify lethal force in many parts of the United States."

Costa-Brown interrupted. "I find it suspicious that Pantheon's... request... comes so soon after Dragon made her own ultimatum about cleaning house, as she put it. It seems likely that Pantheon and the Guild have coordinated this between them."

I hid my surprise. I wasn't aware of that. Was Pantheon? If so, why didn't they tell me? Did they want me to look st-. They must not have known. I would inform them later."Possibly," I answered. "Dragon did have a private communication with Pantheon near the end of June. As well, Pantheon is providing protection and other assistance to the precog Dinah Alcott."

"So they're blackmailing us," Tagg said darkly. "And it sounds like you're going to give into it."
The Chief Director frowned. "We can hardly call it blackmail," she said. "Closer to bribery, with an implicit threat that if we won't accept their terms, they'll find someone else who will. This might cost us some discretionary funding in the overhaul, tie our hands with how we handle the Protectorate, but ultimately it sounds like it might be worth it."

"I agree," Gutierrez stated. "I think that simply the agents we lose in battle with parahumans is enough of a motivator. Hundreds of men and women each year. Even without considering the superhuman capabilities of the M4 or M6, their value as disposable targets cannot be overstated."

"The morale and public relations value is nothing to ignore, either," I offered. "Capturing or killing a parahuman at the cost of even one of our men is a tragedy that taints the victory and makes it much harder to convince the public that it's worth the effort. We could sacrifice a thousand M6s on a mission and still call it a complete success as long as we achieve our objective."

Niles chimed in next. "We can pull funding out of our other costs, as well. Combat pay, injury costs and medical leave for example. Probably make recruitment drives easier as well. There's little downside to this, aside allowing more parahuman autonomy. Which isn't as problematic as it could be, as our entire field model would change. The PRT would be able to lead in the field, with the Protectorate as our backup, instead of the other way around."

"All things well worth considering. I think we should at least hear the full extent of what Pantheon and Dragon are asking for," Costa-Brown replied. "It costs us nothing to listen, except our time. Niles, I'd like you to head a committee to determine where we can pull funding from. Director Calvert, thank you for your contribution thus far. I trust you're up to the task of engaging Pantheon on this topic in the future?"

"Yes, ma'am," I responded. *I was being all but handed a victory here. If only it was really mine instead of th- ours. A shared success.* "It may be some time before they're ready to commit, however. They seem to be devoting most of their attention to the Endbringers."


A/N- This chapter is one of my personal favorites. I feel it captures the sort of 'the more you think about it, the less comfortable you feel' vibe I strive for in this fic.
To the concerned citizens of the Youth Guard.

I would like to thank you for the advice you have provided on the handling of young parahumans. The list of regulations you have negotiated on behalf of the Wards over the years has been an unpleasant enlightenment as to the disturbing risks of abuse and neglect that other organizations have shown in the past. Hopefully the information herein will show we take the lessons of the past to heart.

To begin with, Pantheon would like to make it clear that we are not a military or police organization. We are not government funded, and we have no legal authority beyond that of any other recognized independent hero team. All members of our organization are volunteers. There are no contracts or obligations binding our members to us, and they are free to refuse any request or to leave permanently at their own volition.

We encourage our members to avoid the traditional superhero lifestyle. Instead preferring to champion such examples as Parian and Dinah Alcott, who use their talents for peaceful and lucrative businesses that they manage themselves. We discourage vigilantism and have taken highly publicized steps to remove the need for young superheroes, or indeed anyone, to risk their lives against such things as mere street crime.

For all Pantheon members who desire 'field' experience, we recognize the excitement and romanticism some feel for the vigilante tradition. Furthermore, we have nothing but respect and admiration for those who step forward and provide aid during the Endbringer conflicts. For these members, we still consider safety our highest priority. As such we have standard protocols applying to our members during hazardous situations.

Unless rendered meaningless by their powers, all members are provided hermetically sealed full coverage armor. This generic outfit compares to other tinker armor at a value greater than two hundred thousand dollars, and provides at least partial protection against most forms of attack. In addition, we often customize armor for specific parahumans, such as Khepri's Matriarch, Eki's Radiant, Gaea's Dryad, and my own Huntress. Use of this equipment in the field is non negotiable.

Our commitment to encouraging the student members of our organization to excel in school will take time to demonstrate fully. We believe the decision of our own leadership to return to school proves our intentions. A decision which resulted in Khepri's civilian identity being compromised. Despite the media circus that ensued, she chose to finish the school year. In this, as with everything, Pantheon strives to be the leading example of how things could and should be.
Sincerely,

Minerva.

"I can offer no defense for my actions against Taylor," Emma stated for the reporters. "I would like to make it clear that her sexuality wasn't the reason I targeted her. I didn't know she was gay. I, I have problems. Blaming others for my own failures is just one of them. Even now I find myself wanting to blame Sophia for encouraging me and protecting me from the consequences of my actions until it was far, far too late to turn back."

She paused for a moment. She may not be blaming Sophia, but some people would. And they'd blame the Protectorate through her. Or at least Piggot, since the PRT threw her under the bus.

"The simple fact is, Taylor was someone I saw as an easy target, someone I could hurt without fear of repercussions. Someone the teachers didn't care enough about to protect. That was the reason I chose her, and if I hadn't, I would have targeted someone else, instead."

I stood watching her. Amelia stood beside me. SupportConcernLove. I'd already read this speech of Emma's. Knowing it was coming, that helped. Having Amelia here, that helped more. And, if I was honest with myself, my test run of the new, fully functional UltraLisks was a high I was riding on for all it was worth.

The new variants were almost thirty feet tall. Granted, Behemoth was our next fight and he had that beat by half again, but I had two of them and if the fight was 'on schedule', I'd have five more by then. The idea of fighting side by side with Alexandria on the front lines was a thrill. Especially compared to my virtual helplessness against Leviathan.

"It was sick and wrong and I have no excuses," Emma continued in the foreground, putting all her skill at faking sincerity to use. "I see that now. I see a lot of things differently, now. I'm not asking for forgiveness because I don't deserve it. I'm not asking for understanding because I don't think I could explain it if I tried. All I'm asking for is a chance to fix things. To make things right again. That is why I'm here today, and why I am joining Pantheon. So that I can help, and I can try to make up for the things that I've done."

CalmSupport. Oh, I'd been letting it get to me again. I focused on our mantra. Accept and push through. After all, it was that or break the bond. I wasn't about to accept that as an option. Emma stepped back, not bothering to answer questions. That, that would be my job. Our job, I amended, looking at Amelia.

We stepped up to the podium.
"I'm sure you have lots of questions," I started. "We'll see if I can answer them preemptively. Yes, I am accepting her apology, and her offer to help. I've done no small amount of wrongs in my life. I robbed a bank using deadly spiders as a threat to terrify innocent people. I helped attack a party that at least some people in this audience attended. Acts of terror and violence, not unlike what I'd suffered at the hands of my attackers. To claim my motives were better is hollow at best. I could hardly ask for others to forgive me if I can't do the same in their shoes. And I owe a great deal to the forgiveness of at least one of my victims."

I reached over and grabbed Amelia's hand. As it stood, I really was touched deeply by her forgiveness. Even if it didn't quite extend to Tattletale, yet. Then again, mine didn't extend to Riley, either. Amelia was getting there, that would have to be enough for now.

"There's a story going around that she hit you with a fire extinguisher when you first met," One of the reporters asked. "Is that true?"

_Oh god, that story._ "It's true," Amelia answered. "And I'll do it again if she gets too uppity." That earned a few chuckles. _When did she start telling jokes like that?_ "But of course it's true that I've forgiven her for that. I hope others can do the same."

"Do you extend the same forgiveness to Legend?" one of the reporters asked. Expected question, if not an expected path to get there.

"Of course," I answered. "One of the unfortunate flaws in any military system is a fear of contradicting a superior officer. Legend has otherwise proven nothing but honorable and steadfast in fighting the good fight. One mistake shouldn't be allowed to destroy that legacy."

"Dragon credited you with helping develop the anti-master drug," another asked. "How does it work, and are you planning to develop it further?"

Amelia's question to answer. "I can't share how it works," she answered first. "Security reasons. I would rather avoid others designing an antidote to our antidote, as I'm sure you can understand. Further development of the treatment is on hold for the time being, although it is a project we will visit again in the future. For now, we are dedicating all our efforts to the coming Endbringer battle."

"So Pantheon does still intend to show for that fight?"

Amelia looked at me and nodded. _EncouragementYield._ She preferred that I handle this. "Yes," I answered. "We have a number of new weapons and strategies prepared for the next attack. M4s intended to assist search and rescue. New variants on insect life that I will be able to use to fight the monsters more directly. When Behemoth appears, we will be ready for him."
"Care to share any of these weapons?"

"Absolutely," I answered. "But only one for now, we'd be here all day otherwise."

The ground shifted and opened, a tunnel to our zergling pits. I selected one of the variants and let it up the path. "This is a shadowcat," I informed them as they got a good look at the six legged tiger-like creature. Or, it would be like a tiger if it wasn't hairless and covered in black chitin. "With a top running speed of almost sixty miles an hour, and a fifty foot vertical leap, it's an effective mover. It is also a powerful combatant that ranks a brute five. In addition, it can track tremors in the ground to follow Behemoth's path, and the sails absorb radiation."

Blue winglike membranes snapped out from near the shoulders and hips of the creature. "I can't demonstrate for you, as the effect would disrupt your camera equipment. When activated, it creates a powerful electromagnetic field that consumes almost all energy directed through the area, and uses it to boost the Shadowcat's speed and strength. Against Behemoth, it means the safety of all nearby capes. In addition, it will draw Behemoth's electrical attacks. We don't honestly expect they can survive a direct hit from Behemoth. We do expect that sacrificing an easily replaceable decoy to save a human life is an obviously correct decision. Especially as we're likely to have three times as many shadowcats on the field as there will be capes."

Chances are, the reporters wouldn't be as interested in this as the capes who saw this broadcast. And that was fine; we didn't need reporters to show up for the Endbringers. I did have the thing do its leap- thirty feet was actually a very accurate number. We would be attempting to swarm Behemoth with these things, perhaps draining enough energy from around him to lock him down entirely. Probably not, but they weren't the real weapon anyway.

=========

A/N- That formal letter in the beginning of this chapter sucked to write. Worth the effort. But it was a lot of effort.
"They're late," Crystal muttered.

"I'm having a real hard time finding a problem with that," Taylor said. "Parahuman violence is always lower in the week or so leading up to an Endbringer, and we're producing a new Gargant every day. I'm okay with having fifteen of them instead of the eight we expected. Another couple hundred shadow and frostcats don't hurt, either."

"I meant Flechette, Parian, and Vista," Crystal corrected.

"Oh, right," Taylor responded. *SheepishConcerned.* "Sorry, my head's elsewhere."

"Why can't we call them Ultralisks and zerglings?" Zach complained.

"Because that's been taken," Crystal responded. "So when are they suppose to be here? I wanna open our Christmas presents."

"Vista's mom is still mad at her for leaving the Wards," Clarice stated darkly. "She has to sneak out."

*DistasteConcern.* I frowned. I hadn't considered what this recruitment meant to the home lives of our recruits. Vista, especially, given her age. That and it was starting to annoy Riley. I wasn't sure what, if anything, she'd do about that. But she was only slightly less protective of Missy than she was of me.

"I'll have a talk with her," Lisa volunteered. "I was kinda hoping the Endbringer fight would have happened first. Then we'd have better chips on the table."

I wasn't so certain about Lisa, lately, either. She'd been different ever since Rapture left. Quieter, less brash. It was nice, but concerning.

"How about if I talk to her?" Theo volunteered.

"Probably better," Lisa agreed. "If all else fails, let the part where you're heir to a billion dollar estate slip. That'll get you in her good books all by itself."

*Oh. Well that's just lovely,* I thought. Theo didn't look like he was happy hearing that, either.
"I've managed to sneak Vista out of her house," Taylor informed us. "She'll be here in... okay, nevermind, she's here. I just sent her to grab the lovebirds. So let's get this party started."

We went to our lab subbasement. The one that was used for most of our group projects. It was separated from the rest of the labs by a membrane wall that, at this point, only our 'main' members could access. While Kid Win and Chariot had been extremely helpful, we couldn't trust them with the secret that was Bonesaw. Not yet, perhaps not ever. She stayed in other parts of the labs, and I had taken to staying with her, since she could no longer move freely about our home.

By the time we got there, Vista was already waiting above, so I opened the passage that would let them simply go from the surface down to us, without need to enter the top part of our building. Emma was already in the lab, alongside Chariot and Kid Win.

"Now that we're all here, let's see the new toys," Crystal announced. "I get to go first since you held us up enough already."

Emma was glowing with excitement. Literally, as the case was, casting red light from her eyes like a couple bright torches. "That one's my personal favorite," she agreed. "Radiant Variant Four."

"What happened to the V3?" Crystal asked.

"It sort of caught on fire, then melted, then exploded," Emma admitted. "Don't worry, that won't happen again. We tried. Go ahead, try it on. Same method as usual."

Crystal floated up and put her feet into the neck of the suit. It opened up and she lowered down into it, looking disturbingly like she was being swallowed by a bizarre snake. Once she had gotten fully inside, what resembled a hood moved up and encased her face, finishing the process. "Fits like normal. So, what's the new features?"

"First, the forcefield interaction has been optimized, coming to a sum total of a nine hundred percent increase in your shield strength," Emma announced. "It does take time to fully established. You'll have normal strength for about the first thirty second, and the old max in approximately a minute. Five minutes is required for full insulation. The shields will lose power as they take hits, but at our current estimate you should be able to trade punches with Leviathan for a couple minutes with no real risks."

"Nice," Crystal said appreciatively. "What else do you have for me?"

"Improved energy generation and manipulation," Emma replied. "Same anti-behemoth tech in the zerglings."
She gave an almost pleading glance at Zach. He ignored it. "It also serves to hone your attacks, reducing their target surface area to a tenth of before. More damage for the same power output, and you can now use full power to charge the weapons, without problem."

Crystal nodded.

"I tossed in a movement boosting system based on readings of Vista's powers," Chariot replied. "You should gave about triple flight speed, although it will drain the suit's energy supply some."

"And last, but not least," Kid win added. "A whole array of new weapons. You can trade out battlestaves at will, and we have six of them. Hold out your hand and say 'laser lance'."

"Okay," Crystal complied, reaching out. "Laser lance." A staff appeared in her hand, but fell away and vanished.

"Yeah, you have to catch it," he suggested. "If they fall more than a foot away from the suit, they disappear back into their pocket space."

"Laser lance," this time, Crystal caught it.

"At full power, that weapon can slice through a building," Emma informed. "They're all at full charge, and your HUD shows the list in the corner. The active one is highlighted and shows its battery power."

"Oh, cool," Crystal stated. She dropped the staff, and it vanished. "Frost lance." She caught the new weapon. "This one only has a lethal setting."

"That's my favorite," Emma smiled even more broadly. "Chris and I spent forever designing it. When fired, it targets a specific point and shunts all heat in that region into a pocket reality. Reducing approximately a cubic meter of space to absolute zero. There's no other possible setting, so only use it when you don't want the target to survive. Vertigo's your best bet for nonlethal combat, going from painful and nausea inducing to high intensity sonic bursts."

"This is insane," Crystal muttered. I could see the suit starting to swell a bit and change color as Crystal charged the system. "I'm practically a match for Legend like this."

"You might hit harder, actually," Emma corrected. "Don't have his speed, or his durability, or his versatility. But in terms of pure stopping power, you might have him beat."
"Okay, you've had your fun, let the rest of us have a turn," Missy smiled.

"I got this one!" Clarice insisted, grabbing Missy and pulling her over to one of the alcoves that held the suits. "This one's the Singularity."

Missy touched the green and white armor that wasn't too different from her own costume. "So how do I put it on?"

"Lean forward onto it," Taylor instructed. "It works like my Matriarch."

"Okay," she agreed, stepping into the alcove. The armor basically sucked her in, and sealed behind her. "Okay, that's the weirdest thing I have ever felt." she stepped backward out of the alcove. "So how's it work?"

"Use your power on it," Clarice instructed.

"What?... Wow..." Vista muttered.

"That's why we called it Singularity," Clarice stated proudly. "It reacts to and amplifies your space folding abilities, directing it along specific channels. Anything trying to get through that inch thick suit is going to have to travel the equivalent of at least twenty miles before making it through to hit you."

"Twenty miles where it will intersect with itself every twenty subjective feet," Emma added. "I based the pattern off an infinitely repeating fractal helix I saw once. We believe that the design will disrupt, potentially even blind, all thinker powers. We already know it works on Minerva and Dinah. If we're lucky, you might even be immune to the Simurgh, but no promises. As it stands, no other precog or thinker should be able to see through that armor when it's active."

"And I thought my armor was nuts," Crystal chuckled. "I got the anti-Behemoth, you got the anti-Simurgh. I... might be jealous..."

"We're not done yet!" Kid Win interrupted. "There's also a weapon built into it. The Point Singularity Projector. Right arm has a bracing system with the weapon loaded in. Charge it with your power, aim with your arm, and fire. It concentrates the wave and then it hits hard enough to destroy almost anything."

"Basically, you get to shoot miniature black holes at people," Emma explained. "Different settings have different damage outputs. The lowest setting is painful, but only life threatening if you hit the brain, but each new step up is an exponential increase. Stage two is bone breaking force. Stage three is like being in the middle of a head on collision between two unbreakable semi trucks. Five should
be equivalent to Crystal's, and on par with Legend or Alexandria in stopping power. It's the strongest we can make the weapon without it exploding."

"And none of the Endbringers have shown gravity or space manipulation powers, so you're safe to fire on any of them without a problem," Clarice added cheerfully. "Plus, with your abilities you can aim it around walls like Legend does. Only you can see people through walls so it's even better! What do you think?"

Vista was still looking at her arm. "Theo? I might be thinking about breaking up with you and marrying my costume."

"I don't blame you," he replied.

"Told you it'd be worth the wait," Clarice sang cheerfully. "So who's next?"

"I've already seen my armor," Taylor said. "It's nice, but all my real upgrades are in the form of gigantic bug monsters. Which is more than fine by me."

"Tapestry next," Clarice decided. "That's Kid Win's project."

"This one's for Parian," he said, opening the next alcove. Parian's armor was the largest displayed thus far, and in the form of a beautiful cloth doll, wrapped in blue ribbon. "We've improved on the old fabric design, allowing your outfit even more durability. Same as your current suit, but greatly improved upon. We've built systems to harness the pressurized telekinesis inside, allowing you high end flight, and a weapon similar to the Singularity made with a concentrated telekinetic beam, instead."

"It's not quite as destructive," Emma replied. "Still limited to the Manton Effect. But the nature of your power means you can, essentially, 'stick' a target with a beam. Infusing their clothing or equipment instantly and from range, giving you telekinetic control or destroying it utterly, without risking harm to the person wearing it."

"So you've given her the nudity gun?" Zach joked.

"Yes, yes we did," Emma agreed cheerfully as she looked at Zach. His smile vanished. She fell quiet as well.

Chariot continued for her. "Tapestry also has six ribbon sails that'll respond to your power, giving you a reach of fifty feet, at approximately two and a half tons of strength each. The material itself is energy absorbent, refractive and self mending, making Tapestry the second most durable suit we've designed. Also the physically strongest, from a brute measure. And the fastest, with the potential to
"You really didn't hold back on this," Parian said, admiring the armor even as it formed itself around her. "I was afraid you might, since I'm not one of the ones who goes out fighting and stuff. Thank you."

"It also uses the same fractal system as the Singularity," Emma added. "It's harder to do with yours, so you should be similarly resistant to precogs, but some other thinkers can get through."

Parian was all smiles in her new costume, especially as she had about as much control over it as I had over my Dryad. Speed of thought response is something that none of the others would have in theirs. She hugged Flechette and kissed her happily. I couldn't quite ignore my envy.

"So, last and nowhere near least, Flechette's system," Emma announced. "Azrael."

"Angel of Death?" Flechette asked, as the alcove lit up to show the solid black body suit. It had four wings extending from its back, though they more closely resembled a pterodactyl than a bird or bat. It looked positively demonic in nature.

"In many ways," Emma continued. "The most boring suit. Good antigrav flight capabilities, average durability. Better than average sensor system to take advantage of your power's trajectory senses for improved combat efficiency. We couldn't cram much more into it."

Flechette frowned. "But that's all worth it," Clarice stepped in. *They practiced this show together,* I realized. "For the nanothread system. Azrael has an incredibly complex monomolecular fiber weave layered in its skin. Allowing you to use your power on the whole armor at once. When charged by your power, the Azrael is indestructible, and can destroy everything it touches. Only you, and the Azrael itself, are immune."

Her eyes widened. I could imagine why.

"Please don't do that inside," Zach requested.

"Each wing also houses a copy of your arbalest's projectile generator," Kid Win added. "Linked up to the nanofiber system so you can charge and fire the bolts. Approximately two shots per second per wing. They travel faster than your old weapon, so you may need some practice figuring out the differences. The system can also add a powerful sedative on command. We thought of adding Crawler's acid as an option, but didn't have enough space. It's not like you need it anyway."

"You're... this is meant to be an Endbringer slayer, isn't it?" Flechette's voice trembled.
"We certainly hope so," Minerva responded. "Can't know until we try, but we have another weapon to try that we think has a better chance. We also think you're going to like your new names."

=============  

A/N- Tech porn chapter. I'm kinda glad there are so few of them. They're a fun "sometimes" food, but I wouldn't want them too often.

Also: Riley REALLY wants to be a flower girl. Unless she's the maid of honor. In which case, Missy can be the flower girl.
I woke to someone shoving my arm. "Get up!" Riley shouted. "We just got the alert. It's Behemoth."

My eyes snapped open. Costume. I thought, running over to the closet. My standard outfit simply slid onto me as it is meant to. Really, it's nothing more than a thirty pound mass of specially modified Yggdrasil. I almost laughed at how awake I was. Adrenaline is one hell of a drug.

"What about everyone else?" I asked.


"Bringing anti-Behemoth units to the surface," I stated. She'd hear me, now, thanks to the modifications to the bracer. Over eight hundred of the various cats, and a couple hundred Raptors started flowing from underground. Our full set of forces. Except the Gargants- those we kept on the other side of the portal. A thousand units, each a match for any average parahuman. All under Khepri's command. I promised my partner an army, and I delivered on that promise.

Plus another five hundred suppression pods. We were ready. I ran through the halls to the outdoors, followed by Riley.

"Dragon's sending our pickup," Minerva informed me, only half enveloped in her armor. "Two minutes ETA."

I got outside, carrying Riley thanks to the power of augmented Yggdrasil muscles. I leapt onto my Dryad, to be swallowed up. My costume merged with the armor. Riley was shifted into her place in the new design. It was the only real way we could bring Clarice with us.


A number of people were gawking at the swarm of monsters, already. Bugs got in the way, warding them back.

"An Endbringer is attacking," I stated, alerting everyone with the amplified voice function of my armor. The flood of panicked looks made me cringe. Could have phrased that so much better. "Somewhere else, we're waiting for pickup."
"Can you handle this all in one trip?" I asked, looking at Chariot.

"Uh... sure. I think. Maybe we can split it up a bit?"

"Okay," I said. "We'll set the first signal for the front lines with Gargants and icecats. Then the Raptors, then the search and rescue. We'll make sure the right groups have the right equipment."

"Got it," he teleported over to the monsters. They wouldn't really function without Taylor. The Gargants, at least, would kind of. They'd been built with instincts that could be summed up as 'that's an Endbringer, first you run toward it, then you try to kill it'. Icecats were meant to be offensive backup. The shadowcats were defensive, meant for search and rescue purposes. Each had been programmed and reprogrammed, bred for their functions. Even without Taylor in command, they would obey orders. Smarter, in some ways, than a well trained dog. In almost all others ways, they were incapable of thought at all.

Taylor dropped down in her Matriarch armor. Damn that outfit makes her look incredible. FlatteredProudExhilarated.

"So, it's time for us to kill a fucking Endbringer," she announced to the gathered group. "You all know your jobs."

"Transport the monster brigade," Vista stated. "Then it's secret weapon duty."

"Right," Taylor confirmed. "Sorry that you can't really test out your armor, but we're only going to be able to use this weapon once. The Endbringers are fucking smart. If this works, it will only work once. We make it count."

"It's Behemoth, so Theo, you stay with the Moirai," she ordered. "Also, get a code name."

"Yes, ma'am," Theo answered.

"I'll go with Chariot and Vista," said Osiris. He was wearing a cowboy hat in addition to the rest of his outfit. For some reason. Held on by strings, no less. "Gotta get the last bits sorted out. I don't have a thinker job, y'know."

"Okay," I answered. I noticed the Dragon suit. "Time to get to go," Chariot vanished, along with Vista, Zach, Flechette and Parian. And with that, the giant mass of monsters vanished from sight, one section at a time.

We waited for the dragon transportation. The five of us that would be traveling this way. Taylor and
I, Minerva, Crystal and Clarice. Complete with Riley inside the Dryad with me. The others had their own way, but they’d need us in place first. It was a relatively quick jump before we landed the first time.

Alexandria, Eidolon, and Legend stood together off to the side. He wasn't a member of the Protectorate, anymore, but they would never stop being the Triumvirate.

Minerva walked straight up to them. Alexandria stepped forward. They locked eyes. They didn't speak, they didn't blink. The dark haired amazonian beauty, and the small blond smartass. Locked in their contest of... what? Wills? Intellect? They still weren't saying or doing anything but stand there.

"Holy shit," Crystal muttered. "They're doing a Taylia."


"Oh, yeah," Crystal answered. "That's what we call it when you and Taylor do your weird psychic conversations thing. You both just sorta zone out while focusing on each other. Of course, with you two, there's more smiling and acting like lovestruck schoolgirls. This looks more like Alexandria's about to assign her a pop quiz."

*Do Taylor and I really look like that? Huh. How did Taylor's identity stay secret as long as it had?*

"Okay," Alexandria said. The first words either had spoken. She took the small signaling device that Lisa had handed her. "I'll be recommending your status be upgraded to thinker nine when we get done here, by the way."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Tattletale responded. She was still smiling as she turned and walked back to us.

"So, what was that about?" Taylor asked, with a smile.

"If I'm a nine, then Alexandria's a ten," Minerva stated. "Or, well, not really. She's a thinker like Emma's a tinker. A bunch of different relatively minor powers that all stack together into something really scary. If I'd met her before Rapture, I'd probably hate her instinctively, just out of jealousy. Either way, she's definitely part of Cauldron and she knows that I know. We've... kinda got a meeting arranged later. Probably a couple weeks after the Behemoth fight, depending on what happens here. No need to focus my power on it until later, just the way she planned."

"But you didn't say anything," I contested.
"Didn't need to," she responded.

Some of us had others to talk to. Flechette found the Wards team from New York, and seemed intent on introducing Parian to all of them. Emma had caught a ride with what remained of our own Wards team, which was with the Boston team. *Probably closer to Clockblocker than us when the alert came through.* We still hadn't made much progress with him or Weld. Who had chosen to stay with the Protectorate, believing he could do more good there.

Dozens of other Dragon transports were scattered across the area. "Return to the vehicles. Behemoth's target has been narrowed to the Indian subcontinent."

We climbed into 'our' vehicle. It didn't appear special compared to any of the others. I don't know why I expected it to.

The next couple hours were nerve wracking. Taylor and I cuddled as best we could in our combat armors. Our reserve team had it worse, they didn't even have the news feeds from Dragon. Not that the feeds told us much of value. They'd narrowed down Behemoth's target zone to New Delhi, but the monster had not surfaced. He hadn't surfaced even as we landed in the city. *The fuck was going on here?*

We started getting out of the ships. The sun was setting on an already overcast and humid day. A rumble of thunder and minor flashes of lightning heralded the arrival of the storm. It was atmosphere like this that might lead one to suspect Endbringers had a sense of drama. "I need to make an announcement," Taylor told Dragon. "To everyone."

"Very well, I'll patch you through to all the armbands," Dragon replied. Her actual body, and Defiant, were on a different vessel. The one with Legend, I expected. But she was managing communications between a thousand different factors. Multitasking possibly on par with Taylor's own.

*DreadAnticipationWorry.* "You'll be amazing," I told her.

*FocusDetermination.* Khepri walked forward. Her Matriarch armor was the 'official' name for the 'Queen of Blades' design. Our best flier, combining a bit of Vista's power with a potent set of layered antigravity technology. Not our best 'top speed' suit, but easily our most agile one. It would take someone with superhuman awareness to pilot the thing, which is why only Taylor had that suit. Maybe we'd trade off the design to Dragon.

"Go ahead," the armband spoke to her. "You're set to transmit to everyone. I've set a subroutine to translate your speech to Hindi where needed."

She took a deep breath. "This is Khepri speaking. A number of monsters are going to appear across
the city shortly. Do not be alarmed. They are mine to command, and Pantheon's front line force. The
gigantic ones are gargants, and they will engage Behemoth directly. Let them. Remember that every
hit they take means that a cape didn't have to. They will hold the line and buy you time. Use it."

Alexandria had flown off toward the front line position, and had activated the signal. Within seconds,
the Gargants and icecats had started appearing. I could only imagine what the locals thought. The
ones that likely had never even heard of Pantheon.

She took another breath before continuing. "The tiger like creatures are there as mounts. Everyone
without mover abilities is encouraged to ride one. Turn their heads like you might a motorcycle, and
they'll turn that direction. Everyone who is capable of fighting inside Behemoth's kill aura, the blue
ones are the icecats, and they're for you. The black ones are shadowcats. They're for search and
rescue. Unless you have better mover powers, take one. They will save your lives, and the lives of
those around you." Shadowcats were Aceso's domain. She was leading the search and rescue ops, at
least for our team. Clarice's senses, Riley's medical expertise. No one could be more qualified.

"The giant wasplike creatures are Raptors," Khepri kept instructing. Her emotional state got more
confident and intense as she fell deeper into the roll of the commander. My General, the thought still
gave me goosebumps. "They are meant for blasters who don't have flight or other movement powers.
Wave at them if you want one."

Eki pressed her button, and the creatures manifested in the air. They were only around eight foot
long, but the antigrav tech kept them in the air. They weren't heavy, really. They were, however,
pretty fast. It wasn't long before most had descended to pick up riders.

"You'll also notice the giant flower buds near the front lines. Those are suppression pods. They
should counter almost all of Behemoth's attacks past the range of his kill aura. Alexandria package
capes, spread them out at intervals of about a hundred meters. That's their effective range. With even
a modicum of luck, we can make this the most successful Endbringer battle in history. Khepri, out."

She sighed. DreadExhilaration. "You're not going to mention your other weapon?" Alexandria
asked us over the com.

"Better for morale this way," Minerva replied. "We're pretty certain it will work, and if it does I'm
sure no one will complain about us keeping it a secret. If it turns out to be less impressive than we
hope..." she trailed off, but the point was obvious.

"Understood," Alexandria responded. "And the best of luck to you."

Minerva went to the command center. Taylor and I to medical. Her medical skills would be useful
enough there, and she was already in command of over a thousand troops. She was on every line
simultaneously. We were ready. I pressed the button that signaled the final jump. Parian, Flechette
and Vista appeared next to me. Along with several tons of raw Yggdrasil mass that I expanded
across the roof, allowing it to flow down the sides. Dozens of Yggdrasil-spreading creatures traversed the sewers, distributing the spores as rapidly as I could assimilate them into the whole. What took days to achieve in Brockton Bay, I would do here in minutes.

"Chariot wanted me to let you know that the Yggdrasil already has a strong footing across our earth's Europe and Africa," Vista informed me. "As well as most of Asia. He estimates a couple weeks until full coverage of the surface area."

"That's really good to know," I replied. "ETA on the world being habitable?"

"Dunno," she answered. "But we can make a quick trip home safely when we're done here, easily."

"Behemoth sighted, DA-5" the armbands announced. From our position on the hospital, I could see it myself. The ground cracked and spewed forth magma and smoke. Behemoth had chosen a hill from which to emerge, giving those of us with any elevation a good view.

The creature's head appeared, then it stopped moving, turning its face to survey the area. A face that Minerva had assured me was meaningless. It did not need eyes to see, nor ears to hear. The Endbringers, despite their loosely humanoid shapes, were less human than my Yggdrasil. However they sensed, it wasn't through any organ as we understood the concept. They were not animals. They were not alive. They were incredibly powerful and bizarre machinery from an unknown maker.

Still, Behemoth's gigantic head made a very good impression of a person surveying the landscape of New Delhi. A city armed with parahumans and Dragon suits and a thousand disposable shock troop designed solely to kill it and controlled by a single mind. His head turned around, presumably along with the rest of his body, but that couldn't be seen. He submerged.

"Behemoth is withdrawing," the bracelet communicated to us. "Repeat, Behemoth is withdrawing."

===================

A/N- This was a remarkably controversial chapter.
"You don't have to go," I pleaded. I wasn't too proud to beg, not when it came to this. "They don't need you for this."

"Sorry, Mom," Crystal answered, already in her body armor. "We've had this conversation. I'm going, and we're going to kill the son of a bitch. Then the rest of those fuckers."

"Then I'm coming with," I insisted.

"No," she responded, determined and focused. "We haven't built a suit for you. I'm on par with Legend in this gear. Maybe even better than he is. I can survive anything Behemoth throws against me. You'll get hurt. Or you'll get me hurt because I'm too worried about you to focus on the fight."

"When did you grow up into such a wonderful young woman?" I was already tearing up when I embraced her. It wasn't quite the same, with the armor in the way, but if that armor brought Crystal back home to me, then I would give it all the hugs in the world.

"Okay, mom," she said, hugging me back. "That's enough being sappy. I've gotta go now."

She went out the door and took off. She was never that fast before, I thought. She was never that fast before, I thought. Must be more of the tech she has in that armor. Was Amy telling the truth? Would Neil and Eric still be alive if she was allowed to fully flex her powers? Today would answer that question, one way or another. Either Crystal doesn't come home, or I have proof that my husband and son didn't need to die. Either way... I, I just couldn't bring myself to face this alone. I called my sister.

The phone rang a few times before Carol answered. "Did you hear?" I asked.

"What?" she said. She sounded tired.

"Behemoth just moved," I told her. "He's set to appear somewhere in Africa, according to Dragon's new tracking system."

"And?" Carol responded.

"And your daughter's going to be out there fighting that thing," I repressed the urge to scream at my sister, reminding myself that things were not good in her life right now.
"Amelia," Carol practically spit the name. "Made it pretty clear she's not my daughter. No surprise, I don't think she ever thought of me as a mother, and I never really saw her as my daughter." We'd had this argument before, more than once. In some ways, she was more angry at me than she was at Amy. After all, I was the one who insisted she adopt the little girl. *I should have been the one to take care of her. Things would have been so much better if I had.*

"Okay," I sighed. "If you've given up on Amy, then fine. My daughter is going to be out there fighting as well. Your niece, Crystal, in case you've forgotten. Or are you going to disown her, too? So help me, I will personally come over there and kick your ass if you dare suggest something like that."

"I..." Carol took a breath. "No. Sorry, you're right, it's just, things aren't in a good place right now for me and Mark. You're inviting him, too, aren't you?"

In her question was a hope that I wouldn't. I had to disappoint her. "The whole family," I insisted. "We should all be here for this, no matter what happens."

"Okay," she replied. She didn't hide her disappointment. "I'll be there soon."

She hung up, and I started dialing the next number.

-----

"You remember to stay safe," I insisted to Taylor yet again.

"Dad," she rolled her eyes while removing the material covering her suit. Some kind of plant that heals and recharges the thing. Any other time, I'd be yelling at her for leaving the dried pieces on the floor. Not today, however. If the only thing I could do to help her was clean up dry leaves on her floor, I could do that.

"I've already fought one Endbringer, and I did it with bugs," she assured me. "This time I have a whole monster army that exists for the sole purpose of fighting them. Behemoth doesn't stand a chance. I'll be home in a few hours, but don't worry about cooking anything. It's a long trip and by the time we get back, the Mayor or someone is going to invite us to a fancy dinner somewhere. Pick out a suit and get ready for free food and thorough ass kissings."

*Ah, the confidence of teenagers.* I hugged her before she climbed into the creepy looking body armor. I wasn't so sure I approved of how overly 'feminine' the design was, either. *Why did she have high heels built into it? She's tall enough already.* "You're just like your mother," I told her. It was true, of course. "You both find a cause and throw your whole heart into it, heedless of the risks and costs. I hated that about her almost as much as I loved it."
"Thanks, dad, love you too," she paused for a second. "So, do you think they'll let us keep Behemoth's head after we kill him? Halloween's coming up, and that'd be the best jack-o-lantern ever."

I chuckled. The joke wasn't funny, really, but this was her way of getting back to less emotional topics. "Long as you have somewhere else to put it. I don't want that thing in my house."

She broke the hug and stepped into the suit, casually allowing it to split and grow around her, then she hovered her way to the door. I smiled. *She wanted the power to fly ever since she was a little girl,* I thought to myself. *I guess I should have known, even then, that she'd become a superhero.*

Not long after she left, the phone rang. *Sarah's home phone.* "Hello?" I asked.

"Hi, Danny," she said, unable to hide the tremble of fear in her voice. "I wanted to invite you over. Have the whole extended family together when, y'know..."

"Yeah," I answered. "I'd like that. Just give me a few minutes to get things sorted out, here."

Crystal was surely going with the others, so she was as terrified as I was. Not a lot of people could understand what it felt like to watch their children running off to slay a monster. Of all the things I worried about when I learned I was going to be a father, this was never one of them. I was expecting diapers and skinned knees, while dreading boys and broken hearts and college expenses. *Well, I suppose I dodged the bullet with the boys, at least.*

My next phone call was to work. "Hey, Frank, I need to call off today," I told him.

"Sick?" he asked. The man was kind of a hard ass. Honestly, at this point, I could probably quit the job. I'd made a reasonable enough nest egg just off the paid interviews. Interviews that I only agreed to because Taylor insisted that it was important for me to do at least a few, for whatever plan the girls had cooked up. The part where I made a few extra bucks was just a bonus.

"No," I answered. "They spotted Behemoth. Set to hit Africa, somewhere."

"Shit," Frank muttered. "Take the day off. Tomorrow, too, if you need it. If it was my kid, I know I wouldn't be able to think about anything else."

"Thanks, Frank," I said, then I hung up the phone. I swept up the dead leaf-stuff from Taylor's room. I had just grabbed the keys when there was another phone call. I considered ignoring it for a minute, but it could be important. I looked at the ID, which said it was Kurt's number.
"Hey, man," I said when I answered. "I was almost out the door."

"I just heard the news," he said. "Figure you're blowing off work today, anyway. Wanted to see if you needed some company."

"Oh," I responded. "That sounds good, but I was already invited over to Sarah's." He already knew who I meant, of course.

"Yeah, I get it," he replied. "So, what's your daughter think about you dating her future in-law, anyway?"

"We're not dating, Kurt," I told him. "She's just helping me out with this whole 'superhero parenting' thing, that's all."

"Danny," Kurt sighed. "Let me ask you a question. How long were you and Annette together before you managed to figured it out?"

"This is an entirely different situation," I insisted.

"She's too busy for you, she's too good for you, she's smarter than you, she'd never be interested in you and it'd be a messy situation, right?" Kurt listed off. "Danny, by what possible definition is that not exactly the same situation as it was with Annette?"

"Try the part where her husband died a few months ago," I answered. "It's too soon, Kurt."

"Daniel Hebert," Kurt chuckled. "Picking up beautiful women left and right. But only when he doesn't realize it."

"Oh, fuck you, Kurt," I smiled. "I've gotta go now."

"Take care, buddy," he responded. "And make sure to hold off on the marriage until after Taylor's." The line disconnected before I had a chance to offer a retort.

=====

A/N- This chapter, and the other "parent interlude" chapters are out of order... I had originally written them a few days after the Endbringer fight. And immediately regretted not having them aligned with the actual battle.
And now they are in "proper" order.

I left the original chapter titles in, for purposes of consideration by readers.
I watched on of the few televisions that still worked in this place. It was the first time I'd actually have a chance to get a look at my daughter's handiwork. She had promised to fight the Endbringer. She had promised to kill them. It was hard for me to imagine the sweet little girl from so long ago being capable of such a thing, but I believed in her in a way that only a father could.

"Thanks to the early warning system developed by the esteemed tinker Dragon, New Delhi has been almost completely evacuated. Cameras have been set up to catch what is hopefully the most complete footage of an Endbringer battle on record. Behemoth is often called the 'hero killer'. Parahuman casualties against Behemoth are, statistically, much greater than the conflicts with either of the other Endbringers, despite Leviathan and Simurgh often having greater overall casualties and other losses."

Lung stood beside me, impassively. Teacher was there as well, along with the unfortunate once known as Valefor. One of my men approached, silently. They knew not to interrupt the broadcast. He held out a cigarette. For any other block, it would have cost more. Part of the arrangement. "Valerie, go with him," Teacher instructed, and Valefor followed the man who had taken his arm.

The cameras weren't manned, so they switched between cameras to get better views, instead of adjusting camera angles. It was also clear none of the news footage was filmed for an English speaking audience, as all words and notations were in Hindi. The next scene displayed a view of the gathering first wave of capes. The Triumvirate was highly visible in the skies of New Delhi, ready to hold the line against the beast. A handful of Indian capes, in garishly flashy colors even compared to the Protectorate heroes they were mixed with, gathered together in clusters.

I still wasn't quite certain how Valefor, crippled and powerless, blinded and mute, was sent here. His crimes, much like his partner Eligos, were certainly of a nature that deserved the Birdcage. The well known bias against Master type villains was also evident in the decision, as the man was entirely harmless at this point. They could store him in any ordinary prison safely enough.

Both ended up in my cell block. An act that, in retrospect, leads me to believe Dragon felt a need to guarantee the death of both. Teacher offered to purchase Valefor almost immediately after his arrival, which I of course expressed a tentative interest in. It never hurt to hear an offer, after all, and Teacher went out of his way to be fair and honest in his dealings.

Valefor wasn't of any use to me directly, but the supply shipments were divided based upon the number of inhabitants per block. Giving up the additional resources, I was rather loath to do. However, both he and Eligos both proved... uncooperative... as members of my cell block. To the point where the latter had attacked me and Lung.

We made an example of the man. A very bloody and very public example. Out of respect, I offered
the beast that was my closest companion these last few months first dibs for executing the madman, but Lung declined. Seems he didn't like killing helpless victims unless it was truly personal. So it fell to me, as I had hoped it would. Court was held, and I butchered him in the most horrific way I had managed to develop over the years. Functionally taking control of his skeleton, if crudely, and forcing his bones to peel the flesh off like climbing out of a jumpsuit.

Too difficult to do in a combat situation. In fact, the prepwork took almost an hour to make it seem convincing to others that I could do it in combat, but it was the kind of psychological message that kept others from challenging my position. As with all my executions, I bequeathed his 'fairy' to Glaistig Uaine. She would have taken it anyway, and none could stop her. Offering it as a gift kept her disposition toward me kindly, and that too was a form of intimidation. Others would not risk the ire of the Fairy Queen lightly, even if her insanity made her unreliable as an ally.

Now, I regretted not keeping him alive longer.

Teacher had learned some fascinating details about Valefor, which he of course shared with me. In part because of our agreed upon conditions, and in part a way to cultivate a pleasant relationship between us. As it turns out, Valefor had an interesting history in Brockton Bay. He had attacked a new group of heroes by the name of 'Pantheon'. I had already heard of them, of course. News reached us about their slaying of the Slaughterhouse Nine, but not their civilian names.

When I first heard, I had dismissed the news as satisfying, but unimportant. Now it filled me with pride. Thanks to Valefor, I knew that Pantheon was led by my daughter. Amelia had kept her name, and was apparently a true biokinetic, with absolute control of any living thing she touched. She had achieved what her father could not, and killed Jack Slash.

Valefor's compelled honesty forced him to describe his attack on Pantheon. Controlling Khepri's adopted children and their nanny, and using them as suicide bombers. Teacher had, quite rightfully, offered to 'sell back' Valefor. At no cost but a refund of the price he had been bought for in the first place. If he was merely a murderer of women and children, I might have accepted that offer. But I wasn't feeling so merciful. I simply requested that Teacher do something 'special' for the man who had angered me like none before in this life.

Teacher's power to control his thralls is incredibly varied and customizable. He could modify their memories and feelings, not unlike Heartbreaker. Often so subtly so that no one would realize they were controlled at all. Or he could control them more mechanically. Force them to follow a specific set of behaviors, while still having full awareness. Yet no ability to exert their will. This is what I had him inflict upon Valefor, trapped in a body he could not control, but knowing and feeling everything that happened to it.

In a show that I am certain amused Lustrum to no end, he castrated himself publicly. I didn't pretend the act would earn me any personal favors from the militant feminist, but something like this was better done with approval from multiple block leaders. Her approval added legitimacy, in as much as such a thing existed here. And that was as much support as I needed from her that day.
Teacher's surgeons did their work, and Teacher himself modified his Valefor's power, making him generate an effect through touch that caused others to perceive him as an attractive woman, the exact details of which changed to suit the desires of the viewer. He now existed to service any of the men that might want to pay for the privilege. It was a satisfactory enough punishment for the man who had tried to murder my daughter. That it also served to cement peaceable relationships between a few of the more difficult cellblock leaders, and taught everyone to fear what I would do if someone truly angered me was mere side effects.

A thunderclap drew me from my thoughts of Valefor's punishment, and back to the television.

A huge monster appeared in front of the assembled capes. It was clearly armor plated and had four thick, powerful legs. As well as a pair of equally thick arms, with wickedly curved talons extending from several joints on its body. Several more of the beasts popped into existence.

"In a startling new development, several creatures are appearing on the battlefield. Our crews are looking for better footage of them. The mysterious new arrivals don't appear hostile. They are positioning themselves ahead of the defenders. Information from local crews indicate that these monsters are controlled by heroes and meant to contribute to the fight."

I remained impassive, watching the display, but I was impressed beyond words. No others chose to speak up, either. Teacher because we were much alike in our desire to hide our reactions. Others because they were afraid to interrupt as I watched my daughter display her power.

Nilbog was relatively fresh in the public memory when I was captured, one of the powers that caused terror across the eastern half of the United States. Amelia, and I knew it had to be her, was wielding that same kind of power, openly and without reservation. She was hailed as a hero for it. *How the world must have changed for such a thing to be possible.*

Dozens of other, horse sized catlike beasts with six legs and fanlike wings started appearing across the field as well. Some capes climbed on their backs. And yet another type appeared in the air. They looked like nothing so much as horse sized mixtures between a dragonfly and a hornet. "It seems this organization wanted to make a strong show-" the reporter woman paused. "There's yet another development."

The camera swapped to an image of a large hospital building, if the large blue 'plus sign' above the entrance was any indication. A large mass of blue green vines were growing their way down the sides of the building at speeds that gave the impression of a banner being unfurled. It rapidly and
completely shielded the building. Several people were on the roof, too far away to be identified visually. A dome rose up out of the mass and covered the roof, protecting those inside.

"We have confirmation that the strange plant, as well as the unidentified monsters, are from the Brockton Bay hero group known as Pantheon," the reporter supplied. "Led by Gaea and Khepri, the team has claimed to have developed weapons for the sole purpose of fighting Endbringers. It appears that these monsters are the weapons they spoke of."

They cut to a clip of the plant, called Yggdrasil, consuming portions of the boat graveyard.

So they cleaned that up well, I smiled. I also considered the incredible amount of skill and control it had to take Amelia to perform these feats. Clearly, she had a team with her. Someone to teleport these beasts onto the field, at the very least. If Valefor's information was correct- and it might not be, all I could know is what he believed was true- then her partner as the leader of Pantheon could control bugs. Did that mean she was also able to control these gigantic buglike monsters? An amazing power synergy.

"The group has made bold claims as to their ability to fight and kill the Endbringers," the reporter continued. "Gaea and Khepri vowing to postpone their future marriage until after the death of the monsters that have terrorized the world for decades."

The video footage switched to an obviously old recording of a young hispanic teenager.

"That's what my big sister said," the girl explained. "They won't get married while cities were still being destroyed every three months. So the Endbringers have to go. And then they can get married and have lots of babies and I'll be the cool auntie that they all love the most."

Big sister? I thought. I doubted a real biological relationship. Did the Dallons have another child? No, both of them were clearly very Caucasian. E88 ideal Caucasian, no less. Perhaps they got divorced and this was the product of a new spouse? I had no way of knowing from in here.

In their effort to fill in time before Behemoth's arrival, the news chose to display a few other scenes showing the girls, always together whether in costume and out. Including a few truly heartwarming shots of them sitting together under a tree at school. I recognized my daughter instantly. She had grown up beautifully, a fine blending of my features and her mother's. She also, I noted with a smile,
inherited her father's taste in women.

"We have just received word!" the reporter woman spoke excitedly. "Behemoth has been sighted." The scene shifted back to New Delhi, showing the ground splitting and smoke billowing into the air. The massive face of the Endbringer showing itself before the heroes.

I held my breath. This was it, I realized. The Endbringers play for keeps. If my little Amelia is half as powerful as she claims to be, then it truly is a matter of having to kill the monster. No matter what, by the end of this, either my daughter would be dead, or she'll have slain the herokiller.

Then the monster turned and dived into the ground.

He had fled. Behemoth had run away.

==============

A/N- And there you have it. A day in the life of Marquis. Proud papa, Cellblock leader, classy villain, and sadistic son of a bitch when you press the 'protective father' button.
I saw Behemoth turn through the eyes of my army. Felt him leaving through the infravision of the shadowcats and the tremorsenses of the frostcats. I held my breath as he sank lower into the earth, too deep for my senses to go. Even then, I still couldn't believe it.

ConfusionAnticipationVictory? I looked over at Amelia. "No," I said. It was an absolute. "The fucker has something planned. I just don't know what it is."

DreadTrustConfidence. I smiled. Amelia believed me, and believed in me. I could handle this. I would not disappoint her.

That seemed to be the general consensus amongst the other capes. Only a small handful got off their respective mounts. There were no cheers. No celebrations. The field was silent, aside from the occasional chirp of the armbands, informing us of Behemoth's progress toward the Earth's core. We waited, tensed with adrenaline and fear. As Bakuda had once told me, it was a matter of fears. There was the the fear of the unknown, a fleeting and relative minor terror, as it only happened once. Then it was known, and that fear was gone.

Then there was the fear of certainty. Knowing what was coming, and knowing it would be horrible. The Endbringers were always that latter type of fear. They were the inevitable, the unstoppable. For almost two decades, they had taught us this fact. None of us believed that changed today. And so we continued to wait. For the next hour, and then the anticipatory terror started to abate. Rarely did Endbringer battles last this long. For better or for worse, the fate of the battle was decided early. If only thanks to the Golden Idiot's arrival.

I stayed vigilant, even as others started to relax. Then the last sliver of the sun vanished behind the horizon.

"Alert!" The armband chirped. "Simurgh sighted at SN-6. Sim-". She had dropped like a comet from the heavens, piercing the thick layer of stormclouds fast enough that wisps of vapor followed her down. Landing hard atop Dragon's flagship, shields burst in the collision and her she pierced the hull to the knees as the ship rocked to its side.

"Defiant down, SN-6," the armband felt the need to inform us. Simurgh bent down, straightening her fingers on her left hand like a knife, before punching through the armored plating. "Dragon down, SN-6." Simurgh leapt upward, kicking off of the damaged ship and sending it careening to the ground. An entirely meaningless gesture. In her left hand, she clutched the limp form of Dragon like a child with a rag doll.

Only then did the singing start. Endbringers love their drama.
I could feel the movement of my team. Each suit, alive. Each one I could track and even speak through. "Osiris, your job hasn't changed." "Eki, laser then thermal, alternate between them. Don't waste time with other settings." "Lachesis, can you get a lock on her?"

"Trying," Missy's voice answered back. "She's the fucking queen of precogs. Give me some time."

"Will do," I promised. I fanned out the Raptors, giving me hundreds of angles to view the Simurgh at. The capes fired with wild abandon, catching her with minor strikes as she casually evaded anything powerful enough to do any real damage.

"For 'murica!!" Osiris shouted as he rushed in on his heavily customized variant of the Raptor. A kamikaze attack. One of the Simurgh's wings moved to block the impact and rapidly blossomed into ice crystals. Most of that ice was made from carbon dioxide. "Osiris deceased, SN-6"

I distributed the shadowcats outward. Simurgh wasn't like the other two, and I couldn't afford to treat her the same way. Spread out and keep moving, give her as many separate variables to track as possible. Her mental powers were frightening, but they weren't infinite. Like any precog, you just had to hit them with enough variables at once, and their effectiveness would plummet.

Alexandria rushed in, amid a chain of shots from Legend and Eidolon. A method they'd obviously used before, given the absolute perfect timing they executed. Simurgh use the ice shell on her wing to soak most of the attacks, then wing-slapped Alexandria upward into the sky. Where she was struck by lightning. Not a matter of powered attacks, simple natural lightning from the storm. Not enough to even phase the hero that gave the name to flying tanks.

"She's showboating," Amelia spoke from beside me. HorrorAngerFear. "That bitch is showing off."

"Osiris, go in for a hit from behind." "Eki, hold fire for my mark."

I sent a dozen of my unclaimed Raptors in for close range. They opened fire with a kaleidoscope of energy blasts, etching small lines of damage in her skin. Her frozen wing swept out, launching pieces of ice crystal. My raptors avoided most of them. But most is not all. "Flare deceased, RN-6. Screech down, RN-5. Plus six of my unmanned raptors. One peeled off from the attack to dive and catch Screech. He was still alive, and I dropped him down for one of the Shadowcats to bring to our hospital position. Even as the others kept up the attacks.

Another plume of ice blossomed, this time out of Simurgh's back. It laced around and between the joints of her body and wings. "Everything, now!" I told Eki.

The white hot stream of laser light struck out, catching Simurgh in the chest. It didn't stop there, this was the full fire mode. The beam cut a trail down her stomach to her hip before the reserve of power
finally ran out. Enough power to melt a city block. Enough power to burn away one of the Simurgh’s breasts.

"That's okay, they're probably fake anyway," Atropos joked.

ShockAmused. I even smiled, myself. It wouldn't show from through the costume, thankfully.

"Switch to sonic," Emma instructed over our private com system. It was only directed to Eki, but I heard anyway. She probably saw something I could not.

"Vertigo lance," Eki stated, swapping out for her other charged weapon.

Osiris came in for another strike, which Ziz evaded, slapping him way. I took direct control of the raptor and had it twist into her at the last second. It caught her leg, and then spread to the other.

"Everyone fall back," Emma told everyone on the armbands. "This is going to be big."

Eki rocketed upward, even as I pulled away all my flying units. Ziz rapidly started moving, evading like an expert dogfighter while trying to find cover from what was coming. Eidolon flashed a bright red-orange color, and the Simurgh was frozen in place by an aura of the same colors. Telekinesis? Time manipulation? Some kind of momentum nullifier? I didn't know, and now wasn't the time to speculate. It held her still just long enough for the sonic disruptor to go all out.

The area around her exploded, shattering glass even a mile from the epicenter of the attack. As it stood, the block she was above, and every block bordering it, splintered and collapsed. It was far more destructive than I'd expected. The names of dead and wounded started pouring through the com. Most of them were foreign. Indian or east European capes. Maybe African. None in languages I'd recognize or remember. Twelve wounded, eight dead.

The smoke cleared, revealing a Simurgh that looked like an ancient statue. Most of her surface had chipped and pealed off, exposing her deeper layers. The composition didn't look any different than her surface. Still the perfectly formed ivory coloration. But this was more damage than we achieved against Leviathan in Brockton Bay. Half a second later, Ziz was hammered into the ground by countless blaster attacks.

"Can you do that again?" Alexandria asked Eki over the armband.

"Needs time to recharge," Crystal answered. "Five minutes. More if I have to do anything else."

"Endbringers are comprised of crystalline material," Emma's voice came over the com. "Keep
layering on the cold and sonic attacks. Eidolon, if you can spare a few minutes, I think I can show you how to kill the bitch."

Alexandria plummeted into the streams of energy attacks, landing atop Ziz and forcing her right back into the ground.

Energy blasts and missiles streamed across the city, slamming down into the defenders of the city. I did what I could to evade the attacks, but in more scenarios than not, there was nothing that could be done.

"Apex down CM-3, Archon deceased ST-2..." I tuned out the rest. I already knew what happened. Mental commands were issued, sending the Shadowcats into full retreat, and the Raptors with them. I slammed the com. "The Dragon suits are compromised! The Simurgh has taken control of the Dragon suits!"

=============

A/N- Simmie's my favorite Endbringer. For reasons.
"God damn it," I yelled, but at least I deactivated the armband first. I moved my Gargants, which hadn't really been doing much in this fight before now anyway. Two of them leapt in a way a creature of their mass simply should not be able to, thanks to the antigrav built into their system. One was repelled by a suit's shielding. The other landed on top of it, and the shields buckled, allowing it to get a foothold into the metal.

It struggled with the armor plating, and I had to use the tusks’ frost saws to cut through. Forcing the armor to become too brittle to survive the pressure.

It was a humbling thought, actually, that the Simurgh, generally regarded as the physically weakest Endbringer, cut through the same defenses in a couple seconds. A dozen icecats had taken position with their riders. If they believed they were strong enough to withstand Behemoth in close quarters, then I'd trust they were strong enough to take down these suits.

The names of the dead kept rolling in. "Myrddin down, SA-4. Shadowfax deceased, SA-4." I managed to get an empty Shadowcat in the way to take a missile that would have ended it for Myrddin. A brute I didn't recognize collided with the side of the ship.

Atropos took to the air, firing the discus-like weapons that we designed to best take advantage of her power. Slicing several missiles to pieces. They were getting too close to the hospital. Amelia wrapped a shell of living material around us. Moments later, a video showing the outside formed on the inner walls of the dome.

A nearby suit exploded for a reason I didn't recognize. Two of my gargants were brought down by railgun fire. God fucking damn it.

_Fear_Frustration_. "Concentrate on spreading the Yggdrasil," I instructed Amelia. "We're going to need it. We already need it._Urgency_Focus_Determination._

For her part, the Simurgh ascended into the air again, along with shattered fragments of destroyed Dragon suits. The distraction of all the friendly fire had given her an escape window. Her wings unfurled, revealing the still unconscious Dragon in her hand. She had shielded the tinker with her own body. She needs Dragon to command the suits, I realized.

I wasn't the only one to have that thought. Alexandria swooped in, not to go after Ziz, but to target Dragon. Meanwhile, one of the suits breathed a black cloud at a gargant. It simply ceased to be, dissolved into ash and nothing. Along with the region around them. Armsmaster's weapon. I retreated all my remaining forces away from that system.
The Simurgh folded several wings about Dragon, protecting her from attack. She caught Alexandria and threw her into Osiris, causing the modified raptor to detonate and encase her in solid ice and liquid oxygen and nitrogen. Didn't slow Alexandria down, as she turned and body slammed into the Simurgh, shattering the ice ball.

"This... this is Defiant," a voice gasped over the armband. "Azazel's weapon is vulnerable to fire."

_Not completely down, then._ I explored the cockpit with my perfectly ordinary insects. One of Defiant's new weapons was embedded in the control system. That would explain why that suit didn't join the fight. He was in... remarkably good, or remarkably bad, condition and I had no way of knowing which. Leg crushed all the way up to the hip, other leg crushed below the knee. An arm broken. But very, very little blood loss. _A machine? A robot puppet like our changelings? Cyborg?

He had managed to cobble together a working vidscreen or somehow patch the monitoring system. That's how he knew Azazel was a problem.

"Eki, need your help on this one," I communicated.

"Inferno lance," was her response. _Good, she was paying attention._ A stray missile launched toward her, and I exerted my control system in her armor, juking her to the side. "Fuck!" she exclaimed, dropping the lance as the rocket traveled by and I let an empty raptor take the blow, simply to spare the two dozen riders I still had up in the air nearby.

"Inferno lance," she said again. I had no idea which of our tinkers built that little marvel, but that was fucking genius.


She flew into position as I moved two of my three remaining gargants in position.

Legend's voice came over Osiris' armband. "Target the wounded areas," he instructed. "The ice seems to block her regeneration."

"Mark," I instructed.

The stream of superheated plasma was invisible to the human eye, or even infravision, before striking. Some tinker bullshit about making a laser out of pure heat, or something. I stopped asking questions right around the time Bakuda made a bomb that's only ability was to cause pain. _Fucking tinkers._ The ray struck, and blossomed into fires that rendered the street molten in mere seconds. It was a sort of curse in disguise that, by now, that there was nothing left in the area that could die.
The gargants rushed in, slamming both sides of the Azazel simultaneously. They didn’t care about heat—being designed to withstand Behemoth’s kill aura and everything else he might throw at them. But, then, neither did the suit. At least the weapon got through the force shielding that Dragon had implemented in her new armors, and burned away the nanothorn weaponry.

Then the last thing I could have expected happened. Snow started to fall. Not much, but this was mid-August in India. Snow was not supposed to be falling. Now that I thought about it, the air outside our protective bubble was getting colder, if I judged by the insects becoming slower to respond. That was something we’d probably need to worry about later.

The gargants twisted Azazel’s limbs, bending them into positions that would resemble a submission hold. But I wasn’t trying to force it to submit, I was trying to crack it in half. Dragon must have really liked this one, I thought. It’s tougher than the others by a whole fucking lot. The third gargant had made it on scene, landing atop Azazel, slamming it to the ground. I’d break it. Eventually the three of them had to get through.

"Running out of power, here," Eki announced.

Fuck, couldn’t be that easy, could it? I had the Gargant leap upward again, then at highest point, made it deactivate its antigrav. Twenty times the mass of a bull elephant plummeted down, crashing into Azazel. The staff flickered out. And then my Gargants were consumed in the nanothorns. Azazel, at least, seemed stationary now. Protected by a thicket of instant death, but no longer running across the battlefield destroying everything.

But I was out of heavy hitters to bring down the other suits.

Of the nearly five hundred defending capes, we had lost seventy three of them simply from Dragon's weaponry. And we weren’t even halfway through the suits. I was running on less than half of my original stock of troops, and most of them were Shadowcats. Only forty Raptors left, only a hundred Frostcats. I had to admit to myself. If this had been a battle between my army and Dragon’s, without other cape interference. We would have lost so badly.

"Vertigo lance," Eki spoke, taking her weapon back. "Clear the field," she instructed, and everyone fell back, except Alexandria and Osiris. The former had a strong grip around Ziz, her legs locked around the Endbringer’s neck, even as she struggled to force the wings away that were insulating Dragon. Osiris was now smashing his mount along her outer wings. She was half encased in ice, not that it seemed to make a difference.

With half the suits destroyed, at least that gave me room to send my Shadowcats after the wounded. I had them evacuate from the area surrounding the Simurgh. Eki fired, and there was the now-expected shattering. The explosion of ice shards and the region around the Simurgh covered in fine frozen mist. She flew backward from the force of the explosion, leaving the cloud. A kick from
Alexandria and a pelting of lasers from Legend sent the Simurgh careening toward the ground again. It was the opening that Alexandria needed.

She thrust forward into the pocket that Ziz created for Dragon, then flew back, her arm covered in viscera and holding a trail of material that could only be interpreted as a human spine. *NauseaShockGrief.*

"Dragon deceased, KP-4," the armband announced.

==

A/N- Ah, the bitching this and the next couple chapters caused. To preempt that happening again, I want everyone to repeat the words "fucking tinkers" ten times before posting complaints.
For a moment, I paused to absorb the thought. Alexandria killed Dragon. *Alexandria killed Dragon.* I had no insects in the area to confirm anything. Really, I had no insects at all but for a few in the houses, and inside the shelters themselves. A fine powder of snow lay on the ground, but the temperature had continued to drop even after the snow stopped. Aside the spots that were on fire, a thin layer of frost had formed on every surface.

"My units are starting to get sluggish from the cold," I said to the others on our private link.

It was Emma that answered back. "Sorry," she gasped. She was clearly out of breath. "Didn't build them for super cold climates. We were suppose to be fighting an Endbringer, not arctic weather conditions. Take them near the fires and let their energy absorption recharge their batteries."

Seemed obvious when it was said out loud. I sent the more important units, the Shadowcats, to where there was sufficient heat.

"You said something about killing her?" Eidolon asked over the armband. "What's your plan?"

"Sonic attack," Emma's voice cracked. I couldn't blame her for being a bit star struck. This was Eidolon, after all. "And I know just the power to make it happen. Minerva's found a guy who can speed time in a local area. I'll explain there."

And then the dragon suits opened fire again. Decimating my ranks and catching far too many of the defenders in the crossfire. *Fuck! The Simurgh's suppose to be the least lethal of the three!* We're already seeing losses as bad as Leviathan, and she's still in the fight.

"Dragon's suits are still in the fight," I announced over the radio. *It didn't work.* I wisely left those words out, but everyone was thinking them.

*DisgustAngerBlame.* I didn't disagree. And out there on the field, a lot of people were thinking the same thing. At least, the ones not caught in the thick of the fighting.

I felt something forming in the sewers, and looked at Gaea. "New shadowcats?"

"Acid," she answered. "Crystalline shells that should be able to bypass Dragon's shields. If the Ultralisks are any hint. Designed to detonate. Suicide attacks."

I nodded. *A way to fight back. My new, what? Acidcats? Sure, why not?* They were more than
capable of climbing walls and breaking through streets. Not as fast or strong as the 'perfected' models, but I could tell she had absorbed and copied some of them with the Yggdrasil to produce these new weapons. I could almost imagine Osiris laughing that we finally took his suggestion, if he weren't busy with distracting the Great White Bitch.

A couple of them did manage to get through one suit's shielding. One was shot by some kind of kinetic weapon, but the other collided with the hull and exploded. Several gallons of Crawler-acid ate its way through the side. The other suits took off. *Funny, they could have done that at any time. Why'd they stay on the ground this long?*

Another salvo of missiles cut through our already decimated ranks, and I was lucky to save all the ones riding on what was left of my cats and raptors. *We're losing this. We've already lost, only a few minutes until we're exposed to the song long enough to be Simurgh's future puppets.*

Then another song started. A physical one, this time, a screech that I'd heard before. One that still brought dread. *Shatterbird.* The remaining suits splintered and collapsed, their glass ripped from them. The city itself wasn't effected, nor were our armbands. Eidolon rose up, encased in the shimmering and near invisible shell of glass. *Was Shatterbird's power really that perfect? Did Eidolon simply get a similar, but better, power? Or was there a second power dedicated to this kind of focus?*

The suits, at least, were no longer a factor. Eidolon rose and blasted Ziz with an intense sonic attack. Now I knew it couldn't be Shatterbird's power, she couldn't do that. The sound of the attack- as interpreted by my Raptors and their far superior to human hearing and echolocation- changed even as he fired, fluctuating in pitch and intensity. *That's what the Shatterbird power was for. A way to alter the other attack on the fly. If you don't know which frequency hurts the most, take a power that lets you change it at will.* It was hard not to feel inadequate compared to that kind of power and versatility.

Eki followed up with a stream from her laser weapon, leaving another scar across the Simurgh. This time through the biggest wing.

"I've got her!" Lachesis declared. She hit the coms. "Everyone fall back! The Moirai Cannon has a lock!"

Most of them listened. I drew away the few raptors that still had riders and began focusing on the empty raptors, including those that that had been repaired by Amelia. There was no pretense of survival. They collided with Ziz and tried to tear into her flesh. They had strength enough to cut the outer layers, but the deeper areas that had been exposed in the battle were seemingly indestructible. Like our weapon testing on Theo's armor. But they weren't the main event. They were the distraction.

Alexandria went in for another pass, slamming the Simurgh downward, again. *God damn it, Alexandria. I wasn't feeling especially charitable to her right now. Killing Dragon for nothing. Well,*
if she was willing to let others make that sacrifice, she could make it herself. "Fire when you're ready," I instructed them.

"Alexandria," I warned her. I may not have been her biggest fan right now, but I couldn't simply order her murder. "Get out of the way! You're not immune to this weapon and we can't afford to wait."

She pulled up as the shot was taken. The side of the Yggdrasil bubble was pierced by the attack, and painfully cold air poured into our roof bubble. To call it a cannon was a misnomer. Really, it wasn't a traditional weapon at all. It was our Moirai at work. Three parahumans working in concert. Parian, Clotho, to control the streamers of spider's silk and make it flow properly. Vista, Lachesis, creating the path so we could actually hit the bitch. And Flechette, Atropos, charging the strips of silk so they could slice through anything. Hopefully, that included Endbringer cores.

Ziz never moved before like she moved then. She dropped to the ground, landing hard enough to leave a small crater. The streaming lines of barely visible silk twisted and followed her. She left a sonic boom as she jumped sideways, her halo of depriv and weaponry forgotten as she focused all her telekinetic strength on herself. And then she leapt straight up. Legend pelted her with rays. She ignored them. Escaping the ribbons was more important than dodging Legend's attack.

She was near the thick, low cloud cover when she flashed with the green light again. Eidolon's stopping attack. It had been used exactly twice in this fight. Why? I didn't know. I really didn't care all that much. It was there when we needed it the absolute most, and that was more than enough for me.

The Simurgh turned, facing the fate laid out for her. Did she foresee this? Could she have? It seemed unlikely. We had two precog jammers as part of our Moirai. Then there was Eidolon, who, amongst many other entirely unfair abilities, was also precog immune. She put her arms out, as if she could block the inevitable. She could not. Even gods had to answer to the Fates.

The strings hit her hands first, her fingers split, and then the hands themselves splintered. Wings disintegrated under the nigh invisible, completely unstoppable, attack. We didn't know where her core was. We did know a single hit would not be enough, regardless of weapon used. Instead, we unleashed a million separate attacks. Death by papercuts, as it were.

A leg dropped, and was shredded. Her body was reduced to pieces no larger than a human fist. Her wings, scattered and mostly shredded as well. That's when the trio lost power. More specifically, Atropos reached her range and mass limit. The Simurgh started pulling itself together, telekinetically pasting its pieces back into place.

"We need a minute to finish the job!" Lachesis instructed.

Legend, Eidolon and Eki opened fire, blowing pieces out of, or away from, the Endbringer. Osiris
got in and froze a good portion of the mass. The ice cracked as Simurgh forced her pieces out, and he struck again. We'd done more damage than anyone before. More damaged than anyone could have thought was possible, minutes ago. We'd finish her with the next salvo.

"Take cover!" Emma screamed over the armband.

Less than a second later, the sky exploded.

================

A/N- Intense, no?
Sarah gave me a quick hug. "Hey, Mark, how've you been?"

"Well," I shrugged. "I don't have a lot to compare it to. In some ways, I feel better than I have since I was a teenager. In others... well, we have other things to worry about right now. No sense in throwing any more problems in your lap."

"Hey," she offered a small smile. "Dealing with problems is what I do, remember?"

I did remember. Sarah was always the heart and mind of New Wave. To the outside, it might have looked like Carol was our team leader. She was always the smart, confident and successful one. She just never quite had that charisma to lead a team of friends, or the mindset to handle the rapidly changing circumstances of the battlefield. She was happier in a orderly, mechanical world where everything obeyed specific and agreed upon rules.

*Speak of the devil, Carol is already here.* I spotted her as I walked in. "Hello, Mark," she said.

"Hey, Carol," I offered a smile. I hadn't talked to my wife much in the last couple weeks. Not since she learned I had been discussing joining the Protectorate. Calvert was a great deal more persuasive than their last director, and I was getting restless. I hadn't felt this good in years, this eager to actually go out to do some real good. Of course, I happened to live in a town where there wasn't much good left to actually do. Pantheon broke the drug trade into pieces, and violent crime was almost gone. Or, at least, the kind of crime that could be called 'professional', like muggings and rape. Personal crimes, like the violence at school, and fights in the refugee shelters, that sort of thing wasn't so quick to change.

"It'll still be a while before Behemoth surfaces," Sarah told us. "Please, make yourself at home."

"Don't mind if I do," I said, taking off my shoes. "Is the news saying anything?"

"Only that they think Behemoth's path is tracking northeast," Carol answered. "Looks like Pakistan is the target, now."

"Is there anything in Pakistan worth attacking?" I asked. "They usually have goals where they hit."

"A cape war, of sorts," Sarah answered. "Isolationist groups trying to cut off the middle east from foreigners, like the CUI did to China."
"Sounds like a prime location, then," I agreed. "If he's hoping the defenders might not cooperate with each other."

There was a knock at the door, where Sarah was still waiting. She opened it, revealing a tall and slender man that I didn't recognize. He was rather unremarkable looking, honestly. If I had met him before, I don't think I'd remember his face later. A new boyfriend? Good for her, being able to go on with her life after everything that's happened.

"I wasn't too late, was I?" he asked.

"Of course not, Danny, come right in," she smiled graciously. That was Sarah, alright. Always the professional hostess, even in a situation like this one.

He stepped in and looked at me. "Hello," I said, holding out my hand. "I'm Mark Dallon, you can call me Mark. Any friend of Sarah's is a friend of mine. Speaking of which, how do you know Sarah?"

"Daniel Hebert, call me Danny," he shook my hand. Firm grip, probably a bit too firm. *Overcompensating because I'm a cape*, I just smiled and ignored it. Nothing I hadn't run into before. "I'm Taylor's- err, Khepri's, father."

"Then you're practically family, already," I smiled, slapping his shoulder. *This was Khepri's dad, then*. I hadn't even met Taylor personally yet, but now that I knew to look, I could see the resemblance. *Seems like Amy's fiance will never really fill out*. I suppose if either of them have a problem with that, they could always change it to something more their liking.

Carol walked right past us. "Sarah, a word in the kitchen."

Danny looked at my wife with an understandable amount of concern. Carol was never really the warmest person, and she'd gotten worse lately. She was angry at everything these days, and when she wasn't angry she was miserable. She never was good at dealing with feelings.

"Women folk need their alone time. You know how sisters are," I said, guiding the man away from the minefield before he accidentally set something off. "Come on, we were just about to start a game of 'guess where Behemoth's grave will be', but I'd rather learn more about the tall mysterious secret agent that ran off with my daughter's heart. The more humiliating the stories, the better."

"Sure," he agreed, putting Carol's behavior out of his mind. "When she was little, she basically worshiped Alexandria," he said smiling. "We'd find her running around in her pajamas with with a towel tied around her neck all the time."
I lost a good amount of my smile when he said that. I don't think Danny noticed. Victoria used to do the exact same thing. "Alexandria, huh?" I offered a bit of a laugh. "That explains a lot about her costume design choices."

He managed to chuckle a bit. Not much of one, but it was a start. No one could expect to be too cheerful minutes before an Endbringer attack, but I had every confidence in those girls. Tonight would be a celebration.

-----

"The hell are you thinking, bringing him here?" I hissed at Sarah. "You said this was family only."

"He is family, Carol," my sister retorted.

"His daughter's engagement to Amelia doesn't mean a thing," I insisted. I didn't care what Mark said on the issue. *How could they just accept a stranger in like this without even considering my feelings? Why did it even surprise me?* Sarah never listened, and the way Mark was acting these days was like a completely different person. He was never the most considerate person, but at least he tried before. Now it was like he wanted to upset me whenever possible.

"Then the part where his daughter is fighting alongside mine against Behemoth," Sarah responded. "That's enough for me. They're teammates. I know you know how deep that bond runs. Especially in teams which face Endbringers together. He's a good man, and he's facing the same fear we face when our own children put their lives on the line. No one should have to go through that, but we do. The least we can do is keep him from going through it alone."

I couldn't help but glance toward the living room, where Mark was asking all sorts of questions while they watched the news. "You should have talked to me first," I insisted. "It's not fair to blindside me with something like this. You know I don't like strangers."

Sarah deflated. "Sorry," she said. "I sort of forgot he's a stranger to you. I've gotten to know him pretty well the last couple months."

"Have you, now?" I replied. I looked straight into her eyes. *Oh fuck. Was she really? Neil has only been dead for three months!*

"We met when Pantheon did that cleanup operation at the boat graveyard," she told me. "He was so obviously Khepri's father that I was afraid he'd blow the whole secret on the news right then and there. After that, well, he needed to learn all the tricks capes use and the rules they play by. All stuff I wish someone told us back when we were new to the scene. At least he already knew how to handle the PRT when they wanted to play hardball."
"I see," I confirmed when she finished. I didn't even really pay attention. She was... and him... and how was I even suppose to take that? The truth was, couldn't. There was no way for me to approach the topic without it ending up in a fight that I would lose, at a time when Sarah needed the support most. I bit my tongue, and picked my battles. It wasn't like this was the first man my sister was interested in that I didn't like.

She picked up on my continuing disapproval, of course, but didn't push the issue. "So," she said. "I see what you mean about Mark, he seems so... energetic, now."

I relaxed, that was a safer topic. "He acts so immature," I knew I was just complaining now, but it felt good to complain sometimes. "It's like his personality was completely rewritten."

"And you suspect Amy is re-"

"Amelia," I interrupted. "She's decided she's Amelia, remember?"

"You think it's Amelia's fault," Sarah continued.

"Who else?" I said. "People don't just change like that on their own."

"I don't think he has changed," Sarah offered. "Yes, he acts different than usual. But I remember his good days, when we were younger. The days where he was functional, even without the medication to balance him out? He was always energetic, silly even. Remember how he'd spend all day just playing with the kids like he was one of them. Maybe that's just who he is, without the depression and the drugs getting in the way."

I paused. It was true. It didn't happen often, and less often as the years wore on, but those were the days where the kids were happiest.

"Get in here!" Mark shouted. "It's starting!"

And with that, the conversation was over.

We rushed in to witness Behemoth leaving.

"He... he retreated?" I heard Sarah gasp.

"Not possible," I insisted. "Endbringers don't retreat. He has something else planned."
We watched, and waited in near silence for over an hour, listening to comments and speculation from people that had no idea what they were talking about. All of which was interrupted when the Simurgh dropped from the sky.

"Fuck!" Mark exclaimed. The rest of the battle was almost impossible to parse. The cameras were high quality, but thick cloud cover at night makes for awful lighting conditions. Most of it was us staring at nearly black screens, parsed by flashes of light as the heroes tore into the Simurgh with one energy attack after another. We only figured out the Dragon suits were attacking when it was nearly already over.

We were treated to a truly horrifying scene when Alexandria ripped a hero who had been captured by the Simurgh in half. Somehow, it happened within feet of one of the still functioning cameras, and there was enough light from a nearby burning building to make it easily visible.

"She wanted everyone to see that," I muttered. It was an obvious statement, there were no arguments made. It was only then that the video stopped.

"Channel nine would like to issue an immediate apology," he said. "We should have stopped the video the moment we realized it was the Simurgh at the scene. While it is not illegal to show footage of Endbringers, it was irresponsible to do so knowing the Simurgh's skill for manipulation. We urge the public to exercise discretion. The Simurgh relies on paranoia and irrational behavior to spread the worst of its damage. We will not be displaying more video of the battle itself, and urge other stations to take the same action."

"I never knew things were like that..." Daniel whispered.

Sarah put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry," she said. "Your daughter is strong, she'll make it through. They all will."

For the next few minutes, we watched speculation by the various talking heads about what we'd witnessed. Generally, it was agreed that whatever unfortunate cape the Simurgh had captured was already dead, and what Alexandria had done must have been for a reason. Nothing but the PRT lapdogs in the media trying to cover for a hideously gruesome act.

"They'd be better off just not taking about it at all," I stated. "The speculation's just going to make things worse in the long run."

"Video's already out," Sarah agreed. "The cameras are live feeds, streaming online as well as broadcasting directly. I'm sure the internet is going to have every last scene available, both raw and in
"Contact with the site of the battle has been lost," the anchorman stated. "They're still trying to determine the cause. Reports are coming in from other cities in India. It appears a massive explosion has taken place, reaching as far south as Hyderabad and as far west as Pakistan."

We watched breathless for the next half hour, as they showed low quality video of the devastation. We sat through words like 'destruction of most of the Indian subcontinent' and 'cataclysmic effects for the environment'. Eventually they found one good view. A weather satellite that had been watching the stormfront we'd seen from the cameras in New Delhi.

A flash of light started in northern India and we watched it spread down, and then along India's coastline, making its way inland until it had covered almost everything. It was a rapid spread, but not nearly as fast as speed of light should have been. Like watching a fire spread across a pool of gas. Then the light vanished, and with it all the clouds that were there before the explosion happened.

"It appears the explosion originated at the point of New Delhi," the anchor said shakily. "What this means for the Endbringer, those brave men and women defending the city, and the future of India and the world as a whole is currently unknown."

"Amy," I gasped, the tears coming hard. I looked at the others. Daniel and Sarah were currently holding each other. Mark was staring at the screen in disbelief. And I couldn't stop shaking. I just lost my remaining daughter.

=============

A/N- Still intense, no?
Parian screamed as a gust of flame burst through the hole left behind by the Moirai cannon. The port was sealed by a mirror metal. Theo's power. I could feel the temperatures through my Yggdrasil. It would have been enough to scour the usual design. But this variant was meant to withstand Behemoth, if at all possible. Heat converted to electricity converted to magnetic storage systems that Emma and Riley had taught me how to grow.

It was hell, on the other side of the bubble. A mush that I only realized was asphalt after the Yggdrasil started to consume it. The sewer lines had collapsed, molten materials dripping down onto the established Yggdrasil. There were pockets where things were still cool enough to remain standing. But the air was deadly hot, even within the sewer tunnels. The surface had to be worse.

"I'm blind outside of this building," Taylor said, her voice trembling. HorrorFearRealizationGrief. "The Gargants, the cats, even the insects in the shelters. It's all gone. Eki's still alive out there. She's covered herself in ice. I can't find Osiris, Emma, Minerva or Chariot. Past that? There's nothing, except some worms deep in the soil."

I cringed. She still had relays in the Yggdrasil. Her range extended for miles in every direction. A nuclear bomb- a thousand nuclear bombs set off on top of each other- couldn't have done what that explosion had done. If the suits were destroyed, there was almost no chance their wearer had survived, except Osiris. It must be a nightmare for him out there.

"Theo!" Missy exclaimed. I spared the chance to look. Blood was pouring from his side. A cut through his armor? Oh, Flechette's power hadn't completely deactivated. "What... why would you?" She sobbed. "You knew not to get in the way."

I couldn't hear what he said to her from over here. I wasn't sure he could say anything, considering that at least one lung had to have been bisected.

"Heal him!" She insisted. I hesitated. If I pulled my concentration away... a lot of people would die. Crystal likely amongst them. The suits were durable, hers more than most, but they weren't indestructible. A lot of capes were tough enough to withstand at least the area somewhat further away. Some could handle it permanently, others for only a few minutes at most. Theo was... one life compared to potentially dozens...

"Riley," Taylor spoke up. She was checking on Flechette, whose suit was all but destroyed by the flames. "We'll worry about the consequences later. Let her work."

Good idea, I thought. I took the briefest time necessary to die her hair black. A very simple modification of the Dryad touching her scalp. The back of my suit split, letting her out. She rolled backward and landed on her feet, then bolted over to Theo.
"Clarice?" Missy asked.

Riley nodded. "I need you to grab some things from in the hospital..."

I turned my attentions back to the outside. Finding the few identifiable zerg bodies was always an advantage, when I could. They were built for shunting heat and other types of energy. I subsumed them into the Yggdrasil, made all the easier because that was part of their design from the beginning. How we were supposed to face Behemoth.

The building rumbled. "Behemoth?" I whispered. Half a question, half a prayer that I was wrong. I pushed more of the Yggdrasil mass into the basement and forced it to reach out through the stone to anchor itself and give me some idea what had happened. No, it wasn't Behemoth. Or, if it was, he was being unusually subtle about it. The area around the hospital was shifting due to part of it being heated to a liquid state. That was taking the building with. I managed to lock it in place, at least for the time. It, too, would collapse in a couple days.

Our 'viewscreen' finally managed to reactivate, showing us the outside world. I almost wished it hadn't.

Nothing was left standing except this one building. The streets reduced to molten tar, the buildings on fire, collapsed into rubble, molten into slag, or some combination of all three. Some parahumans were still active, and I kept forcing the Yggdrasil outward with every ounce of will I could muster. Now that I could see, I could pick my battles better. Directing the tendrils in specific directions. Knowing which intersections were worth punching paths to the surface.

A zone looked like it hadn't been annihilated. A dozen people clustered inside. Some kind of forcefield user? Clearly an insanely powerful one to have withstood that blast.

Steam was pouring out of some areas. Busted water lines, probably. The defenders reacted intelligently, at least. We were the only place still standing. The only thing that looked like refuge. They were coming to us. I grew paths of Yggdrasil, and expanding islands of it where I could see people further off. There was nowhere left to target. Almost everyone left was already dead.

Alexandria had Legend's cape wrapped around her, and she was carrying an obviously wounded Eidolon. Her helmet had been destroyed in the explosion.

I changed the color of part of our protective dome from its current refractive silver to a dark grey. A clearly visible sign of where to go. I created other such openings at the base of the building. Places where people could get inside from the heat and potentially deadly gasses. I built other safety pockets where I could, now that I had time. Enveloping the few still living in Yggdrasil pods now that they were close enough, and I had the spare material.
The air was cooling, at least. Less heat meant less energy, making my vines respond more sluggishly as they did their thing.

The hatch opened for Alexandria and Legend. Now that we were closer, I could tell that Legend was injured, too. Not as badly, and more uniformly, than Eidolon.

"He needs medical attention," Alexandria commanded even as she dropped down. The injury she received from Siberian so many years ago still looked fresh and raw. There was metal dripping from the open wound. Her helmet, maybe? No, it was deeper than that. A prosthetic face replacement? Recognition Surprise.

"Set him down, I'll handle the rest," I answered. The Yggdrasil wrapped around him. Infused into his burnt flesh and muscle. Here I was restoring Eidolon. I'd be restoring a lot of people soon. At least that would be easy for me, now. All the other lives I could have saved, if I'd had the courage to make Yggdrasil years ago. All the lives that it wasn't able to save here and now.

Alexandria froze, looking at Riley. Panic Terror. Her fist clenched. Legend saw her reaction, and saw the girl. Fuck. I brought up a wall between them. Didn't believe for a second it would stop Alexandria or Legend. I needed Missy to realize something was wrong. Alexandria glared at me accusingly. "You're har-"

"Endbringer truce," Taylor interrupted. Oh god thank you. "We don't attack each other during the truce. We don't reveal identities learned during the truce, either. You never saw her. Did you, Chief Director?"

Alexandria stood there for a minute, glaring at Taylor. Taylor stood her ground, placing herself between one of the strongest heroes on the planet, and the child monster that had tortured her and mutilated her friend not so long ago.

Alexandria's good eye narrowed. "No, I suppose I did not," she responded. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "I'm going to find and ferry back more survivors. Can you lend me one of your armor systems? It's difficult to breath out there."

"Not without time we don't have," I answered, a bit hesitantly. In all the Endbringer fights I had attended in the past, I'd never met Alexandria in person before. I had certainly never come within heartbeats of being killed by her. "They're very much custom designed. I can give you something that'll at least give you some modesty and an air supply, though. That'll do for now, right?"

"That will do," she answered. She handed Legend his cloak back before I'd even begun. The woman didn't seem too particularly concerned about her state of undress. Then again, if I had her figure, I'd feel like I was doing something wrong by wearing clothing. Envy Annoyance.
I folded the Yggdrasil around her body. A full suit, designed specifically to convert the excess heat in the atmosphere into oxygen production. It wasn't perfect, but it should last well enough. It was, of course, face concealing. The same organic viewscreen technology that went into all our systems. I adjusted the suit's pigmentation to loosely match her actual costume. She flew back out. The same hot air gusted in. It was still hotter than most ovens could get. *No hope for normal humans to survive.*

_**WorryConcern.**_ I could feel Taylor trying to offer me some kind of comfort. But there wasn't any to be had. Crystal was out there. Zach, at least, I could trust to make it through. But she was right there in the epicenter. Where Simurgh was destroyed. Somewhere in the pool of liquid glass and molten metal that was almost as wide as the crater where we built our base.

"Is it going to be like this next time?" I asked. "Will each dead Endbringer result in this kind of destruction?"

"I don't know," Taylor responded. "If it is... will it be worth it?"

As I stood there, putting most of my concentration on speeding the abilities of the healing pods and stabilizing the wounded within, I found I had no answer for that question.

===================

A/N- Know what? I think this chapter needed some work. So I did it. Enjoy the improved version.
My fingers clutched my seat so hard that they bled, and I didn't even notice. Watching the fires spread across India. Knowing my Amelia was in the center of that inferno. Not knowing what happened as the news speculated about death tolls and environmental bullshit. I would have screamed at the television, if not for all the witnesses.

No one said anything for a while, and then Lung spoke up. "That didn't get her," he stated with absolute certainty. I looked at him, but he was his usual inscrutable self, watching the screen with a combination of deadly focus and bored aloofness.

"Not that I would even consider questioning your wisdom," Teacher spoke up. "But I'm afraid I'm stumped as to how you know that."

"The bug girl," Kenta elaborated. "She survived me twice. Using nothing but little bugs. If I can survive it, then she can survive it. That, right there," he pointed at the screen. "That is something I can survive."

I hid my shock better than some of the men. Lung's claim that he could withstand such an inferno was a bit hard to swallow. Certainly, he was powerful, but this was a firestorm that engulfed almost all of India. I wasn't exactly top of my geography class, but that was a pretty big area. In fact, the expert they had speculating on the damage estimated that the area covered was over four times the size of texas. It was hard to believe that even he could survive in that.

Which was nothing compared to the sheer incredulity of believing that Lung could be fought by mere insects.

Teacher was as nonchalant as usual, however. "Hard to argue with that logic," he acquiesced. "Smart money is that the girls are alive and well. Now for the real million dollar question: do you think they got Her?"

Teacher didn't need to use the name, we knew who he meant. Lung simply shrugged noncommittally, as he often did.

I smiled. "I'll take the bet, if you want to make one," I said. "They said they had an Endbringer killer, and I believe them. So it's one down, two to go."

"I'll pass," Teacher replied. "I only gamble when I know I'll win."

A hollow platitude from Teacher, no surprise. He knew he had nothing to gain from claiming he
disagreed with me right now, much the same as he chose not to argue with Lung. And he possibly had a great deal to lose. Few people were brave enough to tell Lung he was wrong to his face, and even if he might talk back to me in private, or during Court, he'd never do so as a guest in my territory.

----

Sarah clung to me as we watched. I felt awkward. *I never was good at offering comfort,* I thought. *I'm not good at confronting loss, either.* Right now I was staring at the screen, willing it to change. For Taylor to be alright. *Was it selfish of me that I was less worried for the others? That Amelia and Crystal and the others didn't matter as much to me as Taylor did?* I decided it didn't matter. If that made me selfish, then I was selfish.

"They'll make it," Mark insisted. He didn't sound convincing. Carol was staring silently, her hands over her mouth. She didn't bother to hide her tears.

I put my arm around Sarah. Not much comfort, I know. I hoped that a little bit of Annette's ability to give great hugs had rubbed off on me.

"Tell me they'll be okay," she mumbled into my shoulder. I couldn't. I didn't want to be a liar.

It was almost an hour later when the news finally had something new to say about the circumstances at New Delhi, now known as Ground Zero. Australian news, at that.

"...American parahuman known as Legend, a survivor of the New Delhi incident, arrived in Perth." The showed him, of course. He looked quite a bit worse for wear, wearing a different costume than we were use to him wearing, an ugly brownish affair, but it did have his symbol on it.

"I want to let the world know," Legend stated for the camera crews that had hastily assembled at what was no doubt the middle of the night for them. "There are survivors in New Delhi, and the battle with the Simurgh has ended. We deployed a new weapon against her, one which was capable of slaying the Endbringers outright."

"And by 'we', you mean our daughters!" Mark declared.

"The Simurgh sustained massive damage during the initial use of the weapon, and immediately attempted to flee. When she was prevented from escaping by the defending capes, the weapon was deployed again. It appears she self destructed when she was destroyed."

"They're alive," I declared, as Legend continue to offer details. Everyone looked at me, and I was suddenly quite aware of how I was dealing with experienced heroes. "Legend's outfit," I clarified. "It
looks like something Taylor puts over her armor when she wears it home. She says it's to keep it repaired when away from the base."

"Which means Amelia had to make it," Carol was the one who spoke up, her voice wavering.

"And if Amelia's alive, then so are the others," Mark laughed. "Told you we'd be having an End of the Endbringer party tonight!"

"Taylor said the same thing," I managed to genuinely smile for the first time since this morning. "Something about Mayors and getting our asses kissed."

"Sounds like a plan," Mark said with a smile. "Are we gonna have to dress up and pretend we care about what year a bottle of wine came from?"

"Probably," I chuckled. "Let's just hope they don't expect me to know all the forks."

----

Danny held me as we kept watching the news. Knowing that our daughters made it had lifted a weight off of me.

"There won't be any celebrations," I told Mark. "The Simurgh's been destroyed, but she made the victory hollow. A billion people dead, entire countries depopulated. No one's going to celebrate this. They might even look for someone to blame."

Danny squeezed me a little tighter. It was nice. "Sarah's right," he agreed. "This... this is massive. Simurgh was always the hope killer of the three. The one that, how did they put it? Even if you win every battle, you still lose the war."

"Fuck," Mark cursed. "It's true, isn't it? There's no way to call this a victory without looking like the biggest assholes on the planet."

I nodded. *This proved it, didn't it? They beat the Simurgh. They beat her and they killed her and they survived the destruction she brought down on them after. *Do you think Amy was right?* I asked, then I realized they didn't know what I meant. *About her being able to stop the Endbringers. She said if we'd let her really use her powers fully, she could have stopped Leviathan from destroying Brockton Bay."

I left the last part of the question silent: *Would my husband and son still be alive?*
No one had any answers for that question. Carol couldn't even look me in the eyes, and Mark... I just reminded them of everything they'd lost.

"I don't think so," Danny said. "Maybe she could have slowed him down, I don't know. But Taylor made it pretty clear the only reason these monsters and weapons they built work is because it's a team effort. Taylor to control them. Without her, they're too dumb to fight. Amy to build them. A bunch of tinkers to upgrade them enough to actually work. I'm sure you guys know the shit Emma put Taylor through. She's part of their team now, because they needed her powers to do what they did to Simurgh. She didn't even have powers when Leviathan attacked. No matter how you look at it... no, they wouldn't have been able to kill Leviathan back then."

"Thanks," I said, and squeezed him. "That means a lot."

"I... I think I'm going to go home," Carol said. "There's... I just. It's been a rough day. I'm sure you understand."

Mark watched her, then looked back at us. "I should probably..."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Go." He didn't wait for me to finish the sentence.

Danny waited until after they'd left, before looking at me. "So, am I allowed to ask, or is this one of those complicated family things that I'm better off not worrying about? Don't worry, I won't be bothered if it is. Discretion and valor and all that."

"No, it's fine," I assured him. "You know that Amy practically disowned us, right?"

He nodded. "Taylor told me something to that effect. Said Amelia called you kidnappers."

I flinched. That was a painfully close to true. "We... she's Marquis' biological daughter. We didn't know about her until after we'd arrested him. We weren't left with a lot of choices."

"I can see where that would be a problem," he agreed. "I remember those days. Letting Marquis go would have been bad for everyone. He had a lot of enemies, and some of them would have hurt Amelia. Or took her away to see what powers Marquis' daughter might develop. Considering the power she did get, it's a good thing she had a good family to look after her. Could you imagine if she was raised by Kaiser, for example?"

"We made a lot of mistakes with her," I said. "When she told us off, well, she accused us of making her scared of herself and her powers, and talked about how easy it was for her to stop the Slaughterhouse Nine. Considering how she destroyed them and E88 when she cut loose, I believe
"Right," He nodded. "She could have. Maybe not Siberian, but I can't imagine the others would put up much of a fight."

"Especially if she had Taylor's help from the beginning," I added, and he smiled. It was nice seeing him play proud father like that. "If she had stopped the Nine early, then Victoria, Glory Girl, wouldn't have died fighting them."

His eyes widened in realization. "Oh, that's," he looked toward the door. "When you... then they..."

I nodded.

"Christ," he shook his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"You didn't do anything," I insisted. "I was the one who brought it up, all you did was try to comfort me."

"Daniel Hebert, always saying the wrong thing to the parents of the bride," he offered a smile.

"It happens," I smile back. I was suddenly very aware of how very close we were, and the tear stains I left on his shirt. Like Carol said, it had been a rough day. We just looked into each other's eyes for a couple minutes, not saying anything. He was sweet, in an awkward dorky sort of way. I leaned in a little, and he did the same.

Then, hesitantly, I moved in and kissed him. He kissed back.

================

A/N- D'awww.
Three hours later, we'd already found everyone that could be found. Two hundred and sixty two people. All of them in this hospital. The sum total of survivors in the city of hundreds of thousands. Most of whom were in the hospital before the fight even started. Then there was the destruction beyond. Our initial guess... all of Delhi had been destroyed in the explosion. All of it, millions of people. I couldn't even parse that into perspective.

Crystal had survived, if barely, encased in a shell of ice by her own weapon. Third degree burns and frostbite. The only thing that saved her from hypothermia was the emergency life support. Emma as well, in slightly better condition. Alongside a barely breathing Clockblocker. She managed to hold out and cool off a pocket of the sewer system with her power. As we'd learned already, her 'ice' state works better when there's more energy to draw upon. She biotinkered the hell out of poor Dennis to keep him going, and Riley was still undoing and rebuilding the mess.

Zach had made it back, almost on his own. Naked. Apparently if he's destroyed often enough, quickly enough, his power 'forgets' his outfit and other stuff. He didn't have a lot to say, I gave him a close copy of his costume, like I'd done for others who made it back without clothing, which turned out to be most of them. Powers that let you survive hell were apparently more common than powers that let the area around you survive hell as well.

Lisa and Chariot weren't among the survivors.

Legend finally returned. He'd left after I healed his injuries. They were strange, in the way breakers always are when injured in their alternate forms. Spread out unnaturally and mostly across the surface, instead of deeper inside where there was real health risks. He landed through the now permanent opening in our Yggdrasil bubble.

"Dragon will be along shortly," he told us.

ConfusionHope. "Isn't she suppose to be dead?" Taylor asked.

"Some kind of robot decoy," Legend responded. Then he sat down on one of the makeshift chairs I'd built. "We got the Simurgh, though. Every instrument that's been used agrees with that assessment. She's gone. Destroyed. They're keeping all samples collected during prior battles under watch, in case they activate and try to regenerate."

"You sound remarkably unhappy about that," Flechette observed.

"No, I'm glad for that," he hesitated. "I just wonder about the cost. It's worse than we thought out there."
Alexandria was the one to ask the question. "How much damage did it do?"

"Hundreds of miles," Legend answered. "Most of India, into Pakistan and a few other countries. Even the most conservative estimates are at over a billion people."

_AweDreadRemorse._ "Fuck," Taylor muttered. _That one word said it all, didn't it?_

"She made it worse than it had to be," Legend replied. "The reason it was so cold is..."

"She froze the fucking sky," Emma interrupted. "She used my technology. Created an ice sheet out of the clouds, kept it there with our antigravity and maybe her own telekinesis. When the explosion went off, it was reflected downward and outward. Not all of it, of course. But a shaped explosion that caused more destruction than there might otherwise be by an order of magnitude. Everything else. Dragon's apparent death. The fight with the suits. All of that was nothing but a delay tactic so she could get off that one final 'fuck you' to the world."

"Our technology..." Taylor chuckled painfully. "Our freezing tech. Our antigravity. Waiting until the moment our superweapon looked like it was about to win this fight. This was a message to us, to everyone, but especially to Pantheon. Letting us know that even if we win, we lose."

"She wants us to be afraid of trying this again," Alexandria agreed. "We are, of course, trying it again. Right."

That wasn't a question. A billion dead. A fucking billion. One out of every five people on Earth. More devastation than all the Endbringers combined had wrought in decades. What kind of psycho wanted a repeat showing of that? The same kind that could execute a hero in the middle of a battle, I reminded myself. A plan that didn't even work. The fact that it wasn't really Dragon didn't matter. Alexandria couldn't have known that.

"We'll have that discussion later," Taylor said with finality. I continued to be in awe of how she could confront Alexandria as confidently as she did. Of course, it did help that I patched up Flechette first. Her costume wasn't in perfect condition right now, but between her and Missy, we had the superior firepower if it came to a fight. Unless Legend and Eidolon stepped in. Then we were probably fucked.

_We still had to talk to Flechette and Parian, and probably Theo and Missy, about Riley, _I realized. _I don't know if they'll even want to work with us anymore._

"There's no reason to make rash decisions," Taylor continued. "We have months before the next Endbringer. Maybe we can find a better way before then. Refine our technology. The Simurgh was..."
always the most dangerous target, to us. The one that was most likely to avoid our weapon. She failed at it, probably because..." She paused. *Probably decided she didn't want to give away our anti-precog systems.* "The other two should be easier."

Alexandria's expression was impossible to read through the mockup of her costume that I built for her. "There will be an international summit about this," she stated. "That's a certainty. They won't let us participate, because we're parahuman. But they're almost certainly going to try to make the decision for you, one way or the other. Be ready for the fallout from that."

*First implied threats, then a warning about international politics? Are we sure she's immune to Simurgh's power?*

"I sent the message to the rest of the team," Taylor told me. "We're heading home."

"But... the rest of the wounded?" I asked.

"Are in your pods," she said. *WorryFearClaustrophobia.* "They'll recover before anything evolves that can feed on your Yggdrasil. If only because the area's been pretty thoroughly sterilized. There's nothing more for us to do. And the longer we stay here, the worse things might get."

"Okay," I answered. *She's right. We need to go home.* The rest of the group slowly arrived. At least we'd had the good sense, eventually, to give Riley a makeshift copy of Aceso's outfit. Much as I had for many others.

With everyone in place, I encased us in a specific kind of Yggdrasil and activated the last of our jump devices, pulling the whole mass out of our dimension, and into the new one. Teleportation without actually teleporting. It was based as much on Trickster's power as anything, and an equal amount of Yggdrasil mass from our private earth was shunted back into normal space. I let the shell 'taste' the air around us. Almost no excess radiation. Our suits would have been fine, even before I started 'scrubbing' the planet, but I was a bit gunshy given everything else we'd been through lately.

The bubble collapsed into the Yggdrasil. This patch, its genetic memory, would be kept. All the stuff I learned in that inferno. A new code I wouldn't have to think about to copy, as long as I had access to our base, or our world.

"Oh, thank god," exclaimed a voice behind me. "I thought we'd have to walk all the way to fucking North America."

***********

A/N- Is true. CAN we be sure Alexandria's immune to Simurgh?
"I still fail to see why everyone is so interested in this fight. Surely, it has been repeated a thousand times before: the Dragon will rise from the earth, brutalize the assembled capes, ravage the landscape, and return from whence it came when it finally grows bored."

I raised an eyebrow. "You don't think the defending capes are what drive him off?"

She laughed and, if anything, it was worse than when she spoke. Her chorus made what should've been a tinkling giggle, cacophonous and mournful. "Oh my, no. A dragon comes and goes as it pleases. The slings and arrows of mortals are wholly insufficient to drive it off."

"Well then, you should enjoy this fight. I hear there's a new group that styles themselves as gods. They're even claiming to have a weapon that will kill the Endbringers."

"Do they truly? Tell me, who is their leader? Cronus? Zeus? Odin?"

"Gaia and Kephri, actually."

"Gaia, I can understand, but I would not have expected the dung beetle to lead gods. Perhaps he has grown tired of pushing the sun up each day." She asked as one of her shades turned the TV to the proper channel.

"Actually, Kephri is a woman. I don't know much else beyond that though."

"Aha! Is that why you're so interested? A continuation of your old movement? Are, perhaps, you hoping for more allies in your war against men?"

I huffed and crossed my arms. "Is it really so much to believe that I want to see when one of those monsters finally gets killed?"

"Oh, but dear Lustrum, the raging Titans shall not reach us under this hill. Why should we care if they live or die?" The self-proclaimed Fairy Queen was laughing again, but I wasn't really listening. The fight hadn't started yet, so the news program was doing a biopic on Pantheon's leaders. They currently had a video of the two girls sitting under a tree, out of costume, and I thought I recognized one. I knew from the incident with Valefor that one of them was Marquis's daughter, and the similarity was easy to spot, but the other —

"You are not listening." A hint of irritation had entered Glaistig Uaine's voices.

I winced, the unexpected sight had distracted me, but antagonizing the insane para-human was one of the last things I wanted to do. "My apologies. Kephri looks familiar, and it caught me off guard. I think I knew her mother."

"Ah. Was she one of your followers or, perhaps, a lover?"

I was saved from having to answer by Behmoth's appearance and near immediate retreat. "That's it? They scared him off. Just like that?"
She snorted. "Of course not. Dragons do not simply retreat. Especially before battle is even joined. Even Marquis's pet knows that much."

I nodded. "That is true, on both counts." I snorted at the thought of his idiotic bravado. Lung's stunt with Bakuda had nearly gotten him killed, it probably would have if she had been in my block, all so he could prove he had the biggest dick. "I suppose that means we'll have to wait until he plays his hand. I wonder, in the meantime, would any of your… Fairies be able to give us more insight into Pantheon's members?"

"Hmmm…" She closed her eyes as her shades faded out of existence and three new ones appeared surrounding her. They whispered in her ears for a few moments before she opened her eyes again and started grinning. "Well, the Shaper and the Queen Administrator have certainly gathered an interesting court. It seems, they have even begun to glimpse the script we are meant to follow. Perhaps they truly will be worthy of their name." She started laughing again, but this time it was louder and the chorus was less mournful.

We had a few hours to wait till the Simurgh finally made her appearance and only a few minutes more until the fight was done.

"Goddess." I breathed. "They really got her. The Simurgh is dead."

"So it would seem."

"She burned India. The bitch couldn't just let us have the victory, could she?"

Glaistig just raised her hand. "Such is the result of Titanomachy. There will be more to come, torchbearer. Perhaps even our hill shall shake before all is through and done. Good day to you Lustrum."

I accepted her dismissal for what it was, said my goodbyes and headed back to my block to think about what I had seen and what the Fairy Queen had said.

============= 

A/N- It's canon except for the one (uncaught until this moment) error at saying the fight lasted "a few minutes". Simurgh's power takes longer than that to set in, and they were close to the wire.

The overall battle probably took an hour or two.
"Oh thank god," Chariot exclaimed. "I thought we'd have to walk all the way to fucking North America."

"Chariot?" Taylor exclaimed, then she looked to see the thirty seven others, most of them injured.

Minerva's suit, controlled by Khepri's power, spoke. "Lisa? Are you alive?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Minerva made me hit the 'oh fuck' button after the Dragon suits stated firing on the command center. Got a dozen of us across. Others I picked up during search and rescue. What happened after we bugged out?"

"Hey, Khepri," Lisa responded weakly. "Kinda in bad shape. There's a vine growing up into my femur over here. Not quite sure what it thinks it's doing, but I'm pretty sure it's the only reason I'm conscious right now. I sure wish it would stop doing that."

Minerva's suit spoke. "Amelia's here, I'll send her to you."

Gaea's suit spoke. "Amelia, Minerva's injured, I'll guide you."

Khepri spoke. "It's bad. The Endbringers self-detonate when they're destroyed. We killed her, and pretty much all of India at the same time."

"Holy fucking shit," Chariot muttered.

"Can you cobble together equipment to shift them back to Bet?" Khepri asked.

"Yeah, sure, I think. I'll have to tear apart some of my equipment."

"That's fine, we'll pay for replacement parts. Claiming we have high end site-to-site teleportation is one thing. Admitting access to a whole other world..." Khepri paused. She was factoring the value of the portals, the risks and abuses and violence that could come from them. She didn't know it then, but that thought would birth Exodus.

....
"We have completed our full analysis of the India Disaster," Number Man spoke at the meeting. "First, via Contessa's power, we determined it was a parahuman which initiated the explosion."

"Who?" Alexandria asked.

"A local cape by the name of Phir Se," he answered. "Well known as a short range time manipulator. Nothing further than a few minutes, at most."

"We thought he was immaterial?" Doctor Mother replied.

"Well, yes," Number Man responded, as unhappy as he was capable of being. "We hadn't quite realized his power was exponential and iterative."

"Layman's terms, if you please," Doctor Mother asked.

"It's like the old economics mind teaser of doubling a penny," Number Man started. "If you start with one cent and double it once per day. In a week you have sixty four cents. In two weeks you have eighty one dollars and ninety two cents. After thirty days, you have over five million dollars. Before long, it results in more money than actually exists. We have no way of knowing how much energy he started with, or how quickly the energy doubles, or how long he was maintaining the cycle. It seems unlikely to be truly exponential. If it was, he could have casually initiated such massive disasters on an hourly basis."

"I see," Doctor Mother responded. "Have we taken steps to acquire him as an asset?"

"He appears to have taken his own life," Contessa responded. "I can only guarantee he did not fake his death. If you wish to know if this was murder or suicide, it will take time to investigate."

"No," she sighed. "I don't think that's necessary."

"His power was still not what we needed to fight Scion," Alexandria stated. "Too many of us survived, even at point of detonation. Unless we are to believe that I am more durable than Scion, his power wouldn't have been a factor in that battle. I am still more interested in Atropos' ability. She allowed spider string to pass through the Simurgh like she was made of smoke."

....

"She used my thermal shunting technology inside the clouds," Emma stated, showing a hand drawn diagram that looked like a side sketch of a sandwich. "Ice separated to the top, solid carbon dioxide into the bottom. Held together by gravity technology that might have been ours, or might have been
Dragon's. Or some other tinker, it's impossible to know. What I am sure of is that she used my knowledge of energy dispersion to orchestrate the next phase."

She flipped the page, revealing two lines and a zigzag between them. There were arrows pointed up and down on the outside lines. "She turned the whole sky into something that's one part fiber optic cable, and one part vacuum tube. It's something I can do. Something I have done, in fact. Laser research at near absolute zero is how I built Radiant's weapon systems to begin with."

Emma resisted the urge to describe in greater detail. The mundane, such as the insulating properties of perfectly formed ice. The exotic, like achieving perfect conductivity of laser light. Of instantaneous, loss free conversion between types of energy. Things that only she was able to understand. Things she suspected were used to transfer the energy. Some of her suspicions were correct. Others were wrong only for her limited ability to comprehend the full details.

"So, probably our tech," Minerva responded. "I don't recall any other 'cold' tinkers on the field. Built from tech ripped out of the Dragon suits, most likely. Suits and people that wouldn't have been there, if we'd known we would be fighting the Simurgh instead of Behemoth. She planned for this, constructing everything from the most advanced tinker equipment on the planet."

"The energy attack from the unknown parahuman came from below, striking the Simurgh and then the ice shell. Some of it was refracted downward, destroying the city. Perhaps a sum total of a tenth of the energy. It happened too quickly for me to get a good look. The rest was caught in the cloud layers. Redirected along more paths than I can count, throughout a stormfront that extended over a hundred miles. Where it broke through at specifically the perfect angles to burn almost every population center in northern and central India. More died from fires, gas explosions, and other side effects than from the energy weapon itself. It was also pinpoint accurate. Nothing was wasted on, say, trying to cross the Himalayas. Or burning miles of mostly uninhabited fields or forests. Maximum loss of life for minimum power expenditure."

"That's beyond fucking terrifying," Eki insisted. She was one of those hit hardest, changed the most, by her experiences. Even during her fight with Leviathan, she had never been so terrified of death. Even when grieving the deaths of her brother and father, she was never so keenly aware of the dangers she faced every day.

"You want terrifying?" Emma didn't smile. She was too frightened to smile. "She went easy on us."

"Easy?" Khepri scoffed. "She depopulated most of India, and parts of half a dozen other countries! With a fine precision that makes me feel inadequate."

"It's true," Minerva agreed. "I've looked at it every way my power will let me. The damage was deliberately focused on the Endbringer shelters and other population centers even at ground zero. She could have easily redirected that energy to the hospital, and everyone inside it. Killing the rest of us would have been trivial as well. Whatever her reasoning was, she chose to let us live. And she wanted us to know she let us live."
"Do you think she knew we were going to kill her?" Atropos asked. She was more nervous than any others. She had been the one to kill the Endbringer, the one most expected to face and destroy all other current and future Endbringers. Even if she was not yet aware there would be others. That pressure had changed her. Would continue to change her as the days went forward.

"I'm not sure," Minerva answered. "We had at least three powerful precog jammers involved in destroying her, if we include Eidolon. All of whom are strong enough to disrupt even Dinah's powers. It's possible the Simurgh was capable of predicting this. It's almost equally possible she could not, and her plan of attack happened exactly the way she intended it to, save for her own destruction."

....

The civil war in India reached fevered pitch in the weeks after what the locals were coming to call 'The Burning' in their local languages. The parahuman population was now almost equal to the population of nonpowered humans within the cities caught in the destruction. In the countryside, which had largely escaped that attack, armies were being established. The southern tip of the continent managed to hold a semblance of order, by changing their interaction with their own parahumans. A new way that parahumans looked at their country, and the country looked at their parahumans. A way based on other, successful examples of parahuman led societies. A mimicry of godhood in a culture where gods were still taken seriously.

In six and a half years of struggles in the the aftermath, a new government was born. A slow recovery from the violence and the economic and environmental hardships. It would be another three years before India could finally overthrow the CUI's invasion and conquest of most of its territory, and another two before it could repel the troublesome warlords that had either moved in from Africa, or established themselves from local factions. Over a decade of almost constant warfare, but they would succeed.

All of these things were unimportant. Mere side effects of other factors.

....

Minerva stood facing Alexandria. The pair spoke to one another on a level not normally experienced by human beings. The concepts were difficult to translate, even to the women experiencing the effect first hand.

Alexandria exerted her presence, a confidence born of long years of conflict and success. Strength that had been proven, then broken, then rebuilt even stronger.

Minerva, equal confidence born of certainty of details Alexandria did not know.
Alexandria reacted with curiosity and interest. Minerva conveyed, if accidentally, that they had weapons that could fight Endbringers. A weapon she believed could kill us permanently.

Alexandria could not hide her surprise at the realization. Not to Minerva's ability, at least. No other observer would have caught it.

Minerva flinched, ashamed she had given away the secret. Annoyed at her lack of control.

Alexandria asserted her superiority again. Attempting to goad the younger thinker.

Minerva reflected that it would have worked, possibly to embarrassing levels, if not for her recent use of her power for introspection.

Alexandria is shocked at the emotional maturity of the thinker. She might suspect it was indication of emotion repression as part of her power, if it wasn't clear her emotions were normal based on other reactions. She upgrades her opinion of Minerva, both as a person and in terms of abilities.

Minerva smiles. She knows she lost this contest, from a competitive perspective, but she'd be happy to lose more often for results this beneficial.

Alexandria recognizes the mutual respect. She's willing to cooperate with the girl's plan, now that the situation and positions of the two are established and respectable. "Okay," she says, the first to speak.

Minerva hands her a device. The beacon for their 'dimensional shunt' technology. A key part of the plan.

....

Khepri and Gaea communicate. Their mode is outside my ability to see, and I am aware of it only through their description of it to others. A function born of accident that was never meant to be, giving them partial access where only the Makers were intended to tread. I am not blind to the results of those communications. These girls, an accident of an accident, send ripples through their collected allies. Allowing them, again quite by luck and accident, discovering how to produce tools that hide others from my view. Accidents of accidents of accidents. Chaos cascading through an otherwise predictable reality. Eventually, I might be obsolete.

If they were more aware of my range, they might even be able to truly catch me unaware and unprepared. Their greatest vulnerability is relying upon Dinah Alcott. As they wish to harness her power, they must avoid blinding her to their presence. Where she can see, I can see as well.
They plan to slay us. Myself, my brothers. Their weapon, such as I understand it, is truly capable of this. It seems an oversight, that the Makers allow this ability into the hands of this species. I cannot see into the intentions of the Makers, I cannot know their plans. I only know their system is broken.

I cannot allow them to destroy me or my siblings. The idea of self preservation, much like all other emotions as humans know the concept, is alien beyond my ability to know how it influences them. The concept of purpose is one I understand perfectly. Organic minds are unable to comprehend it as I do. Even the Makers, though closer, are still unable to know an existence that has only Function.

I also cannot allow them to be destroyed. My Summoner has imprinted a second Function, if by accident. I am needed to stop the remaining Maker, regardless of cost. There are four Paths to achieve this. One that might very well be lost forever, due the unknowable chaos revolving around its components. One that relies solely upon the Summoner's mind alone. A mind I am as unable to breach as the Makers, themselves. Whom I can only simulate. Another postponed, perhaps forever. And another in its fledgling stage, that may never be ready.

Four paths to destroying the Maker and fulfilling my Purpose.

Today, I war with them all. And in that war, I increase the probabilities of success of three paths, and my simulations suggest it improves the fourth as well.

I communicate with my brother, warning him of the coming danger. Ripples of seismic activity so faint that no other being on the planet but us would recognize and interpret the signal correctly. The Eldest moves just to the surface, startling and upsetting them. I move through the clouds, a stormfront I had determined prior, and added to subtly. I revealed new abilities. Removed inhibitions to function properly in this battle. It was acceptable.

I descend after my brother had left. Time enough for the time manipulator to charge his attack satisfactorily. Time enough for him to be too tired to think about his actions, but not so tired as to risk him reacting too soon or too late for the proper timing.

....

I will find myself safe. The dimension shunting technology is relatively simple, meant to pierce between dimensions with existent portals. Of these, there are many. Only three connecting to this iteration. But one iteration, the one used by my Summoner's allies, connects to every world the other Maker had collided with. They had discovered many of them. I found one they would never locate.

My body will be ravaged. It will be years before I recover from the damage to my core, and more until I am fully functional again. I shall never be needed by my Summoner again. There is no future in which I have returned to full strength, the Summoner still exists, and the Maker still exists.
I will rest. I cannot know if I awaken again.

=================

A/N- Fucking with tenses is both a pain in the ass, and a lot of fun.

Also... I'm beginning to think I have a fetish for foreshadowing.
"Let's get this straight," Flechette said to our gathering. "You've been harboring fucking Bonesaw, this whole time."

Riley was on one side, flanked by Missy who was flanked by Theo. To her other side was our other main tinkers, Blasto and Emma. Not much help under the circumstances. Missy seemed... strangely okay with Clarice's actual identity. Part of it may have to do with her saving Theo during the aftermath of the disaster. The dozens of others she took care of in the hospital, while I was still struggling to save those outside the barrier may have helped. Then again, she may have already known, it's not like I was a telepath.

Flechette on the other side of the room. She hadn't removed Azrael. The armor was half shredded, held together more by the sheer resiliency of Yggdrasil's design than any other factor. Its contact with the floor let me know it was more than half dead, already. I would have repaired it before, but we had more immediate concerns. The armor was a loss, anyway. They'd have to build an entirely new nanofiber system for it. At least I knew that, even if Flechette became violent over this, I could disable her with a thought.

Parian stood next to Flechette, of course. Their relationship reminded me a lot of mine and Taylor's. Beyond the obvious bits, of course. Lisa was sure it was Parian who took the effective lead in their relationship. Flechette wasn't a slave, or another. But she tended to defer to the other's decisions. In that, it was like my relationship with Taylor. Pantheon was my idea, my dream. Taylor cared about it at least as much as I did, but she let me make the major calls. Backing me up. Protecting and supporting me. Same relationship between them.

Chariot was off from the group by a bit, choosing to watch instead of participate. Zach had gone to his room, claiming to be tired.

And that left the final cluster. Taylor, Lisa, and myself. Taylor fidgeted uncomfortably. Probably still thinking the same thing. Riley was a lot of things, and most of them gave people nightmares. I'd come to see past that a bit. Even if Taylor was getting better about it. To everyone else, with exception to Emma and maybe Missy, she was still, and would no doubt always be, Bonesaw.

"I'd speak up, but that'd probably only make things worse," Lisa offered as a weak attempt at humor.

"Ya think?" Flechette retorted.

"She saved lives, today," Taylor reminded her. "A lot of them."

"That doesn't begin to make up for what she's done," Flechette countered.
"If you include everything else," Lisa suggested. "She might actually be able to claim she's done more good than harm at this point."

"How the fuck do you figure!?" Parian shouted. The first words she'd spoken since we got back.

"The anti-master tech, to start with," Lisa supplied. "The rest of us never would have known how to achieve that. Even if we just count Heartbreaker, that's easily hundreds of people over the next few years. The advanced biosuits are mostly hers. Everything we've done to exploit the Manton Effect belongs to her research. Lily's wearing something that could make the Siberian into her bitch. Riley designed that. We killed the Simurgh, because of her technology amplifying your powers. I don't know how many Bonesaws a Simurgh is worth, but I'm sure it's more than one."

"I thought it was Emma's tech that did that," she responded.

"My tech let us block precognition," Emma answered. "That's how we even managed to hit the bitch in the first place. My tech's why the Yggdrasil wasn't burned away during the explosion. I was able to add a few improvements to the battle suits, making them energy efficient enough to power Chariot's antigravity, so that the suits can fly. But the armor itself is all Riley's work."

"And the shock troops," Taylor added. "Those are as much hers as anyone's."

"She saved my life," I replied. "The only reason I survived after Valefor's bombing run."


"Fucking hell," Parian muttered. "Amelia, you saw what she did to my friends and family. You healed them, all the while knowing you were keeping the thing that mutilated them in the first place safe."

"It's true," I admitted to myself. I couldn't quite bring myself to look Parian in the eye. I couldn't look at Riley, either.

"She's a monster," Parian continued. "No one can do the things she's done and be called anything else."

It was then that Riley spoke. "I... I don't want to be a monster," she sobbed. Bonesaw was sobbing. "I want to be a good girl like mommy told me to. I want her to be proud of me." The tears were flowing freely, now. "I'm trying to be good. Tell me what I have to do to be good. Please." Riley begged Parian.
We were all speechless. I was the only one that had seen her like this before, and even then it was light whimpers in her sleep.

"It's an act," Flechette said, her voice cold.

"It's not," Minerva contradicted. "This is entirely real. This is her being honest for, well, not the first time. But the first time that I've personally witnessed. Congratulations, you just saw Bonesaw cry. For real. You are currently wondering whether or not you're suppose to feel bad. Whether you're suppose to be nice and forgive her. That's your perogative, but I sure as fuck have not and will not. At the same time, revealing her and turning her over to the authorities won't change anything. The people she's tormented will still be dead. She'll be dead. And any of the good she might actually do in the future will never happen. Including fixing our armor."

By this time, Minerva had walked over Flechette. "Your suit's garbage, mine is even worse. Emma's was burned off entirely. Granted, Emma didn't design hers to be as durable as ours for energy attacks. Which was fucking stupid, by the way."

"I... uh... thought my powers could handle it," Emma defended herself. "I went for movement and utility features. It's not like we could have expected what happened. I made my costume for dealing with Behemoth. Being able to run away before he stepped on me seemed way more important than insulating against energy attacks that I'm already able to basically ignore."

"So we keep her around because she's useful?" Flechette all but spit. "I could handle that logic with Emma. She's a bitch who deserved the beating she got. But Bonesaw... even she hasn't thought up something horrible enough to call a fitting punishment for what she's done."

"She's not here because she's useful," I interrupted. "Yes, it started that way. But she's my family." Holy shit, did I just say that out loud?

SurpriseTrepidation. I looked at Taylor, begging her with my eyes to be okay with this. She grabbed my hand. Good enough for me.

"She's my best friend," Missy added. She had moved next to Riley at some point during Minerva's expose. Riley clutched into her side and held on for dear life. Theo didn't say anything, but he put his hand on Missy's shoulder.

"She's pretty much my only friend," Emma admitted, stepping closer as well.

"I don't really have a dog in this race," Chariot stated. "So from an outside assessment... they're right. These suits are way too dependent upon their cybernetics. I already knew they had another tinker
they weren't telling us about. Wasn't sure who. Based on the quality of the work, I thought it was Dragon helping out in secret so she could stay 'politically neutral'. The tech really is that good. We can't do what we're doing right now without her help. Unless, again, we get Dragon over here."

"You want your revenge? Fine. Try guilt," Minerva offered. "She knows what she is, even if she tries to hide behind her pretend cheerfulness to ignore it, to forget. Pretending she's a normal girl, however ludicrous that thought might be. She has friends and family now. All her victims, everything she's ever done, now wear their faces. When she remembers hurting others, she feels what it would be like to hurt them."

Riley sobbed and nodded, not moving her head from its spot buried in Vista's side.

"So we just pretend she's not guilty of hundreds of crimes against humanity?"

"Oh, fuck no," Minerva responded. "The exact opposite, in fact. Remind her every chance you get. But also remember that she was six when Jack fucking Slash got his claws into her. You've met young triggers before. Ask Lachesis if you want to know how bad that sucks. Then try being raised to think the Siberian is cuddly and Shatterbird's a positive role model. You'd be pretty fucked up, too. Considering your power, you might even have been scarier than she is."

It was Parian who broke the confrontation. "Okay," she said, stepping forward and grasping Flechette's hand. "I'm not saying I forgive her, or that I like this at all. But you're right. Revenge isn't going to do anything but make everything worse. If she leaves me alone, I'll pretend I don't know she's here. If she hurts anyone else, then I hold you, all of you, personally responsible for it."

"I can live with that," Minerva responded. No one stepped in to argue.

"We can handle everything else later, right?" Parian asked. "I'd really like to go home now."

"Yeah," Minerva agreed. "It's going to be a while before anyone even knows what to do with what happened today. We have time to, well, 'relax' would be too much to hope for. But we can at least decompress for a little while. I think we could all use that. Meeting adjourned, see you all tomorrow. Say, noon. Give me a chance to know how the rest of the world is starting to handle this."

No one disagreed with that, either.

=============

A/N- This was a fun chapter.

Also: foreshadowing.
I was exhausted by the time I climbed into bed, my costume discarded on the floor. I didn't care enough to put it away. *Same night clothes I wore to sleep last night,* I absently thought. *What a stupid thing to think about.* I stared up at the ceiling. On a whim, I adjusted the colors, creating an imitation of a clear sky. Even managed to put together light and warmth from the imitation sun. It was comforting, after what we'd been through.

Taylor walked in not long after, still in costume. "First time I've ever had to open the door myself," she offered a half hearted smile. I returned it, if even less enthusiastically. "Our link seems to be muted."

I gave a quick look. "It's physically fine," I responded. "I'm just... I don't know. I don't even know what to feel."

Taylor walked over to a corner, facing it, then she stepped backward, leaving the armor behind. It wasn't entirely unlike watching a cicada climb out of its shell. "It wasn't our fault," she said after she worked her way out of the armor. *She's in her jogging clothes,* I noticed. I also noticed that I was far too numb to appreciate this detail. "It wasn't our weapon that did it, it wasn't even Ziz that provided the power. They don't self destruct."

"I know," I answered, looking at my partner. "It's just... what would have happened if we did't come there equipped to kill them? You said yourself, they get meaner when you hit them harder. We hit harder than anyone ever had before, hard enough to kill them, and what we get out of it is a country that's still burning. Hundreds of millions, maybe even an actual billion, dead. Riley's existence exposed to the Triumvirate."

"And Cauldron, and our own members who were still in the dark about her," Taylor added "Lisa's going to be smug as hell about that for months. She saved our asses big time, and she knows we know it. She's going to want to draw at least some mileage out of it. Maybe not as much as before, but something."

I smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "Well, if that's the price, then I'm okay with her being smug about it for a while. I happen to like your ass. Glad she saved it."

Taylor blushed. *ShockedPleasedShy.* "I noticed," she teased as she sat down next to me on the bed.

"Only because I let you," I teased back. She leaned back gently, resulting in her head resting on my stomach. I toyed with her hair a bit, even as I felt her mood shift back to business. As nice as the distractions were, neither of us really were the type to let go of things. I always was a worrier, as far back as I can remember. Taylor seemed basically the same. The fact that the world was just shy of literally on our shoulders at most gave us an excuse to do what we would have done anyway.
"We'll need to talk to Zach," she started. "He was out there for almost half an hour."

"I know," I agreed. "But how do we even approach that subject? It got to him, but you know how he is. He'll never admit it."

"I don't know," she admitted. "Maybe we should ask Crystal to take a stab at it? The two of them seem to... well, she's better at getting him to let up on the bullshit than anyone else, at least. And she's one of the ones that had to survive out there. It's common ground that we don't have."

"Just so we're clear," I said. "If she does this, we're going to have to deal with her being as smug as Lisa."

"Probably," Tayor admitted. "Those two are so fucking alike, sometimes."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Y'know, we're too much alike. Even our friends are alike. No wonder everyone thought we should get together."

She shrugged noncommittally.

"Hey," I poked her nose. "You thought so, too. I very much recall the part where you attempted to seduce me."

She blushed. ChagrinWorryRegret. "Yeah, sorry about that," she mumbled.

"To quote that phrase you use all the time," I said. "'I don't mind'. I still dream about it, sometimes. They're very good dreams."

SurprisedHappy. "Ah, okay," she stammered a little. "That wasn't really. I probably should have just talked to you about it instead of trying something like that."

"Maybe," I replied. "But I'm glad you didn't. As far as first kisses go, I think I got one of the better ones."

"Except the part where I ruined-" I put a finger over her lips to silence her.

"You ruined nothing," I corrected. "It wasn't ruined at all. Circumstances beyond your control cut it short. It was wonderful."

"Now we should probably decide what other things we have to worry about," I reluctantly steered the conversation back to work. I was more comfortable with Taylor than anyone could think was normal, but this conversation was taking my mind places and my body was starting to follow along. Not something I needed her realizing, especially when she was currently laying in bed with me. I'd have to bury myself alive. Again.

"Our secret world was exposed to the Protectorate at the very least," Taylor sighed. "Which means Alexandria, aka Chief Director Costa-Brown. Shit, I forgot to mention that to Lisa. That's a stupid mistake, damn."

"She has other stuff on her mind," I said. "We already knew Costa-Brown was trying to help us out from that recording Chariot got for us. We already knew Alexandria was probably part of Cauldron. That means we have an ally, at least of sorts, at the top of the Protectorate and PRT. I expect she's important in Cauldron, too. This is probably the only truly good news that came out of this."

"Destroying an Endbringer doesn't count as good news?" Taylor asked. Her emotions were muted with worry and doubt.

"We killed her and we still," I hesitated, trying to find the words to express the idea. "When I went outside... people were looking at us like we were the survivors of a fucking natural disaster, not the people who destroyed the Simurgh. This isn't what victory against the fucking apocalypse is suppose to feel like. I can't even find it in my heart to call it a Pyrrhic victory. It just feels like we failed."

"We'll do better next time," Taylor said, stroking my arm.

"Next time?" Even the thought of 'next time' sent an unpleasant chill through my body.

"She clearly wants us to back off," Taylor replied. "She wants the world so terrified that we'd rather deal with a slow death. An infection. Rather than amputating the wound and at least having the chance to recover."

"Or she wants us to think that," I said. "She had to know we'd second guess something that obvious."

"And then we can second guess that second guess," Taylor answered. "We're insulated against her precognition. Emma's," DisgustAnnoyance. "Anti-precog tech works. We are invisible to her, the weapons we build are invisible to her. Whatever sick plans she had in mind, they can't reach us."
"You're probably right," I agreed. "I just... I don't know if I can, anymore."

"You don't have to," Taylor assured me, lifting her head off of my stomach and shifting herself fully onto the bed. *ProtectiveComfortResolve*. She wrapped herself around me from behind, pulling me into an embrace. "As you said when we began this thing, I am your General. You give me the strength to fight, and I'll take care of the rest for you."

"You know what happens after we get all of them, right?" I teased. *Since when did Taylor sound this sappy?*

I could hear her smiling when she replied. "Hey, I don't mind, remember?"

=================

A/N- Decompression chapter. They can't all be dramatic and shit, right?
The fires were all around me. I couldn't breathe, couldn't see anything through the blinding light, couldn't move. Ice, encased in ice and still on fire! *Trapped. Freezing. Burning. No way out!*

I awoke to my own screaming. Shifting and struggling. I was still trapped, but now that I was awake I and was starting to figure out where I was, I knew why. I was in one of the medical pods. I was back home. I simply willed myself to calm down and move gently, and the pod yielded. That was good, it would have kept me if I was still too injured to move about on my own. Originally Amy’s tech, but Riley had improved on it a lot while we were prepping for...

*The Endbringer.*

It all started coming back to me: the fight, tearing that bitch to shreds, driving her off and... and then the fire. My overshields took the brunt of the initial burst, though they were almost completely drained in the process. Then the energy absorbers, until they burned out. Then the suit itself started to cook through. One final, desperate move later I was encased in ice. Not a fun sensation, especially when it melts and the inferno breaks through again.

Maybe if I'd frozen myself earlier, when the energy protection was still working and the suit itself hadn't been badly damaged. Maybe the suit could have protected me from the agonizing cold seeping into my body. I'd all but given up by the time it had cooled enough that I wasn't at risk of dying the moment my breathing system gave way.

I focused, but couldn't recall much else. I was asleep, and now I'm back at our base. Or... did Amy build a medical bay in India? *But I am alone,* I realized.*And I'm pretty sure I wasn't hurt so much that everyone else got out of the place before I even woke up.*

I look at my hands. *Fresh and pink, they've been regenerated, almost up to the elbows.* Fingernails completely gone, replaced with a layer of skin. They’d grow back, eventually, but a girl couldn't help but be upset about something like this.

I was nude, which was not a good sign at all, since it meant the healing pod needed full body coverage to do its work. Also wasn't so happy about the fact that someone saw me naked. Specifically, either my lesbian cousin, the ten year old monster, or Emma. *That's just lovely.* I looked down, my legs were... *fuck, halfway between knee and hip.* Toenails gone, too. *Damn that looks weird.*

Standing up felt strange, and my legs wobbled more than a little. *A couple days of recovery, probably.* The was a tap on the door.
"Don't come in!" I shouted, then finally looked around and spotted my clothes. Not the pair I'd worn this morning, which had probably already found their way into the recycling system. Just another outfit that I'd left here. I got dressed as quickly as I could considering it felt like I had two left hands. Just how badly was I hurt?

"Okay, you can come in now," I yelled at the entrance. Zach walked in.

"Hey," he offered a half hearted smile. "The alert said you were up and moving. It's a bit past four in the morning, if you're wondering."

I shrugged. "I was pretty bad, huh?"

"Almost as bad as Amelia after Valefor," he confirmed.

"My armor's trashed, of course," I followed up.

"It was dead when they got to you," he shrugged. "Needed Alexandria to peel it off since Amelia couldn't."

"What about everyone else?"

"Alive," he answered. "Atropos took a nasty hit, and Theo was cut by some of the Moirai Ribbons when blocking the hole to protect us. They've already been patched up. Emma was hurt, a bit, but she's fine now. Case-53 regeneration thing at work."

"We kinda... well, basically everyone knows about Riley now. Our whole team, and Alexandria, and the rest of the Triumvirate, and whomever they choose to tell- which probably mean Cauldron. On the plus side, no one's decided to report this and have us all put on the kill list. On the minus side, not everyone's decided not to report this, either. Expect possible blackmail in the near future."

Fucking hell. "What happened to the Simurgh?" I asked. "I sorta lost track after... after the explosion."

"We almost had her, and then some fucktard had to help," he growled the words. "That bomb? A parahuman power. Dunno who, probably won't ever find out. We destroyed the Simurgh, completely and totally annihilated, but that blast destroyed almost all of India in the process."

My stomach dropped. "India has..."
"Over a billion people, yeah," Zach muttered. "Most of them are dead now. Pretty much wiped out Pakistan as well. So much for our 'ding dong, the bitch is dead' party. It's not our fault, in fact I'm pretty sure it would have happened even if we hadn't shown up, but everything is fucked now."

I nodded. *It makes sense*, I thought. Her actions, the way she fought that day. *She wanted to provoke whoever it was that did this into attacking.* "Think she knew we'd kill her?" It was the only thing I could think to ask.

"Dunno," he answered. "Clotho and Lachesis were both precog immune, and they did all the real damage. But she was... I dunno. Either way, she made the world suffer for her death. They're still doing all the math and science shit, but she just racked up a death toll greater than both her brothers combined."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I ran my hands through my hair. They were shaking from more than just the regeneration I'd received. My fingers caught on tangles and even some flakes of burnt material near the tips. "I need a shower."

"Okay," he agreed. "You know all the important stuff. I'm sure we'll spend all of tomorrow talking about the details anyway."

I left the base. As much as the showers there worked, technically, they squicked me right the fuck out. We didn't have traditional pipes in the base. Our running water, as Riley had described it, came from 'a series of bladders'. I was fully aware there were more meanings for that word but I couldn't help but think of the most obvious one. And standing underneath warm water that came out of a bladder... no thank you.

Flying was always one of my personal joys in life. The freedom and the wind in my hair. Victoria always said it was her favorite power, and I agreed fully. The air was a little chilly. Mid august, just in time for things to start getting cold. From up here, our city looked downright beautiful. It was getting better for the people who couldn't fly, as well. Khepri had gone almost a week without finding any drugs more serious than pot, before we left to fight *Her*.

I entered upstairs, through my own bedroom window. *No sense in waking up mom*. A quick look in the mirror, which only prompted me to frown and try not to cry. My hair was trashed. I'd probably need to cut most of it off. *At least the short hairstyles are popular right now.* A rummage through my closet for better clothing, and then I was hovering my way to the bathroom. No point in making any noise, and I was still too shaky on my feet. I would rather not accidentally fall over if I could help it.

Mom's door was open, and I passed it quietly on my way to bathroom. Light was on, but that wasn't anything unusual. We had a bad habit of wasting electricity like that. Half the downstairs was lit up, actually. I pushed open the door and stepped inside, then quietly closed it behind me. I treated myself to a long shower in mostly lukewarm water. The regenerated skin was too sensitive, and it hurt to use the hot water.
I spent almost an hour under the stream of water, most of it dedicated to working out the mess in my hair. Looking down at the gunk running off of me, I identified the bluish-green liquid found in the suits, a light green liquid from where the healing pod needed a contact to diffuse chemicals into my body, charred material that probably came from the underlayer of the armor, clumps of hair that had been singed away, and a worrying amount of blood that I wasn't certain was all my own. It was almost hypnotic, really, imagining what caused all this.

A billion people dead, I thought. Not our fault, but would anyone else believe that? The Simurgh had been destroyed, so we still won. But so did she.

The sun was already rising when I was finished, and had managed to unclog the drain of various stuff that had fallen off of me. I looked at my now ruined hair and tried to imagine how to fix it. Oh well, Jasmine would work her usual magic.

I floated back toward my room, coming by mom's room again. I should let mom know I'm okay, I thought. I nudged the door open. "Hey mom, I just wa-" I slammed the door as hard as I could and rushed for my room. That was not something I needed to see!

==============

A/N- Breakfast and a show.

Also- the chapter shuffling is done. Definitely flows better the new way rather than the old.
I was in my room, staring at my ceiling when there was a knock on the door. "Crystal, sweetie, can I come in?" My mom's voice, of course.

"Yeah, mom, go ahead," I answered. I was sorely tempted not to.

She opened the door, wearing work clothes and looking positively mortified. *Well, that's good to know. "I... umm... I'm sorry you saw that,"* she started.

"Not half as sorry as I am," I muttered. "Maybe if I'm lucky, Amy will give me a memory wipe."

"I take it you're upset, then," she sighed.

"Just a little," I answered. "And weirded right the fuck out. I mean, seriously. I just walked in on my mother in bed with my cousin's future father in law. I know half my team's named after Greek gods, but that wasn't an invite for..." I waved my hands around. "This!"

"It's not the same thing," she countered. "You know that."

"No, it's not," I agreed. "It's just... jeez, mom, isn't there a grace period before you are allowed to go out and find a new man?"

"It's not like I was expecting this to happen!" she exclaimed.

"You invited him over," I said dryly. "Or did he sneak in through your bedroom window with some wine and a box of chocolates."

She chuckled, which only annoyed me more. "That actually happened to me once," she said.

"Dad?" I asked. *Oh please let it have been my father, I'm traumatized enough.*

"Your Uncle Mark, actually," she corrected. *Eww eww eww eww- "He was there for Carol and got the wrong window."* -Oh thank every god!

"So what's the story with Mister Hebert?" I asked. I still didn't know him well enough to call him 'Danny'.
"After you left to fight Behemoth, I invited Danny over," she said. *She definitely knew him well enough. "AND,"* she stressed. *"Mark and Carol. I didn't want us to be alone when... well, during the fighting. You have no idea how hard it is to go through something like that. Nobody really can understand it until they have children of their own."*

"Okay, I get that much," I responded. "Now when did you get the bright idea to fuck Taylor's father?"

She flinched. Probably wanted to yell at me for the language, but under the circumstances she really couldn't. "It wasn't... I... he was there to comfort me when we didn't know what happened. After the explosion, I thought you were dead. I thought everyone was dead. Danny was there, a shoulder to cry on."

"So you guys just came up with the bright idea 'whelp, we're out of kids, let's get to work making new ones?' I regretted it as soon as I said it, but I was still pissed off. My father and my brother were gone, and here my mother was with a new man. 'Replacement father, complete with already assembled sibling' was not something I was looking forward to.

"No!" She exclaimed. "It was after we found out you were okay! Mark and Carol left and, I, well... there were a lot of emotions going around."

"Oh, I bet there were," I stated. "I'm going to get some air." I took off, and passed Mister Hebert in the hall. He, at least, didn't try to talk to me, or even look at me. I really wasn't in the mood to hear anything he said anyway. I noticed his car in the driveway when I went out the front door. *If I'd come into the house like a normal person, I thought. Then at the very least I could have spared my eyes."

....

By the time I'd stopped just hovering in the air and had gotten hungry, it was close to ten. I stopped by the pizza place that had opened up near our base and asked for some breadsticks. I was in the mood for something covered in cholesterol, and I didn't trust my newly rebuilt limbs to handle anything messy or requiring silverware. As much as I'd been contemplating shoving a fork in my eyes on purpose, I didn't want to do it accidentally.

The highschool girl who took my order did her best not to stare. *Oh, right, I remembered. Need that haircut. Or maybe she just recognized who I am.* I didn't ask.

I was still figuring out how to put the food in my mouth with more than a 30% success rate by the time I got back to the Treehouse. *Have we really lived here for three months without coming up with a better name?* Amelia was there to greet me with a hug.
"What's the occasion?" I asked.

"Aunt Sarah called," she answered. *God damn it.*

"Did she say anything?" I let myself be led into the building.

"Just that you left and she wanted you to call her as soon as possible. We don't know what happened." Taylor spoke up, and I cringed. *She looks an awful lot like her father.* "I was keeping an eye in case something went wrong. All you did was drift around for a while. Didn't want to bother you, since you obviously wanted to be alone."

I paused as I heard chuckling from Lisa. I glared at her. She raised her hands. "First, I just want you to know that I had no idea this would happen. Well, okay, I did, but I thought it would take another six or eight months at the earliest. Second, I feel really really bad that I find this so funny. And third, it honestly is hilarious and you'll laugh, too, when you get over the initial shock. I promise."

"Uh... what happened?" Amelia asked.


She looked at me strangely, but went along with it. "Who's there?"

"Guess," I said.

"Guess, who?" She still went along.

"Guess who walked in on your dad having sex with my mom this morning?" I finished. It didn't seem all that funny. The other girls had gone silent.

Taylor was the one who spoke up first. "Umm... congratulations, dad?"

"This doesn't bother you?" I asked, incredulously. "This is your father we're talking about!"

"It'd probably bother me more if I was the one who walked in on them," she admitted. "Not something I want to have a picture of in my head if there's any hope of avoiding it. But, no, it doesn't bother me. Sarah seems like a really good person, and they both deserve to be happy. If this makes
them happy, then I'm all for it."

"You don't feel like he's trying to replace your mom?"

"No," she answered. "Mom can't be replaced, for either of us. And I doubt your mom would try. Honestly, I'm glad for this. He spent years depressed over losing her, being miserable and just making me more miserable than I might have been. Losing a parent hurts, but I effectively lost both of mine. If this is him finally recovering and moving on, then it's a good thing. You wouldn't want your mom to spend the next decade alone, would you?"

She's right, I realized. Also: god damn it, she's right. I still wasn't exactly feeling better. "Okay, fine," I agreed. "But it's only been three months since my dad and my brother died. This is way too soon."

She nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right," she agreed. "I can't imagine how I'd have felt if dad found a new girlfriend that quickly. But this is better than the alternative. Trust me, I know."
I spent my time attempting to learn to use my limbs properly again. I was a cheerleader before, well, powers. That disqualified me from competing in pretty much any sport, of course, but I still practiced gymnastics when I could, plus all the martial arts that I had thought were useless before recently. It was incredibly frustrating to need to use my powers just to walk straight again. No one wanted to tell me just how bad I was hurt, so I went the one place where I knew I could find out: the labs.

Riley was there, alongside Missy and Theo. That's right, I recalled. The Bonesaw secret is out. Riley had black hair with a tint of purple when it caught the light, for some reason. It was uneven and kinda splotchy, so it probably wasn't power change. Just ordinary hair dye. Done poorly.

"So," I asked. "How long until the Radiant is fixed up again?"

My cousin might have told them not to let me know about what happened to me, but Riley was disturbingly naive at times, and she was a tinker. It's physically impossible to make them shut up about their toys. I would work my way around to what I really wanted to know.

"It's not," Riley informed me casually. "We're designing the V7."

"What happened to six?" I asked.

"We decided to skip that weeks ago," Riley stated.

"Zach made dumb car jokes," Missy replied. "Really dumb car jokes that Emma had to explain to Riley."

"I now know what 'check under the hood' means," Riley stated. "We'll be skipping eight for the same reasons."

Dammit, Zach, I thought. "So... where's the v5? I'd... umm... like to say 'goodbye' to it. Y'know, sentimental reasons."

"Oh, it's in its storage pod. We're running diagnostics. Figuring out what worked, what didn't, and what we can do better next time. Plus we need to revive it enough to get the lances out of storage."

Missy and Theo looked like deer caught in headlights. They knew they couldn't stop me, but they really wished they could. I moved to its display pod, and it opened to my touch.
The armor was in tatters. The front was split open like something in the middle of open heart surgery. Granted, I knew that happened after they got me safe. *Alexandria really did rip it off of me. That sounded wrong.* I traced my fingers along the inside of the armor, and came away with soot. There were no legs on the armor, as far up as the knees, and the arms ended halfway between wrist and elbow. Matching, to an extent, the damage on my limbs. The helmet was missing the Yggdrasil bits, entirely. Burned down to the metallic armor weave. Even that had cracks in it, probably from the rapid freezing and thawing that I put it through in a desperate attempt to save myself.

*It was a matter of seconds,* I realized. *Seconds and centimeters away from death.* I was shaking again, and it wasn't the nerve regeneration. "Who rescued me?" I asked. "Who got me out of there?"

"Zach, Emma and Amelia," Theo answered after a minute. "They all had a pretty big part in it."

"How bad was it? I need to know."

"You were legally dead," Missy replied. "The only thing that saved you was that you accidentally froze yourself."

"The armor was designed to maintain your life functions even if you were already dead," Riley informed me. "It wasn't meant to function in cryogenic situations, but it's really really good at what it does. Your brain was preserved perfectly, and with minimal oxygen loss. Emma got you into one of the pods and kept your thawing controlled. Zach was there to undo any mistakes."

I shuddered. Suddenly I didn't care that much about mom and Mister Hebert. "Fuck," I muttered. "What's the damage?"

"Nothing permanent," Riley answered. "Had to use the neural regenerator on you. Side effects will include vivid dreams, possibly 'waking dreams', and an increase in mental ability by approximately two to three percent. Your sense of smell and taste may have unusual side effects for a while as well."

"Thanks," I muttered. *That might explain why the breadsticks tasted like cardboard.* "Anything in there about overreacting emotionally?"

"No, not really," Riley responded. "Newter reported crying for no reason after smelling coconuts. But that appears to be an anomaly and went away after a couple weeks."

"Okay... thanks again." I said.

"Are you okay?" Theo asked. "Something seems to be bothering you past the near death
"Yeah," I answered. "I, well, turns out my mother's now together with Taylor's dad. I might not have handled it all that well."

"That's awesome!" Riley exclaimed, and actually glomped me around the waist, I gasped as I lost my breath for a second. "I get more sisters! Oooh! I have a great idea! Theo, your dad's dead. Missy, your parents are divorced..."

"No!" Missy exclaimed. "We're not hooking my dad up with Theo's mom."

"Of course not," she agreed. "That'd be silly. But Amelia's parents look like they're going to get divorced so we can hook them up with your parents and I can be your sister, too!"

We were all dead quiet. Meanwhile, I was trying to find a convenient way to escape from Riley's surprisingly powerful hug. "Mom's got a new man, I literally died and was brought back, and Bonesaw is hugging me. Wait, didn't she say something about waking dreams? That's what this was, right? A waking dream? Okay, how do you wake up from one of those? Does pinching work? I gave it a shot, and no, nothing changed.

"It doesn't really work that way," Missy answered. "Step siblings don't actually count as siblings."

"They don't?" Riley sounded heartbroken, and her arms relaxed their grip around my waist.

"No, not really," Missy sounded resentful as she spoke. "They're just other kids that you have to put up with. Kinda like the kids at school that you're not friends with. They're not family, not for real."

"Oh," Riley looked down, and actually let me go. I felt bad, so I gave her a hug back. She saved my life, and then probably saved me from being brain damaged after the others managed to revive me yesterday. She deserves that much.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "You're still Amy's little sister."

"Yeah," Riley agreed, looking up and smiling.

"You can be my sister, too," Missy offered. "Who cares whose parents are or are not married, right?"

Riley quickly let go of me and rushed over to hug her newly acquired sibling. I was amused to note how much they even looked like sisters. Close to the same height. Same (natural) hair and eye colors.
I managed to leave the room without interrupting the new faux-sibling hugfest. As cute as it was, I wasn't really in the mood for it.

=================

A/N- FORESHADOWING!!!

Also... this was one of my favorite chapters for mood whiplash. Drama (of the 'hey, I was dead') variety. Comedy. And cuteness. All bundled into one package.
I was still shaky when I left. *I've died twice since joining this team*, I realized. *At the Endbringer fight, and when Purity shot a hole through me.* The v5 was tough enough that Purity couldn't have possibly hurt me if I had it when fighting her. Yet still something found a way to kill me. I owe Zach and Emma thank yous.

It didn't take me too long to find Zach. He was in his room. I knocked. I shall knock before entering the kitchen from this point on.

"Come in," he yelled. I pressed the panel that opened the door and stepped in. He was sitting at his computer, some brightly colored image with a 'paused' label in front. A video game, of course.

"Hey, Zach," I started. How do you approach this kind of conversation? "So... I heard you saved me yesterday."

"Ah, that," he looked away. "It was nothing, really. All I did was move some ice and save-scum for you while Emma did her thing."

"Save scum?" I asked.

"Umm... nevermind," he shrugged. "It's a gamer term, nothing you need to be worried about."

"Oh," *damn this is awkward.* "That couldn't have been easy, working with Emma for that long."

"Hey, it's not a big deal," he insisted. "I just had to spend a few minutes around the ex in order to save a friend. Taylor can tolerate her, so can I. It's not like we were ever serious, and she was too busy working on you to try talking to me."

"What was it like out there?" I asked. "I was unconscious and walled in behind ice the whole time. You and Emma actually made it through alive and conscious."

"I'd really rather not think about it," Zach muttered. "The 'resetting so fast that it destroyed my armor' was the least painful part of it. Look, can we just drop the topic and then never speak of it again? Call that my 'thank you', or whatever it is you're trying to do?"

Okay, bad subject. "Sorry," I muttered. "Thanks for saving me. I'm here to listen if you need someone to talk to."
"No, it's not your fault," he sighed. "Change of topics. Got anything zany that I can laugh about? I could really use that right about now."

I sighed, putting my hands over my face. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Apparently my mom is now seeing Taylor's dad."

"Really?" He laughed. "Go Mister Hebert. She's a total fox." I glared at him, but it didn't seem to dissuade him any. "Wait, isn't she older than him? Do you think dating younger guys might run in your family? I still know a great place..."

I rolled my eyes. "Great, and now I pretty much can't say 'no' because not only did I start asking you about a painful topic, but I literally owe you my life. I hope you realize this is completely unfair and it makes you an asshole."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm just teasing. Taking advantage of something like that would just be sick."

"Why do you do that, anyway?" I asked. "Go between asshole perv and almost overly sensitive like it's a weird kind of bipolar disorder?"

He shrugged. "Let's just say life's too short not to. You never know what tomorrow's going to bring. I learned a while back that just going for it, and suffering the consequences of failure... or even success, for that matter... is better than not trying at all and being forced to wonder 'what if' for the rest of your life. Take it from someone who does a lot of both... I'd rather die than never know what would have happened with that chance I never took."

"So that's how you justify flirting, poorly, with every possible female?"

"Pretty much," he confirmed. "And how I justify signing up with a completely unproven superhero team that came out of nowhere. And how I justify agreeing to literal suicide missions on a regular basis. Feel free to ask Lisa about it, I'm sure she can explain my particular damage better than I can. It's not worth waiting when you don't even know if you'll be here tomorrow. For that matter, it's not worth waiting even if you know you'll be here forever. I'm sure your mom would agree with me."

_He's right, I thought. I died twice, that's a second and third chance wasted if I ignore it._

"Thanks for the oddly out of character advice that's probably entirely self serving on your part," I smiled. "Still not gonna date you. You're fifteen and I'm almost twenty. When I was your age... you were ten and I was babysitting ten year olds. There are no possible words for how creepy that would be."
"That works," he shrugged and smiled at me. "See you in, say, five years?"

I chuckled. "Tell you what," I answered. "If both of us are single in five years, then sure."

....

I arrived home. Zach's advice, strangely enough, made me feel better. Mister Hebert's car is gone, I noted. Good, this was going to be awkward enough. I opened the door. "Hey, mom, I'm home!" I shouted. I probably should have done this the first time.

"Oh, Crystal, thank god!" she rushed in and pulled me into a hug. "Stop scaring me like that!"

"Scaring you?" I asked. "Mom, come on, we're in the safest city on the planet right now and I was a few hundred feet in the air. I just went out to fly and clear my head a bit. Not like I glued twenty dollar bills to myself and went on a walk through the projects."

"You're right," she said. "I'm probably over reacting. It's easy to do that when..."

"That's okay," I sighed. "I over reacted, myself. Seems to be a family trait, now that I think about it."

She finally broke the hug. "It really is," she agreed. "You're sure you're not upset anymore?"

"No," I confirmed. "I get it. Scary situation, it's not like I'm a stranger to life and death situations and how they make you rush things. Not a virgin, either. I mean, I still think it's way too soon, but now that I think about it, you've been spending a lot of time with him, haven't you?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "We get together at least once a week, and talk on the phone a lot. He's been a lot of help, and this came as much a surprise to him as it did to me. A lot of guys in that situation would have, y'know, expected something from me. We were just, well, one thing leading to another."

Right, expecting something. Been there, too. "So," I finally asked mom. "Is this thing with Mister Hebert serious, or was it just a one off sorta thing?"

"Well," she smiled. "It was in the middle of becoming a three off when you walked in."

"Oh god eww no," I cringed. "First, not something I ever wanted to hear my mother say. Second, not what I meant."
"I know," she agreed. "I don't have an answer for you. It's... whatever it ends up being, I guess. I
don't think I'm ready for 'serious', and probably won't be for a while. But I'm going to continue
seeing him. Hopefully without having to hide it from you."

"No, no," I agreed. "I get it. I'm okay with it, even, now that I've had a chance to recover from the
shock. I won't freak out around him or anything. We can get together, have a nice family lunch.
Force Taylor to wear something cute and girly for a reason other than showing off for Amy."

"Really?" mom smiled. "Is that a thing they do?"

"It's a thing Taylor does," I informed her. "She's dark colors and baggy shirts all the time, unless she
finds out Amy's going to be there, then she'll wear pretty much anything Lisa and I tell her will make
her girlfriend stare. We even got her to buy this really skimpy two piece bikini. But you'd better
swear on your life you won't tell her dad about that. I doubt she's even actually worn it, so I'd rather
not have to disown you over it."

She laughed. "Okay, I swear, he won't learn about his daughter's updates to her wardrobe from me. I
was a teenage girl, myself, once upon a time. Of course, back then we didn't have bikinis. Or
beaches."

I hugged her again. "Thanks mom, you're the best."

================

A/N- There were people that needed other people to explain Sarah's joke there at the end.

There. The chapter restores faith in humanity. The author note murders it again.
Minor incisions only, I thought as I scratched my claws through the flesh of my forearms. They quickly and easily regenerated. From this close, I could regenerate entire limbs if I needed to, but it was better to use my other healing method for that. This power was unpredictable and potentially unstable. I made that mistake once, and it was hell to remove the extra eyes that had grown from my arm. Small amounts of damage only.

My heightened senses alerted me to the incoming presence. Flight, larger mass than a parahuman. Vehicle? I relied on my peripheral vision: no point in looking suspicious by turning my head toward the supposedly hidden newcomer. Or more suspicious, at least. A large man in a trench coat draws a certain level of attention no matter what he does. When it's nearly midnight in late July, that just makes it worse. Still, in Brockton Bay as it existed now, no one was going to be more than passively intimidated by me. Pantheon's influence hit the underworld so hard that it broke.

Looks like you get to be a hero at last, Taylor, I smiled sadly.

A black winged horse landed nearby. The girl on it, Aceso, one of Amelia's recruits. Her 'little sister'. Not human, I recognized almost immediately. Is she some kind of artificial person? One of their M4s? She looked at me, then sniffed the air slightly. "Are you injured?"

I shrugged. "Nothing serious," I answered, stretching and hopping off my perch atop Crawler's corpse. It was covered in profanity and insults, now, but people had gotten bored trying to break the statue. Turns out, it got tougher as you worked your way inside. Eventually too durable for anything but superhuman strength to damage.

She accepted my word without question. Super senses, lie detection. Is this what Lisa feels like, all the time? Knowing just enough about everyone and everything to constantly be the smartest person in the room? No wonder she was such a smug bitch.

"So, I heard Gaea and Khepri are engaged," I invited. I was certain that Aceso was Clarice, who I had seen excitedly bragging about their plans on television. I had wondered what Taylor would do, now. First saving Dinah from Coil, then saving the city from everything. Now on to saving the world from the Endbringers.

Very much a 'Taylor' thing to do. I felt proud of her, as weird as that sounds. Still wasn't quite sure what to think about her awkward and, in retrospect, obvious crush on me being replaced with a lesbian betrothal, but I had more important things to worry about.

"I'm not suppose to talk to strangers," she replied. Knowing Taylor, and how powerful Aceso is, that's probably for the benefit of the strangers in question more than the parahuman death machine in front of me. I knew how to recognize parahumans, and Clarice was frightening at best.
I ran through my mental options. *I could claim to be an 'old friend' of Taylor and/or Lisa, it was true after all, but that would be more trouble in the long run, since Aceso would report back to them.* Cold reading was useless against her nonhuman physiology. Victor's power was telling me there was no one there. Was this Aceso's power? Something like a miniature copy of the Siberian? Was Genesis using a new identity?

I had no way to know, which meant no shortcuts to be found there. Except that I knew she had a lie detection ability. "That's a good rule," I agreed. "One meant to protect children from people that could hurt them. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact I'll just stay over here far away from you so you don't have to worry about even coming near you."

"Okay," she said. "But I need to go where you are."

"Business with the not-so-dearly-departed?" I asked. She nodded in response. I stepped away to let her do her thing. Two quick jumps later and she was atop the monster's damaged skull.

"Now I'm curious," I said, dipping into the social skills I'd stolen from Victor and borrowed, more or less permanently, from Uber. Making myself seem eager and friendly. "Could you please tell me? I promise not to tell anyone else. It's only fair since I moved away for you."

*Ugh,* I thought. *This makes me feel more unclean than having two women chained up in my basement.*

She tilted her head, still sticking things to various parts of Crawler's head. I was pretty sure it was tinker tech, but I wasn't linked in to Leet's power right now. Or any time I could avoid it, for that matter. I wasn't sure if it was all tinkers, or just Leet, but I really didn't like accessing his power. Even if I was, there was no reason to believe he'd know what this did. "We're doing a few tests," she answered. "We might be able to undo the crystallization."

*That was easy,* I thought. Suspiciously so, until I remembered she was a child and had a lie detector, and I had told the truth. No intention of sharing the details. Time to feign some ignorance to indicate I'm not that bright. "Please tell me you're not planning to resurrect Crawler."

"No, all the other people caught by the glass bomb," she stated. "Big sister was very insistent that Crawler stay safely dead."

I chuckled, even though it was again only Victor's skillsets that made me. "Good," I replied, stretching my arms out. "I hope Crawler stays like this forever. But I should go home before my friends start to get worried, don't stay up too late."
"Okay," she agreed, not bothering to look away from her work as I walked away. The cyanide cocktail I drank earlier in the evening had already been countered, so I had no need to stay any longer. It was an insight into Pantheon, at least. I was sincere about hoping Crawler stayed where he was for a very long time, and I tried to be glad that the people that were frozen would survive. But all I could think about was that Panacea would get her bitch of a sister back, and I would never see mine again.

....

I walked into my base. Hilariously enough, only a couple blocks away from where the Undersiders once called home. Feels like a lifetime ago.

"Hey, chief," Leet said as I walked in. "One of the bugaways has broken down. The other two are still good, so it's not an emergency."

"Still top priority," I responded. I was the only one who could repair Leet's equipment reliably, thanks to the weird hangups his power had. Apparently those weaknesses didn't apply to me, for whatever reason. Probably for the same reason I couldn't use Fenja's power to enlarge more than just the clothes I was wearing, or choose which of Othala's powers got applied to a target. Why I needed touch to apply Victor's power, even though I could still feel potential skills from a distance.

"Also, you'll need to heal Fenja again, she's developed a minor infection."

*Lovely*, I thought. *That has to be first, then.* I went down to the basement. Leet followed me and Uber joined the progression when we passed the kitchen. Part of my rules to them: they had to be with me whenever I entered the basement. A psychological tactic, as much as one to pragmatically prove I wasn't doing anything particularly cruel to my guests. The clowns were villains, certainly, and ones that engaged in some sick shit in their day, like their GTA sequence. But even they had limits.

Othala glared at me. Victor simply stared blankly. I'd sapped everything he knew, already. Or almost everything, at least. He could still walk and feed himself and knew to use the bathroom, even still had a vague understanding of English. Past that he was a blank slate, a virtual zombie. A step above Fenja, who was in an induced coma, and not even a full step.

Othala, however, was quite aware of her surroundings.

"You nigger fuck!" she shouted the moment I was in view. "Your asshole minions came in here and forced themselves on me!" I knew she was lying immediately. Thanks to Victor's knowledge, there was nothing I did not know about her. I had to admit, her deliberately tearing her own clothes and giving herself a black eye to make it look more real was an impressive touch, but it was still fake.
Uber didn't really react, he maintained a talent for hiding his emotions. Leet wasn't so good at concealing his reactions, and it was through him that I measured the pair, their loyalty, their honesty. Leet was visibly startled, but surprised startled, not guilty startled. I chuckled, much to Othala's rage and dismay.

"Really?" I smirked. "You guys are into the skinny bony type, huh?"

She growled at me, her knuckles turning white as they gripped the bars. She was running on nothing but hate and rage, these days. She'd break, eventually. Holding on to rage only works when there's something to work toward. A goal that can be achieved. Othala had none of that, she had no means of fighting back or working on a plan to free herself and get her revenge. Despair would erode the anger. I'd remember to be 'nice' to her, shortly. I knew her clothing sizes, and would buy her something just a little too large for her. One more button to push.

"Not really," Uber responded in his perfectly practiced neutrality. He knew what I was doing. To say he agreed with it would be a bit of a stretch, but he didn't disagree much. I paid them both generously and on time, and I helped Leet restore some of his old tech to full working order. It was a good arrangement for all of us. Even if they were going to develop a conscience, they wouldn't waste it on the Nazi bitch who just accused them of rape. "Definitely prefer some meat on my women. Nice bubble butt, that's where it's at."

I wasn't sure how much of Uber's statement was true or not, as I said, he was resistant to the various talents for reading people that I pulled from Victor. It didn't make a difference.

Leet hesitated, but he figured out more or less what was expected of him, simply based on how Uber was acting out of character. "I'm a tits man, myself," he managed to sputter out, just enough that Othala could hear him. That was true enough, and still didn't matter.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I told her, feeling almost guilty as I used her insecurity and body image issues against her. "You're adorable and all, but a tad underdeveloped for real men. Now, if you'd claimed they were abusing Fenja, I might have believed you."

She visibly flinched at the comment. While the conscious part of her mind knew she was desirable based on, if nothing else, the way men stole glances at her and Victor liked to flaunt her in their civilian identities. Her subconscious mind was mired in her childhood, and status as a late bloomer. It was especially cruel, comparing her to someone like Fenja who was clearly altered via plastic surgery, at least to my now expert appraisal.

After she broke, I would use the opposite tactic. A combination of tenderness and Stockholm Syndrome. The others, I didn't need. Victor and Fenja were unnecessary except as tools. But Othala's power was incredibly versatile and could make already strong capes even stronger. To have her willing aid, for a given definition of willing, was worth this bullshit. If only I'd gotten to Valefor before Pantheon, I could have skipped right to the end in one step. I'd keep my eye out for other chances, of course, but master type capes were hard to come by in the best of times. And Leet
already blew his mind control tech turning squirrels into packmen.

I passed Othala and went to Fenja's private room. She was unconscious, as always. It took me eighteen tries before I finally hit the 'regeneration' effect on Fenja, allowing her to heal, albeit slowly, from the infection. We weren't exactly running under 'hospital conditions', even if Uber's main job right now was seeing to her medical care. I canceled the recovery before it reached the damage done to her brain. This was why it had to be me that restored her: we couldn't risk Othala healing just a little too much, and undoing the brain damage that kept her under control.

====================

A/N- Man, Brian's kind of a dick.

Can you believe people didn't object to THAT being out of character, but did object to Uber and Leet being so? Despite the horrible shit they pulled in canon.
"A hollow excuse," Legend was contrite in front of the cameras. Honestly contrite, he meant what he said. "One I expect no one to accept. As such, I am resigning from my position in the Protectorate. I shall continue volunteering for all Endbringer battles, as I have always done. I failed to take responsibility, and it cost lives. I could not live with myself if I did it again. But I do not deserve to call myself a leader after everything I failed to do."

The couch arm I'd been gripping splintered in my hand, to my surprise. *I hadn't been gripping that hard, had I?* No, I realized. *I hadn't.* Or, at least, what had felt like a relatively gentle squeeze was enough to crush wood. Crawler's alterations were making a massive difference in a relatively short amount of time.

*Legend was partially responsible for Aisha's death? He was honestly sorry about it, but he was partially responsible.* I wasn't sure what to do about this. Even if I did go after him, he was still too strong for me to believe I could kill. Piggot, on the other hand, showed no signs of remorse and was far easier to kill. She was easily the first target. I would decide the guilt of Legend, and others, later.

....

Pantheon was gone from the city, though it took almost half an hour before I was confident enough to act. The Endbringer had finally made its move, and with that I could make mine. It was a simple enough task to learn where they were keeping Piggot. Breaking into houses wasn't exactly the hardest task, getting close enough to lift a few passwords was trivial. An accidental bump on the street was all it took with my newly developed eidetic memory. *Wonder what they're going to consider me now,* I idly thought. I knew enough about PRT protocols to make a very good guess. Brute 5, Striker 5, Mover 3, Shaker 3, Stranger 5. Trump 6, easily.

I frowned, looking at the prison. Minimum security. Cushy, even, and not the sort of place they'd ever send a poor boy like me. *If I were arrested for pickpocketing, they wouldn't have sent me to a place this nice. Piggot's guilty of multiple premeditated murders and gets stuck in a country club that's only drawback is she's not allowed to leave.*

I checked the timer. *Tee minus thirty seven seconds.* I waited, concentrating and calling on Menja's power through the quantum tunnel that Leet set up. My six and a half feet, thanks to Crawler exposure, shoots up to the new maximum, just over twenty feet. But that's twenty proportional feet to my new, already improved, physiology. The way her power works, it's more like I stay the same and everything else shrinks to a third its normal size. In my normal state I can lift about half a ton, and jump twice my height. With Menja's power, I could lift a over ten tons and still jump twice my height.

The hacking bot activates, shutting down the prison's ability to call out. The system would go
through an AI loop that, if I was really lucky, would convince them backup was coming when it was not. If I was really unlucky, it just bought me thirteen minutes on top of the fastest possible non-parahuman response time of seven minutes. If there was a parahuman response, it would be from those that didn't go to the Endbringer.

I leapt from my hiding spot- a cloak field that would keep anyone from seeing me too soon, and was back to my normal size before I even left the bubble. I crossed the two layers of fences in that single leap. This was not a prison for parahumans. It wasn't even a prison from real criminals. This was a prison they sent rich old men to after busting them on so-called 'white collar' crimes. And even real prisons weren't designed to keep people from breaking in.

Several bullets hit me as I was traveling through the air. *One of these guards is a really good shot.* I landed and tumbled, laying still. *Fuck that stings.* The latest sessions with Crawler had been the dividing line. I no longer needed to be near him to keep his corrective regeneration. It was, of course, still stronger if I was, but my body had mutated to the point that I had a permanent version, much like my superhuman strength and durability was permanent. I also had Othala give me the regen setting before I went out for this. Wasn't something I wanted to rely upon, but having it was nice.

The bullets melted away, dissolved and digested by my mutated physiology. It took me four seconds to roll to my feet and bolt again. I made it to the gate inside the prison. Closed, of course, and guarded. More bullets, this time not even breaking my skin as I bulked up some in size. If I worked this right they'd assume I had something kinda like Lung's power. A backhand was all it took to render one unconscious, and I body checked the other into the wall. Enough time to absorb the access code. Gripping his hand, I forced him to punch in the numbers. *Let them wonder how I did that.*

The gate opened. *One minute and twenty two seconds.*

Inside meant I wasn't getting shot at constantly. And they weren't using long range rifles. Handheld guns didn't mean a lot to me. A couple quick 'splats' and I was adhered to the floor. *Containment foam.* I realized quickly. *They were prepared for parahumans.* I activated the overshield and pushed my way forward. Its frictionless effect kept the foam from actually sticking to me or my clothes. Didn't mean it was easy to fight through the gunk, but it gave me the ability to.

My senses from Victor at least told me the path to take- the one blocked off from the current guards. They couldn't keep me here, not with any of their tools. But I had a mission to complete, and if I wasted too much time then I'd fail just as handedly as if they'd caught me. This was my one and only opportunity. I broke through and bolted, pouncing on a guard and holding my oversized hand around his mouth and nose. He emptied his handgun into my chest and stomach. Nothing to be worried about. Meanwhile, I pulled his memories of the building, its procedures, and what to expect next.

*Six and a half minutes.* The guard passed out. Victor's power, but it would appear to have been suffocation from how I'd gripped him. Three others had appeared at the end of the hallway. Whether they didn't shoot because they figured it was useless because I was clearly bulletproof, or because they didn't want to accidentally shoot their friend, I didn't know or care.
I leapt straight up and locked onto the ceiling. Kinetic manipulation designed by Leet to imitate Spiderman. *Whoever that is.* I jumped again, landing next to one of the guys with the foam launchers and knocking him out. Then I leapt and backflipped as he was hosed by the other guy. A quick blow to the side of the head knocked that one out and gave me a basic refresher on how to use the weapon. Nothing I didn't already know from Victor's extensive repertoire, but it always helped to 'update' in case it was a new model or there was something specific to worry about with that weapon.

I pulled the launcher off him, deactivated my shield, and put it on. They knew I was bulletproof, they knew I was foam proof. They'd keep trying, of course, but the intimidation factor meant something. Plus, the more powers I demonstrated, the less they'd be able to guess who was attacking. The less they'd assume I was someone else, too. If I did this right, they'd have no idea who I was and why I was here. Even if they'd be able to guess who I was here for.

Eight minutes and thirteen seconds. There was a rattling sound as they slammed the doors, locking me into this corridor. Fuck. I charged the direction I needed to go. The prison's infirmary section, which included the cells of all the patients who had dire medical needs. It was the only place the bitch could be. I had boosted up to the largest size I could afford while still indoors, and collided with the metal hard. It was the proportional equivalent of chicken wire to me, and it caved that easily.

An expert blow sent one of the nearby guards flying back, and I wedged the barricade into the wall blocking off another direction. A quick pop of containment foam cut off a third access point.

*Nine minutes and twenty seconds.* I'd reached the infirmary section. A dozen guards were waiting for me. *They must have guessed my target. This complicates matters.* If they killed her first, and they might, it rendered this moot. I activated a flashbang still in my hand. Something I'd immunized myself against almost immediately after learning my power drain still worked on Crawler's crystal body.

I rushed in, disabling them all in the least deadly ways possible. I didn't want to hurt them. They'd foamed the entryway, hoping it could keep me out. They would have been right, too, but I still had Leet's technology to back me. One short range teleport later, I was on the other side. *Ten minutes and forty five seconds.* I didn't even have to foam the passage to keep others out.

I passed over thirty cells before finding Piggot's. She had a dialysis machine plugged into her side. Victor's twice-stolen knowledge at work.

"Here to kill me?" she sneered angrily. I gripped the cage to her cell and strained against it. Body slamming wasn't something I could afford.

"Eventually," I grunted as I broke the locking mechanism. "We're going to have a talk first."
"So I can hear you justify your crimes?" she scoffed.

"The opposite, actually," I answered. "I want to hear you justify your cold blooded murders."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ah, more of my mistake coming back to bite me in the ass," she sighed. "That'll go down as my biggest regret in life, Mister Laborn, failing to kill all of you at once."

*She wants me to kill her,* I realized. "You're sick," I muttered.

"Says the man who's here to murder me," she retorted.

"Yes, says the man who's here to execute you for your crimes," I answered. I reached out and grasped her mouth before she could say another word.

And then I pulled at her mind. Procedures not available to grunts. Knowledge Uber and Victor could not have. Codes and passwords that were already defunct, of course. Most importantly: names. A lot of names. Starting from Nilbog and ending with her arrest. The men and women who gave her the job of looking over a city. The ones that covered up how disastrous Elisburg was. The ones that gave Piggot promotions in order to keep her from revealing what she knew about that failed mission. A lot of Protectorate secrets.

---

Legend: telling the truth about his complicity. Miss Militia: said nothing, did nothing. Armsmaster: still alive, now with the Guild. Director Costa-Brown: using Piggot for her own purposes, followed by destroying her credibility and throwing her away the moment she was no longer useful. Shadow Stalker: hidden away in juvie a hundred miles from here. Triumph: the mayor's son. Calvert: the only other survivor. All reflected through the beliefs of this paranoid psychotic bitch, of course, but her impressions were only biased, not wrong.

I drank lightly and broadly of Piggot's knowledge. Couldn't afford to go so deep as to influence her mind long term, now that I'd decided to leave her here to rot. *She wants to die? She can get off her fat ass and do it herself, because I am not about to give her the fucking satisfaction. A lifetime in a cell, suffering from a body that was pathetic and weak and hideous until her dying day? I wouldn't be able to dream up a better revenge.*

Seventeen minutes and thirty three seconds. A quick blow to her head and a deeper pull from her short term memories. She'd be unable to remember the last twelve hours with any sort of clarity, and by the time she recovered from the damage enough to convert her short term memory to long term, anything she knew about me would be long gone.

One last button press, and I was outside and in my cloak bubble. *One mission complete. Eighty two remaining.*
A/N- Ah, Brian.
"So," Taylor said, giving me a quick hug. "Crystal's managed to patch things up with Sarah."

"You mean your new step mother?" I smiled. AmusementAcquiescence. "That's good, Aunt Sarah deserves to be happy. We probably should have warned Crystal about her and your dad before. Could have eased her into it a bit more gently."

"Well, they were oblivious before, so there wasn't anything to-" ShockAversion.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Err, nothing." Taylor muttered. "I just..." SurpriseHumiliationWorryRelief. Taylor started blushing. "Nothing I'm going to repeat. Either thing. I'm done spying. Back to pretending I don't hear tens of thousands of conversations per hour."

"How do you do that, anyway?" I asked. "I could understand 'too much, can't sort through it all', but... hearing it all and pretending you don't?"

She shrugged. "It's like wearing clothes," she answered. "It's not like your skin doesn't know, you just don't notice them unless you're choosing to pay attention. It's kind of the same thing. I'm not paying attention, so I don't notice and it doesn't stick in my memory at all. Now let's stop talking about it, because I really really want to think of something else. Anything else, I don't care what it is."

"Anything?" I asked.

ReluctanceConcern. "What did I just agree to?"

"Well," I said. "We have to get Emma and analyze what we know of the Simurgh fight." AnnoyanceDistasteResignation. "Okay, I'll contact her, and Crystal and everyone else. So much for after battle relaxation."

"Well," I smiled, then whispered in her ear. "I can think of a few ways to relax before they get here."

ShockedPleased.
Emma's report was disturbing, to say the least. *DreadParanoiaHesitation.*

"She did more than just go easy on us," Taylor muttered, clutching my hand tighter. "She helped us."

"How do you figure?" Flechette asked. She was in her old costume, now. The press might have made a big deal of that, but I'd set up secret tunnels through the Yggdrasil that would let our team come and go without being seen. The best way to keep secret identities, such as we still had any, a secret.

"We survived," I answered. "We're the only people making a presence that had no losses. Everyone else..."

"Over two hundred Protectorate members lost, if we include the wards," Lisa answered the unspoken question. *ConcernDismay.*

"A lot of people will want to join our team just because of that," Taylor confirmed. "In addition, the PRT cannot refuse our offer of the M6s, now. They don't have the resources to function without them. Some cities were hit really, really bad."

"Chicago's the worst," Lisa again informed us. "They have two members left. I doubt even they realize it yet, but by the end of the week there won't be a PRT or Protectorate there, with all the parahuman gangs that will see blood in the water. Expect the Fallen to make a visit, probably the Elite."

"We'll have to act almost immediately," Taylor answered. "And we'll have to do it in a way that doesn't reveal that my range is, theoretically, planetary. She wants us to split the team and make us vulnerable. Fucking Simurgh. Couldn't have just let us go after Behemoth, could she?"

"There's also the fallout with Alexandria killing Dragon," I added.

"That wasn't Dragon," Lisa corrected. "Or, at least, not really. Remote control system a lot like our changelings. What Alexandria killed was just a puppet."

"Did... did she know that at the time?" I asked.

Lisa looked at me, her eyes narrowed for a second, before she sighed. "I don't know," she admitted. "Alexandria's a powerful thinker, ranks higher there than she does as a brute or mover. And she's
pretty damn impressive at both of those."

"So how are we handling all of this?" I asked.

"Dragon and Alexandria will hold their own press conferences on the issue, I'm sure. Shouldn't be too hard for the world's most powerful tinker to demonstrate her robots. The fact that our changelings are already well known thanks to the M4s can't hurt, either. She could claim she was borrowing our idea for herself. But I'm pretty sure she was using remote control tech long before Amelia came up with her version."

"Highest priority, then, is completing the M6 and the production pods," Taylor stated. "It took us a month to build up everything we used in the last Endbringer fight, we'll resolve to dedicate two months for the next. Right now, we need to expand our fortifications to other cities. I'll talk to Commissioner Micheals and Director Calvert. Arrange some cross training in the remaining M4s, that way when we're ready to distribute the new gear, we'll already have people in other cities that know how to actually use it."

"Now that all our tinkers know about me," Riley stated, then hesitated under Parian's gaze, before she continued speaking. "We'll need to work on the next generation of weapons. And a way to mass produce the generic armor systems. Even if we can't give custom armors, there's certain generic power types that we can boost at least a little. Every little bit is going to help right now."

"Is this what the flying bitch wanted to do to us?" I muttered. "Force us to split our efforts so many ways that we start screwing up?"

"It... would be the easiest way to defeat us as an organization," Taylor suggested, following my line of thinking. "We've been riding success after success this whole time. It's self feeding, and I won't exactly bitch about it. Simurgh was an ugly victory, but it was still victory enough that we haven't lost momentum. Trying to take on too much, too fast, could break that momentum. And..." She put her arm around me. "It's what happened to New Wave, after all."

"Maybe," Lisa agreed. "We don't have a choice, however."

"We really don't, do we?" I sighed. "This is how she operates, isn't it? Making it look like we don't have a choice. Taking away all the better options."

"It is," Lisa nodded. "And in that, at least, the bitch won. If we don't act to replace the damaged Protectorate, we could lose half the country by the end of the year. As it stands, the west coast is almost certainly fucked. China's going to be that much more of a threat, and we're likely to be the only heroes that can afford to show up to the next Endbringer battle."

"Fucking fuck!" Flechette shouted, punching a wall. She used her power and sank her arm up to the
elbow. "We killed a fucking Endbringer. That means things are suppose to get better, not worse! Monster slain, celebrations and drunken parties and national holidays. Not civil wars and international threats and quadruple guessing everything we do from now on!"

AgreementAngerFutility.

A/N- And now for something completely different?

No, seriously, I like leaving plot threads to dangle sometimes. Is fun. Drives some readers nuts.
"This is Pantheon," a new voice answered. "Noelle speaking."

"I'm afraid I don't know the name," I replied. I don't recognize the voice, either. I opt not to say that part.

"They've decided to hire a secretary," she answered. "Who's this?"

"Chief Director Costa-Brown," I answered.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I'll put you through to Minerva if you don't mind holding a second."

"That is fine," I responded. Their secretary isn't very good at this. There was a click on the phone, and then another.

"Good afternoon, Chief Director," Minerva responded. "Sorry about that, we're juggling a lot of things right now. Probably not as much as you are, so let's get down to business. You're interested in our M6s, but content to handle that through Director Calvert. So this is about the Endbringer killing weapon."

"Yes," I responded. "Our people have studied the aftermath of the attack. We can confirm that it was not your weapon, or the Endbringer having a 'self destruct' feature, which burned India. You are authorized to utilize the weapon on the remaining two. In fact, we insist that you do so." This isn't the point of the conversation and she knows it.

"We're hoping to field a superior version for the next conflict," Minerva confirmed. They already knew it was not the Simurgh that caused the energy burst. "We were also hoping to speak with Alexandria soon. We think we have a way to improve her effectiveness for Endbringer grade conflicts."

That was the key to this lock, good girl. "... Only Alexandria?" I asked.

"At this juncture, unfortunately, yes," she answered. "We'd need to do extensive research on the other two to develop a strategy for improving on their powers. Legend is... well, our best current analogue is Eki. Her armor works by feeding in energy. It's safe enough for her, but to use it on someone who becomes energy... I'm sure you understand how incredibly dangerous that might be for

"And Eidolon's power is, frankly, too versatile. We can't build efficient power interactions when we don't even know what power to expect. He's... actually best suited for our standard, unaugmented armor system. It's durable enough in its own right, and comes with excellent flight capabilities. At the very least, it frees him from selecting movement or defensive powers in most scenarios. We're creating a better flight version for users with high defensive powers, and a better defense version for movers who are otherwise vulnerable, in case he'd prefer either of those instead."

"I'll see to it both he and Alexandria get the message," I stated. *True enough, in its way.* "I won't keep you from your work any longer. I must continue mine."

"Busy day for everyone," Minerva agreed, before hanging up.

I made another call immediately, to Dragon. "To what do I owe this call, Chief Director?" the false voice spoke. Dragon never used her true voice, although she had an admittedly very good simulation that she used at near instantaneous speeds. Now I was certain I knew why. *She is artificial. Perhaps an AI tinker that hid behind his or her creation, or the Dragon persona was entirely an AI.*

"I wished to confirm that you weren't harmed in the conflict with the Simurgh," I told her.

"Not physically, no," she responded. "Defiant's injuries, and the use of my equipment to kill so many... it brings its own kind of pain." *It sounds like legitimate sadness in her artificial voice,* I realized.

"It does," I agreed. "I can't say I know what it's like for a tinker, to see their own weapons turned against them like that, but I know what it's like to see loved ones lost in battle against monsters." *Hero,* I thought. Then quashed the memory. *Now is not the time.*

"It helps to know that all of my instruments confirm the Simurgh is no longer detectable," she continued. "It appears that Pantheon has legitimately succeeded in eliminating the Endbringer."

"Every tinker and thinker we have consulted agrees with your assessment," I informed her. "Of course, given that it's the Simurgh, I am hesitant to believe she hasn't found a way to hide from detection. I of course wished to hear your analysis. I'll leave you to your work."

I had several more calls to make, including one to the President and others to the Prime Ministers of both Canada and England, but in truth my mind was consumed with what Pantheon might devise to improve on my powers.
I landed outside their base. From above, it could easily be mistaken for a fairly large chunk of parkland in the city. The first time I had been to Brockton Bay since Leviathan. I was truly impressed by how quickly they had managed to recover. I frowned at the flashes of cameras. *It was almost ten at night in this timezone, and the tabloid reporters were still at it? Perhaps my decision to drop in unannounced wasn't such a wise one.*

The ground opened up for me as I made to land. I simply followed it down, finding myself in a surprisingly expansive laboratory. Bonesaw was there, working with some machine. "Everyone else will be here in a minute," she sang cheerfully. It honestly bothered me a little that I was ignoring her presence here.

I'd long since stopped thinking in such a childishly black and white fashion about morality, but this was still Bonesaw. I couldn't help but remember my fight with the Siberian when I looked at her. At the same time, I could relax knowing that Pantheon was a group of pragmatists, willing to do what was best instead of getting mired in what was right. *These are people Cauldron can work with.*

"I can wait," I replied, trying to sound... not 'friendly', but at least 'polite'. "It was... difficult... to find an opportunity to speak in person."

"I understand," a voice spoke. My head snapped in that direction as Khepri stepped out of an alcove. *No, not Khepri,* I realized. *A Khepri doppleganger. One of their human form androids. I can barely tell the difference.*

"I was asked to make contact," I told her. *True, although I wouldn't acknowledge my other identity.*

"First," she said. "Everything said here stays confidential, correct."

"Correct," I answered. We all knew I'd already informed Cauldron. "Doctor-patient confidentiality, applied both ways."

Khepri nodded her approval. "Amelia's on her way," she informed me.

"This is really exciting," Bonesaw smiled eagerly. "The first thing is the simplest. You've stated you have difficulty breathing in hostile conditions. So I built you this!" She lifted up something that looked like a wriggling white two foot long worm covered in tendrils. And those tendrils also had tendrils. "Really it's for anyone who wants one. What we do is stick it in your lungs and it'll breathe for you. Or, well, it generates oxygen right next to your bronchioles. Breathing is rendered totally unnecessary except for the purpose of speaking."
For the first time in years, I actually cringed at the thought of something. "And its needed supply of energy?" I asked.

"Nothing you don't produce anyway," she answered. "The heat energy released into the environment when you breath will instead be converted into chemical energy to maintain the system."

"Do... all of you have these?" I asked.

"No," Khepri replied adamantly. "In fact, none of us do. We use something like them to keep the M4s and M6s well oxygenated, but we haven't had them installed inside our bodies."

Oh thank you merciful God, I thought. "Then I'm afraid I'll have to decline," I replied. "I'd prefer not to be the test subject for an untried device."

"Aww," Bonesaw pouted, tossing the thing back toward the table. It landed with a wet splat, where I couldn't stop watching it wriggle in the corner of my eye. "But you could have been the most amazing spokesperson. Everyone would want one if they knew Alexandria was using it."

Gaea arrived in time to hear the last of the conversation. "Riley, what's rule seven?"

"If it's a parasitic worm, then no one's going to want it," she answered. "But it's not a worm at all, it's a tree root!"

"It's still not something people are going to want," Gaea insisted, as she walked over to me. "Sorry about that. Now, the first part of this is that I will need to touch you. Attempt to learn how your power influences your body. This will determine what, if anything, can be done with your power."

"It's quite alright," I lied masterfully. Bonesaw offering parasitic upgrades is very much not alright. I did, however, extend my hand for Gaea to touch.

She frowned almost immediately. "Your body is... I can sense it as easily as anyone else, but I can't alter it. At all. It's frozen. Your Passenger seems to have locked your body in stasis. Theoretically, this means you're untouchable to almost every power, or interaction between powers. I... cannot alter you or build a system to capitalize on your power."

"I can think of one," Bonesaw sang happily. "You're going to love it."

"Okay, I'm listening," I regretted the words before I even started speaking them.
A/N- So many shadows being fored.

Chapter End Notes

For those that are curious, I put together a list of Riley's rules during my last reread:
Rule 1 - unknown, if I had to guess I would say it's something along the lines of "listen to Amelia"
Rule 2 - If the plan starts with 'kill people indiscriminately', it's a bad plan
Rule 3 - Don't encourage/induce unwanted/(inhuman?) pregnancies
Rule 4 - No Sentient Minions
Rule 5 - Unknown
Rule 6 - Zach's plans are never good
Rule 7 - If it's a parasitic worm, no one's going to want it
"So, am I the only one who noticed that the mayor's name is dick 'em daily?" I heard Respawn mutter. Too quiet for anyone other than a parahuman to hear, but of course picked up through all of our armor systems. I couldn't comment, I wouldn't comment. Emma snickered over the communications, much to Taylor's annoyance. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

"Thank you for seeing us, Mayor," I said with a smile. Richard Daley had been mayor of Chicago for decades, from what I had been told briefly. His career was, well, 'checkered' was a polite way of putting it. None of which really mattered.

"And thank you for coming. Things have been trying, as you might imagine, and we are glad for the offer of assistance."

I nodded, there was no doubt of that, at least. "Wish we could be here under better circumstances," I answered. "We have several plans I'd like to discuss with you. We need to make a statement to the criminal groups that are taking advantage of the tragedy in New Delhi. Chicago's been hit worse than anywhere else on the continent, so we'd like to start here."

"Of course," the elderly Mayor agreed readily. "I've already collected my advisors."

He was eager for the help, as was no surprise. Of course, Costa-Brown's backing probably helped push this faster, and more cleanly, than it might otherwise have gone.

....

*Another podium, another press conference,* I sighed inwardly. *When had this started to become tiresome instead of terrifying?* I couldn't pinpoint a day. Probably around the time Taylor's identity was revealed to the world. *Yeah, that annoyance, that's when I got tired of this sort of thing.*

"I am proud to welcome Gaea to the fine city of Chicago," Mayor Daley announced for the press conference. I found myself wishing Taylor was here with me. She had another mission to accomplish. Most of our team did. I felt the return wash of emotion. *LonelySupportResolve.* I smiled. We were all in this together.

"Thank you, Mayor," I said as I looked at the camera. "Pantheon would like to make an announcement on behalf of our team, our nation, and the human race as a whole. With the death of the Simurgh came a staggering cost. Too great a cost to call the battle a victory."

---------
LonelyNostalgia. Aww, she missed me. I felt warm, and not just because Matriarch had the best life support comfort ever. Pity I wasn't able to really use it in this mission. I simply sat in a room next to various dispatchers. The PRT, every police department in the city, and somehow even the National Guard had been tapped for this. I always thought the National Guard was meant for riots and the like. Then again, maybe that was the expectation: that there would be riots.

I push a tack into the map, and the police would head to that location. Green, Yellow and Red for levels of danger. Once they arrived, I would show them where to go via insect trail.

My relay bugs had been fanned out across the city. There was no pretense, no subtlety. We no longer cared: the world could know the full extent of my power and it changed nothing. We had slain an Endbringer, after all. They knew I had city wide range, already. And so, I was willing to demonstrate my city wide range. Let them think this was the last of our secret weapons instead of the least of them.

I was simultaneously aware of over two million people, most of them I wasn't paying attention to. I focused on the scents the insects were detecting. Bugs, at least in the numbers I had access to, were more sensitive to drugs than any dog could be. Heroin and cocaine were distinctive, if generally rather muted from their packaging. Meth was painfully obvious even from a block away. Oddly enough, marijuana was still one of the most difficult chemicals to recognize. Most insects couldn't tell the difference between it, and any other packet of dried leaves from the average spice rack. I had to make more assumptions on that one.

We weren't here for the marijuana. Chances were high that it would be legal in a couple years, anyway. Much like back in Brockton Bay, we were not here to make arrests. It would take rewriting the constitution to make this kind of search valid for prosecution. We weren't even here to clean up Chicago. That would require abandoning our home. We were here to make a fucking point.

I felt a certain satisfaction and nausea at the few we truly could arrest. The places with forced prostitution. The rapists. The crimes in progress. The law allowed for 'belief of immediate danger' to trump the need for a warrant. It also allowed me to do more than simply report. Where I jabbed a black pin into the map they'd provided for me, it meant 'send medical personnel'. They got the same treatment as I gave Eligos. A hundred pounds or more of crickets and cockroaches, biting and chewing their skin. Tens of thousands of papercuts. They couldn't prove I didn't interrupt a rape in progress, after all.

We were sending a message: any city that Pantheon needs to save is going to cost every criminal group a whole lot of money. The PRT and Protectorate and Police and even Pantheon could not police everyone. But the gangs could police themselves. And they would, if simply to avoid drawing our attention. We would exist as the hammer, ready to come down on any city that was too troublesome, any group that would not play by the rules. And if we came down, we came down on everything at once.
"Atropos, we got your target," Khepri spoke through the communication system in the armor. I looked over at Sabah.

"About time, I was getting bored," I replied. "Who's the target?"

"Guy called 'Topsy'," Khepri answered. "According to what I'm being told, he likes to think he's some kind of oldschool gangster. Has a couple unknowns with him. Minerva will give you details en route."

We took off, or really Parian took off while I held one of the ribbons and let my AG field do the rest of the work. Using her power as fuel for some kind of crazy rocket engine was novel, and had finally convinced my girlfriend that her power didn't suck. She still complained that mine was better, but it was good natured now. She was potential competition for Alexandria, after all. More than enough power to make anyone happy.

By the time we arrived, we knew what we were getting ourselves into, and I had concluded yet again that my girlfriend's costume was far too form concealing for my tastes. You could only tell it was meant for a girl because it looked like a giant stuffed doll. We split up. Parian went inside waited down the hall from their apartment. I waited for her to get in position, then hovered my way almost casually to the window and then knocked.

"Fuck!" A woman exclaimed inside, but quietly enough that I only heard thanks to the armor system. That would be Mockshow, a matter manipulator who builds golems. Similar to Sabah's power. Or, more a hybrid of Sabah and Theo. She had a Manton Limit, and that meant we weren't at any risk of her being able to hurt us.

"We're surrounded," another man declared. Probably Watch. Grab bag cape thats power was basically 'see living things, get close to them really fast, then touch and kill them'. He was the dangerous one. A sadist who had killed and maimed often enough that he'd go straight to the Birdcage. He was why Sabah had infused the door with her power.

"Shit, grab what you can and run," and that'd be Topsy. Gravity control and, well, that was basically it. Scary if you weren't prepared for it. We were most definitely prepared for it.

"There's no chance of escape," Khepri's swarm voice spoke. I shivered. I was one of the few people on the planet with a hard counter for her bugs, and the cloud of insects mimicking human speech sent the worst kind of shivers down my spine.

"Fuck, that's... fuck, I think I'm gonna throw up," the girl muttered.
"I can track you anywhere in the city. You either surrender, or try fighting your way through," Khepri continued. "Feel free to take a minute and prepare, we wouldn't want you to think you only lost because we caught you with your pants down. Oh, and in case you're wondering, your opponents are Clotho, a high end telekinetic who can trade blows with Alexandria and at least break even. And Atropos, who has superhuman accuracy with the projectiles built into her armor, and can dissolve through anything that touches her armor or weapons. Even Endbringers. Also, they have a dozen exotic tracking systems in their armor, so they can hear everything we're saying and follow you with infrared and bioelectric detection. You've already lost."

"Wait... you mean you sent the fucking Endbringer Slayer after us?" the girl exclaimed. "Shit! Okay, I'm done. Sorry, Topsy, I'm not afraid to do a minute in the pen, but I'd like to do it with all my limbs where they belong. Wh-wai-" she started screaming.

I bolted in through the window even as the door disintegrated by Sabah's power. Two seconds and four bolts later and Watch had dropped screaming in pain. I didn't bother charging the shots or adding the sleep agent, they hit with standard impact velocity. Both his kneecaps and elbows were shattered thanks to my flawless accuracy and sense of timing. The fucker was attacking his own team, I had absolutely no reason to be gentle.

I considered one more bolt- it wouldn't need to be much, it would look like an accident that he bled out and died. Sabah would know, Khepri would know, neither of them would say anything. I wouldn't, of course, I wasn't a murderer. But if they could ignore Bonesaw, then they could ignore...

A couch launched, or really more like fell, at me. It vanished where it touched, leaving only fragments that missed me to continue on and into the wall. Some even bounced off Sabah's armor. "Really?" I said, looking at him. "What part of 'dissolve anything' did you not hear?"

A couple ribbons snaked out and picked up Mockshow from where she was gripping her arm. "Don't worry, we'll fix it," she insisted to the girl who was doing nothing but muttering profanities. The ribbons cradled the girl gently. A third had far less gently wrapped around Watch, who had passed out from the pain. That was fine, we had no intention of patching him up before sending him away.

Topsy regarded me for a moment as the ribbons did their thing. "Had to take a shot, y'know," he shrugged. "You win. Get the feeling that either of you alone could have taken all of us without a problem. Bug bitch... fuck, I saw the video of what you did to Eligos. I'll pass, thanks."

Mockshow hissed. "Fuck, why couldn't you have shot him sooner?!"

"Sorry," I muttered. "Didn't think he'd go after one of his own team like that."

"He's a fucking psycho, you dumb bitch!" she yelled. "Of course he would!"
A/N- These three got curb stomped the FIRST time. Clearly, they never stood much of a chance here.

Also: yes, referenced a real person. As a Chicago (region) native, I can assure you that Worm's "it gets worse" aura means Daley triggered with immortality and will never stop being the mayor of Chicago.
"Umm, small problem," Clarice stated. "Looks like a couple of Atropos and Clotho's targets got hurt, they're being brought in. I might need to pay more attention to that. Expect Clarice to be slow in this fight, okay?"

"That's okay," Lachesis answered. "We have half our firepower here, and Th- Horus can protect me."

She looked toward me, and I knew she was smiling. Couldn't see it through her armor, however. I nodded to confirm. "Of course," I replied. "Khepri and Eki are going to be doing the heavy lifting in this fight. We're just here to catch the runners and provide first aid to those who need it."

Our target was the 'Teeth', I thought darkly. They, or their predecessors at least, had killed my mother. It was unlikely that the Butcher was here for this one- a new city, so far from home. We had no real way of knowing, however. They'd found their place to hide in a slum neighborhood. I couldn't help but think of my father describing places such as this one, and the 'inferior blood' that lived there. I wasn't sure how I felt to see he was wrong in at least one regard: there are plenty of whites here. The Teeth, it seems, did not discriminate. They accepted scum of all colors.

"It's time," Khepri instructed, and sky turned dark. Thousands of tons of insects dived the area, swarming every member of their sick gang almost simultaneously. The screaming was echoed in a chorus of fear and pain as we moved forward, not even needing to act. We were here for the parahuman response, and we got it.

Emerald arrows formed in the sky and started launching toward us. *How do they know where we are?* I wondered. *Powers, of course.* I provided a shield of metal- not because any of us needed it, but simply for appearance's sake. The arrows crashed against the shields, dispersing their energy into thousands of dimensions simultaneously. They splintered into shards of glass and then vanished into nowhere, much as they had come from nowhere to begin with.

Eki stuck a hand out of the side of the shield, soaking a blow from one of the arrows. "Less than a tenth of a percent," she stated. Not to us, but to Khepri and Minerva. She waited a second for confirmation before taking to the sky. Her armor in stealth mode, she activated the widest range of the vertigo weapon, blasting the area with energy. Most of the teeth collapsed to the ground, and some even started being ill. I've been on the receiving end of the weapon. Not a pleasant feeling, but it confirmed that my armor did not protect me from low end sonic attacks. The injure and kill settings, my power would block. But whatever part of the Manton Effect that allowed me to see and hear through the armor made me vulnerable to the vertigo setting.

We moved forward, step by step, moving past downed members of the Teeth. Turning over the ones that might be at risk of choking, checking the health of those that looked worse off, mostly from injuries that had not healed from whatever fights they had before we got here. After they had
dropped, the tranquilizer mosquitoes made sure they would not get up.

"Are you sure no one will be able to identify the drug?" I asked Clarice. Riley, I reminded myself. I had known her for so long as nothing other than 'Clarice' that I had trouble thinking of her as anything else. She was Bonesaw, once, I reminded myself. If even Bonesaw could change, why couldn't Kayden? I resolved to ignore that thought for now. Now is not the time.

"No one will ever be able to prove there was a drug," Clarice answered with her artificially perfect voice. "Well, Dragon can probably figure it out, maybe the Protectorate has someone who can surprise me."

"But they're not gonna tell, they need us too much," Missy said with a girlish excitement. "Uh oh, looks like we have company."

A large gorilla/wolf monster stood atop one of the buildings. He screamed, and Eki faltered, then started falling. "Powers down!" she screamed as she fell. I set a ramp to catch her, and another scream dissolved it.

"Fuck!" Minerva, this time. "That's Animos! Power nullifying blaster attack. Changer with brute abilities. We've proven our point, get Eki and fall back!"

"I got him," Missy said with cold certainty, and then she was gone. She appeared behind him on the building, only a second later, raising her hand and blasting him. I could see the visible distortion of time and space released from her attack, which meant it was at least stage two. He went flying off the building, while I managed to rebuild the ramp for Eki to slide down.

Missy stepped again, and appeared below Animos, firing straight up. The monster was carried by warped space upward into the sky. She was right next to me in another second. "So, is he rated high enough to survive a thousand foot drop?" she asked casually. She is amazing, I realized for approximately the hundredth time. It's not just that her power is incredible, it's how smart and efficiently she uses it.

"Maybe," Minerva answered. "Probably not. Horus, you'll have to catch him if possible.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded, pulling myself out of my own thoughts. Eki had hit the bottom of the ramp and was going back up the other side. She drew herself away from the slide under her own power.

"I'm back in the fight," Eki informed us. "Thanks for the save, Horus."

"Time delay of seventeen point three seconds," Aceso spoke. "That's how long it takes to recover."
"Still gotta recharge the shields on the suit," Eki answered, diving back behind my shield for cover from the constant stream of crystal arrows. She looked her armor over, and I gave it a glance as well. There were several areas where the camouflage layer had been cut by the arrows. "Good thing this armor is so durable. Thanks." She patted Clarice on the head. "Guess I owe you. Again."

"That's what family's for, right?" Aceso replied.

"This guy with the arrows has a shield I can't get through," Khepri said through the suits. "You'll have to go after him personally. Also, Animos is falling. Injuries are fine, but we really don't want to kill anyone during this. We're already going to be scary enough that some groups might get the bright idea to team up and come after us. Sure, we have contingencies for that, but it's not something we want to actually happen if we can avoid it.

"I'll clear out the building he's in," Eki stated, looking in the direction that Khepri was pointing her. I flew up toward one of the nearby rooftops, to get a better angle and view. More bolts collided with my armor uselessly. Missy stepped again, and vanished with Aceso. The tracking system put them a couple blocks away.

"Found their reinforcements," Missy said over the com. Four seconds later she spoke again. "Disabled their reinforcements. We're gonna need at least one more bus to haul these losers away. One's getting back up, regen. Aceso has enga- Aceso is purs-. Nevermind, the new parahuman in custody. Brute, mover, seems to be a really fast regenerator. Like faster than Lung."

*Those girls,* I smiled. *So very glad they're on my side.*

Animos collided hard with my ramp- he was a brute, after all, and while I was pretty effective even powerless thanks to the suit, I didn't want to be forced to fight like that.

He rolled for a bit before managing to find an angle to slide. I didn't allow it to be completely frictionless this time, so he slid up, and back down, without nearly the speeds that I had put Missy through after we first met. He ground to a halt, eventually.

"Animos is down," I stated for the team. "Human state, now. Broken leg, don't like the look of his ribs, and he's unconscious. He'll survive, but that's about all he'll be able to do for a while."

An explosion burst from the side of the building Eki was in. "This guy's a pain in the ass," she muttered. "It's like trying to fight an even more dick version of Shatterbird. He can use his forcefield to fly."

"Fall back," Minerva ordered. "Unless he engages you, let him run."
"You have a backup plan?" Eki asked.

"A couple," she confirmed. "One of our more fun secret weapons."

I paused, a moment of silence for the dead. In that minute, I felt the pulses of emotion off of Taylor. As I had started this speech, live, the operation had started. The thrill of victory, and occasional bursts of disgust and concern radiated off my partner. Her emotions sang. *This is her element, where she was happiest.*

I wasn't the same. I loved the conflicts, my Passenger guaranteed that I would. Still, mine was not a power for the front line. I was a builder, and the more I built the more my Passenger rewarded me. More skill, more control, more confidence. Everything I had been lacking. My General was on the front lines, where she belonged. I was here, where I belonged, making everything possible.

*Time to continue the speech.* "It has been confirmed that the explosion was not the result of the Simurgh self destructing, as was originally believed, but instead a tinker weapon she built and deployed." *A partial lie,* I knew. *True enough to pass any lie detection,* however. "If there is a victory in this, it's knowing that her brothers can be eliminated without risking the death of much of the rest of the world. Pantheon will be there to ensure that destruction." I gave a minor pause. Judging by Taylor's emotional undercurrent, she was pleased on her end. *Good.*

"But today is not about that mission," I conditioned, switching tones. "Today is about the cowardly actions taken by others in the wake of New Delhi. The world has lost many of its heroes. Not simply those who called themselves heroes and worked with the Protectorate, or those in independent teams like Pantheon. There are those who call themselves villains, and those who wish to avoid using their powers entirely. They who did not call themselves heroes, yet still had the courage to stand and fight against the enemy of all humanity. Let no one say their sacrifices were any less dear."

"To those who see the this tragedy as a weakness to exploit," I continued, letting my own disgust seep into my voice. The feelings that Valefor and the Slaughterhouse Nine evoked in me. "To the pathetic cowards who look upon the death of almost a billion people and consider it an *opportunity,*" I spit the word. "Pantheon issues this warning: we consider any attempt to use New Delhi for personal gain to be a direct violation of the Endbringer truce. We will act accordingly."

"Chicago has been invaded by such scum," I continued. "Jackals looking to prey upon the suffering of others. We are moving to remove them from the city, even as I give this speech. Within the hour, they shall be disabled and in custody. Along with a number of other criminal elements. The city of Chicago is now clean." I said that with full confidence, knowing that Taylor was still entirely pleased on her end.
I let that concept sink in for a second, and even a few of the men watching this announcement murmured their surprise.

"In order to keep it that way, we have brought to this city the first of our M6 defender models. Our upgrade to the M4s deployed in Brockton Bay. Powerful enough to legitimately fight most capes. Versatile enough to ensure they can respond to almost any threat. Brockton Bay's PRT Director Calvert, and Police Commissioner Micheals have both provided volunteers to train the police and PRT of Chicago in the use of this equipment."

"I will be handing over the stage to Director Hearthrow, to explain the PRT's plans with this equipment."

He approached me and accepted the microphone as I stepped back. "First, I would like to thank both Pantheon and Director Calvert for their joint efforts."

*CertaintySuperioritySuccess*. I smiled broadly as I tuned out Director's speech. What he said didn't matter compared to the emotions from my General. My Partner. *We won. No sense of muted disappointment, except maybe the part of Taylor that had hoped it would be more of a challenge. It took only a few minutes. The other gangs, the ones that were relatively benign, received their warnings and their bruises. The ones we truly cared about had been shattered.*

The Adepts were the one gang we left essentially untouched. They had traits distinguishing them from the others: they sent people to New Delhi, and they did not kill. To them, we made a different sort of offer. Pantheon was expanding, as was the Protectorate and the Guild. If they wanted, as individuals or as an organization, they could get out of crime now and we would do everything in our power to ensure they had a chance to be heroes.

When we moved on Los Angeles, and Miami, and Houston, and Vegas in the coming weeks, we would do the same thing. We weren't stopping until we had undone the damage caused by the Simurgh. The message would be sent. The old ways are no longer an option.

==============

A/N- Man, this was a *fun* chapter for me.

Also- the Author's Notes Drinking Game is to take a sip every time I say "foreshadowing". More than a sip, and you will die.

There's a LOT of foreshadowing in this chapter.
I arrived promptly five minutes before my scheduled meeting. Same secretary as before, I noted. Smarter than average. College educated. Ambitious. Driven. No desire to seek out a more prestigious career. Six figure salary. I was actually surprised. Knowing that Accord knew how to take care of his people was valuable for the future.

I gazed out the window at the skyline. Excellent view, I noted. Accord has same view in office. Recent renovations of certain buildings. Symmetrical pattern. I blinked. Accord purchased several city blocks in order to sculpt this view of his. Why hadn’t I noticed these details before?

I turned my power inward. Focused on Accord, jealousy toward other, more successful thinker. Distracted from other useful details by focusing power on finding methods to safely goad Accord without risk. Inferiority complex-

I cut the feed and suppressed the desire to sigh. Fucking Rapture. After learning she could do such a thing, I had to try it for myself. I didn't need my power to tell me why yet again. It was the competition. She’d gone somewhere I'd never before dared, and I just couldn't live with that thought.

All those zen monks could go fuck themselves: self awareness sucks and murders the very concept of fun. The one saving grace is how much stronger it made my power, if indirectly. Not wasting my efforts on infantile contests of will freed up a truly depressing amount of power to direct at other, more valuable, concerns. Still not enough to save Taylor from that what that empathic bond is going to do.

"Accord is ready for you," the secretary informed me.

"Thank you," I replied as I walked in. The office was an impeccable as before. In fact, I was fairly certain that everything in it, including Accord himself, was in exactly the same place as before, down to the centimeter. My power noted the symmetry in the patterns. It was, in its own way, flawless. I hated it instinctively. There is no mystery here, no imagination or possibility.

"A pleasure to see you again, Accord," I said as he stood.

"You as well, Minerva," he acknowledged. "I admit I'm once again somewhat surprised by your request for an audience. As well as your apparent promotion."

Promotion? Oh, right, I acted like nothing more than an errand girl last time. "My bosses seem to like my work," I almost shrugged. Habit from last time to be unnecessarily annoying, quit it. "I'm now head of their thinker department."
He nodded, just barely enough for my thinker perceptions to note. "They certainly have proven an ability to harness their employees talents to the fullest," he stated.

"Yes," I agreed. Approves of efficiency. Approves of order. Amoral, does not view 'good' and 'evil' as things. Replaced by concept of 'order' and 'chaos'. Views chaos as morally repugnant. "As much as I'm sure they love knowing you appreciate their efforts, we should get to business. Pantheon is currently, and I do apologize for the pun, branching out."

"As in Chicago?" he asked. Has spies, knows our plans, not internal, through the PRT, knows I'll realize this.

I nodded. "Yes," I agreed. I suppressed the desire to claim I knew the whole time. It's something I would have done, before. Fucking Rapture. "I admit... I am a little caught off guard that you knew. We weren't planning to act until tomorrow."

"Do you blame me for spying upon you?" he asked. Testing resolve and pragmatism. Is willing to make amends if it upsets me, or Pantheon.

"Not at all," I responded. "If anything, it's flattering. And it says good things of your intelligence and the strength of your information network." All true, except perhaps for being flattered by it.

He nodded. Considers test to be passed successfully.

"It actually makes me feel a lot better about my task here. I've come here to propose a... merger, of sorts, between our organizations," I informed him.

"I see," he nodded. Surprised by idea. Had desired an official alliance, had not expected such an aggressive offer. "I will make no promises, but I am interested in hearing your ideas. What you believe our respective functions would be in this arrangement."

I nodded, and carefully formulated how to present the pitch. It would be best, for a man like Accord, to start by explaining why we entertaining such a seemingly rash maneuver. "First," I started. "We have been watching you as well, as I'm sure you're aware. As I said in our last meeting, we are all very impressed with your work in Boston. You have never participated in the drug markets, or any of the other... messy... crimes. Your goals are the same as our goals."

He nodded. He was more at ease, now, knowing we had given this real consideration. The praise didn't hurt, either. "The truth is, Accord, you have strengths that we do not. We can provide resources and play politics with the best of them. However, we are facing new challenges now. After New Delhi. I would be lying if I claimed we were fully prepared for the aftermath of that."
"No one can truly prepare for the chaos that the Endbringers represent," Accord offered. *Trying to offer condolences, is sincere. Huh, I thought. Did not expect that.*

I nodded. "Of course," I agreed. "The Protectorate has been broken, and with it the order and stability they represent." I could imagine him frowning beneath his stern mask. He had no doubt already considered what the loss of so many heroes meant.

"Pantheon is moving to... hold things together. By replacing the Protectorate entirely if we must. Or, far more preferably, acting more as the Guild. Moving into destabilized areas and enforcing order," I explained. "We will be recruiting in large numbers, or forcing recruits to the Protectorate simply by making crime difficult and unprofitable. Those remaining criminal organizations will be unable to present themselves as a significant threat."

"And that would include my own less than legal operations?"

"Well, in your case, I believe we can offer legal choices that are far more profitable," I smiled. "As I am sure you are already aware, Pantheon and its allies currently own well over thirty percent of the city of Brockton Bay. Several billion dollars in net worth, and increasing rapidly in value as order is restored." I left out 'plus whatever a planet costs' in my calculations, of course. It was a question we might have to pose to Marketing, some day.

"Yes," he agreed. "I have been made aware. I admit to purchasing a reasonable amount of property, myself, after meeting with you last time."

I nodded. *Also a known fact.* "We could do the same in Chicago and other cities as well. To say nothing of the profits we can make in other areas, plus leveraging the sheer political influence we have thanks to our relationship with the PRT and police forces."

"You're saying you're willing to share that power with me?" he asked.

"Quite a bit more than that," I responded. "I'm saying we're putting you in charge of it. You are a force for order in the world, but you have trouble with people and are better working from behind the scenes. Pantheon also desires order, and I believe we have achieved that in our own way, but we are better at working with people and confronting the less civilized threats in a more direct fashion."

"A succinct way of putting it," Accord agreed.

"What we propose is an obvious division of responsibilities. Pantheon will continue operating the way it currently does," I continued. "We'll expand our presence into Boston, complete with our Yggdrasil and a minor base of operations if possible, where we can supply you and yours with our equipment. We will drive out all threats, break the drug and prostitution markets as we have in
Brockton Bay. You will also continue as always, managing... our joint economic resources, including the significant wealth we have control over from Coil's organization. How to best distribute aid to areas that need it for maximum results. Allowing us to be both effective and profitable."

No surprise, level of disappointment. Knew Coil. Working relationship. Saw him as a friend. Fuck. Why didn't we think to ask Coil about Accord? "We will, of course, put you in contact with the man we have controlling those resources. Another of our silent partners, recruited much like you're being recruited. You and he will likely be working together regularly. I believe you know him already, although he goes by another name now."

Got the hint, is relieved despite not knowing why he was upset. I didn't let my smile show. Accord isn't one of the thinkers who looks inward.

He was probably doing the calculations in his head. Simply clearing Boston of the Teeth alone would be worth potentially hundreds of millions to him in the long run. The 'insider trading' arrangement we offered for future real estate and other development projects would be hard to calculate, though with his power he likely already had. More than all of that: an opportunity to use his power to its fullest extent. He'd be managing the economies of several cities, while we handled the politics so he didn't have to.

"And all this costs me is the criminal side of my organization?" Accord asked.

"For the most part," I informed him. Won't like next part, needs a way to view it as beneficial enough to be worth the trouble. Best to divorce him from the problem entirely so he knows he'll never have to concern himself with it.

"You will have to accept some... inefficiencies... when it comes to dealing with troublemakers. In essence: you won't. Pantheon will handle disruptions and determine punishment itself, possibly in ways you would find less than satisfactory. Our leaders believe in offering second chances to almost everyone. This does, sadly, mean that some people will disappoint us by taking advantage of their generosity," I stated. He of course agreed with that assessment. Now to show him the upside of the endeavor. "However, I really cannot complain. After all, without that policy I would not have this incredible opportunity, and there would still be three Endbringers."

"You bring up an excellent point," Accord sighed. "As messy as it may be, I admit I cannot dispute the results. That is acceptable, as is your offer of a merger."

I set my briefcase on the desk. "These are a list of our assets and arrangements. As well as various estimates of our organization's production capacity. If necessary, we can leverage influence with the PRT, the Guild, Alexandria, and almost any police or political force within the cities we approach. We also have the support of Dinah Alcott, but we are using her for... other projects, also detailed in the notes presented here."
He nodded. "Understood. When do you believe you'll be ready to implement my projects?"

"Our operations for the next two days will be tied up in the planning and execution of our project in Chicago. After that, Houston is our next target."

"Why Houston?"

"The Fallen have managed to earn the... personal... attention of our leadership," I responded. Worried, sees this as a vendetta of revenge instead of pragmatism. "In addition, this cements a stronger relationship with Haven and cripples or eliminates one of the more destructive forces still remaining in the country. Given their... attitude toward the Endbringers and our past history, the conflict is inevitable. If we don't go after them, then they'll eventually take the fight to us. It's better to strike now, while we have the opportunity and before they have prepared themselves."

He nodded again, relieved by my logical reasons. "It will be a week, then, before you're ready?"

"Likely only four days," I answered. "Let us say a week, however. Time enough to recover any resources spent on our objectives. I will, of course, be available to discuss our plans and needs at any time."

"I will familiarize myself within two days and make contact," Accord stated.

"I look forward to a long and stable relationship," I smiled. "Thank you. I shall see myself out, if that is all."

"It is," he agreed.

==============

A/N- And they didn't even have to brainslug him.
Chicago had proven insanely successful, I considered as we went to our next destination. Director Calvert had his career made for him, now. Brockton Bay's PRT was being remodeled into something closer to 'elite training facility'. The PRT was already recruiting primarily from the same pool of candidates as the military's special forces branches, and now they had an elite even amongst the elite. He had other directors courting him to determine where the next waves of troops would come from, and where they would go. The establishment of M6s across the country.

We had a contract, of sorts, now. Calvert's new PRT would lead the charge in parahuman encounters, providing the front line cannon fodder in the form of easily replaceable M6s, and then backed up by parahuman firepower. It was a system that didn't even need a Protectorate, really.

Speaking of which, Brockton Bay no longer had a Protectorate. Battery and Assault were gone. Miss Militia, Triumph, Clockblocker, and Kid Win were the remainder of the team, and all of them but Miss Militia were looking at moving, probably to Boston. They'd likely be moved again within a year. We were hoping to convince them to switch sides, but it was... well, New Delhi. For us to recruit official members of the Protectorate under these circumstances was not acceptable.

Besides, our model had changed. We were no longer a cape group, we were setting ourselves up to be above and beyond that. By the end of the month, we would be part of an alliance of teams. Accord and his Ambassadors would be one, possibly the Guild as another. The Adepts and Haven would likely be in as well. More of a federation of groups than a single organization. Other independent hero groups and any number of rogues would no doubt start joining as well, if only because we provided a nearly obligation free membership that came with incredibly powerful defense from the PRT's strong arm tactics.

We were, of course, traveling through our own planet. One of those "secrets" we wanted to reveal semi accidentally, much like Taylor's identity and Clarice's supposed family history. Most of us just made the trip home, but Taylor and I had to drop off the prisoners. We'd have to be batshit insane to actually keep them anywhere near Chicago. So we were taking them to one of Dragon's facilities. Somewhere in Vermont. Under a lake. That meant Missy was with us. And where she went, of course Riley followed, and Theo. All on the next generation of flying horses.

No flying horses for Taylor and I, though I finally had a flight system. We rode on the front of the prison transport. A sort of walking cage, it did resemble a stagecoach, or probably closer to a covered wagon with countless centipede like legs instead of wheels. In the back was twelve parahumans, all considered the most dangerous of the bunch. Ordinary criminal assholes were, of course, going to ordinary prison.

I snuggled against Taylor. "So, is this our equivalent of a pumpkin carriage?" she asked.

"Guess that makes you Cinderella," I agreed, laughing.
"You're the one in a dress," she pointed out.

"Toga," I corrected. "And I made the carriage, so clearly I'm the fairy godmother. Besides, you're the one wearing high heels."

"Okay, you win," she sighed. "Also, I'm telling Sarah you called her an evil step mother. Then I'm telling Crystal."

"You wouldn't dare!" I exclaimed.

"You can't stop me," she teased.

"I can turn you into a slug," I told her. "We'll see who you can tell what, then." I stuck my tongue out at her.

"Still have my swarm," she dismissed. "Plus, you like my legs waaay too much for that." To emphasize her point, she stretched back and brought her right leg up. Then she ran her hand along from her knee to her hip.


She pulled me into a hug, resting her head on mine. It was nice, even with the armor in the way. "No you don't," she whispered to me.

I squeezed her tight. "No, I don't. But I might still club you with a fire extinguisher."

"Best first date I've ever been on," Taylor joked back.

"Same for me," I laughed. "You should meet some of the dumbasses I kept getting set up on blind dates with."

"Y'know, I had to bribe Lisa to keep quiet about our second date," she chuckled, then she added huskily. "You remember, the one where I woke up handcuffed in bed."

I blushed at that. Or the way she said it and the images it provoked, at least. AmusedPleased. "Sorry about that, by the way. I was a total bitch."
"There is absolutely no need to apologize," she insisted. ComfortGratitude. "You saved my life. Or at least saved me from being crippled and in pain for the rest of it. You're my hero. Don't you dare forget that." I smiled, feeding the warmth of our link.

Vista, still on Calysta, appeared beside us. "Hey, you two," she said. "In case you've forgotten, there are impressionable children here. You can talk about beds and handcuffs when we get home."

SurpriseEmbarrassment. I covered my face. Or the armor over my face, at least. The planet was still not really comfortable for people to be outside unprotected.

"Why would anyone want to use handcuffs?" Riley asked. "There are so many better restraining devices."

Theo choked and started coughing. UneaseShock. And with that, what was left of the mood was broken.

"We're here," Missy informed us. "Have been for, like, two minutes."

The kids got off their horses, leaving them behind as they took position on top of our transport. I fused their armors to the biomass, allowing us all to be considered a single lifeform for the purposes of the teleporter. Then I pressed the button for our 'shunt' technology, and the world changed. Or, the world stayed the same and we left it for a new one.

There was no flash, no warning, simply the change of a scene. A flat plane of biomass replaced with uneven greenery of trees and life. A sun that was both brighter and smaller than the one of our world. Atmospheric illusion, apparently. When we were done terraforming, our own planet's skies would look much the same. Except the birds. Chances were that we'd never introduce a natural biosphere on our world.

Thirty PRT soldiers were there, alongside another six others in armor suits. I recognized Dragon and Defiant, but not the other four which flanked them. They all had a distinctly draconic appearance to them, and were almost identical to each other. When did Dragon start recruiting soldiers? I wondered.WaryCurious.

"Good to see you again, Pantheon," Dragon started. "I take it there weren't any difficulties."

"Nothing important," Taylor answered, buying a bit of time while I adjusted to being nearly blind again. Going from continent level awareness to almost nothing was disconcerting. "Transporting a lot of people can take a while."
She nodded. We were presenting our dimensional shunt as a form of teleporter tech. Not completely untrue, of course, but there were obvious flaws in that as a cover story. Flaws we knew they'd pick up on. Better for them to focus on that than details such as Riley's actual identity. Even if it was now the least well kept secret in the world. Worst case scenario, we'd tell the world the truth. Without her help, we would not have been able to kill an Endbringer. It wasn't the most elegant of choices, but it was there if we needed it.

"I see," Dragon nodded. Defiant, meanwhile, had gone to the back of our transport. I sent the first pulse, that separated our suits from the thing, so everyone could climb off. Then the second command, that caused the walls of the prison containment to open and fold down to the ground like ramps. The prisoners blinked as they slowly started to wake up. We didn't have containment foam, after all, so we theoretically used a sleep gas. Or just my power ensuring they didn't wake up.

They were gathered up by the PRT soldiers, with Defiant supervising.

"So, I see you're expanding," Taylor said, nodding toward the armored men.

"Yes," Dragon confirmed. "Recent events have... raised a number of concerns. We've also recently recruited a new tinker that has greatly simplified mass production of tinker tech."

I nodded. "That... that is impressive," I stated.

"Not quite a match for Pantheon's production ability," Dragon admitted. "If we're being honest, I only have permission to field a force like this because of you."

"You mean because people want someone out there that can kill us if we get too troublesome," Taylor concluded.

Dragon didn't respond. In truth, she didn't have to. It was the only possible conclusion.

"We've been meaning to discuss something, actually," I stated. "We're creating a sort of alliance of non-government cape groups. We'd like to invite the Guild to be members. The perks are pretty straightforward: shared tinker knowledge, backup when it's needed. Pantheon's role is... mainly support. Our bioarmor suits are the main appeal, we offer them to any of our affiliates, although I can see where the Guild might not feel the need."

She regarded us. "I will have to discuss this with the others," she stated. "It's not my place to make those decisions."

"We also offer individual memberships," Taylor added. "There are a number of capes that have joined while still continuing to work for the Protectorate. Sure, they probably murdered their careers
in the process, but you don't need to feel pressure to choose between the Guild or Pantheon."

She looked toward Defiant. "That could work," she agreed. "I do need to consider the... political repercussions, however."

_Annoyance Disappointment_ "I understand," I said. _God damn politics._ "We'll keep in touch."

She nodded. By now, the prisoners had been taken out of our transport and moved to theirs for whatever it was they did with prisoners. _Processing? Is that what they called it?_ Either way, they'd be locked up in the bottom of a lake, in case anyone decided to try to escape. Only those members of truly horrific groups like the Teeth, and a handful of the other nastier gangs were here. Some were birdcage bound, others weren't but should have been. Almost twenty other capes remained in PRT custody in Chicago. The ones that there was no doubt the PRT would try to gang-press into the Protectorate or Wards.

It felt bizarre, considering our original plans to functionally break the Protectorate and PRT in half, that we were doing this.

After only a few minutes, we shunted back over to our personal dimension, and went home. With less than a third of the number of people, and a shorter trip in general, we were home in only a couple more minutes. I allowed the transport to melt back into the Yggdrasil mass before we stepped through the portal. Our suits, and the pegasus... pegasuses? Pegasi? Whatever, we all were clean of radiation.

Taylor followed me as we went to what I had started to think of as our bedroom. She still had her own, of course. But she only ever used it to change. We stripped out of our armors and left them to be healed by the Yggdrasil. I spent my time looking at her legs as she stretched and plopped down in bed.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, smiling.

I smiled back. We both knew the answer, so I summed it up with a single word. "Handcuffs."

She blushed. _Pleased Amused_.

We just sat there for a minute while I was strongly considering kissing her a second time, just to see if it would work better when spontaneous. And then a man appeared out of nowhere in our bedroom.

===============
A/N- Yay! A happy chapter!
"To those pathetic cowards who look upon the death of almost a billion people and consider it an opportunity," Gaea spoke for the cameras. Her passion was obvious, as was the threat in her voice. This was an ultimatum, and they were confident in their ability to enforce it. "Pantheon issues this warning: we consider any attempt to use the losses suffered in New Delhi for their personal gain to be a direct violation of the Endbringer truce. We will act accordingly."

I almost sighed. I never was the passionate or charismatic one. That was Hero's job, and later it was Legend's. They had what it took to truly move the crowds, like Gaea on that stage. Idly, I wondered if I had that option. To my surprise, there even was an ability like that in my untouched repertoire: the power to know how to evoke powerful emotions in others through my words. Somewhere between 'master' and 'thinker' in its scope. I strongly considered accessing it, but instead I allowed it vanish into the well again. I rarely used pure Thinker powers, and I never touched Master powers at all.

It wasn't powerful enough to match Contessa's ability, and it could not have influenced Alexandria at all. So it would not have succeeded in convincing them to give me access to one or two more vials. Not much, in the scheme of things. Enough power that I could be there, could matter, for the deaths of the last two Endbringers. I wouldn't be the one to deliver the finishing blow, but I could save lives. I could ensure the next fight was not a disaster like New Delhi was.

"Contessa," Alexandria spoke. "When you said they were going to establish parahuman 'feudalism', I had expected it to be 'feudal'. This is closer to watching a fast forward of the colonization of the New World. They just took control of both Boston and Chicago in everything but name."

"All of our thinkers, Contessa included, expected them to stop expanding after Boston," Doctor Mother replied. She was, in her own way, living up to the 'mother' part of her title by protecting Contessa from Alexandria's criticism. She viewed the younger precog as a child of her own. I could admit a pang of envy at their relationship. "Khepri and Gaea both have authority, trust and control issues that should have made it impossible for them to maintain control over a larger territory, even given their incredible powers. They seem to be far more willing to delegate power than any of our models predicted."

Contessa finally spoke. "I believe it was the Simurgh's actions," she finally stated. "No power could have anticipated New Delhi."

"It makes sense," Doctor Mother replied. "I'm sure the experience was traumatizing enough to make them rethink their plans. Clearly this is also a response to the Protectorate's greatly weakened forces. Coupled with their sudden and unexpected willingness to cooperate with the PRT and Protectorate. I think we can assume they'll hold Chicago for the time being."

"New York, as well," Number Man volunteered.
"Pardon?" Doctor Mother asked.

"They've made... overtures... with the Adepts in Chicago," he stated. "I haven't divined all the details, but there was a payment of exactly one hundred thousand dollars from one of Pantheon's accounts. It's obviously part of a ploy to convert the Adepts. Likely a multistage plan."

"Why were the Adepts in Chicago, anyway?" Doctor Mother asked. "Aren't they East Coast?"

"Following the Teeth, it appears," he confirmed. "Same as Pantheon. Pantheon is moving to target the entire organization. Likely planning a pincer attack against their forces in both Boston and New York simultaneously."

Alexandria frowned. "The Butcher is one of the more powerful parahumans. One we had hoped would make a real impact against Scion. Do you think we should interfere to protect their organization?"

"We are better served allowing Pantheon to succeed. The Butcher has potential, but is hardly comparable to Pantheon's value," Doctor Mother responded. "Pantheon's strength isn't merely in its own parahumans, but in its ability to be a force multiplier to other parahumans. Your new equipment, for example. It is remarkable, both in terms of simplicity and ingenuity. It's possible you might be able to use it to be the next... what are they calling Atropos now?"

"Endslayer," Legend responded. "Alongside the other two Fates that operated their Moirai Cannon. But it's known that her power is what makes the weapon lethal, even to Endbringers."

"Yes," Doctor Mother agreed. "I think we agree that, as always, the death of Scion is the highest of our priorities. If Pantheon's actions ruin our experiment in parahuman feudal states, or cost us a few promising soldiers for the conflict... yet provides a stronger and better equipped force for the final battle, I see no reason to interfere with them."

There were nods all around.

I kept my own counsel on the subject. Force multipliers and power manipulation. Capable of upgrading even Alexandria. Could they do that for me?

....

Teleportation was one of the powers I was running low on, but it was better than using one of my horribly reduced number of flight options. I only had a handful of flying power that could also
double as a defensive or offensive power. I had used the last of the truly good ones in the battle against the Simurgh. Telekinesis over glass. Remarkable in its elegance. *Pity I lost it during the firestorm.*

Strangely, I felt incredible during it. The fear, the panic, the certainty of death. I had tapped deeper into my well than ever before. Granting me a boost to my strength that had almost restored me to the power of my early days. It was slipping already, of course. But it was slipping slowly. I had, perhaps, another month or two, if I was conservative. I needed to be conservative.

I appeared inside Pantheon's base. My current power simply placed me next to the person whose face I envisioned. In this case: Gaea. One of the weakest teleport options I still had available. It required I knew the target's actual, and recent, facial features, which took time and concentration, perhaps even a scrying power, to achieve. It also didn't allow me to bring others with me. Of no value against the Endbringers or Scion, I could afford to surrender it forever.

A girl screamed, and before I could speak I was encased in a living mass. *Strange, it didn't triggered my defensive power. Oh. They weren't planning to actually harm me.* I could have broken free with trivial ease. I chose not to. The tree moved and shifted around me, giving me some space, and light allowed me to see my sealed prison. I blinked.

A video screen formed inside, near my face. "You have a lot of balls teleporting into our bedr-" she paused. "Eidolon?"

"Hello, Khepri," I didn't bother smiling. One of the things I wasn't very good at. Others could make smiles look charming or friendly or even seductive. I just looked stupid and awkward. She looked over to her side and was saying something I couldn't hear. I felt the presence of an energy trying to interact with me. It was something of a booster to my confidence that it failed.

"Okay, how do we know it's you?" She asked.

"If I demonstrate a power that lets me escape and is nothing like the others you've witnessed?" I suggested. "Is that acceptable?"

She nodded. The plant material around me disintegrated into dust. A dessication power, again worthless against Endbringers or Scion. Also the source of my current energy sensing abilities. I stepped out and dusted myself off.

Khepri stood defensively in front of Gaea. Both were out of costume. Neither girl was especially striking in their appearance, and I could imagine passing a hundred not unlike them without looking twice. Except for their eyes and the energy that danced between them. These two had will and presence well beyond their ages. "I'm sorry," I apologized. "I hadn't expected you in bed so early. It's only five here, right?"
"It's been a long few days," Khepri responded. She'd started to relax. "To what do we owe the visit?"

"I can trust your confidentiality, I presume," I asked.

They didn't quite look at each other, but somehow they communicated their agreement before Khepri spoke. "What you tell us stays between us," she said.

"I was impressed with your work with Alexandria," I stated. That was certainly true. I took a deep breath to steady myself for what I was about to admit. "I was hoping to discuss a... problem... I am having. One that you might be able to fix. Or at least delay for a while."

They frowned in unison. A bizarre form of visual stereo. "Go on," Khepri volunteered. I was still busy trying to figure out what my power was trying to tell me about these girls when another voice came from the doorway.

"Holy fuck," another girl's voice muttered. "He's losing his powers."

============

A/N- it would have been a MUCH better cliffhanger if we readers of Worm didn't already know this.

Eidolon managed to look annoyed through his mask. "Yes, that is the problem I was going to ask about," he admitted.

"That's bad," Lisa stated. "Like, that's really fucking bad."

He sighed and nodded. "I know," he agreed.

"No, I mean, you're basically the go-to hero. Sure, Alexandria can hold her own, and there are couple others. Pantheon's equipment can make a few more come close to good enough to really matter against the Endbringers in a drag out brawl," she rambled. "But that's only close to good enough. Without you... we're fucked. You are the only reason we were able to hold the Simurgh long enough to finish her. It'll be the same with the rest of them. We need you if we want to finish this. And we really want to finish this."

"I assume that means you're willing to help, then," he stated.

"Let's go to the labs," Lisa said. "Hope you don't mind spending time in the basement. I was beginning to expect that Alexandria was going to cry or run screaming when she was down there. Did she tell you any stories?"

"No, she said it was pretty standard," Eidolon answered. "Gaia used her power for a scan, some tests were done, and you grew everything in a vat overnight."

Lisa smiled her foxlike smile. "Then it'll be a surprise."

"Lisa, stop terrifying our guests," Taylor muttered, sounding tired. "You and I know the worst thing that happened to Alexandria was when she had to get dressed after Zach did his thing, and she had a warning and privacy screen for that."

Eidolon, who had been moving to leave the room, froze. *RealizationHumiliation.* "She left that part out," he admitted.

"It was a power interaction test," I offered. "Zach has an ability to teleport people. It reacts oddly to certain powers. We wanted to see if it would work through her power's stasis effect, for a number of reasons. Turns out, it does."
"I suppose I probably shouldn't tell her I know about that," he chuckled.

"I've contacted our Tinkers," Taylor said, changing the subject. "It'll be a couple minutes."

"Okay," Eidolon agreed, as we left into our living area.

"Dude," Zach said from the living room, looking at Eidolon. "Theo, you owe me twenty bucks."

"And you owe me two hundred," Lisa reminded him.

"Can I get an autograph?" Zach asked.

"I suppose," Eidolon agreed, smiling. Zach ran off to his room.

Theo stood up and walked over to our guest. "It's an honor to meet you, sir," he said as he held out his hand.

"Thank you," Eidolon shook it. "It's nice to meet fans. Especially ones that are heroes in their own right."

Theo almost blushed at the compliment. "I haven't done much to be called a hero, sir."

"You saved lives," Eidolon insisted. "More than that, you did it by stepping in front of a weapon meant to kill Endbringers. And even after being practically cut in half by that weapon, you kept concentrating long enough to save everyone in the shelter. In what way are you not a hero?"

"Told you so!" Riley crowed triumphantly from the stairway to her labs. "You saved my Big Sister and Missy and everyone from being cooked. That makes you a hero, and now you have to accept it because Eidolon hangs out with all the best heroes, so he'd know."

Theo smiled and actually, finally, did blush under the praise and attention. Eidolon, on the other hand, frowned a little. And then, so did Lisa. *That was a question I needed to ask later. Badly.*

"Don't worry," Eidolon offered. "I'm not really good at accepting praise, either. For me, it's always been about the legacy. Knowing that I help make things better, that I'm building something that's greater than myself. That's always been my motivation, at least. You do get used to the praise and attention, eventually. But some people will never like that sort of thing."
He's a completely different kind of person than Alexandria, I thought. Inspirational, really. I guess if you spend enough time around Legend, you learn a thing or two. I glanced over at Lisa, she was still watching and observing. Less a fox now, more hawk. Definitely acting hawklike.

"Lab's ready," Riley stated. "I've got a few initial ideas, but this could take some time."

By now, Zach had managed to rush out, holding a jewel case. In his other hand, he had a pen. He handed the pen to Eidolon, and extracted a sheet of paper—more like a blank card than anything—and offered it to him.

Eidolon looked at it and smiled. "So, you got to Alexandria and Dragon first?" He clicked the pen and signed his name. "Haven't bothered asking your team for theirs?"

He shrugged. "I dunno, kinda seems weird to try that. I mean: have you ever asked Alexandria or Legend for theirs?"

"You have a point," he granted. "So, are we ready?"

"Yup," Riley answered cheerfully. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to study you up close!"

I cringed, but Eidolon took it in stride. "I'm sure," he said. "Hope you won't be insulted when I say that I would have done everything in my power to stop you, before. Your actions in New Delhi changed my mind. You risked everything by showing yourself there."

Riley looked down, unable to find words for it. "Thank you," she said, softly. This might be the first time anyone praised Riley for doing something truly heroic, I realized. I resolved then to make sure she heard it more often. I could feel Taylor's emotional response, the recognition that Eidolon was right. Too subtle to influence my emotions over the link, but enough that I at least knew the feelings were there. I reached over and grasped her hand.

Riley sprinted down into the basement, clearly determined to do her absolute best to help the arguably most powerful parahuman in the world. Eidolon and the rest of us followed at a more subdued pace, including Theo. Who wasn't usually interested in visiting the labs.

"Alright, first, symptoms time," Riley said, pulling out a couple instruments. "Have a seat and tell me what the problem is."

"Simply put," Eidolon answered. "I'm running out of powers. There was a time, early in my career, when I could access any power I wanted and expect it to be at full strength in seconds. Now it can
take several minutes for a truly strong power to finish charging, and the maximum charge now is less than ever before."

"Could be physiological," Riley suggested. "Overuse of powers causing deterioration of the Pollentia or Gemma. I've seen it before. Never in a... uh... parahuman with unmodified powers." She went silent. And I thought back to the nightmares she set on me. Murder Rat, especially. *Those women were still alive after what she'd done to them.*

"I'll try," I suggested. "Faster for me to run the scan than anyone." I reached my hand out, and Eidolon took off his glove to make contact. I frowned. "I... I'm not seeing anything," I said after a couple seconds. "You counter my powers. Almost exactly like Weld."

"Interesting," Riley answered, then she looked at her instruments. "Would you mind using your power? Something minor, and do it as slowly as you can. The more time we have to observe your powers, the more data I can collect."

"Okay," Eidolon agreed.

Riley watched the screens for a minute. "Save file, E.I. One," she instructed her computer. Sometimes I wondered about the logic of using nothing but vocal command systems only, but Riley insisted it was more secure that way. "Hey, Osiris, can you see if your power detects him?"

"Okay," Zach agreed, and he was the next one to make contact with Eidolon. "Umm... no?" Zach answered, sounding confused. "I'm getting nothing at all. It's weird."

"What does that mean?" Eidolon asked. "I might be able to offer insights. I felt both of you trying to influence me, and you're not the first who've tried."

"Well, my power only works on living things," I answered. "The only exceptions we know of would be a number of non-organic Case 53s, people under the influence of Clockblocker's ability to freeze time, and now, you."

"I can't effect Theo's power, while it's active," Zach replied. "I can't effect Atropos' bolts when her power's controlling them. Or Clock's frozen objects. I, umm... I also made contact with Simurgh enough times to know I can't read Endbringers, either. It's not just because she's too heavy. I still know I'm in contact with something, if it's too heavy. My power tells me "

"Okay," Eidolon answered. "Sounds like they're both Thinker powers at their core. I've long ago learned I'm immune to Thinker powers. Precogs included."

"Would you mind using your power? Something minor, and do it as slowly as you can. The more
time we have to observe your powers, the more data I can collect.” Riley asked.

Eidolon looked confused. "Riley,” I started. "You already had him do that.”

"Did I?" she asked. "Funny, I don't recall. Computer, name most recent saved file."

"E I One," the machine intoned in Clarice's voice.

"Taboo," Lisa responded. "His power is Taboo."

A/N- The part where Riley repeated her question actually confused me for a second during the editing. Until I read the next couple lines.
"Thanks, Emma," Dennis said. I was sitting on the chair I'd built and leaning back against my wall, holding my cell to my ear. "I'm sorry about this, but I don't really have much choice. You know why I have to do this. They need everything they can get."

"It's fine," I confirmed. "Everything's changed after..." I paused. The words 'New Delhi' didn't need to be spoken. Anyone on the planet would know what I meant.

"Yeah," he said. "You could still, y'know, come with?"

I sighed, closing my eyes. "We've had this conversation, Dennis, I can't."

"You can and you know it," he said. "Fuck, you have every reason to walk away. They treat you like garbage and you know it."

I cringed. It wasn't quite true, but it was still a nerve to be struck. Taylor avoided so much as looking at me where possible. Zach actively pretended I didn't exist, to the point of absurdity at times. I expected that, from both of them. I deserved it, even.

None of the others would really talk to me at all. At most I could hope for polite indifference, like from Rey, Crystal and Theo. They weren't unkind to me, they just didn't have a lot to say to me. At worst, they avoided me. The way Amelia and pretty much all of the others did. They were, one way or another, Taylor's friends. They may have accepted that Taylor didn't want them to do anything to hurt me, but that didn't mean they needed to be nice to me, either. Congratulations, Taylor, you won in the end.

Riley was the one that hurt. Her relationship with Amelia had been improving, slowly but surely, and with that she seemed to be... afraid to be too friendly with me. That, plus her friendship with Missy. The two of them were like sisters.

*I had a friend like that once.*

Yeah, that hurt. Riley was the one I was most connected to. *What does it say about me that Bonesaw is the person I miss most?* Her, I trusted with everything. I let her modify me in ways that I did not, could not, understand. Still didn't fully understand, even with my powers. I was her favorite project for a while. Her co-conspirator. The one she went to for advice in dealing with tricky situations and dilemmas where there were no easy answers. Now I was, at most, her lab partner. I'd been all but forgotten. *It is amazing how much that hurts.*
"Emma?" Dennis prompted.

"Sorry, just thinking," I replied. *Dennis cares about me.* "I'm sorry, I have to stay."

"You don't," he insisted. "You know it's not healthy. There are other options. You can join the Wards, they love Tinkers. You've seen how much Kid Win gets for some of his inventions. You're a better tinker than he is, you could pretty much write your own check."

I smiled. *Can't fault him for trying.* "You just want me to have a suggestive and vaguely offensive code name. Like 'Ice Box' or something." I teased.

He laughed, even if it was a little forced. "See, you're already a natural."

"No, what I'm doing here is far too important," I insisted. He hated it when I pulled that card. The Endslayer project. The augmented weapons systems. Clockblocker even got some customized weapons. Basically the standard package, plus nearly indestructible strings that he could use to freeze things at range. Both of us knew it wasn't the real reason for me to stay, however.

"After they're dealt with, then?" Dennis prompted.

"Maybe." *No.* "I was thinking I'd join the Guild. Y'know, work directly with Dragon. What kind of tinker could pass up on something like that, right?" *I'm sorry, Dennis. Going with you isn't even my second choice."

I knew it should be my first. He was there for me when I needed it the most. I just didn't have the feelings he obviously had for me. I probably never would. He was transferring to Boston, and from there who knew? Almost certainly, he wouldn't be there, or in New York, by spring. He would find someone who could love him, and he'd forget about me. Everyone would be happier that way.

"Yeah," Dennis admitted. "I could see you working alongside Dragon and Defiant. Being one of the world's best Tinkers."

"Emma," my dad shouted from downstairs. "It's time for supper."

"Gotta go," I said, both grateful and annoyed. "The 'rents are still on about that whole 'dinner's a family meal, everyone eats at the table' thing. As if that's going to make much of a difference in anything. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Okay," Dennis answered, not sounding especially happy about it. "I... I miss you."
"Miss you, too," I answered back, not really meaning it.

By the time I got downstairs, my parents had managed to be at the table. It was, as always, uncomfortable. Mom and dad went out of their way to pretend nothing at all had changed. They knew everything I'd done, but pretended I was the same child as before. I came back from fucking New Delhi, and they called it a road trip. Where I got a sunburn. *Yeah, first and second degree burns across almost eighty percent of my body. That was a 'sunburn' now.*

Turns out, my hair is considered alive by my power, so it regrew itself along with the rest of my regeneration. Small favor, at best. Also meant I would have exactly the same hair style for the rest of my life, because it restored itself to this no matter what I did to it.

*You're one of the ones that came back,* I reminded myself, a mantra in my head. *You survived. No one can say you're weak, not after that.*

"How's your job going, dear?" Mom asked. I cringed. That's what they called Pantheon, now. My 'job'. Like modeling was, before.

"It's fine," I answered. "We're pretty stable right now, so I'm using the downtime to apply for my GED."

"That's good," dad nodded. "You were always a smart girl, you should just skip the rest of highschool and go right to college."

"That's good," dad nodded. "You were always a smart girl, you should just skip the rest of highschool and go right to college."

*No I wasn't,* I repressed the urge to scream. *Taylor was the smart one. I was average at best. Sure, I'm smart now. My powers plugged about forty bonus IQ points into my brain even without considering the Tinker and Breaker parts of my power.* Of course, they had to pretend I was always smart so they could pretend nothing happened. Just like dad was ignoring the real reason I couldn't go back to highschool.

"I'm not going to go to college," I said. Their looks of disapproval was almost palpable. I backpedaled on instinct alone. "For a year or two. The job's a hassle, and I could use the break. It's been a pretty stressful year."

"Okay, dear," mom agreed. Of course she did. They'd been treating me like a Fabergé egg ever since... ever since I was attacked by the ABB. *Why would I ever have expected them to stop now? And when did I start to hate them for it?*

"That makes sense," dad conceded. "You should at least sign up for a couple classes at the community college, just to stay in the habit. They say people lose two months of school over summer break. You need to stay sharp."
*My power includes near perfect memory.* "I'll be sure to do that," I agreed.

I forced myself to eat. I didn't need food, anymore. My digestive system still worked fine, which more a hassle than anything, but my actual desire to eat was nonexistent. I had no sense of taste or smell, and I did not experience hunger. I couldn't starve to death, or even lose weight, because my regeneration pulled mass out of nowhere to undo damage. It did so slowly, granted. Took over a day to recover from Taylor breaking my nose and cheek. I still hadn't fully healed my injuries after New Delhi, over a week later. But eating was both useless and without pleasure for me.

I tried to explain this, but mom said that I was spending too much time around too-skinny models, and insisted I didn't have to starve myself to be pretty.

I was grateful for the silence that having food in our mouths brought. The less I have to talk to them, the better, I had come to realize. It was a nice meal, I had to admit. Pork chops, fresh vegetables, mashed potatoes and gravy. If I could have gotten away with it, I might have snuck my share out and given it to someone who could appreciate it. I was halfway through the meal, my phone rang.

Dad looked at me. "Sorry," I apologized. "It's... work. I have to take it."

At least dad appreciated that much. Being a lawyer meant he understood the concept of demanding jobs and the occasional irregular hours.

I stepped away from the table and answered. "Emma speaking."

"Got another important customer," Lisa informed me. "Need you pretty much ten minutes ago."

"I understand," I answered, then hung up the phone. 'Customer' in this case usually meant a unique powerset we really wanted to study. Not exactly an impossible code to break, but then, no code was impossible to break. It was easier just to keep the details so vague that even the person receiving the information didn't know anything important. I looked at my parents. "Sorry, it's an emergency. Promise I'll make it up to you later."

"That's fine," dad said. "You have adult responsibilities now."

"You should invite some of your friends from work over for dinner," mom suggested. "It's been so long since I've talked to Taylor, it'd be nice to see how she's grown."

I resisted the impulse to ask her what alternate reality she thought we were living in. "No promises," I said. "Most of them live the job 24/7. Don't even have time enough to visit with their own"
families.” I rushed upstairs to get into my armor. The flight system, more than anything, was why I needed it now. Although its ability to regulate my hybrid state and buy me extra time at full power would be useful if they needed my power.

_They never call me unless they need my power._

===================

A/N- If that's the sound of you feeling bad for Emma? That means I've done my job right.
"Taboo?" Eidolon asked. *Apprehension*Surprise.*

"That's the term we use for certain memory effects that powers can cause," Lisa replied. "It's... sort of like a universal stranger power, like how parahumans black out when someone nearby has a Trigger Event. And how precogs can't sense Endbringers or, well, you. And Scion."*Hesitation*Concern.* I frowned. *I know it's Eidolon, but should be be volunteering all this information?*

"So a new name for an old idea," he nodded. *Suspense*Relief.* I've seen some studies done on that. Like how it's impossible to predict a trigger event until after it occurs. If you just so happen to be using precog on an individual before their trigger, their predicted future will often be completely different afterward."

"Interesting," Lisa said. "We didn't know about that. Another piece to the puzzle."

"Don't feel bad," Eidolon shrugged. "People have been studying the phenomena almost as long as powers have existed. You do have one thing on them: Taboo is much more elegant than the alphabet soup the scientists on that job have managed to come up with. I'll have to pass calling it 'Taboo' along to others. Much better than Induced Parahuman Memory Loss Phenomena."

"Wow," Zach replied. "So, science has managed to just completely run out of good acronyms at this point, huh?"

*Annoyance*Impatience.* "Emma's finally here," Taylor spoke up. "Told her we're in the lab, didn't say who we had with us. We're pretty well shielded against Thinkers down here, so there's still a pretty good chance no one knows you're here."

"That's appreciated," Eidolon replied. "If it makes you feel any better, my power says this remains a private conversation."

Lisa nodded. "Actually, it does, thanks."

I felt Emma's presence through my power. Her biosuit, like all of them except Parian's, was designed to link into the Yggdrasil on contact. And with that, I got the still strange sense of Emma's biochemistry. It was no less bizarre today than the first time. Half organic, half... something else. Something my power didn't consider alive. I opened a more direct path for her, and she was coming down the newly created staircase in mere moments. It vanished behind her.

She smiled and waved "Hey guys, what's the..." she paused when she spotted Eidolon. "Oh, oh
"I remember you," Eidolon spoke. "You're the girl that figured out sonic powers work against Endbringers."

"Yeah, that's me," she agreed. "I remember you, too." I glanced over at Taylor. ConfusedAmused. I didn't know Emma very well, but right now she was acting more awkward than Taylor and I used to.

"That was brilliant, what you did," Eidolon stated. "I don't think I would have thought of something like that, combining two relatively weak powers into something that could do that much damage."

"Well..." she smiled at the praise. "It's something Pantheon taught me. Awesome power combos seems to be our specialty." AnnoyedTerritorial. I focused on that sense for a second. Oh, Emma saying 'our' when referring to Pantheon. At this point, it was certainly true enough. Emma exemplified the concept of power combinations.

"Yes, well, I may need to learn how to do that more often in the future," Eidolon stated.

"You should see this," Riley stated, pointing at her computer. "It's a recording of Eidolon using his power."

"Okay," Emma agreed, going over to the computer and watching the screen while we waited silently. "The powers are dying out," she said finally.

"That's my problem, yes," he acknowledged again.

"No. I mean all of them," she said. "Or ours, at least. The Case 53s. The artificial triggers."

"What?" Eidolon asked.

"My power was one of the most recent," she said. "And each new one's going to be weaker than the last. The reason I turned out as powerful as I did is because my power saps energy from the environment around me. Constantly, and more when I absolutely need it. That lets me recharge what is otherwise a pretty much dead battery."

"You said the artificial capes," Eidolon asked. "This doesn't apply to the natural shards then?"

" Doesn't appear to," she answered, still looking at the monitor. "Mind you, we haven't exactly tested everyone. Those with."
"You know more about this," Lisa interrupted. "You're not surprised. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised. You know why the powers are dwindling. You know where they come from. What the Passengers are, don't you?"

He nodded. "We call them 'Agents',' he answered. "They're... it's going to sound crazy..."

"Omnidimensional planet sized space whale virus gods that are also basically incomprehensibly powerful supercomputers that know magic, somehow?" Zach volunteered. "Yeah, we've managed to figure out the basics, at least."

Eidolon blinked. "That helps a lot, actually. I suppose the next part is that there are only two of them, and we call them Entities. Each Agent, what you call Passengers, is a piece of the whole in the same way a cell is a piece of a person. A given Agent is huge, bigger than this city, probably. The Entities themselves? We don't know... our best estimate is that they are individually more massive than our entire solar system. Although they exist in dozens, if not hundreds, of realities at a time. Their actual footprint in any given one is probably no larger than our moon."

"The Trigger Vision!" Emma exclaimed. "I know the rest of you can't remember them, but that's what I saw when I got my powers!"

Eidolon sighed. "Yeah, them," he acknowledged. "I don't remember my vision, either. Some of our members do. It's rare, but some people, usually people with thinker powers like perfect memory or no need to sleep anymore, can still envision them. A handful we have on record, two of which are natural triggers, the rest are, as you said, artificial."

"Good information to have," Lisa nodded. "Now how did you get the ability to make capes?"

"We're... harvesting one's corpse," Eidolon answered. More or less admitting a key role in this the conspiracy. "We don't know how or why, but one of them was wounded when landing. Or perhaps they were never meant to land at all. There's a lot of guesswork as to just how the Entities work. We're pretty sure it didn't intend to leave itself so vulnerable that it could be killed by the natives of that world. At the same time, we know very little about their life cycle. It's possible that one of them does need to die as part of their reproduction."

"It's common enough for organisms on earth," Riley answered. "Viral life, insects, even sexual reproduction looks like death and rebirth from the perspective of the individual cells involved."

Eidolon nodded. "So, is this enough information? Do you think you can help?"

"Yes, actually," Emma answered. ReliefConcernCuriosity. "It will take us a little while, but I think
we can. Your energy readings aren't that unique. Not much different than my own when I change states. Of course, you're using a lot more power than I am. Our Passengers are still alive, sort of. Still drawing power, just not as much of it. Not enough. We can make you something a lot like my armor system, meant to store and shunt energy to the passenger slowly. It's not perfect, and the way you consume energy means, well, it's going to take weeks of charging just to give you an hour of maximum output."

"So you're saying I am going to have to go powerless between the Endbringer battles," Eidolon stated. "If I want to remain valid during them."

"Yes," Emma agreed. "Maybe you can use your powers continuously if you have access to a truly astronomical sum of available energy, but we're talking really, absurdly, vast amounts of power."

Eidolon nodded. "I see."

"We'll need one thing before I agree to parting with that kind of tech," Lisa insisted. "Do you know why the Entities are here? Their end goal?" I briefly considered pointing out to Lisa that she didn't make these kinds of calls. That was up to me and Taylor. But I did want to hear the answer to that question. I could discuss Lisa's presumptions in private.

"If you're right, and the artificial powers dying, our hope of finding a recipe capable of solving the problem for us is functionally dead," He sighed. "You girls might be the only ones who can stop this, so I'm going to trust you. When you called them viruses? That's true on a literal level. They arrive on a world and spread their Agents across the planet. They then merge, for reasons we're unsure of, with the dominant species. Drive their hosts to irrational behavior and violence, or at least they do that to humans. We're unsure if that's intentional or a side effect, we don't know if that's what they do on every planet they find. And, at the end of the cycle, when they're done breeding, they consume all the matter and energy available. Killing the world. Killing every version of the world in every possible iteration of reality. That's where they get the mass and energy to reproduce and form more members of their species from."

"Fuck," Lisa mumbled. "We were hoping they were just parasites. Feeding on some kind of psychic energy or something. Shit. Of course not! It would be insane to expect humans to supply that kind of power. They're not using us as food. They're using us as... as... some kind of intermediary agent."

"A biological mechanism to sort viability of a given strain," Riley volunteered. "To ensure only the best genetic material, or whatever they have as an equivalent, is used in the next generation. Every natural species that can reproduce sexually has such mechanisms."

"Wait... so... you're saying that humans are basically their version of lube?" Zach muttered. DisgustAnnoyance. "Alright, well, there goes my appetite for the next five or six years."

"How about bees used for pollinating flowers?" Emma suggested. ComfortIrritation. "A lot less
squick that way. They give us resources, in the form of powers. And in exchange we run around, what, field testing them? An organic debug system? We fight, and that lets them evolve? They must be in love with us, then."

"And at the end of it all, when they've determined what 'genetics' are best for them, they consume everything and use that raw material to create copies of each Passenger that was considered viable. Probably with a series of deviations in it to ensure diversity in the offspring," Riley finished.

"So... we now know what the Passengers are," Lisa concluded. "What else do we need to know?"

"We haven't found a way to break into any of the dimensions that contain Agents," Eidolon informed us. "Seems they're locked off, somehow. A power that they don't give out. One of the ones were desperately hoping to find by accident when we started harvesting the dead Entity. We also know that the Entities use a sort of avatar to interact with their host. We don't know why they do that, either."

"Scion," Lisa's voice was a whisper. "The Entity, the source of powers, it's Scion."

==================

A/N- Man, it's been so long that I forgot they ever didn't know.
So much for going to bed early, I thought. Eidolon had left, it would be another week before we were finished building his suit. Promises were made about him talking to his associates about letting us Tinker with a few of their formulas, giving us access to their research. To see if we could improve the potency or regenerate the dying powers somehow. We didn't have much hope of that, although Riley said she had some 'exciting ideas'. Something that filled me with equal parts dread and slightly different kids of dread.

"We have an idea of what Dinah's predictions mean, now," Lisa sighed, as she poked around on her bulletin board, moving pictures and pins and strings. The material on that thing was so random and haphazard that I suspected even Lisa had forgotten what half the stuff meant. "Scion. Fuck. I never would have guessed it. It seems so obvious now that I know."

"Taboo," I answered. "Of course he wouldn't want us to know his real motivations. So why don't they lose their memories now that we know?"

"They haven't made the mental connection, or at least not the one the Passengers are looking for," Lisa answered. "None of us really have, nor will we be able to. We can envision Scion. If only as a powerful parahuman. We can't envision the Entity that's controlling him. And he is being controlled. A puppet, not too different from the Siberian or the changelings you build. The Scion we see is not the real him, and the Passengers only care about hiding the real him from us."

"I knew," Taylor muttered. HorrorIntimidation. "I saw him during the Leviathan fight. I felt him, like others have described. He was angry, and disgusted when he looked at Eidolon. I didn't put it together until just now, but on some level I knew he was a threat even then."

"Makes sense," Lisa replied. "Eidolon is powered by the corpse of Scion's girlfriend. Or whatever passes for it in their species. The Entity might think in a nonhuman way, but Scion himself still acts human."

"Of course!" Riley exclaimed. "That's what the 'perfect human DNA' is in the Cauldron vials. It's the remains of the other Entity's avatar! Its version of Scion!"

"We should find a less clunky name for it," I suggested.

"Heiress?" Emma volunteered. She paused and looked abashed before explaining her logic. "Well, I mean, it's basically the same meaning as Scion, and if they were imitating humans and are a mating pair, it's natural to think of the other as a female variant. It'd probably at least choose to look female since Scion chose to look male, right?"
"It's as good as anything," Lisa agreed. "With exception to Emma, we all have Scion shards. Meaning our powers come from him. They're recharging at their natural rate, and have power enough to last until the end of whatever weird lifecycle Entities have. At which point, we all die."

"Chances are we die of old age before then," Riley volunteered. "I mean, sure, my sister can do the whole 'eternal youth' thing for a select number of us, but if they want to be effective about their genetic testing, they'd need to test billions, potentially trillions, of Passengers. It should take centuries at the very least."

"There's also the scale of powers they've given," I added. "Taylor and I have a couple of the truly critical portions of the Entities. Our powers, at full strength, are pretty much the nervous and circulatory systems of their full organism. It's why we can function even at planetary range. Compared to what our Passengers do normally, a planet is barely anything."

"Chances are, Scion has powers dedicated solely to gathering power," Lisa volunteered. "He might be killing entire planets every hour on the hour and we'd never even know it's happening. There's more realities than anyone could hope to guess. They wouldn't pick ones with people on them, probably. Too great a chance of something going wrong, like what happened to Heiress"

*ApprehensionShock.* "Do you... do you think the dead world we found was one of theirs?" Taylor asked.

"Unlikely," Emma answered. *AnnoyanceDistaste.* "First, that planet isn't the same kind of 'dead' as an energy sapped world would be. Second, that cataclysm happened a long time ago. If Heiress was killed and is now being harnessed, chances are they've only been here for fifty years, at absolute most."

"They'd put blocks in the way of any dimension that contained Passengers, anyway," Lisa added. "We'll need to find a different way."

"Power interaction?" Taylor asked. "They clearly didn't mean for us to find a way to open holes to other realities in the first place. Surely that means they haven't planned for everything. We should be able to find a way, eventually."

"We'll certainly try," Lisa replied. "Okay, what we need to do now: First, build more Endbringer weapons. Yum knows enough to do the 'forced evolution' without any help, right? They were as effective as we needed last time, they'll still be good enough next fight. We don't waste our efforts upgrading them, unless we can do it enough to make them valid against Scion."

"Yeah, Rey can handle that on his own," Riley agreed. Emma also nodded.

"You two are going to put all your efforts into completely undoing the Taboo," she instructed. "I
need a true way through it, instead of just around it. Maybe a way to break Dinah and Accord through as well. Without that, it's like trying figure out what a building looks like using nothing but sense of smell."

"You can use my memories, if you have to," I offered. "I broke through... maybe that's enough to let others."

"It adds more data, if nothing else," Emma agreed. "Lisa, would you mind if we ran the scans on you, too. Between the three of us, maybe there's enough to synthesize a treatment that'll work."


"That's good," Emma agreed eagerly. "Do you know if she had one of those 'third triggers' or anything like that?"

"It's possible," Lisa admitted. "It would explain why she's so... bizarrely reasonable, for a parahuman. Most of us are colossal assholes by default. Only the ones who've broken through the Taboo, one way or another, seem to be able to be, well, sane."

AnnoyanceOffended.

"Yes, Taylor, that includes you," Lisa muttered. "Your link with Amelia is just a layer of cream frosting on top of a god damn iceberg. I've looked at the psych reports the PRT has on both of you. Every one of their thinkers guess wrong. Because your personality is so different thanks to that empathic bond you've got going on that you no longer act like you anymore. And that's not even the most fucked up part."

AnnoyedDefensiveProud. "That's fine, I didn't like me much to begin with."

"That!" Lisa exclaimed. "That right there is the most fucked up part. Most people would be scared to death by this, and you two are over there happy as can be with it."

"We'd do it anyway," I said, coming to Taylor's defense. And my own, I suppose. "Our powers are a whole lot stronger this way. Easier, smoother. Falling back on the link... I dunno... it makes everything clearer."

"Depth," Riley volunteered. "The more attuned you become to your passenger, the more you do what it wants, the less effort it has to devote to manipulating you and forcing you to do what it wants. So it spends its time improving on your abilities. That's part of..." she hesitated. "It's why Jack was so powerful, despite having such a sucky power. Why my powers are so much stronger than most, how
it's so easy for me to work with other tinker tech. Because we embrace the impulses our Passengers give us."

"You're saying our Passengers want us... together... like this?" Taylor asked. ConcernDistrust. I felt my stomach drop.

"I don't know," Riley answered. "I don't think they know enough to know you're together. How humans think, how we act normally. They seem to just care about powers being as active as possible for as many different things as possible. You're both using your link constantly, and using your powers with each other to do things that neither of you can do alone. But that's the same for all of us. Rey, Emma, and I get to work on things that otherwise could not exist. We're feeding Lisa a constant stream of information for her to use her power on. It's a sustaining cycle that lets our Passengers prove themselves as the most evolutionarily fit, so they'll be the ones to pass on their traits the most."

"That actually means were less influenced by the Passengers, not more," I concluded. ConfusionHope.

"I don't think that's the message you should be taking from this," Lisa argued.

"No, no, it makes sense." I insisted. "Why do you think we're here, able to discuss a war against, well, them. I think if they were any kind of smart, the idea of killing Entities would be impossible for us to contemplate. But it's not. If they can't figure even that out, I doubt they can figure out human relationships. All they know is that Taylor and I are using our powers actively and almost constantly, so they don't have a need to pressure us into anything." RealizationAcceptanceSoothed.

"We're doing exactly what they want us to do, so they're rewarding us by giving us more power to keep doing what we were already doing. If we break the link... try to avoid using our powers..." I paused. "They will drive us insane if they have to, won't they?" What I did to Victoria... was that me, or what the Passenger manipulating me?

"It makes sense," Emma offered, looking down. "I can't speak for the others, but Taylor, I knew you before you got powers."

AngerDisgustBetrayedImpatience. "Yes, everyone knows this," Taylor said darkly. I started letting the negative emotions in the bond break up. Don't fight. Accept and push through, I reminded myself. Taylor started calming almost immediately.

"This so-called 'new' you isn't new," Emma mumbled, unable to look at any of us. "It's the Taylor I remember. Back before... everything."

ShockPrideCertaintyJoy. Taylor started laughing.
A/N- That was one of the fun ones I was working toward.

... Incidentally, those last two lines were practically the whole reason I included Emma as a major character, here. Sure, maybe I could have used Danny for it. But. Meh. This was a fuckton more natural.
"Okay, you can do this," I told myself yet again. I simply sat there staring at the tree. *Fortress. It was a living fortress, and in it Amelia controlled everything.* An incredibly humbling thought. 'Pantheon' was an appropriate name. *This is the kind of power that gods wield.*

I closed my eyes and exhaled painfully. *It's true. If I had encouraged her to use her powers to their full extent, she could have saved Victoria. Could have made it so Victoria didn't even need saving. Would the S9 have even dared enter this city if she had that Yggdrasil ready to be used? Khepri's father said that she wouldn't have been able to stop Leviathan with it... but the Slaughterhouse Nine, for all the fear they inspired, were mortal.* I fought back the tears.

I started the keys to the car. *I can't do this, maybe I'll try again later.* Then the most disturbing sound formed beside me. A cacophony of discordant clicks and hums forcing itself into something that mimicked words.

"You can come in if you want," it said. And the voice was most definitely an 'it'. In spite of my years as a hero, in spite of being one of the few that had faced Leviathan in combat, I screamed, and instantly transformed into my invulnerable state.

"Is it really that bad?" the not-voice asked. "Damn, I thought I was getting pretty good at it, too."

"Wh-who are you?" I asked, forming back into a human state just enough to ask.

"Taylor," the swarm answered. "Now would you like to come inside? We can talk in person, so I don't have to communicate through the bugs."

*That voice.* I was going to go home and scrub down with steel wool later. "Umm, yeah, sure," I agreed. "I'll be there in a couple minutes."

I got out of my car and walked to their home. It was kind of a long walk, actually. They had a lot of unused space available on this plot of land that was once a Leviathan made crater. I was about to walk around the outer wall to the actual entrance, which faced inward to the center of the crater, instead of outward to the street, but the wall itself opened for me. Amy's power.

*Wasn't I planning to just go home?* I asked myself as I walked through the passageway.

Their home really was built much like a fortress. Now that I was past the first wall, I had another twenty or so feet to walk before I got to an inner wall. There was no escape from this point except to blast your way out. The area was eerily beautiful, lit solely by bioluminescent blues and purples. It
could even be romantic, if you came here with the right mindset. I was nowhere near that mindset. Still, it was wondrous in an alien sort of way.

The next set of walls opened. Crystal was there. "Hey, Aunt Carol," she said cheerfully. She was beautiful, a younger version of her mother. She pulled me into a quick hug, and I squeezed her back. It was good to see she was well.

"You cut your hair," I said as I let her go. It was the first thing I could think of to say. She lost most of her smile.

"Yeah," she said, her smile coming back as she offered a shrug. Maybe she could have fooled someone else, but I've known her since she was born. "It... was time for a new 'do. Short hair's trendy these days."

"Okay," I dropped it. I don't want to pry, not now. "You know how out of touch I am with kids' fashions these days."

"Speaking of fashion," she said with her usual energy. "I was just about to take Taylor on a shopping trip. Gotta pack that summer wardrobe away and get stuff for fall and winter. The poor girl thinks 'hoodie' is the only winter wear necessary."

"It should be," another girl argued from around a corner. "It's comfortable and convenient and if you get too warm you can just take it off."

"Giggity!" a boy shouted. A couple seconds later he started coughing. There was a soft thump that sounded something like someone dropped a sack of flour on the ground, and the coughing stopped. "Where do you keep hiding the grasshoppers!"

The girl stepped out where I could see her. She was tall, lanky even. So, this is Taylor, I thought. Not unattractive, but not about to win any prizes. Except maybe for her hair. Long, chocolate brown, and it was obvious she took pride in caring for it. She should give Amy pointers. "Hello, Mrs. Dallon," she said as she walked up to me. "I'm Taylor. It's nice to finally meet you." She paused for a second. "For real, at least," she added awkwardly.

"Pleasure's mine," I said, it what I hoped was a friendly way. The girl had several inches of height on me. Hide her hair and you'd think she was a boy, not a girl. Apparently my daughter liked the androgynous look. "I've heard a lot about you." None of it from Amy.

She offered a smile. "I've heard a lot about you, too." I was sure that, if any of it was good, it had come from Crystal.
"Is Amy available?" I asked. I really didn't know how to talk to this girl. Didn't know how to talk to most people, outside of business. "I'd like to talk to her. Alone, if that's possible?"

"Uh, sure, she's in o... her bedroom," Taylor corrected. I kept my face passive at that slip. It didn't bother me as much as I might have thought to know my underage daughter was sharing a bedroom with her girlfriend. I'd probably have had a minor aneurysm if this were a boyfriend. One more bit of gender bias. "Just go down the stairs and follow the hall," Taylor gestured while stepping off to the side. "Then turn left where you see the kitchen. The door will be open for you."

"Thanks," I said. "Maybe you can come by some time, talk about things. I've already met your father. You can invite him, too, if you like."

"Sure, okay," she agreed. "That could be nice. I've got to go now."

"Okay," I nodded, pausing for a moment to watch as she fled after Crystal.

I followed her instructions. The entire building smelled, well, alive. A little like the air after a fresh rain. It was all lit by bioluminescence, most of it in bright green tones. Much brighter lighting than the area upstairs. The stairs were deep. Two stories worth, if all my years working in offices had taught me anything. Elevators are for emergencies and people who don't care about staying in shape.

Downstairs had a nice open arrangement. Lounge area off to the left, with a couple couches and some chairs that I realized were made out of the same plant as the walls and floor. There was a couple boys playing a video game at one of the TVs. I wasn't so sure I approved of them living here with all these young girls, but I couldn't say much about what other kids were doing, and I knew I didn't need to be concerned about Amy. What a weird form of gender bias.

The other side had a large meeting room. Complete with what appeared to be a very expensive video system and a lot of chairs. I kept going forward. The kitchen was obvious enough, though larger than I would have expected. Combined with a dining room that set up like a miniature restaurant. *I guess when you have miles of space underground, efficiency takes a back seat to the cool factor.*

Amy's room was a bit down the side hall, and the door was indeed open. I found Amy standing, in her costume, though lacking the helmet and mask of her usual outfit. In the corner stood another costume, a true full suit of armor. *Too large for Amy, must be Taylor's outfit.* Amy watched me, as if challenging me to say something about this obvious display of a shared living space. One she could have hidden with ease using her powers.

"You wanted to talk to me?" she asked. I recognized that tone. That's the tone I used when I disapproved of her. It stung, realizing how good she was at using it.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry," I told her. "I've been... I was never much of a mother, was I?"
"Not to me," Amy answered. "You were decent enough to Victoria."

"I know, and I'm sorry for everything," I tried to meet her eyes, but I couldn't. She was angry, accusing. Worse, she was right. "I... when I took you in, it was out of obligation. We had to. We couldn't have put you in foster care without risking... one of your father's enemies getting to you."

"You hated him," Amy said, still cold. "And because you hated him, you hated me."

I couldn't speak, I simply nodded.

"Is that all?"

"No," I managed to say. "I... I wanted to let you know I would take it all back if I could. You're not your father, you never were. You were an innocent and I... I treated you like a monster. Or a ticking time bomb ready to go off. When you got your powers, that just made it worse. I couldn't see the good you might accomplish, only the destruction you could cause. I'm sorry it took this long for me to see you as my daughter."

She sighed. "I wanted to hear you say that for years," Amy admitted. "I... I could have handled everything else. All my other problems. Maybe I wouldn't have been happy, but at least I could have coped with it. Did you know I spent all that time in the hospital just to prove to you I wasn't bad? That I wasn't a monster, that I wouldn't become my father? So I could get your approval? Your love."

I flinched. I hadn't realized. I was too busy being relieved that she wasn't home, reminding me of everything she represented. When I wasn't angrily wondering why she didn't heal Mark's depression. *There's an example of being careful what you wish for.* "No," I confessed. I didn't elaborate.

"What made you change your mind?" she demanded.

"New Delhi," I said, and this time I didn't fight it as my eyes started to water. "I saw... I thought you died. We thought you were dead. That's when I realized."

"Is that so?" Amy asked, her face still stone. "Fuck, all I needed to do was die. Who woulda thought?"

I flinched. "Please, Amy," I begged. "I know you're angry. You should be angry, I deserve it, but you're my daughter. I love you. You have to see that."
Her gaze locked with mine. Her face was cold, but even through my own tears I could see the ones forming in her eyes. After what felt like an eternity, her eyes fluttered, and her stance relaxed. She muttered something under her breath that I couldn't hear. I doubt it was something I was meant to hear. Was she talking to someone through her armor?

She stepped forward, and the costume simply fell off her back, another step and she embraced me, sobbing. All my remaining self control broke, and I wept while holding my daughter.

=================

A/N- This is the arc where I really explore the depth and impact of the Taylia bond.
"Carol's back," I told Amelia. I'd just come in to let her know I was about to go off on my shopping trip.

*IrritationDejection.* "Again?" she asked.

"Yeah," I nodded.

*ResolutionExasperation.* "Fuck it, just ask her to come in. The first couple times were a little bit cathartic. Now I'm just starting to feel sorry for her. Invite her in, so she can say whatever it is that's pretty much turned her into a stalker."

"I can call off the shopping trip, stick around while you two talk," I offered. "I'm sure Lisa and Crystal will understand."

*GratefulSafe.* "I appreciate the offer," she smiled as she looked up at me. "But I'll be fine. You've been avoiding this trip since before Chicago. Things are calm, you aren't needed for anything, and I'm not going to let Carol get in the way of Crystal's fun."

"How come it's always me?" I argued. Okay, let's be honest, I was pouting. Meanwhile, I was talking to Carol via bug swarm. "Why don't you ever get dragged off on these shopping trips?"

"First," she smirked. "I already have nice clothes. Second, you're the one who looks amazing in a skirt. And third," a mischievous gleam formed in her eye. *AmusementDesire.* "They won't let me climb into the changing booth with you, so there's really no point. Now let Crystal and Lisa have fun finding more pretty outfits for you to show off, because you're fooling no one."

I sighed, pretending to be far more annoyed than I really was. Not that I could hide my real feelings from her, any more than she could hers for me. Sometimes, I wondered if it was unfair, the way I was teasing Amelia like this. I had brought that up before, and quickly learned that the idea of stopping actually upset her a lot more than it did me. Oh well, with all of the strange things in our relationship, this one probably wouldn't even make it into the top ten list.

"Carol's at the wall, I'll show you exactly where," I offered, and had a few of the blade beetles slice along the inner wall closest to her. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay and play backup for you?"

She hugged me. "No, it's fine," she insisted, washing the bond with a swirl of happy emotions. "Unless you're offering to show off that elusive 'skimpy bikini' I keep hearing about. In which case,
you should have offered before inviting Carol in."

I felt my face heating up. *HappyAmused*. I also resolved to murder Crystal and Lisa. Speaking of, I also directed Crystal to where she could expect Carol to show up from.

"Alright," I sighed. "Well, guess I'll go up top and talk to her first. Never know, this might be work related and we're just being drama queens." *DoubtAmusement.*

"Just built a staircase near the living room, go that way," she volunteered. I already knew, but she was being considerate. I felt her reluctance as I moved away from her, then I rushed out to meet Carol at the new door. Crystal was already upstairs, talking to her aunt.

"Gotta pack that summer wardrobe away and get stuff for fall and winter," oh, great, Crystal is talking about me. "The poor girl thinks 'hoodie' is the only winter wear necessary."

"It should be," I insisted, a bit over halfway up the stairs at this point. "It's comfortable and convenient and if you get too warm you can just take it off."

"Giggity!" Zach shouted. I frowned and found one of the grasshoppers I had smuggled in on Theo's shirt. I waited for the perfect moment when he was distracted by his game, and the insect leapt into his mouth. He started coughing and became dust almost immediately. The now freed insect quickly dived behind the couch. I was sure Theo noticed, of course. "Where do you keep hiding the grasshoppers!"

I smiled, and focused on calming myself a bit. Maybe I shouldn't have been so nervous to meet Carol, but I was. She was Amelia's mother. Or closest thing to one that the closest thing I've ever had to a romantic partner had.

Carol was shorter than I had expected. Than I remembered. *Maybe her costume had platforms? Maybe I'd grown taller in the last few months? Maybe it was just a trick of memory, as the last time we’d met, there was that blowout between Amelia and New Wave.* She looked tired now, I noticed. I felt a little pity for the woman.

"Hello, Mrs. Dallon," I said, approaching Amelia's mom. "I'm Taylor. It's nice to finally meet you. For real, at least." *Oh, wow, Taylor, that was smooth.* I saw Crystal looking at me from behind her aunt and it was only my link with Amelia that let me stabilize and keep my cool.

"Pleasure's mine," she smiled half heartedly. "I've heard a lot about you." I studiously kept my eyes on Carol instead of glancing back at Crystal.

"I've heard a lot about you, too," I stated. *Not much of it was good, but I'd heard plenty.* Some
conversations with Amelia, a couple with Crystal. It was hard for me to reconcile the difference between their descriptions of the same woman. Lisa had summed it up as Amelia being melodramatic, and Crystal never really seeing how consistently bad Carol was at the whole 'being a parent' thing. She wasn't malicious, she was just incompetent. The rest of the blanks were filled in by Amelia's own hangups. Especially the part about her attraction to Victoria.

"Is Amy available?" Carol asked. I was struck by the oddity of the position. *Shouldn't I be the one coming over to her house and asking her that?* "I'd like to talk to her. Alone, if that's possible?"

"Uh, sure, she's in o... her bedroom," I almost slipped up. I didn't really have my own room here, anymore. Either I stayed at home, or if I stayed here, I stayed in Amelia's room. I moved to the side. "Just go down the stairs and follow the hall, then turn left where you see the kitchen. The door will be open for you."

"Thanks," she said, forcing more of a smile. *Maybe she didn't notice my screwup?* "Maybe you can come by some time, talk about things. I've already met your father. You can invite him, too, if you like." *Right, they were all together for New Delhi.* I still hadn't talked to dad about that. We were still in the 'pretend neither of us know that we both know' stage. He might legitimately believe I don't know, and I would rather wait for him to talk to me about it than to press the issue.

"Are you okay?" Amelia asked. She'd put her armor on, and with it I had voice communication. *I can imagine how I feel through the bond right now.*

"I'm fine," I answered. "Just a little weirded out, y'know."

"Are you sure?" *CompassionWorry.*

"Sure, okay," I agreed to Carol's invite. "That could be nice. I've got to go now."

"Okay," Carol nodded to me. I moved past her, unable to make eye contact as I continued speaking with Amelia through the armor.

"Yeah," I said. "Y- Carol just invited me and maybe my dad over for a visit sometime. I just lied and said that sounded nice."

"Oh god," *AmusedIncredulous.* Amelia chuckled. "That sounds awful."

"It would likely go down in history as a candidate for the most awkward conversation in the history of awkward conversations," I agreed. "I can see it now... 'Hey, girl who's engaged to my daughter, I see you've brought your dad, is he still boning my sister?'"
"She's not my mother," Amelia said, her mood and voice darkening. There was still the undercurrent of longing underneath, however. I thought back to my mom, and how much I missed her. Amelia sighed. "That's not fair and you know it."

"Sorry," I apologized. "I don't think Carol agrees with you on this. She's trying awfully hard to be nice, here. To reach out to me of all possible people. It's hard not to be sympathetic. Like watching a sad puppy. Or Riley after one of her nightmares."

"God damn it, Taylor, for you to feel bad for someone, they have to be really pathetic," Amelia muttered. "Fine. But now you have to do that incredibly awkward 'meet the family shit'. The whole family. Bring Crystal and Sarah. That is your punishment. Deal with it."

I caught up with Crystal, finally. She had made it to her car, and the little garage Amelia had built for it. Sure, we could have gotten there from underground, but Crystal insisted that we needed to go outside and see sunlight every once in a while.

"About time," Lisa teased. "So on a scale of one to ten, how bad is the fallout going to be?"

"I have inadvertently agreed to a 'meet the folks' date with Amelia, her parents, and my dad, and his new girlfriend." I reluctantly admitted. Lisa started laughing.

Crystal cringed. "God damn it, Taylor. This is going to involve me, isn't it?" Apparently, she was just going to ignore Lisa and talk in front of her. Not like my she wouldn't know what the hell was happening anyway. Forcing her to use her power to figure things out just meant less energy used on things that really mattered. Plus it kinda annoyed her that she couldn't play nosy super sleuth with us the way she likes to do.

"Blame your cousin for that one," I insisted. "I was willing to bite the bullet and go it alone, but Amelia is convinced that this is a suffering that must be shared with every possible member of her family. I wouldn't be surprised if she invites Riley along. Just for even more weirdness."

"Stay with me?" Amelia begged me right before Carol walked in.

"Always," I answered back.

"So, still spying on Amelia, right?" Lisa asked.

"She asked me to, so it's not spying," I answered. "But, yes, I am there to lend emotional support to my friend while she deals with her mother." **Accusation** **Anger** **Disappointment.** I cringed.
"She would do the same for me," I insisted. Meanwhile, I started focusing and mirroring the other, less painful, emotions in the link. I couldn't pretend to understand what Amelia's life has been like. I did know what it felt like to long for a mother who wasn't there. That was a common ground. And Amelia, as much as she didn't want to admit it to herself, still wanted her mother.

I didn't push the emotion. That would be a betrayal. I reinforced it, made sure Amelia knew it was there, kept it from getting lost in the storm.

I followed the conversation, watching Carol bare her soul to Amelia. Then they went silent. AngerPityCompassionAnger. Better than before, at least. I didn't need to hold the emotions at this point, they were coming to the fore on their own, now. One of the many things that we shared. We needed that sense of family. However messed up the family itself might have been.

"Thank you," Amelia whispered, seconds before letting the armor fall off. The link was still there, but she didn't need me there in a more direct sense for the rest of this. AcceptanceDeterminationCompassionPeace.

I finally focused back on the 'here and now'. We were already on the road, heading toward wherever it was my shopping experts had determined we would go today. They didn't say anything as I wiped the wetness off my cheeks.

A/N- Because that scene deserved a look through another set of eyes. I did, unfortunately, have to lift some dialogue straight off the last chapter. Felt like a scumbag for doing it, but, well, all attempts I made to work around it looked like shit.

I just made it an extra long chapter to make up for the partial rehash.
I went over the neurological copying tech once more, perfecting the last few minor errors. Riley's work was as brilliant, as always, but it had flaws. Rey's, too, although it was better suited for this sort of thing. And the neural mapping system from both Cranial and Rapture were held together by patchwork until I managed to actually integrate them properly. It worked, for a given value of work, but was woefully inefficient. And I was willing to let her copy and paste my mind with this? Holy shit what was wrong with me? To the other side I had the last readings Riley got off of Crawler. I smiled as I compared it to the new tests I ran.

"I got it!" I declared, startling Riley from her work on the actual pathway differences between Amelia's brain, as opposed to mine and Lisa's. It was doubtful my scans would be useful, since my brain was no longer organic, but every point of reference held a chance. She was following a very strict formula, to catch any possible Taboo in her research. Every bit of data, double and triple checked by the computer, and me, and Lisa. Scion is going to end the world. If there was ever a time I might be able to prove myself, prove my value, it will be in stopping the apocalypse.

"What?" Riley asked, still working on her project.

"I've figured out how to perfectly interpret the neural engrams you pulled from Crawler," I explained excitedly. "We can pull people back who got glass bombed. Ooh! I just had a great idea! Do you think the PRT has more of those glass weapons? We could build them and use them on serious threats! Crystallize everyone in the area and only restore the ones that we don't want to stay dead!"

"That's great!" Riley declared. "Ooh! Does it have to be glass? Maybe we could do the same with your ice weapons!"

"We could!" I squealed. "It's perfect!"

Riley frowned. "No. Breaks Rule Two."

"Which one's that?" I asked.

"If the plan starts with 'kill people indiscriminately', it's a bad plan," she replied. "I think that includes glass bombs and flash freezing."

I paused for a second and thought about what I'd just suggested. "Holy fudge," I muttered. Did I really just suggest something like that? "I know that's wrong. I knew it when I said it. Why?"

"It's a tinker thing," Riley dismissed. "Don't worry about it too much. You still had one big
"I did," I agreed. You succeeded again. "They'll have to accept me after this."

Riley looked at me. "What do you mean? You're part of the team, aren't you?"

"Not really," I dismissed. "Sure, I work here, but no one wants me around. If they could find a way to take away my powers and plug them into some random guy they find on the street holding a 'will work for food' sign, they'd do it in a heartbeat. No one really likes me."

"I like you," Riley argued.

"You like everyone," I pointed out. I smiled, however. "Actually, you remind me a lot of Taylor when she was your age."

She beamed at that. "Good!"

"It really is," I agreed.

"Why'd you stop being friends with her?" Riley asked.

I froze... err, shifted into my hybrid state. I couldn't come up with a way to answer that question any other way. In my full power state, things were easier. I was closer to a computer than human in this form. Most of my insides were no longer organic, in any state, and my brain was no exception. It was more like a crystalline electromagnetic computer system. And when in my hybrid state, it became a superconductor. Absurdly easy to think, and close to impossible to feel emotions. "It's because I hated myself. A bad thing happened that made me angry and sad. Those emotions make people hurt other people."

Riley frowned, and I dropped the power state. I couldn't keep it running forever, and I needed it for work. "Mannequin hated himself. I hate myself, sometimes," she answered. "When I think about everyone I hurt, it makes me sad and angry. But I would never hurt Missy."

"You're smarter than I was," I said.

"Do you think Missy would hurt me?" Riley asked.

_Probably, if something bad enough happened_, I thought. "No," I lied. I was a good liar, and my physiology was so nonhuman that Riley's ability to spot deception wouldn't work on me. _Even_
Rapture's tech didn't work on me. Her power did, yes, but not her equipment. "Missy's smart, too."

Riley nodded, looking relieved. She'd undone a lot of the personality tech she built into herself. I could still see its remnants running in her brain, at least when I went hybrid, but she wasn't faking being cheerful anymore. She had her bad days as well as her good, like everyone else, although she made the bad a lot less bad than it would be if she were relying on normal neurochemistry. Really, it was probably less mind altering than most prescription antidepressants.

"I'm trying to make Taylor my friend again," I informed her. Somehow, she was more well liked around her than I was. *And she was fucking Bonesaw.* I knew how those spider-bots were made, now. There was a human neurosystem in there. A young one, capable of adapting to the change of circumstances. If she had then the kind of lab she has now, I could be persuaded that it was artificial. She didn't. *She had to use a toddle for parts every time she built one of those things.* If others could accept what she had done, surely I wasn't so bad?

"How?" she asked. "I don't think she wants to be your friend anymore. And I'm pretty sure she's not going to let you alter that."

"After we restore Glory Girl," I answered. "It means Amelia will have her sister back. After that, Taylor will have to be grateful that we helped her girlfriend with something that monumental. You'll benefit, too. We both know Taylor's still uncomfortable around you."

"I don't mind," Riley responded. "I tried to hurt Taylor really bad. Tried to take her apart, even. Did horrible things to one of her friends. She has every right to be mad at me. She still tries to be nice to me even though she doesn't have to. It's more than I deserve."

"After this, she'll have to," I insisted. "You can't stay mad at someone after they pretty much perform a miracle for you. Taylor will forgive us both, and Amelia will have her sister and it'll be like the bad stuff never happened at all."

"I don't think that's how it works," Riley responded. "Pretending the bad stuff isn't real just makes things worse. Trust me, I lived with the Slaughterhouse Nine. I'm only getting better now because I'm not pretending anymore."

I didn't speak, and Riley took that as an invite to continue.

"And Missy says I'm her friend because she likes being friends with me. She likes being around me, and I like being around her, and we like it when the other is happy. That's why we're friends, and that's why Amelia's my sister. It has nothing to do with what I can do for her or anything I can give her. That's only why we're part of a team together. And because we're both 'badass action babes'."

I froze and thought back. By that definition, I haven't had any friends at all since... since Taylor. I
had all the friends at school. Girls who wanted to be popular. Boys who wanted to be seen with me, wanted in my pants, or most likely both.

Sophia was closer, but she had been a mentor. Sure, we spent time together, and shared secrets. In as much as Sophia would share anything with anyone. It hadn't taken me long to discover that she'd get upset if I didn't keep doing what she wanted to do. Namely, torment Taylor, lord popularity over other girls, and her activities as a vigilante. Outside of that, Sophia cared about nothing at all, and made her disinterest known in her own less than subtle way. To claim she cared about whether or not I was happy? For fuck's sake, she was going to watch me get gang raped if I didn't fight back.

"See," I said. "Told you Missy was smart." So much for that idea, I thought. Sure, resurrection technology was a big deal. The biggest deal possible. There was no way to exaggerate how important it was. But she was right. It wouldn't result in Taylor's acceptance. I would deserve it, yes. But that wouldn't mean I'd get it.

"How did you get Amelia to like you? Or Missy? Or all of the others?" I asked. "They know what you've done, and still they accept you."

Riley looked down. "I don't know," she admitted.

====================

A/N- FORESHADOWING!!! Arglebargle!

Also: Emma's pathetic and Riley's both horrifying and adorable. In case you weren't aware of this.
Shopping was, as usual, an exhausting experience. Lisa and/or Crystal would decide what looked good for me, argue with each other for a couple minutes, and then I'd have to argue with them about such things as price and too much of my very not tan skin being shown.

"This is suppose to be winter clothes," I finally declared after the fifth skirt they tried to get me to buy. "I am not wearing a skirt for winter. It happens to be cold during winter. If I'm going to get frostbite, I at least want it somewhere I can tell the doctors about and still look them in the eyes."

"Isn't your fiancée your doctor?" Crystal teased.

"Yes," I said in a carefully neutral tone.

"Well, you heard Taylor," Lisa responded. "She prefers looking Amelia in the eyes."

"If Zach was here," Crystal laughed. "He'd probably say something about a kiss to make it better."

I just sighed and resolved that the next city that Pantheon claimed permanently would be in Alaska. I would assign both Lisa and Crystal to manage that site. Forever. Surely there was a PRT Director up there that would appreciate the help.

"Speaking of Zach," Lisa said, grinning.

Crystal's eyes widened. "No."

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Find out what?" I asked.

"No. No no no. Don't you fucking dare," Crystal insisted.

"Aww, but you don't want to share your plans for the future?" Lisa smirked.

"I was just being nice!" Crystal exclaimed.
"Oh Ta~ylor, your future step sister promised Za~ch a~ da~te." Lisa sang every 'a' sound, and clicked her tongue at the last 't'.

At last, I thought. Someone else suffers this bullshit! "Oh, really?" I joined in the smirking. "Sorry, Crystal, now I feel bad. Can't be easy on you when your boyfriend tastes like crickets."

"In five years!" She insisted. "I told him that, if we were both single, five years from now, then I'd maybe go on a date with him."

I shrugged. "Y'know, the way he works out, he's going to be buff as hell in five years."

"Taylor's been doing her part to help," Lisa volunteered. "Grasshoppers are really high in protein."

....

"Umm, huh," I muttered as we approached the food court. I was glad for my morning workouts, it's the only reason my feet hadn't fallen off yet. "Guess what?"

"Riley is busy creating yet another abomination against nature and god?" Lisa volunteered.

"No-" I paused. "Actually, yes. But that's not what I was talking about."

"You've decided one Endbringer is enough and want to shop for wedding dresses?" Crystal suggested.

"Close enough," I declared. "Our parents are on a date a couple blocks from here."

"Where? How come you didn't notice earlier? What are they doing?" Crystal asked.

"I dunno," I answered. "Some Italian place, I'm pretty sure. I didn't notice because I'm trying not to be omnispy. And heavy petting. Very heavy petting."

"Eww, gross," Crystal paused. Lisa snickered. "Wait. You're just fucking with me, aren't you?"

"Yep," I admitted, smiling what I was sure was a Lisa-esque smile. "They just got there. I didn't notice because they came in different vehicles and I didn't realize they were headed to the same place until they were both in the parking lot."
"We should spy on their date!" Crystal declared.

"We are not going to spy on them," I insisted. "It's creepy."

Crystal snickered. "You, of all people, did not just say that."

"No, seriously, it's not cool and I'm not doing it," I insisted. "What they do on their own time is their own business, not ours. I am not going to pry into their relationship by eavesdropping on them without their knowledge or permission."

"They're in Brockton Bay," Crystal countered. "The act of being in this city means they've already given you permission."

"I managed to not know about you and Zach," I pointed out. "You didn't seem too happy when Lisa gave out your secrets to me."

"Fine," she huffed. "But we're their kids, we totally deserve to know. If only so we have a proper warning next time."

"Here's a suggestion," I said. "How about if we just walk right up to them and say hello? Then we can pry to our hearts content without being creepy about it."

"No wonder Amy likes you so much," Crystal complained. "You're the only person on the planet who is better at killing fun than she is. We're going to wind up having that whole 'meet the family' thing with Aunt Carol soon enough, anyway, so let's just let them have their date."

"Good, I was in the mood for cheese fries for lunch, anyway," I said happily. I wasn't going to spy on my dad's date, and volunteering to just show up and interrupt it was a bluff. I was happy he had someone, but I was happier to just let him be happy on his own. Meeting them, seeing them together, made it a bit more real than I wanted it to think about it being right now. It would be easier with Amelia there when that happened the first time.

*ConcernProtective*. I smiled, dipping into the link.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Crystal said. "But how in the hell are you so skinny? You eat more than anyone I've ever met and you still have the figure of a fashion model."

I shrugged. "My whole family's like that," I answered. *It feels so much nicer when Amelia says stuff like that to me*, I realized. *Probably because I know that she means it*. With anyone else, it just made
me feel somewhere between 'awkward' and 'meh, whatever'.

"Good genes, then," Crystal concluded. "I am totally jealous, now. I have to watch my diet and work out religiously to keep my figure."

"Your figure comes with boobs," I countered. "So you don't get to complain about anything."

"That sounds like too much work," Lisa dismissed. "I just get Amelia to give me a tune up once every month or so, plus a few bells and whistles to keep certain other biological inconveniences out of my life," She looked at me, and grinned her usual grin. "Whose idea do you think that bikini was?"

"Oh, you cheating bitch," Crystal groaned.

"What?" she asked, feigning shock. "You mean it doesn't count unless you luck into it by genetic accident?" Her smile grew even wider. I was beginning to picture the top of her head falling off. "Well, then, on the subject of optimal figures for genetics, here's a thought: What are the odds either of your parents brought contraceptives to their little afterparty?"

And with those words, lunch was over. Probably dinner as well.
AnnoyanceDisgustSadness. I cringed. What was that? I went back to my armor and started slipping it on. I had been trying to relax, after Carol left. Yet another unequal relationship in my life, I supposed. She wanted to be my mother, now. Took her long enough. It was... I wasn't even sure. Too little, too late, really. I wasn't someone who needed a mother, anymore. Still, it was closure, and I hadn't realized how much I needed that.

"Okay, what the hell's going on over there?" I asked, once the suit was active.

"Lisa's been infested by Zach's mind, I think," Taylor responded. "She's discovered a way to torment me and your cousin and she's playing it to the hilt."

"It has to do with your parents dating, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah. She found a way to dial the squick up to eleven," Taylor replied. I frowned, the armor usually was better at carrying her tone of voice. Was there something wrong with it, or something wrong with Taylor's emotions at the moment? "We're on our way home, now."

"What? So bad that it canceled your shopping?" I asked. I was more than a little disappointed. AmusedPleased. "Don't worry, I've got a dozen new outfits. I'll show some of them off for you later. Maybe I'll even show off that bikini, now that I know you were the one that wanted me to get it so badly."

"I will build an underground pool for the base, if you do," I offered. Speaking of unequal relationships. Oh well. I honestly couldn't imagine being happier, and I was glad for the no pressure, no obligation sort of relationship we had. Or at least we had in our home lives. Being engaged to marry after we killed the last couple Endbringers was definitely an obligation. It just wasn't one between me and her. It was between us and the PR department.

"Actually, that's a really good idea anyway," Taylor agreed. "Then I can hold Lisa under until the bubbles stop."

"Or it can just be part of the gym," I suggested. "Winter's coming, you know." I had already started the process. It really didn't work, positioned where the gym was. I'd have to destroy one of the labs to do it. So I simply moved the gym. A section near the edge of the crater. Near the house that was still, in theory, where I lived. I haven't actually been there in a week, now that I think about it.

It was a bit away from our living area. That was fine, if anything it was a probably a good thing to
keep it away from the main areas. A bit of work later, and I managed to put together something that I was pretty sure was about the same as the pool in Arcadia. Meanwhile, I kept talking to Taylor.

"So, what did that nightmare you forced me to accept onto the team do this time?" I asked.

"Something that would make the nightmare you forced me to accept onto the team squeal with joy," Taylor responded back. Uh oh. "She's been speculating on the possibility that Crystal and I might end up with a half sibling thanks to... a lack of precaution."

I laughed. "Oh, that'd be hilarious."

*DiscouragedPlayful.* "Thanks a lot," she muttered.

"Oh, don't worry," I laughed. "Sarah's safe. She had me make sure of it."

"Really?" *HopeRelief.* Taylor asked. "You're absolutely certain."

"Unless she had a second trigger that includes regeneration or a breaker state, or asked someone like Riley to undo it?" I qualified. "Then yes, I am absolutely certain. She was fine with the two she had, and only ever put off the surgery because she was afraid of medical complications with the whole 'is a superhero' thing. She got that taken care of like a month after I triggered. Which was a bit uncomfortable for my thirteen year old self, by the way."

*RelaxedComfort.* "Oh thank every god!" Taylor declared. "I'm telling Crystal right now."

"Although," I added with a smile. "It's easily reversible with my power. So don't discount adorable future siblings asking their sisters for help drawing their illustrious and peculiar family tree at some point in the future."

*IrritationAmusment.* "I will find a way to make you suffer for that. I am not entirely sure how, but I suspect it involves Missy, Riley, a sleepover, and approximately twenty pounds of cotton candy. Also, I'm pretty sure Lisa's scheming something extra special for ruining her joke. But we're almost home, so I'll talk to you in person soon."

"Looking forward to the fashion show," I said as I got up and left my room. She probably didn't need my help carrying the bags, but I wanted to. I passed by the lounge area, where Theo and Zach had finally abandoned their gaming. We could probably have just stuck televisions in every individual room, but Lisa said this was a better way to do it. A communal area where we could interact off the job. I suspected she just didn't want to buy all the extra televisions.
Emma was now watching the walkway from one of the couches. "Hey!" she exclaimed, rising to her feet. "Do you have a minute?"

I stopped and turned toward her. Remember, she's still a part of the team, now. Taylor didn't exactly like her, and knowing what she did to Taylor meant I didn't like her, but we owed a lot of our tech to her. It wouldn't exactly kill me to be professional. "Sure," I replied. "I'm not in a huge rush."

She jogged up to me. "Uh... Taylor, are you there?" She asked. Oh, right, my armor.

"Yes," Taylor confirmed.

"Okay, good," she smiled just a little. It was really weird seeing how she reacted to Taylor. "This is one of those things I wanted to announce to both of you at the same time. I've completed the copying device."

"Copying device?" I asked.

"You know, the one that lets you copy minds into new people?" Emma looked at me strangely and shifted into her brown state. I ignored it, we'd decided a while ago that she didn't have complete control over her forms. She usually did, in the way that people controlled their facial expressions, but it was often subconscious. As long as she didn't use her hybrid state, it wasn't anything to be alarmed by.

"Do you mean the memory transfer tech?" I asked.

She looked at me strangely. "Umm... no?" Then she hesitated. "Oh, fuck, you don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" Taylor asked. The voice through the armor sounded a lot calmer than the emotions of worry and suspicion coming through our bond.

"Maybe... maybe we should talk about this in person?" Emma offered. "Just... just the three of us? Somewhere private? Maybe secret?"

"I'll be there in a minute or two," Taylor agreed. CuriosityWorryConfusion.

=============

A/N- Ah, the start of THIS arc. I like this arc.
"Come on, Emma," I said, leading us back toward my bedroom. We stopped several feet away and I forced a bubble to open inside the wall for us. It took considerably less effort to build a room there than it did to build that swimming pool. I'd have to show it to the others later. "Taylor, just go into the bedroom." We waited the few minutes before Taylor managed to get there in silence.

Taylor went along with the instructions, leaving her shopping bags on my desk before stepping into the portal I created. "Okay, so what's going on here?"

"Well, like I was saying, I got the memory device working," she said.

"So you can rescue Victoria?" I asked. HappyConcerned. I looked at Taylor. I could see the mixed emotions on her face, and I knew why. Bringing Victoria back was one of those things I had longed for. I hadn't really stopped to think about what it meant. Given what we now knew about how her aura influenced me... there were a lot of things to consider. I was still going to do it, of course, she was my sister and I would save her. What came after, however, was a far more difficult question.

"That's rather the problem," Emma looked away. "Promise not to shoot the messenger on this one? All I'm doing is telling you about something that I know that you haven't figured out. None of it's my fault. I get credit for that much, at least, right?"

I glanced at Taylor. HesitanceWorry. "Okay, that's fair," Taylor answered. I was most definitely letting her take the lead on this one. Taylor was the one with the personal connection to Emma, after all. I would let make the calls when it came to this.

"This tech only 'saves' people in the same way you save a file on a computer. We aren't restoring her to life, we're building a copy of her body and then giving it her memories. It doesn't 'rescue' anyone, it creates duplicates."

"It's not the same as the memory transfer tech we used on Noelle?" Taylor asked.

"It's the same," Emma answered. "We do not have a transfer device. I doubt such a machine even can exist. Maybe if you somehow teleported the brain out of the old body and into the new one, but that's way outside the abilities of the kind of tech we're using here. This is pretty much no different than burning a CD. When you're done, there's always three copies. One's the original, one's stored on the computer, and the last is the new CD."

ShockGuilt. "So... so when we incinerated Noelle's body original body?" I asked. "Does that mean we killed her?"
Emma nodded slightly. "If this equipment is how you cured her, then yes. The original was just as much a person as the copy. Unless Riley included a second function that wiped the original's brain when it was finished, in which case that killed her first."

I leaned against the wall and formed a place to sit. "We murdered her," I muttered. "I thought we were just destroying an empty vessel, with nothing left inside it. Not killing a human being." ConcernProtectiveness.

"I don't think Noelle would see it that way," Emma countered. "Or, at least she wouldn't complain too much about it. I guess maybe the original might have, if you asked her after the transfer. I've talked to her some, and she always seems really glad to be normal. She seemed pretty set on the idea that if it hadn't work, she'd rather be dead."

I frowned. God damn it. I'm not even saving Victoria... I'm simply creating a duplicate of her. And that wasn't even the worst part. I ordered the murder of a helpless girl. I've never killed before, unless we count Jack Slash, and even now it was difficult to consider that a murder. I injured him, fatally even, and then left him to die. But that was in combat and he was Jack Fucking Slash.

In retrospect, however, I could have easily caught him instead of killing him. So I guess I've murdered twice, now. Taylor moved over to me and nudged me over a bit so she could share the seat with me. I enlarged it. She pulled me against her and started stroking my hair. It was wonderful as always, but I wasn't in a mood to appreciate it.

"Are the copies still the same person?" I asked, after pulling away from my resting position on Taylor's shoulder.

Emma shrugged. "Maybe you should ask a philosopher or theologian that question. I'm probably not the person you should be taking advice on morality and spirituality from. I can tell you that, if it's done correctly, there wouldn't be an observable way to tell the difference between the two. Assuming the bodies are copied as perfectly as the memories. The brain will be a perfect duplicate. Unless you tried something completely insane like copying onto an already active mind. That... then you'd get something incredibly messed up in the head."

"I just..." I sighed. I squeezed Taylor, just to have the comfort of someone to touch. "If we do this, will what we bring back still be my sister? I thought we were going to rescue her. Wake her up from some kind of tinkertech stasis. Not copy her like a computer file."

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew before I even started on this project," Emma answered. "I think it still counts. The mind is what makes a person, right? The brain, the memories, the thought processes? Really, it's not much different than how Zach's power works. Just a lot slower. Honestly, you should all get backups. Maybe update them every week or so. Right now... if certain members of this team die, especially the two of you... then Pantheon's pretty much fucked. And there are a lot of people who want to kill you. Two of whom are Endbringers."
I took a slow breath. "Know what? You're right. We've long since graduated past ethical dilemmas. We are dealing with omnicidal parasites." UnderstandingAgreement. I stood, and Taylor stood beside me. "We're doing it. We'll keep the clone thing a secret. Keep calling it a memory transfer device." ReliefCertainty. Taylor held me tighter. "We'll restore Victoria, and I'll have a copy of myself made."

"You already have the one copy we're studying to break Taboo," Emma pointed out. "I guess this is a big enough deal to have a newer save file made. That way we won't have to go through this again with your copy if something happens."

"Yeah, kind of a big deal," I agreed. "But let's not sugar coat this. If a copy's awakened, it means I'm dead. Having a really good replacement doesn't change that. It means Pantheon can survive, and that's more important than our individual lives, but I would still be dead."

Emma smiled, if a bit hesitantly. "Okay. I was afraid you'd take this a lot worse than you did, honestly."

"Like I said," my smile probably wasn't any happier. "We're facing the extinction of our entire species. We can't afford to be picky." CertaintySupport.

Emma glanced over at Taylor. "Umm, can I talk to you about something? Alone?"

"Is it important?" Taylor asked. SuspicionAnnoyance.

"Not the way this was important," Emma admitted. "But it's important to me. I'll call in whatever credit telling you about this earned me, if that helps."

ReluctanceTolerance. Taylor gripped my hand. "Okay," she agreed. "But if you can say it to me, you can say it in front of Amelia."

Emma looked at me, then at where our hands were entwined. "Okay," she agreed. "That's fair. I was... I wanted to apologize. For everything I've done."

"You've done that already," Taylor grumbled, gripping my hand just a little too tight.

"I know," Emma agreed. "But this time... remember when I said you were acting like the old you? I meant it. And I've been thinking about it. And watching how Missy and Riley are. The way they get along. They're just..." Emma trailed off. And Taylor didn't speak, either.
"They are pretty adorable," I volunteered after an uncomfortable minute or so. If just to prompt one of them to speak up.

"Yeah, they're like sisters." Emma agreed with me, before looking back over to Taylor. "I've been paying a lot of attention to that. And it's brought back a lot of memories. How I used to have a friend like that. You're becoming the girl I remember. The one I used to be best friends with, someone I was closer to than I ever was my own family. I want that relationship again, Taylor. I want to be who I was then. Back before everything that happened."

AngerResistanceIncredulity. I gritted my teeth against the wash of emotion, and then I pushed back. Focusing on the same nostalgia and longing she had used on me just this morning. She froze for a second, losing her grip on my hand. She looked over at me, and I looked back. She paused, and then she relented, letting go of her anger, if only just enough to get the message. I could almost hear her thinking about just how ironic this was. It was my will that won this time, as the hatred splintered and dissolved in the sea of other concepts and emotions.

Taylor smiled at me. She knew the truth: that wouldn't have worked if the feelings weren't there to begin with. At best, we could mute or encourage. We couldn't create what did not actually exist. Kinda like our failed attempt at physical intimacy. Taylor looked back at Emma. Who was waiting with a nervously hopeful smile. "No," she finally said, with a soft certainty in her voice.

What? I hadn't expected that, not with Taylor's current emotional state. Emma's face showed her devastation. "I... I understand. It was too much to ask for, I'm sorry for bothering you." She turned to leave, only to realize there currently wasn't a door to leave from.

"We can't go back," Taylor continued, before I'd put together the concentration to open a new door. "But we can move forward."

Emma turned back to look at Taylor again.

"Holding on to the past isn't going to help either of us," my partner's hand gripped mine tight again. "I'm not who I was, and I never can be again. Neither are you. That door has been closed, and frankly it deserves to remain closed. But maybe, just maybe, who we are now, who we're going to be in the future, can be friends."

Emma was smiling broadly. I was pretty sure she'd be crying right now, if her physiology still had that ability. None of us said anything for a few seconds, and then Emma stepped forward and clung against Taylor, hugging her tightly. I should feel a bit more awkward about this, I reflected.

"Okay," Emma agreed, her voice still relatively neutral. Far more than it should have been. Another side effect of her altered biology.
Taylor looked at me. *HesitationPeaceSatisfaction*. She still held my hand, but her other arm moved around her former best friend's back and held her.

==============

A/N- Isn't that sweet?

And horrific.

If there's not at least a little of both almost constantly throughout this story, then I'm failing as a writer.
Emma left not long after, having extracted promises from both Amelia and I to get our backups done. We'd also have to talk to everyone else, with a rare exception or two, like Zach, who didn't really need the tech. "So, it's still early afternoon," I said. "What should we do now?"

Amelia snuggled against me. "Didn't you say something about a bikini?" she asked.

"Maybe later," I responded. "We do have stuff to worry about. As nice as it is to get closure for things, we have things to do." I kissed her on the forehead. "Thanks for that, by the way. I probably would have punched her again if you hadn't stepped in."

*WarmsafeLove.* She looked up. "Oh, it's nothing you hadn't already done for me," she answered.

*She really is the best thing that's ever happened to me,* I thought, then smiled. *Fire extinguisher included.*

*CuriousHappy.* "What are you thinking about?" she asked, nuzzling into me. "Whatever it is, keep thinking it."

"Just about how we first met," I answered. "And then you hit me."

"Huh," AmusedSmug. "I wouldn't have thought you were into stuff like that."

I shrugged. "Totally worth it for what came later," I answered, and contemplated kissing her. Then I dropped the idea. *Still not into girls.* "Tell you what, let's actually get some work done today, then we'll relax this evening. You should talk to your mom and dad?" *ReluctanceAmbivalence. She still doesn't view them as that.* "Carol and Mark, then. Someone's going to need to convince them to exhume Victoria's body. The others who got caught in that bomb, as well. But it'll probably be easier to talk them into it if we have a proven success first."

"You're right," she agreed. "We could probably do it in secret, but it's better if we ask."

"The publicity, if it works, should also help," I added. "A way to bring back capes after an Endbringer fight is insanely huge..." I paused. *If we had this last time,* I thought. *So many dead...*
Amelia touched my face. "It wasn't your fault," she insisted. *ProtectiveNurturing.*

I forced a smile. "I know," I confirmed. "I'm sure I'd feel a lot worse if it was my fault."

"Okay," she agreed. "You just have this habit of taking responsibility for things completely outside your control."

"I do, don't I?" I agreed. "I'm going to go ask about that backup. Would you mind shutting down the relay network? Including the link. I'm not sure it's a good idea to have it running while they do all this, y'know." *ConcernSuspicion.*

"Umm, if you insist," she agreed. I quickly started going "blind" as the relays went into hibernation. Not the first time, certainly not going to be the last. We'd done before simply to allow the network to be properly rebuilt.

"Thanks," I squeezed her one last time before our empathic bond went silent. "It shouldn't take long. Go ahead and talk to Carol and Mark. Maybe arrange a time for that 'meet the parents, only for real this time' thing?"

"Alright," she agreed. And I reluctantly broke contact in order to head to the labs. In truth, it wasn't that bad being 'alone'. Every time Amelia was asleep, her presence in our bond was missing. And vice versa, even if I still had some control of my power when sleeping, it didn't convey anything intelligible for her to feel. So we were used to an hour or two each day without the other.

I went to our 'secret' passage to the lab. Or, at least, to the hidden lab section where we kept the 'big deal' stuff. The start of Eidolon's biosuit, the next generation of armor systems, Alexandria's new equipment. Rey spent more time working in our 'official' secret lab, which only existed to test run the zerglings and other combat units. I'd be working with him tomorrow, to test the new stuff.

And of course, our official lab space, used to design our team's battle armor, the generic suits, and the M7s. Frankly, they weren't seeing a lot of effort. We'd reached the point of diminishing returns on that tech. Plus we had other, more immediate concerns. At its best, it still wouldn't help us in the future battle with Scion.

I spotted Riley first, mumbling into her recording microphone. Emma, on the other hand, was currently in her yellow state and looking at the computer. I decided not to interrupt. After a couple minutes, she started typing, then spoke. "File saved: IT fifteen."

Riley looked up. "So, anything useful?"

"Yes, actually," Emma answered. "Turns out I might have a way to break you through. Although it's
a weird way of doing it that doesn't explain how Amelia broke through. I don't think the Entities knew what 'sleep' was when they designed this memory wipe effect. If you actually pass out during or right after a Taboo event, you should be able to remember when you wake up. At the very least, it'll let you remember stuff that we've already discovered."

"And we already know how to identify when a Taboo is starting to influence the brain!" Riley declared. "I could probably build an implant that emulates losing consciousness. It may take a few tries, but shouldn't be that hard to achieve. From there, it's just a matter of feeding the target mind enough legitimate Taboo data that the Passenger doesn't know what to remove anymore, like with you!"

"That's really good news," I said from my position near the door, then I started walking in. I meant it, too. "Good work, both of you. Riley, why don't you finish up for the day and go hang out with your sister. You might not get many chances to in the next few weeks."

"Why not?" Riley asked.

"You'll just have to trust me on this one," I said, smiling. "There's going to be a lot of things going on. She'll be really busy, and you'll probably be really busy. We're also pretty close to when you have to go back to school and that'll just make it even harder to find time. Plus, I know I kinda hog up most of Amelia's free time to begin with. Since I'm going to be taking time down here getting a memory backup made, you have time to go spend time with your big sister."

"Okay!" She agreed, and she gave me a quick hug. I repressed the only somewhat diminished urged to cringe. "Thank you."

I patted her now permanently black hair. Then she bolted from the lab. As far as I could tell, she did not have a 'walk' setting.

"So, why'd you really want to talk?" Emma asked.

"Figured it out that easily, huh?"

"So did Riley, even if she didn't say anything," she responded. "You tripped off her lie detection system. And probably her common sense, as well. She acts a whole lot more naive than she really is. Not that I need to tell you that."

"Yeah, probably not," I agreed. "I kinda wanted to ask you for help with something."

"It's the whole you not being gay thing, isn't it?" Emma asked. "No, it's not that obvious, but I have a near perfect sense of human biochemistry. You're not into her, and it has absolutely nothing to do
with you not loving her. You got that much covered, at least."

I nodded. "Yeah," I agreed. "I do. I tried using that, before. Tried making feelings be enough. She, well, let's say she turned down my offer."

"Ouch," Emma sympathized. "I bet that was embarrassing."

"Humiliating," I confirmed.

"And now you want to try again, I take it?"

"Have for a while," I admitted. "I can't ask Riley because she's still ten."

"She's at least eleven, actually," Emma corrected. "Probably twelve, actually. Not that it makes it much better."

"Plus she's still Bonesaw," I continued. "She tried to saw open my skull. I know she's trying her best to be better, but I just can't imagine myself willingly giving her have access to my brain." The very idea of it was enough to give me nightmares.

"And you trust me with it?" Emma asked. "That's kind of a big deal."

I paused. "Hadn't thought of it like that before. But you'd have access to my backups, anyway. So, if anything, I'll have to trust you, eventually. I could ask Amelia, but..." I stopped and thought about how to say the rest of this. Emma didn't know what happened to Glory Girl, and that was not my secret to share. "She's afraid to work with brains. For a lot of reasons, at least partially due to examples set by assholes like Valefor and Heartbreaker."

"No, I totally get it," Emma confirmed "Plus the whole guilt factor of her having to rework part of your brain to make you attracted to her. I'd probably be bothered, too."

"So, can you switch me over to being gay with this tech?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, sorta," she said. "It's kinda hard to rewrite patterns entirely. Easier just to add new ones. Like, this equipment could make you left handed, or make it so you speak Spanish instead of English, thanks to Rey's tech. But it would be a lot easier just to make you ambidextrous or add a second language to what you already know."

"Okay, so you'd just make me bisexual, then?" I asked.
"We can be a little more precise than that, if you like," she offered. "How does 'heterosexual, plus one' sound to you?"

....

"I... don't feel any different," I said, as I climbed out of the chair.

"What? You were expecting maybe to be suddenly obsessed with boobs like a teenage boy?" she asked.

"Well... maybe a little?" I said. "You're right, though, that sounds stupid when it's said out loud."

"Speaking of boobs, are you sure you don't want me to give you an upgrade?"

I shrugged. "I'm fine," I said. "The only person whose attention matters seems to like my current figure just fine." I started thinking about the looks, and feelings, I got from Amelia on a regular basis. And then... well, I started thinking other thoughts.

"See, it totally worked," Emma declared.


"Have ~fun~!" she sang after me as I left the lab.

The whole process had taken a few hours. Apparently, adding new pathways is a pain in the ass without a specific copy already in the database. It turns out that 'wants to sleep with Amelia' was not in the database. Then there was the memory upload, which took a bit of time in its own right. Hopefully I'd want an update, soon, considering what I had planned. I went to my room to do the usual 'freshening up', complete with a shower where I spent most of my time trying really hard not to think about how the water system here works.

I put on one of the cuter new outfits, even though it was a little warm for that, especially inside our amazingly well regulated environment here in the Yggdrasil.

I palmed Amelia's door, and it opened. She and Riley were playing a card game.

"-ust because I have a good memory and basic math skills," Riley said insistently.
Amelia looked up at me and smiled. She's beautiful, I thought. It's wonderful, looking at her and being able to think that.

"Does this mean playtime's over?" Riley complained.

"Yeah," I confirmed, walking in. "I promise I'll make it up to you later, mushroom. I have something fun planned, already." It was true. Spending a couple hours getting your brain scanned left you plenty of time to think. We didn't have any clue when Riley's birthday actually was, but we could pick some time to throw her a party. I'd have to talk to Amelia and Missy about it, first, but it was going to happen.

"Okay," Riley agreed. "I was getting bored, anyway. My big sister's not very good at card games." Amelia pretended to try to smack her, and she rolled away backward, right off the bed. Half a second later, she was on her feet, and stuck her tongue out at Amelia. She was close to me, so I managed to smack the back of her head. "Hey! That's not fair!"

"We're partners," I said. "That means we're automatically on the same team no matter what."

She looked at me, and her eyes narrowed for a moment, then she smiled broadly. "I am so going to tell Theo to use that line on Missy," she declared, and With that, she stepped past me and left the room.

Amelia just looked at me, still smiling her wonderful smile.

"What?" I asked.

"You're being nice to Riley," she pointed out. "You're never nice to Riley. I mean, you're not bad to her or anything, but that might be the first time you've ever touched her without a really good reason. Or tease her, or use a nickname with her."

I shrugged. "I dunno," I said. "A lot of things are changing these days. And she is kinda my future sister-in-law or something. And, well, like you said earlier, she is kind of adorable, especially with Missy. Anyway, we can reestablish the link now, if you like."

She smiled, and closed her eyes. The relay network went up first, as always. The empathic bond was more complex and sensitive, and it took a little more time to reestablish.

"So, do you like my new outfit?" I asked after the bond was fully established. It was a full invitation for her to really look at me, and I luxuriated in her desires. More than usual, not because didn't enjoy
them before, but because now I could return them. *ConfusionSurpriseDesireJoy*. I smiled. Didn't take her long to catch on, either.

I moved toward her and sat on the bed next to her, then ran my fingers through her hair as I drew her into a kiss. This time there was no hesitation on my part. This time, I wanted this as much as she did, and for the same reasons. Our second kiss was wonderful and set off all the fireworks they were meant to set off. *JoyDesireLove*. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed more passionately.

*RecognitionWorry*. She broke the kiss. *HorrorPain*. "Oh god, Taylor, what have you done? *DisgustGuilt*.

==================

A/N- Die happiness! DIE!!!!

... Also, this was a chapter I expected me to get in trouble with the mods over at SB... it did not.

Chapter End Notes

If you were hoping that this was the chapter that got this fic an M rating then I've got some bad news for you...
PainHeartbreak. "I..." Taylor hesitated. "I know, I should have told you. I was going to, but then...and the link... and I just wanted to fix this so bad and..." she stuttered. "I wanted to want you like you want me. I was going to tell you..."

I pushed away from her. "When were you going to tell me?" I insisted.

"Umm... before the kiss," she answered, tears running down her face. "I didn't realize I'd want you so badly after. I went on impulse instead of easing into. I'm sorry."

I couldn't think straight, and she wasn't helping. Her desire was reacting with mine and... and if it went any longer, I would kiss her again. If that happened, I wasn't sure we'd be able to stop until it was far, far too late. A quick thought and I deactivated our bond. Taylor's eyes went wide. Her lip quivered. My heart broke at the sight of it.

"Why?" She asked.

"Because we can't talk like this," I answered. "Taylor, that would have still been after you got the changes, not before. What were you thinking?"

"You would have tried to stop me," she pleaded. "I couldn't keep hurting you like that. I love you!"

"I know! I love you, too!" I exclaimed. "God, we both knew that. There wasn't even the possibility of doubt. We can't even hide it when Zach makes a stupid joke that we actually find funny! How could I possibly not know your feelings for me?"

"I wanted to be able to say it myself," she insisted. "I didn't want it to be the empathic link. I wanted it..."

I buried my face in my hands. "Fuck. Why didn't you listen to me? I told you I was happy with our relationship how it was. I didn't need you to do this. I didn't want you to do this."

"But you did!" Taylor insisted, moving to try to touch me. I pulled back further. The temptation was still far too great. "I could feel it. Every time you looked at me. Every time we touched. I know you would never ask me to do this, but you do want more. And I... I wanted to want more. I've wanted that for a while." She was shaking, and even without the usual bond, there was still the glimmer of emotions from the rest of the network.

She blinked. "Safe?"

"Yeah," and now that I'd said it out loud, I started to put together my feelings. "I want love. I want intimacy. I even want romance. I'm a human being, of course I want all of that. But I don't want to do more. I was perfectly happy with what we already had. Maybe I wouldn't be happy like that forever, but I was happy for now. And I thought you were happy, too. Weren't you?"

"I was," Taylor admitted. "I am. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Which part?" I asked. "I didn't know I had to tell you not to surgically modify yourself for me. I'm sorry, Taylor, I didn't think that was ever going to be an issue in my life. Why'd you even have... why now? Why not wait?"

"Victoria," she answered.

I froze. "What?"

"I'm part of the same link you are," she elaborated. "I know about your feelings for Victoria. Aura or no aura, I know you still have feelings for her. Ones that are more than just sisterly. I'm not sure you even know about them, but I do."

"God, Taylor," I groaned. "You're just not happy unless you're sacrificing yourself for a cause, are you?"

"No!" she shouted, again moving toward me. "No. That's not why."

"Then why?" I pleaded. "Why would you do this?"

"I..." she paused, then whispered. "I was afraid of losing you."

My heart jumped, and I struggled for something to say.

"I was afraid that you'd want her... and then... then you'd stop wanting me," she looked away.
My stomach clenched. "No!" I moved toward her and pulled her into a hug. I restored the link. I need her to know I mean this. ReliefJoyGrief. "Taylor. Taylor, please listen to me. I don't want Victoria. My desire for her is artificial. The result of a fucked up power that got to me at a vulnerable time. I'm over the addiction part of it. I'll get over the rest. And if I can't do it naturally, then I'll start considering something artificial. Rapture's an expert on this stuff, we can talk to her. I'm pretty sure, whatever she says, it won't be 'sleep with some other girl'."

Taylor smiled slyly. "Are you sure about that? She's dating Rey for a reason."

"Well, not as sure as I was a moment ago," I relented. "But the point remains. I was happy with what we had. I didn't want you to... to do this... it's what Victoria did to me on accident. It's what I did to her on purpose. It's not right."

GuiltHopePride. "It's not the same," she insisted. "I chose this. I have the right to do this. I wanted to. I've wanted to for... for weeks now. I was hoping for it to come naturally. That the time we spent with each other, the closeness, would make the physical desires happen."

"And it didn't," I finished. I knew it didn't. I'd spent enough time feeling for it, yearning for the moment she looked at me like I looked at her. Now I had it, and I couldn't even enjoy it. It was tainted. It was nothing but a lie. A reminder of every mistake I've ever made.

HesitationResolve. "I was willing to give it time," she insisted. "A few more weeks. Months. I could wait to see if it would evolve naturally. Maybe do something more gradual with the brain tech. But Victoria meant we... I didn't have that kind of time, anymore. It was a problem. I fixed it."

"You made it worse, Taylor," I said, and the words burned inside me. "Minerva was right. It's the link." FearAbandonmentLoss. "It's always been the link, hasn't it? Without it, you never would have felt the need to be attracted to me. We would have been friends. You could have found a nice boyfriend. I could have found a nice girlfriend, if it turned out that's still what I was still into. Instead... instead we got this. This isn't healthy."

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me," Taylor insisted. DesperationPanic. "I can undo this modification if you want me to. Or you can. It's not like it's a complete rewrite. It didn't make me attracted to girls. Just you. It's not even the only thing I did. I got Rey's medical package as well. I asked for it because it's helpful. You can't say it's not! You don't feel guilty over that, right? It's the same as this. Six years of med school in two hours is a whole lot bigger than a small tweak to who or what I'm attracted to!" Her face and our bond was awash with her fear.

I closed my eyes. "No, that doesn't help," I sighed, fighting back the tears even as I started unmaking our bond. I have to do this. I located the relays, and altered them so they no longer reacted to my power unless I needed them to. The bond isn't healthy. It's doing to Taylor what Victoria did to me. I have to end it. I reached into the bracer and slowly shut it down. For her sake. Abrupt cutoffs were always a bit jarring. "This arrangement was always mutual. The moment either one of us decided we didn't want it, it was over. No questions, no arguments. That was the promise, remember?"
"I remember," she choked out, just before the last part of the bond was deactivated permanently. I watched through tears as she stood and walked toward the door. The portal opened when she pressed her hand on other door.

"I love you," I managed to say. She paused for a second, but didn't say anything or look back before she walked out.

I curled up and started to cry. It wasn't the first time we went without our link for a length of time. It wasn't the first time Taylor stayed at home, instead of here. But this was the first day since our bond was formed that I was alone.

=============

A/N- The author of this story is a horrible person who hates happiness.
The thing about not being able to sleep is that it results in a lot of free time. A whole fucking lot of free time. I could probably do something productive, like studying, or planning combat strategies, or learning a new language. Maybe I could become a painter or write the next great American novel. Although considering the sum total of my art skills amounted to 'stick figure pornography', and my writing skills were even worse, it was probably for the best that I didn't. Instead, I was just bored out of my mind.

I paced along the halls of the magic treehouse. Everyone who didn't live here had gone home. The rest of us that did were all asleep. Unless Emma was in the labs, which would only add another reason for me to not go down there alone. Or with anyone else, if I could help it.

I was sick of the internet, impossibly enough. New Delhi was the only thing anyone ever wanted to talk about. Even the friends I had that didn't know I was a cape were still obsessed over it. I, on the other hand, wanted to talk about anything and everything else. Being flash boiled several times a second is not something anyone wants to think about. I didn't want to think about it when it was happening, either. The whole time I tried to imagine how cool my second trigger might turn out. Maybe I'd be able to bring back people who had died a while ago, instead of just the little bit of 'memory space' I currently had.

There are weirder powers out there by far, right?

Even thinking about Emma was better. If anything, the scifi geek in me thought her new transformed states made her even more hot, and she was a 'ten' before. But, no. Taylor may have 'forgiven' her, for whatever political reason she had, but that didn't apply to me. She tormented another human being for her own sick pleasure. There weren't many things out there that I couldn't accept. Fuck, I spend more time hanging out with fucking Bonesaw than I did with my own sister, back before. And... what Emma did... there was no forgiveness.

I went down to the workout room. I had a custom set of training weights. If we were being honest, it was more like a modern version of being drawn and quartered. I gripped the vines and pulled. They pulled back, and I kept pulling. They wouldn't let go. I disintegrated, if I had to guess, it was a tendon pulling. Another go, this time with the new starting resistance being what tripped my regeneration last time.

I focused on holding my body together as long as possible under the strain, and failed after about three seconds. If this were my 'official' workout, it would be timed, but right now I just needed to take my mind off everything.

Another respawn. I gritted my teeth and grabbed the vines yet again. The strange combination of burning and numbness from my renewals was as familiar as always, and with it the memories. I probably imagined the screams I heard in that scouring light. Some trick of the air being so hot that it
caught fire. I don't know. I didn't imagine the aftermath. The numbers of capes tough enough to survive the explosion, who still died. Sinking into molten tar that used to be roads. Struggling to find somewhere safe. Dying slowly of suffocation in the unbreathable smoke.

I tore my thoughts away from that line yet again.

More pleasant memories. I insisted to myself. Like Crystal agreeing to that date. That was worth a happy thought. She was a real beauty, after all. Smart, too. And smart enough to catch me in my bullshit. Bullshit I even convinced myself was real, sometimes. A man could do an awful lot worse for himself than that. Of course, I have to wait five years for it, I added unhappily. Shoulda tried for three. Eighteen and twenty two is cool, right?

I got out of my makeshift torture-workout device and wandered the halls yet again. Huh, since when did we have this tunnel? I followed it, and quickly realized this was the furthest away from the 'main building' that any of our underground rooms had gone. That I knew about, at least.

"Oh wow," I said when I saw the room. I meant it, too. The central area of the room contained a massive swimming pool. The pool itself was bottom lit by a soft blue glow, while the area around was bathed in a green light. It was warmer than most of the rest of the base, a warmth coming from the water in the center. The smell was slightly sweet, almost like honeysuckle. "The dead could get laid if they brought their date here."

"Okay, I don't even want to know where you got that analogy," a voice spoke from below the waves. I walked to the edge and looked down. No wonder I hadn't seen her. It was Amelia, in her armor. I could barely tell her apart from the floor even now that I was looking.

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't know anyone was here. I was just saying this place is gorgeous. Very romantic."

"Thanks," Amelia sighed. She sounded miserable.

"So, what's going on?" I asked. "Did I just interrupt something? Like, say, a warm up before Taylor gets here?"

"What?" She asked, sounding confused. I waited for her to get the joke. "No!"

At least she doesn't sound as miserable, I thought. Shock isn't quite laughter, but it's better than self pity.

"Okay," I agreed. Ice broke, NOW ask the heavy questions. "So what's the story?"
"Nothing," she answered. *Doesn't sound like nothing to me.*

"Practicing holding your breath?" I guessed. "I'm sure Taylor will appreciate it."

She started sobbing. *Oh fuck, that's not suppose to happen.* "No," she answered. "I doubt Taylor's ever going to 'appreciate' anything from me from now on."

"Want to come up here to talk about it?" I asked.

"No," she answered.

"Guess I'm coming down there then," I dropped into the water before she had a chance to refuse like I knew she would. I sank the thirty feet or so to the bottom and sat next to her. She looked at me.

"Wow, this pool is really deep," I told her. I doubted she could understand words, just 'blub blub' or something. Then I started to take a breath, which tripped my restoration as expected. A burning sensation radiated from my lungs and I appeared at the top of the pool, clothes dry.

*What the fuck, power? You can teleport to get out of water, but you can't teleport to get away from two thousand degree infernos?*

"Okay, I tried it your way. You'll have to come up here."

"Fine," she relented, standing and allowing buoyancy to take her to the top. "Taylor and I broke up." *How the fuck? "Happy now?"*

*No, I thought. "So, you're saying she's single..." I answered.*

"Zach, I swear that if you such much as finish that thought, I will find a way to make you stay dead," she growled.

There was no thought to finish. "Don't worry," I answered. "You're the one into the bony girls. Plus she seems like the type that'd be into weird date gifts like giant bug monsters and chocolate covered grasshoppers. Which, granted, would be a nice change of pace from the version she currently gives me. Is that what happened?"

"Yeah," she laughed bitterly. "You could say that."
Talk about a freakin' shot in the dark. "What happened?"

"She decided she didn't find me attractive," Amelia confessed.

"Then she is a lousy judge of female flesh," I offered the roundabout compliment.

"She probably should be, since she's straight," Amelia defended her girlfriend. "Or was straight. Apparently she decided that was a 'problem' and 'fixed' it. Fucking brain surgery. Most romantic gift in the fucking world."

I paused, trying to find a way to say 'you're a moron' to my boss, and one of the few people whose power I was honestly afraid of. I settled on one word. The only word in the world that could truly convey my reaction. "Huh."

"Such words of wisdom could only come from you," Amelia muttered.

"Doesn't your dad have depression issues?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Not comfortable discussing my family with you," she replied.

"Fair," I granted. "Well, a lot of people have that problem. Some of them take medications for it. So they can spend time with their children, or their spouse, or simply function to go to work. This doesn't sound any different than that to me. Except, y'know, cheaper, safer, and better in every possible way."

"I didn't want her to change herself for me!" Amelia shouted. "She at least should have asked me about this."

"You're not suppose to want her to change herself," I answered. "But she's going to. That's what relationships are. You changing yourself for others. Not because they want you to, but because you want to for them. Like last week when I kept Theo up late and Missy wanted to hang out in the morning. He did what she wanted, didn't even tell her he was tired. He did it because he wanted to, and that makes him a good guy. If Missy had known, she'd probably have told him to get his sleep. If he wanted to sleep and she insisted he get up, that would have made her a bitch."

"There's a big difference between that, and what Taylor did."

"Okay," I granted. "Then let's look at the other extreme. Riley. You know, your little sister. You can't tell me the gap between 'gay' and 'straight' is somehow less huge than the gap between
'Bonesaw' and 'everyone that doesn't belong in a cage or a casket'. She's working so hard to change herself, and she's doing it to make you happy. And Missy, but still mostly you. Yes, it's a good thing she is changing. The entire sane world would back me on this. But it's still her changing for you. Hell, you threatened me with death for making a bad joke, like, a minute ago. That'd be me changing for you. If, y'know, it worked."

"That's not the same thing at all!" Amelia insisted. "It's just asking people to behave differently, not actually be a different person."

"Why?" I asked. "Sex isn't this big amazing magical thing that defines who we are. Koalas have figured it out, and they're going extinct because they're literally too stupid to live. I'm straight as an arrow and I'd give that tech a spin just to see what it's like, if my power would let it work. Hell, I'm kinda curious if they can implant nonhuman memories. I'd honestly love to know what it's like to be a cat. As long as they edit out the parts where it licks its own crotch. I'm pretty sure I would be happier to never learn what cat crotch tastes like."

"Your analogies are disgusting."

"But true," I insisted. "Do you have a problem with gays?"

"No, of course not."

"Do you have a problem with Taylor?"

"No."

"You love each other, right?"

"Yes," she affirmed.

"Then I say run with it," I added. "Existential crises are for old people. What you should do is find your girlfriend, drag her to this love nest you've built here, and don't let her leave until the next Endbringer battle. But not before I set up the hidden cameras."

"God damn it, Zach."

============= A/N- Zach knows less than I do about both ancient execution methods and Australian wildlife. Keep
that in mind if you try to "correct" those parts.
I didn't bother going home. I wasn't in any mood to talk to my dad. I was in even less of a mood to come home to an empty house and make assumptions on where my dad was spending the night. Instead, I went to the labs. Not the secret labs, since I didn't want to interrupt Riley or Emma's work, just the normal ones. Primarily where Chariot worked, these days. His skills and abilities didn't lend themselves to the high priority task of breaking the Taboo, so he was relegated to designing improvements on our bioarmor.

"How's it going, boss?" he asked as I came down into the lab.

"Picking up habits from Rey, now?"

Chariot shrugged. "Not my fault you guys don't hang out with the nerd herd enough for us to pick up your habits. Speaking of: been talking to Kid Win, he gave me a few ideas he picked up studying Vista's power. Already upgraded Matriarch, since it's the easiest to work with. I got the specs for Azrael. By the way, Kid says thanks for his suit."

I tried to smile, a system's test might keep my mind off of Amelia. "So what's it do?"

"Short range teleporter," he answered back. He didn't notice my mood. Then again, he probably wouldn't. I was calm, or at least my body was. It had been a long time since I could truly offload into my power, force my emotions down so that I could focus on the important things. Maybe Lisa was right about the link being detrimental, I mused. I can do a lot more with my time this way.

"Very nice," I praised. It was, too.

"It's a hybrid of the shunt tech, the subspace pocket tech Kid Win uses, and some of Vista's power readings," Chariot started explaining. I knew if it kept down this road, I'd be lost in the sea of technobabble. Fortunately, Chariot was one of the few tinkers that seemed to understand that people don't want to hear that stuff. "Long story short, it teleports you up to a hundred feet. Any direction. At will. Has a charge time between teleports, however. If you need it, you can also use it to shunt between Bet and our dimension pretty cheaply."

"That... I can see how useful that would be," I agreed. I could, too. "So, what do we have to sacrifice from the armor to make it work?"

"From yours? Nothing," Chariot answered. "Your armor is about two pounds heavier, and that's the end of it. Same with the Dryad, Radiant, and Clarice. Can't put it in Singularity due to how it's designed, not that Missy needs it. Azrael and Tapestry are going to suck. I'll need Emma and Riley to help me with those."
I nodded. "Okay, work on the ones you can work on," I agreed. "I'll talk to the others. Mind if I give mine a test run?"

"Sure," he agreed. "I need some user testing of the control interface, otherwise it's in full working order. It has an anti-obstacle system in it... if you find yourself in our pocket dimension, that means it would have teleported you inside of something else in this dimension. Just move around a little and try to shunt back over after the device recharges."

"I'll be sure to relay my results," I answered as I started putting on the armor. Or letting it swallow me with its back, as the case may be. A couple minutes later, I decided he was right, this control interface needed a lot of work. It was meant to respond to the eyes looking at specific parts. Which was great, if you didn't need to look at other stuff at the same time. It took me six minute just to figure out how to get the destination locked in, and I had to do it by deliberately defocussing my eyes.

Then I was outside, well above the Yggdrasil. For a second I was falling, before the antigravity caught me. There was a bit of a moment where I almost succumbed to vertigo, but I solved that easily enough by paying more attention to the insects, and less to Taylor. The conspicuous absence of Amelia made that process both easier and more difficult. Still, it helped some. *I am not alone,* I thought. *As long as there are people in this city, I can never be alone.* Yeah, that didn't work to convince me of anything.

I bolted to the north end, almost wishing we hadn't wiped out E88. I wanted someone to punch right now. I wanted it badly. I spent four hours finding nothing. I spent my time reporting details and suggestions for interface improvements. First to Chariot, then after he decided to call it a night, his recording device. Eventually I gave up and headed home. Any other day, I would have considered four hours with no crime more serious than speeding violations, some kids smoking a few joints in the park, and a single mugging a source of pride. Today it just made me that more frustrated. I stopped the mugger with my bugs, he was too far away to get there in person in time.

Besides, there was a limit to the number of bones one could break in a purse snatcher before it was bad PR.

Sleep did not come easily that night. Dad had long ago stopped bothering to wait up for me. For that matter, he didn't even bother locking the door these days. Break-ins were practically a thing of the past. Break-ins at my home were regarded as a particularly creative form of masochism. And it had happened. One dumb kid trying to impress his friends by stealing an article of my clothes, most likely my underwear. One dumb adult looking to impress his friends by shooting me in my sleep. And two very dumb reporters, also most likely intent upon stealing my underwear.

I could use an assassination attempt right about now. I would settle for punchable reporters. Instead, I got a quiet night in a warm bed. I couldn't help but think about Amelia the whole night.
I didn't want to come into work the next day, I really truly didn't. I didn't want to look at Amelia. I
didn't want to be reminded of what I had lost. If she didn't want to, well, be with me... that would be
fine, I could live with that. But I missed her presence. Her thoughts and feelings. Having a
connection with someone I could trust and knew that I could trust no matter what. And that had been
taken from me. It took everything I had to remind myself that no, this was not a repeat of Emma.

Still, I showed up anyway, teleporting straight down into the labs. An act which would have set off
any number of automated defenses if this armor wasn't made from Yggdrasil. Riley was here, this
time.

"Oh good," she said with her usual smile. "How's the armor?"

"A little sluggish compared to usual," I informed her. "Probably needs a checkup. Either the
teleporter is drawing too much power off the flight system, or that extra two pounds is really that
important to the speed.

"Okay, I'll check out the specs," Riley agreed. Then she stopped smiling. "Now why is my sister
sad?"

"Grown up stuff," I sighed.

"Fix it," she commanded. "Right now."

"There's nothing I can do," I replied. "This is something she has to fix for herself."

"Okay," she said, not quite sounding convinced even though I know her built in lie detection would
back me up. "Lisa needs to talk to you about a couple things."

"Tell her I'm going to be busy working on the zerg instincts, today. If it's not work related, it can
wait."

"It's work related," Riley answered. "Dinah says someone's going to try to assassinate Director
Calvert, later. And we have our working plan on how to take down Butcher permanently."

"Really?" I smiled. *The Butcher is one of the only honest threats left in New England*, I knew from
more than one team planning meeting. With her gone, we could afford to spend more than a day in
other cities.
"Yeah, really," Riley answered. "Gotta take care of Calvert's assassins, first."

"Don't worry," I smiled. "This, I can do something about."

====================

A/N- Oh, hai Skitter, been a while.
I made my final phone call for the night: Dinah Alcott. Every day, the same thing. Ever since learning that Scion was not only the source of our extinction event, but would exterminate life in *every* world, not merely our own, we’d been dedicating most of our resources solely to that concern. It made it more of a pain in the ass since Dinah couldn’t see Scion, only his aftermath. Same with Eidolon, the Endbringers, and apparently the effects of the Taylor-Amelia bond. This limited her effectiveness. Right now, we had sort of taken a more general approach: we were recruiting and upgrading our forces into an army, cross referencing possible power interactions, and simply increasing our power and influence.

"Hello, Minerva," the young girl's voice said in an utterly businesslike tone. *Used name immediately, wants to project illusion of omniscience. Considers her power far too precious for such wasteful display. Relying on other power. Not second trigger. New parahuman. Wouldn't allow herself to be seen as childish enough for such a thing, especially to another thinker. Using equipment. Tinker tech.*

I smiled. She likely spent several thousand dollars on what amounted to a really fancy Caller ID. I considered teasing her for it, but opted to do the opposite. "Getting stronger with your powers, I see," I said, then I channeled my old way of thinking. "Seems like a waste of energy."

"Pots and kettles," she retorted. I smiled. *She was right, emphasis on the 'was'.*

"So, the usual starter questions," I said. I liked this question. It was free, because of just who it protected.

"Point zero nine there is a credible attempt on the life of a member of Pantheon or its priority allies in the next twenty four hours, fifty nine percent chance of a credible attempt on the life of a member of Pantheon or its priority allies in the next week."

"Fuck," I muttered. "Don't waste any energy on that question for a moment, okay? I'm going to think up the most optimal way of narrowing down the possibilities first."

"Understood," Dinah replied. *Afraid. Knows she's a possible target of assassination. I popped up my computer and ran down the list. Right now our 'priority allies' included the Triumvirate, Dinah, Calvert, Accord, Epoch from the Adepts, Dragon, and Costa-Brown if she wasn't already covered. She was listed separately just in case someone manage to hack our theoretically unhackable systems.*

I immediately ruled out the Triumvirate. The phrase 'credible' ruled out almost any attempt against them. Plus they had assured me they had a top tier precog of their own, who was just as blind to Scion and Endbringers as Dinah. I didn't ask about Eidolon and didn't mention Taylia. I trusted Cauldron only as far as 'enemy of our enemy', no further. To allow them to learn about Taylia would
be a monumental disaster.

"Will there will be one attempt, or multiples?" I asked. That would be a way to narrow down the rest of the questions.

"Umm..." she hesitated. "Just one."

That was helpful. "Male or female?" was my follow up.

"Male," Dinah spoke with a brief hint of relief. She ruled herself out. We were down to a pretty narrow pool, most of whom were our own team. Zach's power ruled him out permanently. We knew because we had tested that, already. Apparently Zach's respawning didn't register as 'death' to Dinah's predictions. Whether because the Passenger didn't consider it death, or because Dinah's powers were tied to her own psychology in interpreting what the question was, and she didn't view it as 'dying', I couldn't yet know. "You have three questions left."

She's capable of doing up to nine a day without stress, up from seven at the beginning of her release from Coil's captivity. That's interesting. Did Coil overtax her power and thus weaken it, or is she just naturally stronger now? "Alright... is the victim a member of Pantheon?"

"No," she answered.

So we were down to Coil, Accord and Epoch. "Does the victim live in Brockton Bay?" I asked.

"Yes," Dinah responded.

"Alright, that narrows it down enough," I answered. It narrows it to exactly one, but Dinah doesn't need to know that. "We'll be sure to have our people ready for any would-be assassin."

"I'm billing you for the last two questions," she responded.

"Fair enough. Got one one more for you if you don't need it elsewhere," I sighed. What was twenty grand, anyway? She didn't contest the idea, so I went ahead. "What are the odds we can successfully engage and defeat the Butcher without losing any of our members using our latest battle plan?"

"Ninety six point three seven seven," she responded.

"That is enormously better than before," I blinked. "What happened?"
"I just give the numbers," she dismissed. "The rest is on you."

I smiled. "Thanks," I replied. "So... I was thinking... you know how we've got you under guard?"

"It's appreciated, yes," Dinah responded, sounding a bit suspicious. "What of it?"

"And you know how we've created that Pegasus for Aceso?"

"And more for a bunch of the rest of your team," she agreed.

"Want one of your own?" I offered. "No strings attached beyond the stuff we've already agreed to. It'll have the added benefit of a very visible deterrent to would-be attackers, in addition to your better hidden defenders."

"Ponies are stupid," Dinah dismissed. "Can you build me a Gryphon?"

....

Taylor was conspicuously absent when we had our morning strategy meeting. It was myself, Riley, Amelia, Crystal, and for the first time ever: Emma, who was looking for someone else at the meeting. Obviously, Taylor. Didn't even need my power for that. Maybe Zach, though that wouldn't be likely.

Amelia even managed to show up on time for a change. Tired, didn't sleep at all last night, upset, Taylor missing, fight between them. I didn't need my powers to tell me any of that. Taylia bond broken. Amelia broke it. Taylor did something that upset Amelia. Emma at meeting, looking for Taylor, not afraid of usual reaction. Reconciliation? I blinked. My power had been certain that couldn't happen. Taylia bond responsible. I hated Taylia, sometimes, but I needed to get back to figuring out what broke them up. I was on Emma, right now. Emma helping Taylor? Helped Taylor. Taylor used brain modification tech on herself. Made herself gay.

I almost facepalmed at the revelation. God damn it, Taylor. I knew my best friend had a fucking martyr complex, but seriously? Also: God damn it, Amelia! It took this to break the link? She couldn't have done it when they were both in what passed for a stable emotional state with them? She had to wait until Taylor was at her most emotionally vulnerable to figure out... fuck, of course. If they were both happy, then it meant their bond was a good thing. Ugh.

Emma looked more and more apprehensive as we got closer to 'start the meeting' time. Crystal, however, was the one that spoke up. "Umm, where's Taylor?"
"She must have slept in, she was out testing the new suit improvements," Riley offered, then she looked at Amelia. Is aware of Amelia's distress. Concerned. Indirectly fishing for information. Suspects Taylor is responsible. "We'd know if she was in danger."

Amelia simply looked at her arm, where the slightly lighter patch of her already pale skin denoted the lack of their empathic device. Oh fuck, she's going to cry, can't let that happen in front of Riley!

"We'll just let her sleep in, then," I said. "I'll talk to her later about the meeting. Right now: we have some good news and some great news."

Of course, the first thing I did was go over the news from Dinah. More or less on autopilot. Meanwhile I was watching Emma and Amelia. If Riley figured out exactly what happened, we'd be facing the worst sort of damage control. I'd need to distract her. I'd need to distract her, then I'd need to get Missy to distract her. Then I'd need to talk to Emma. Then I'd need to punch Emma. Then I'd need to talk to Amelia. Then I'd need a way to call Amelia a stupid twat without upsetting Riley. Ugh.

Crystal was glancing between me and Amelia, thinking at least some of the same thoughts. Good, she's my ally in this, I realized. It's really, really nice to have someone who's willing to help me, no questions asked.

"Y'know," Crystal muttered after I finished explaining the news. "This is possibly the only organization on the planet that considers an assassination attempt on one of our most helpful allies, followed by a straight up war with one of the most dangerous people on this continent, to be the 'good' and 'great' news."

"Better than not knowing about it until it's too late," I pointed out. "Either way, Calvert's been alerted and we are pretty much prepared for any possible attempt. Unless the Endbringers are coming out with a new and weirdly specific combat strategy."

"So, what's the deal with the Butcher?" Crystal asked. "We've never had better than a thirty percent chance to take her down before."

"New weapons, near as I can tell," I responded. "Our current strategy puts a lot of the fight on your shoulders. Radiant's update has all kinds of new tricks. You could probably solo the Teeth, if not for Butcher. But the tinkers can tell you more than I can."

Emma moved to speak up, but I interrupted her. "Riley, why don't you show Crystal her equipment? Especially the nonlethal weapons."

Emma looked like a puppy that had her favorite toy taken from her, and Riley kept glancing between me and Amelia, who had said nothing the whole meeting, but I remained firm on this one.
Technically, due to the social dynamics here, Crystal still outranked me. Not that she ever felt the need to assert that status. Also, she was on my side here, even if she didn't know all the details, she knew I had a plan.

"C'mon, mushroom, I can't wait to see my new toys," Crystal smiled, putting her hand on Riley's shoulder.

One last quick look and she turned to follow Crystal to the labs. Thank you Crystal you are literally a life saver.

"Alright," I sighed once I was alone with the two girls who had left their footprints all over my best friend's psyche like craters on the moon. I ignored my jealousy. Knowing I never had, and likely never would have, such a deeply personal bond with any human being hurt. But, unlike before, I admitted to myself that it was there. Pretending otherwise was no longer an option for me. Fuck you, Rapture. Fuck you and every figure you've ever said a prayer to. "So, both of you idiots are to blame for this. Emma... why the living hell would you agree to do this? I mean, I get that you're quite literally suicidally stupid, but there has got to be a limit."

"What? She just wanted a minor tweak to go along with her other upgrades," Emma defended. "It's not a big deal. Would you prefer I told her to try closing her eyes and thinking about Johnny Depp, like Sophia always suggested during our slumber parties?"

Isn't telling the truth. Attempting to use off colored humor to ease tense situation. Not very good at it. Is not used to trying to comfort people. Using a method she learned from Zach. Still strongly... I cut off my feed. It was heading into territory that I had already figured out, and frankly didn't give a fuck about. I needed to worry about Taylor's self destructive behavior, not the bitch that made her that way in the first place.

"I've already figured that out," Amelia sighed. "I over reacted. "I'll be begging her forgiveness, just as soon as I see her again. We will see her again, right? She wouldn't do anything drastic?" She practically pleaded with me to confirm her hopes, and a little piece of my heart actually felt for the girl.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Taylor's not the sort that runs from her responsibilities."

Anything and everything else, yes, but not her responsibilities.
"She's back!" I exclaimed the moment Taylor's armor touched down inside the lab. I rushed off to talk to her. I needed to see her with my own eyes. To know she's okay, to remind myself of how beautiful she was. To talk to her and apologize and hold her again.

Lisa rushed after me. "No!" she insisted. "I'll talk to her first. You'll just make it worse."

Emma trailed behind us, deciding quite wisely to keep her trap shut. I still couldn't believe she let Taylor talk her into that in the first place. Fucking bitch, if she wasn't so dumb about things I'd suspect she did it on purpose just to drive a wedge into our relationship. No, this was just the same shit she always did: find the nearest person who seemed like they knew what they were doing and latching onto them for guidance.

I opened the lab passage right before we got there. Riley was poking at Taylor's discarded armor, while Taylor was halfway up the stairs. "Oh!" she exclaimed, glancing at me, before looking back toward Lisa. Ouch. "So, Riley said something about assassination attempts and a way to beat the Butcher?"

"Uh, yeah," Lisa replied. "Someone's going after Calvert. He's been informed, of course, and we have a general idea of the anti-assassin plan. We'll know more tonight, after we compare notes and discover what kind of fight we'll be up against."

"And the Butcher?" Taylor asked.

"New weapons," Lisa replied. "Zach and Crystal are the primary fighters, with their upgraded suits. The teleportation tech seems to be the tipping point. It all hinges on Zach getting into touch range. After that, we've already won. You'll be playing tactical command, of course."

"Won't Butcher sense him before he attacks?" she asked, showing the calm passionless curiosity that I'd started to forget she possessed.

"Probably doesn't trip her combat senses to be targeted for a slap by a baseline human without a harmful power," Lisa volunteered. "We never had a way to get him into touch range before, and now we do."

"Makes sense," Taylor agreed. "Is that all?"

"We should probably talk about you and Amelia breaking up," Lisa started. "Pretty important in the whole 'team dynamics' thing."
"I'm still here, aren't I?" Taylor said darkly. "My body will adjust to the new circumstances, just like it did before, and my sleep patterns will reassert themselves. Isn't stuff like that normal for a recovering addict?"

She growled the final words.

Emma looked dumbfounded, and I had to blink hard to stop from crying. Lisa, at least, kept a cool head. "Close enough," she conceded. "Surely you can see the difference between how you are now, and what you were like this time yesterday, even. Or what you were like six months ago."

"Know what, Lisa? Fuck you," Taylor barked a short laugh. "You're right, I can see the difference. I was the happiest I'd been since my mother died. I finally had some level of peace with myself. I actually believed it was possible for someone to love me. But that wasn't good enough for you, was it? You wanted me to be miserable, mopey, easily manipulated by even the faintest glimmer of pretend kindness, Taylor. Fine, you got her. Most of her, at least. We are not friends anymore, Lisa. Not now, not ever again. We are business associates, I am your boss, and you are too good at your job for me to let petty personal issues get in the way of that."

I swallowed hard, trying to control my emotions, watching the girl I loved in this kind of pain... I didn't have anything to compare it to. Not that I could say I saw her in pain. The entire time she tore Lisa down, she said it with a level of almost bored calm that I might expect of someone reading from a dictionary. She's better at controlling her feelings now than ever before, I realized. "Taylor, please, can we talk?"

She looked at me for a long moment, her face completely impassive. "Okay," she replied. "Talk."

I struggled to find the words. I had to default to emotions. "I'm sorry," I started. "I didn't mean to hurt you like this. I love you."

For a brief moment, I thought I saw an emotion on her face. "I know," she relented. "I love you too."

"I over reacted when I found out..." I sighed. "I should have at least waited, talked instead of acting on impulse."

"I should have, too," she agreed. "Sorry about that, I knew you'd want to talk me out of it. I thought, if I did it myself, then you couldn't blame yourself for it. I didn't want that. This was something I wanted for myself, I wanted to give you what you gave me. You'd just have to accept that I made my own choice because I wanted to. That's one of the things I tend to do a lot, and you shouldn't blame yourself for my actions."
I choked up. "I know," I sobbed. "I guess I was channeling a bit of you when I shut down our bond. Doing what I thought was best for the girl I love, instead of taking the time to at least discuss it with her first."

She forced a smile. "I guess," she replied. "So, do you think it was for the best?"

"What?" I asked.

"Ending the bond," she clarified. "Do you think this, now, is better than before? If you had it to do over again, would you?"

"N-no," I admitted. "I regret it."

"I don't," she stated. "The outcome, I'd change in a heartbeat. But what I did? Allowing myself the chance to love you, physically, as well as emotionally? I don't regret that for a minute, and would do it again even if this was the only possible outcome."

I smiled, and moved to hug her. She stepped back.

"No!" she exclaimed. "Don't. I know enough about your power. I don't... I can't let you touch me. I can't let you see inside me like that."

I did start crying, then. In front of Lisa and Emma, both of whom had decided to exercise discretion about their presence here. "I can restore the link," I offered. "Let you see inside me, too? Like before."

Lisa went to say something, but Taylor raised her hand up, then spoke. "Don't worry, Lisa," she said. "It's not going to happen."

"Wh-why?" I managed to gasp.

"Because I can't trust you like that again," she answered, looking away. "I did that, once. I ignored how easily you could turn it against me. How everything you were giving me, you could take away again. I believed you wouldn't. I thought that you loved me too much to do something like that. Yet here we are. I love you, that hasn't changed, but I can't trust you. I can't give you that power over me."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. I simply crumpled to my knees and wept. First Victoria, and now Taylor. The only two people in my life I could remember loving, in any sense of the word, and ultimately they both ended terrified to let me touch them. I gazed up at Taylor, begging
her with my eyes. She closed her own, and turned away.

"I'm sorry, Amelia," she said, at the ground. "I can't help how I feel."

I didn't answer. I couldn't find the words for it. I was still trying to figure out if this was somehow better or worse than what happened with Victoria. I thought I'd moved beyond this. I'd hoped to fix my mistakes, not repeat them. I don't know what she thought about my silence. I no longer knew what she thought about anything.

"We've used up enough time on this," she finally spoke again. "Emma, Riley's been listening in. Not sure for how long, but please find a way to keep her from doing whatever incomprehensibly horrible things she might be planning to do to me right now. At least until Amelia's recovered enough to talk her out of it. You can do that, right?"

"Y... yeah," Emma agreed.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be working with Rey on the zerglings. Someone let Theo know that after lunch, I want to see him for training. And Lisa," Taylor added as she walked away. "Why don't you go ruin the life of someone who deserves it for a change?"

===============

A/N- The last arc: exploring the significance of Taylia. This arc: exploring the LACK of Taylia.
My cell rang, and I answered immediately. The ringtone I had set for Missy. Even though this was the 'work' cell, and therefore it was officially 'Lachesis' making the call. "Horus speaking," I said the moment the line connected. Zach was kind enough to pause our game.

"Umm... what's going on with Amelia?" Missy started. "Clarice called me and sounded really scared and upset and doesn't know what to do to help."

"I don't know," I answered. "I didn't know there was anything going on. I'll go calm her down and find out what happened."

"Thank you," Missy said. "You're the best."

I blushed. "No I'm not."

"Yes you are," she insisted. "In fact, Clarice has charts and graphs that prove it. I'm not even making that up. There's, like, eighty of them and they cover pretty much everything. I'm not sure whether it's creepy or adorable."

"That... that certainly sounds like something she'd do," I admitted. It really did. "Okay, I'm going to find her, now."

"Okay, good luck, and keep me updated."

"I will," I promised, then turned off the phone. Neither of us were much for long goodbyes, even under normal circumstances, and especially not over our work phones. Chances were pretty good her mom took away her private cell, for whatever reason. You'd think that maybe, just maybe, 'my daughter is an Endslayer' would be enough for them to trust her to make her own decisions.

Maybe I should do what Minerva suggested and let it slip that I am, functionally, on the low end of the billionaire scale. However, the idea of doing so just did not feel right to me. Reminded me too much of my father, plus it was pathetic and tacky and even if Missy didn't think too highly of her parents, I really didn't want her to know they were... those kinds of people.

"What's up?" Zach asked as I got off the couch.

"Just running a checkup on Riley," I answered. "Seems Missy's a bit concerned."
"You're just trying to get out of the game so you don't have to be humiliated by losing," he taunted.

"Dude," I chuckled. "I was winning."

"By what standard?"

"The game's," I retorted as I headed for the labs. The only place Riley would be if she wasn't in her room. Emma had, apparently, left for the night. Riley was just staring at a blank screen.

"Hey, mushroom," I said as I walked in. One of these days, someone would need to explain to me where she got that nickname.

Riley looked at me. "Amelia's sad and I don't know what to do," she told me. I could see she'd been crying. "Missy didn't know, either."

"Just tell me what happened," I shaped a seat out of metal to sit on. It was actually far more comfortable than it sounds, more like sitting on some kind of magic water balloon than anything. Weird ass powers.

"I was playing with my Big Sis, then Taylor came in and wanted to be alone, I could tell she wanted to do... adult... things, so of course I left," Riley started explaining. I blinked. Wasn't Taylor straight? Oh well, not my business. "And then a few minutes later Taylor ran out looking angry and upset and Amelia was crying and neither of them told me what happened..." Riley sobbed.

Fuck. I put my arm around Riley and gave her a hug. "Don't worry," I told her. "This is a perfectly normal thing. It sucks, but it's normal and it's nobody's fault."

"But... whenever my old family fought, someone died," she cried into my shoulder. "I don't want anyone to die."

I frowned. Not too different than my own supposed family, actually. "The Slaughterhouse Nine probably isn't where you should take examples from. It's just a minor argument. They'll be upset for a little while, then it'll be forgotten and they'll be back to their usual selves. All couples do it."

"Will... will you ever fight with Missy like that?" she asked, clutching me tighter.

I shrugged. "Don't know," I said. "Maybe. And when we do, it'll probably be over stupid things that seem really important at the time but really aren't."
"Like what?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "I didn't have a normal home life, either. Most couples fight over things like not liking their in-laws, or spending too much time at work instead of together. My parents weren't exactly 'most couples'. They fought over things like whether or not all people with different skin colors are inferior, or just most of them." I was actually surprised by the bitterness in my voice at that. I probably shouldn't have been, but I was.

"Yeah," Riley agreed. "That really is stupid."

"Right," I confirmed, then rustled her hair. "So don't worry, I'm sure the two of them will fix things up. Just give them a few days to think things through and remind themselves that their love is what's really important."

....

I walked into our training room, Taylor was in her basic armor, this time. She almost never wore that outfit, anymore. "Good afternoon, ma'am," I said.

She nodded. "I was thinking nonpowered combat, this time," she said. She sounded, somehow, both tired and angry. "Just the biosuits with all the augments off, for protective purposes. No sense in getting hurt unnecessarily."

"Okay," I agreed. To be fair, nonpowered training was something most of us had gotten lazy about. The augmentative armor and all the bells and whistles inside made even normal people more powerful than most parahumans. Even better for those whose powers worked through the changelings, or who have powers that can be amplified. I, unfortunately, had neither. In the meantime, I changed the settings on the armor, turning off all the settings except the compensation tech that kept the armor's weight from slowing us down.

"Ready?" Taylor asked impatiently.

"Yes," I agreed. She rushed me, and I barely managed to deflect what would have been a really painful blow without the armor. I tried to knee her in the stomach, but she jumped and rolled. She was up on her feet before I could press the advantage. This was not her usual calm and collected combat style. She turned and came in low. Even though I was an awful lot more fit than I used to be, she was faster than me. And clearly more than a little pissed. Bad judgment was something I knew I could exploit.

I let her get her hit in, and then simply fell on top of her. We may have been the same height, but I was twice her weight with plenty to spare, even if only part of it was muscle. She couldn't lift me,
and I was better trained with wrestling than she was.

"Okay," she gasped. "Point for you."

I stood, letting her get to her feet as we spaced ourselves apart. "Are you sure you should be fighting right now, ma'am?" I asked. "You don't seem like yourself."

"Tell that to Lisa, next time you see her," she scoffed.

"Is that what the fight was about?" I asked. "Something Lisa said?"

"Of course you know about that," she sighed. "Why can't people just mind their business about my life?"

I looked down. "Sorry, ma'am, I try to respect your privacy, but... well, Riley was upset and I..."

"It's fine," she interrupted. "You're not the one who caused this mess. I just need to work out my frustrations physically, and you're one of the few people I can trust to not want to turn it into a conversation about my personal business."

I shrugged. "Sure, if that's what you want," I agreed. "But your physique doesn't lend itself to the whole 'berserker' thing. You're a more tactical fighter, you're just going to hurt yourself trying what you just tried."

She sighed. "Yeah, I know," she agreed. Then she took a breath and returned to her stance. "Ready for round two?"

An hour later, we were both exhausted. Her more than I, but then she'd won most of the matches. She plopped down on the mat, breathing heavily. "I'm going to ask Calvert to pick out some of his best men and women for us to run the brain scan on."

"Why?" I asked.

"We've gotten to the point where we can use the tech to upload skills," she answered. "Thanks to Rey's college skills, I'm qualified to be a doctor. Sort of. Barely."

I blinked. That was a thought and a half. "So... you're saying..."
"Six years of stressful training, granted in two hours of sitting on a couch," she answered. "We should probably work out a sort of manditory curriculum for everyone."

"Oh, that's great," I laughed. "Wish Victor was around for this. He always bragged about all his stolen skills, as if he somehow 'deserved' them or some such bullshit. Now we have a way to do the same."

"Not really stealing, though," Taylor responded. "Just copying. Does that idea... bother you?"

"No," I replied. "I think I would like having the skills of a doctor. Maybe public speaker, if you think we can get one?"

She shrugged. "Don't see why not. Glad to see you see the value of this. I'm going to bring it up for a vote next time we have a meeting. Won't make it mandatory, of course, but at the very least we should invest some time and energy into setting everything up."

I slowly climbed to my feet, hissing at the soreness in my legs and shoulders. "I'm going to go play video games for a while. Do you feel better?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Mind and body. Thanks for not prying."

"Any time, ma'am," I agreed as I walked, if a bit slowly, toward the exit. Sometimes people need to talk. And sometimes, they need someone who doesn't need them to talk.

===================

A/N- I like Theo.

Also: the foreshadowing bleeds from the walls.
Calvert was an almost laughably predictable man. Every night he'd leave the office at the same time, arrive home at the same time, and go to bed at the same time. This night was no different. Sure, his route was in the safest city on the planet, so almost any standard attack would fail miserably. I wasn't using a standard attack. Instead, I pressed a button, and his vehicle vanished. They'd probably spot the spacial distortion, perhaps even track it to destination after a few days. They'd never be able to determine who was responsible.

Calvert's guards were easily dispatched, if remarkably professional. Some of the PRT's best, clearly. Just not 'best' enough to beat me. Calvert himself calmly exited the vehicle, but he didn't try to fight. "Grue, I presume?" he asked to the darkness.

"You are awfully calm for someone who's going to die soon," I threatened.

"I survived Nilbog," he responded. "It had a certain impact on how I view the world. I don't doubt you can kill me. I don't even doubt you can do worse than kill me if you wanted to. Still, I am currently very much alive, and that means there's hope I get out of this."

"Hardly," I answered. I found myself incredibly unnerved. Calvert no doubt had plenty of training to resist thinkers, and that included the various cold read skills I'd picked up, but he was almost inhumanly calm. Like he was sitting safely in his office in the PRT headquarters, without a care in the world. Curious about the events transpiring, but in no way worried. I was also certain he was telling the truth about me being able to kill him: there was no secret plan in which he expected to survive by enacting.

"Ah, but I am resourceful," he smiled. "I may not be able to defeat you, but I can likely convince you that you have more to gain from my remaining alive, than by killing me. Surely, there must be a solution to suit both of us."

"And I'm suppose to trust you enough to work for you?" I growled.

"You did before, Mister Laborn," Calvert's voice shifted a bit, and I finally recognized it.

"Fuck," I mustered a laugh. "You're Coil."

"Coil, as far as I am aware, has been eliminated by Pantheon," he answered. Interestingly, that passed my lie detection as well.

"Cut the crap," I spat out. "I was just going to ask you if you were involved in the same corruption
that let Piggot murder my sister. Now I guess I have to ask a different question. Did you have another choice? Could your power have saved her? Don't bother lying, I'll know."

"I have no way of knowing," he answered. "Perhaps for the next couple years, until the apocalypse. I chose, instead, to ensure the death of Jack Slash and delay that over all other priorities."

I reached for my gun, a tinkertech weapon stolen from one of my other missions. And then Coil vanished, replaced by a number of people. Pantheon.

I bathed the area in darkness, and was surprised when some of them collapsed. Gaea, Aceso, Minerva, and Khepri simply fell like rag dolls, leaving me the handful remaining. Granted, that handful include Eki, and all three of the so-called Endslayers. I tested my powers, which I promptly lost as most of them took flight, leaving the darkness. Lachesis remained behind, kneeling and shaking the fallen form of Aceso. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but they probably had some kind of closed com system.

I stepped forward, testing her power at least, and regretting it quickly. My power copying never came with the same instinctive knowledge that the actual user had, nor the skills they had perfected. I was now within a foot of her. And with a half step, she was several feet away. I could see how she flexed her power, pushing the others further away from me.

I didn't know why they collapsed... no, now that I looked, I was figuring it out. They aren't real, I realized. I don't sense skills to draw from them through Victor's power. They must have been doubles, like those M4s that the police were using. Apparently they didn't get along with my power. Interesting. I had no desire to fight my former team, or their new allies, so I retreated.

Correction: I tried to retreat. Vista's power made that difficult, although with her power siphoned off for me to use, it was far from impossible.

Then I was slammed down by a kinetic attack. The safety glass of my goggles broke as I was driven into the ground. I looked up: Eki. How did she hit me?! I bolted, and she fired again, causing me to stumble. That was still absurdly accurate. Still, I felt my body adapting. The third shot didn't even slow me down. I fired back, striking her with the teal energy ray. Her forcefield canceled it. Of course it did. She survived New Delhi, this shitty gun means nothing compared to that.

Lachesis took flight, carrying Aceso. Or the body double, at least. She left my darkness, and with it I lost my access to her power. Aceso stepped away, staying in the air thanks to her armor's flight system, and the area around me warped to the point that the ground started to splinter under the stress. I hesitated for a second. Her power doesn't work on living things, I reminded myself as I ran into the mess.

Crawler's enhancements and Victor's skills served me as well as always, as I bobbed and weaved my way through the disintegrating landscape, evading stronger bursts of energy than before.
A steel cage fell toward me, despite it having been dropped well off course. It took me a second to realize it was Vista's power at work, again. I was caught behind the metal bars. This would have ended the fight, if not for Crawler's power. A grip and a tug and I tried to lift the cage off me. Only for it to remain, like trying to move the planet itself. *How?*

A floor of bars formed beneath, denying me even the ability to dig out.

"It's over," Eki shouted from above.

_Fuck. There's nothing for me to do, now, but try to talk my way out._ I dispelled my darkness. It didn't take long for the remaining body doubles to climb to their feet. Superhuman senses was one of the things I had not yet managed to pick up, beyond an ad-hoc 'people detector' using Victor's ability to sense potential skills. I could not hear what they were saying to each other, as they approached.

"B-Grue?" Khepri asked, looking at me. "What happened to you?"

"Hey, Taylor," I said, taking off the helmet. For the most part, my facial features hadn't changed. I was aware of her former feelings for me. We hadn't parted on bad terms. Maybe I could use that to influence her? Although talking to her through this proxy made it hard to read her reactions and emotions. But, then, that was true of her even in person. Lisa was here, too, and I wasn't sure just how well her power would work on me. Too much to bother lying about the most obvious stuff. "Turns out, I have a more or less permanent version of Crawler's regeneration, now."

"I meant the part where you're assassinating PRT Directors," Taylor responded, her voice cold.

"You do know he's Coil, right?" I asked. I suppressed a desire to smile when a handful of people reacted like they clearly did not know this. In fact, of the ones who were actually here in person, none of them knew. I wasn't sure about the doll users, but I was pretty certain Lisa and Taylor had to know.

"No trying to bullshit your way out of this, Brian," Lisa chided. _Of course, imply I'm lying without saying it._ "Where did you pick up this kind of social manipulation, anyway? That's not really your sty-" she froze. "Oh fuck. Brian, how the fuck could you?"

"What?" Taylor asked, looking over. "What did he do?"

"Remember how we couldn't find Victor?" she answered. Taylor's doll didn't show a reaction, but did her real body? I couldn't know.
"You know, I am aware those bodies are fakes," I said. "There's absolutely no reason for you to talk to each other through them, instead of wherever you're really hiding. Except for my benefit, or the benefit of the people who put themselves in real danger here."

"There was never a real danger," Minerva responded. "We knew who you were before we showed up. We just really didn't want you getting access to Gaea's power. Or mine or Khepri's or Clarice's for that matter. But especially not Gaea."

I frowned. "Good to know. So, planning to turn me over? You know I'm birdcage bound, just one show trial that the powers that be will ensure I can't win."

"You've been using people as human batteries, Brian," Minerva answered. "I don't think there's a rule you haven't broken with that."

"Nazis don't consider me a person," I countered. "They don't get to bitch when I return the sentiment."

I was, of course, watching everyone. Clotho and Atropos glanced at one another. Those two, at least, are sympathetic enough. They were also amongst the ones that reacted hardest to learning about Calvert being Coil. "Don't pretend you haven't done a few morally questionable things of your own, getting this far. Bribery, blackmail, recruiting supervillains left and right. I'm not even going to speculate on how you're the most blatantly obvious Class S threat since Nilbog, yet are being treated like heroes by the PRT, instead of on the receiving end of a kill order. Don't say 'Endslayer', we all know that's not nearly enough."

"You're not psychic, Brian," Lisa countered. "You don't even have a legitimate thinker power. You can't know anything."

"I know Armsmaster is still alive, and I know you also know," I offered. "Why are you covering that up? Blackmail to keep the wolves away from your door, I'm sure. Probably blackmailing Calvert, too. Unless he's still your boss. Fuck, Lisa. Taylor. He could have saved Aisha, and who knows how many of the rest of our team. How could you still work for him?"

"We work for no one," Taylor hissed. I was surprised that she cracked first, honestly. "We work with a lot of people. We do it to save the fucking world."

"By being as corrupt as the people who murdered your friends?" I countered. "If you need to worry about Dinah's predictions, then fine: you deal with that cataclysm. Leave me to cleanse the fucking PRT of its corruption and see to it that the world you save is still worth living in. If it makes you feel better, I won't even try to touch Coil. Attempt failed, villain escaped."

"Not how it works," Gaea stated.
"No?" I asked. "Is this a dictatorship? Do you make the decisions for everyone? If you're so sure of yourself, put it to a vote."

"A vote to what?" A young girl's voice asked. I wasn't sure who it was of the people above. Lachesis, probably.

"To decide if I'm more valuable free, perhaps?" I suggested. "That if they take me into custody, I'll talk about whatever secrets I know. Or that my crimes aren't as bad as yours, so you have no right to drag me in to be locked away and murdered. Or that maybe, just maybe, I'm the one doing the right thing and should be allowed to continue fixing the mistakes that you're too busy to fix. Call it a trial by a jury of my peers. The only one I'm ever likely to get, because you know I won't get one in an actual court of law. You won't, either, if they ever decide you've outlived your usefulness."

The three girls in front of me were silent. Likely talking to themselves in person, instead of by proxy. I could imagine the conversation. Refusing to make this democratic basically meant telling some of their most valuable members that their opinions didn't matter. Allowing the vote... well, I wasn't sure how it'd go, but I was pretty sure at least someone would side with me. A schism that I could use.

"Okay, fine," Gaea responded. "A vote."

"Take him in," Eki answered first. "He just threatened us and promised to continue a killing spree. The Nazis can go die in a fire, for all I care. But I am not letting any more unrepentant monsters walk away."

"That's a start," Lisa stated. "Same vote, here. We can't let you go just because you were our friend. Sorry, Brian."

Taylor looked away. "I'm abstaining from the vote. Too close to this." Of course she is, I thought. She knows the way the vote's going to go, and doesn't want to split her team's leadership by going against it.

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I knew which way Gaea would vote, and with her Aceso. Even if everyone else was in my favor, and I was only confident about two of them, that'd just force it back on Taylor. She'd choose her team's stability over me. I pressed the emergency button, and was teleported back to my base. I so didn't want to demonstrate that trick. Next time, they'd be prepared for it. And they had a lot more tinkers than I did. Including one with a transportation specialty.

I sighed. Well, fuck me, then.
Our combat team waited in our side dimension, of course. No sense in jumping twice. Horus and Lachesis stood together with Clarice. While Riley was next to Amelia. Off a little ways was Clotho and Atropos, talking privately. It was a clear demarcation, and I didn't need my power to see the social structure here.

Near them stood Eki, and Taylor's changeling wearing the Matriarch. And my own changeling in the newest model of the Huntress. That was the quiet corner.

Emma, Chariot and Yum Kaash were working the hardware we'd set up to track Calvert. Really, it was a van sized staging platform full of hardware I wasn't about to try to name. A lot of it was tech that we'd traded with Dragon for. Theoretically the most advanced sensory technology that wasn't currently pointed at an Endbringer.

Taylor herself was in her old, silk costume. Fighting via proxy instead of in person. Favors left side. Recent injury. Refuses to let Amelia heal it, refuses to let Riley heal it. Would likely allow Emma, but her skills aren't good enough to do more than merely speed the process. Choosing non Yggdrasil outfi, won't trust Amelia not to 'peak' at her through its connection to the living armor systems. Doesn't want to let Amelia know she's hurt. Doesn't want anyone to know she's hurt.

I tried to ignore the lovestruck longing looks that she and Amelia gave each other when they thought no one was looking. And the occasional glance they gave me that was anything but love. They blamed me for this, and I didn't need my power to tell me that, either. Fuck, the worst part about it is they were right. I fucked up bad, here. I forgot what Taylor was like without the Taylia bond. I forgot what Amy was like, too.

I hadn't accounted for just how completely alone they were, without each other. Bundles of trust issues that were only working around it because they knew the one person they trusted most was always there as backup, so no other betrayal mattered. That safety net was gone, now, and there wasn't shit I could do to fix it.

"He made his move," Taylor spoke. Of course she'd figure it out first. "Teleportation, I think? Out of my range."

"Tracking," Chariot responded. "Got it. Almost twenty miles northwest of the city. Middle of a field somewhere. Missy has the spot on her HUD."

....

Our changelings collapsed as soon as they were hit by Grue's darkness, and we were cut off from
their info feed, leaving our VR systems black.

"Fuck!" Amelia exclaimed. "This happened before, during the fight with Siberian. I forgot about it with everything else that happened!"

"Everyone get out of the darkness!" I commanded through our radio system. I couldn't be certain they heard.

"Got my bugs, though," Taylor responded. *Is upset by turn of events, angry at Brian, misses him, feels betrayed yet again.* "The relay function of my changeling still works, I just can't control anything. Guiding Eki's attacks."

"Lachesis got me out," Riley informed. "She's going to have Theo cage him."

....

"About this thing with Coil being Calvert," Atropos asked. "Is that true?"

"Yes," Amelia answered. "I'll share the details later... let's just say he's thoroughly under control and absolutely no danger to anyone. Ever again."

"You're skating on thin fucking ice," Atropos responded. "It better be a damn good explanation."

"A vote?" Eki asked over the communication network, interrupting that particular bomb. "Of all the assinine bullshit. If he's using Victor's power..."

*Confident, hard to read due to Crawler mutations and Victor's skills, is highly familiar with Victor's power as well as Crawler's, has been using them for weeks. Has access to other powers as well. Likely the other missing members of E88. Has access to high yield energy weapon and long range teleporter. Likely access to a tinker. Keeping them imprisoned somewhere. Believes he can escape if he buys enough time. Will return to his base. We'll go along with it," I insisted.*

"What? Why?" Eki exclaimed.

"We already know he's losing the vote, and so does he," I said. "He's planning some way to escape. Chariot, can you track him?"

"Already on it," Chariot answered. "Not quite sure how to explain some of these readings. He's carrying what's basically a miniature wormhole. No idea how it's being contained or where it comes..."
out at, but the scanners are pretty sure that's what we're looking at."

*Using Crawler regularly. Using E88 member(s). "Brockton Bay," I instructed. "Likely the north end, near the park they're building around Crawler's body. That's where he's keeping his victims."*

"That's crazy," Taylor replied. "How the fuck could he hide something like that from me?"

"Not all that difficult," Riley answered. "You didn't notice my spider bot."

"Because it was using corpses and garbage as camouflage!" Taylor argued. *Frustrated. Less forgiving of Riley's... oddities... Is aware of the danger of upsetting the girl. Doesn't care. Welcomes it, even. Refusing medical treatment. Wants to be hurt. I almost cringed. The Taylor I remembered was never so destructive. Untrue. Emotional connection and nostalgia colored perceptions. Taylor is behaving as normal, if more confidently than before. Isn't afraid of death or suffering, but not actively seeking it, even subconsciously.*

"He has some kind of tinker help," I interrupted. "Don't know who, but someone's responsible for that gun and the teleporter. And the wormhole. Scan Brockton Bay." The last sentence was a clear command, he'd need to be ordered not to by Taylor or Amelia. Neither of them did.

Meanwhile, Grue teleported.

"Got it!" Chariot shouted. "You were right, Minerva. He's on the north end, near the docks. Imputing coordinates."

"He'll run," Taylor volunteered. "We've got at most ten minutes. Gathering insects. If nothing else, I can keep him from taking others with him."

We shunted over in pairs, so half of us kept a charge to return with.

We dropped back right next to the signal. "I recognize this place," Taylor exclaimed. "We're only a block from the old place. He was right under our fucking noses the whole time." She paused for a moment. "The fuck? I can't sense the building."

"Do you mean there's no bugs?" Amelia asked.

"No, there are," she insisted. "I just... they're not noticing anything."

"He's using a technological version of Imp's power," I spoke. "You'd notice if it was simply driving
the insects off or killing them. Fucking clever. Okay, we can't trust the changelings and we can't trust our coms. Eki, fly above and fire the localized EMP straight down on the building. Full power."

"Got it," she acknowledged, taking off.

"I've twisted the surrounding area," Lachesis responded. "He'll be in for one hell of a fight trying to reach us with that darkness."

The pulse of energy hit hard enough that it blinded a lot of our changeling senses for a few seconds. Nothing electronic could have survived. In fact, we were lucky this area was industrial. We wouldn't have dared use this weapon in a residential zone. As it stood, it would still be hours before the repair crews fixed the damage to the power lines. This mission had better be worth it.

"Feeding the wormhole tracking to your HUDs," Chariot stated. "It'll let all of you track him."

Darkness tried to spill out of the building, caught only inches from the door and twisted around like a tornado up into the sky.

Atropos fired a couple more times, into the inky blackness. And then it stopped. Grue dropped, holding his stomach. Regenerating, faking severity of injury. Correction: not faking, is pretty hurt. Regeneration greatly inferior to Crawler's variant. Was relying on other regeneration during Coil battle. That regeneration countered by Atropos' power. "He's still functional. Gaea, cover him."

Most of her Dryad's mass simply tore off of her and collided with Grue, followed immediately by Yggdrasil pouring out of the sewers.

"There's five others in there," Lachesis reported. "Unsure if allies or captives. Two don't appear to be moving."

"On it," Taylor said darkly. "Two in cages in the basement. Another unconscious, has been for a while judging by the... smells." Angry at condition of prisoners, angry at Grue, reminded of Dinah, reminded of how Grue refused to side with her when she wanted to help Dinah. Comparing her relationship with Amelia to her relationship with Brian. Brian is very much coming up short in this. Resentful of how she lost that relationship. "Two others, holding weapons. Small guy and big guy. One seems to be the tinker. Negotiating their surrender."

Through my equipment's enhanced hearing, there was screaming.

================
A/N- The Skitter brand of negotiations.
I almost got sick when I entered the basement. We trusted dealing with Grue's accomplices to the others. Theo alone should be more than capable, the rest were just for assurances. But Taylor didn't want to let the others into the basement. She didn't even want me entering the basement. It wasn't hard to see why.

To call it a 'basement' was bullshit in and of itself. They carved a hole in the ground, pretty much literally. Rough, uneven walls shorn into the earth and then coated with some kind of shell. Possibly melted into an obsidian... I didn't know, tinker bullshit of some description, I was sure. A single extension cord brought power into the room. We had to follow the stairs down before we could really see anything. There were two separate cells that looked to be cobbled together from rebar and chicken wire.

"Who are you?" A woman asked— one of the prisoners. Her clothes looked relatively clean, and she looked in decent health at first glance. The man in the cell on the other side from her was... anything but. Staring blankly, unrecognizingly, at us.

"We're heroes," Skitter spoke, mechanically. "We beat your captors. I'm sorry we didn't know about you sooner."

"I suppose it's too much to hope for that you killed those rapist bastards?" the woman spat. I looked over at Taylor. The real her, not the changelings we were working through. She tensed at the accusation, probably deciding whether or not she believed it.

"You don't have to lie," Minerva countered. "Trust me, we know how bad this is. Rape would be the least serious crime on the list."

"What they did to Victor is rape," the woman insisted. "And Fenja..."

"Riley, back room," Taylor stated from our safe place in our alt earth. "You'll find the third captive. She appears to be comatose, I'm fairly certain it's medically induced. You'll know better than I would."

Aceso jogged toward the back.

"We'll get you out," I told the woman, stepping toward her cage. "What's your name? Are there any traps down here?" I wasn't concerned about us, but I didn't want the prisoners to be killed.

"Othala," she answered. It took me a moment to remember who that was. Had it really only been a
couple months since the removal of E88? "I don't think there's any traps, but one of them was a tinker, so I can't be sure."

"No," Minerva answered. "They were confident the prisoners wouldn't escape, and had no reason to set up traps. There were defenses upstairs to protect Uber and Leet, sure, but I'm pretty sure they were disabled by Eki. Any that withstood that attack? Khepri didn't give them a chance to use."

I gripped the bars and tugged. They broke easily enough. Out of the changelings, mine was definitely the strongest. In all honesty, I doubted it could rip the bars off of an actual jail cell, but this makeshift prison was nowhere near so durable.

Minerva simply opened a rather simplistic latch on Victor's door. He was unresponsive enough that they didn't even bother putting a real lock on it. *How long has he been like this?*

Othala rushed into the cell and gripped her... husband? I honestly didn't know enough about them to be sure. Still, she wept for the man, in full view of us and with no reservation or shame. "Can you help him?" she begged. "You're Panacea, right? A healer?"

*It's been a while since I've been a healer,* I thought.

"She can't," Minerva responded. "Grue used his own power on him, right? Repeated long exposures. Your husband has left behind plenty of case studies, and the damage cannot be repaired. No known healer has been able to fix the lives he's broken in the past, and he's been put through far more exposure than most of them. There's absolutely nothing for us to do beyond putting him in a care facility somewhere. Make his life as comfortable as possible."

"The fuck are you doing?" I asked Lisa from our staging area. "Our neural regeneration tech should be able to fix him."

"At best, it would allow someone else to have his body," she responded. "That mind won't be Victor's mind. Whatever remains of him in that shell is barely above brain dead. There's nothing left to save."

I closed my eyes. She has a point.

"On top of that?" Lisa continued. "Fuck them both, they're still Nazis. What Grue did to them is fucked up beyond words, but that doesn't change the fact that Victor did this exact sort of thing to others on a semi regular basis, and Othala helped murder people in front of their own families for the supposed 'crime' of not being white. I want her to be fully aware that this is an ironic hell of the highest order. They might be victims, but they're nowhere near innocent."

I frowned. I might be able to undo it. I had never tried fixing Victor's victims, due to my fear of working with brains. But she wasn't wrong: whatever I built out of what was left of his mind wouldn't be the same person. Minor repairs, especially in someone I already knew, that was one thing. *This... fuck, most of our zerg have higher mental facilities than what was left of Victor.*
"I'm sorry," my Dryad spoke. "We can't restore him. We... we can make sure his trial is fair. Considering his... medical condition... I can't imagine he'll be subjected to prison." Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, what would even be the point?

"You're going to arrest us?!” she shouted, startling Victor. "Shhh," she cooed at the upset man who couldn't understand what was happening, beyond knowing he was confused and frightened. "After everything that psycho put us through, surely you could just let us walk away?"

Taylor spoke to us in our safe spot. "So, the question is, do we recruit her? I vote against. We can't trust her, and she's mostly a redundancy."

I flinched. Fuck, the woman might be a Nazi, but she's still fucking human, and for us to go straight to the hard sell after she's been through this? I was beginning to remember why I hated Skitter and Tattletale so much.

"Nudge her over to the Protectorate," Lisa answered. "They need her far more than we do right now. Let them deal with the headaches that come with a Nazi nurse on the payroll. Right now, her only realistic value to us is making Calvert look good."

"It won't be that bad," Skitter responded to Othala. "Things have changed drastically since you've been down here. The Protectorate will make an offer. You'll get off scott free, long as you're willing to work for them. And they'll take care of your husband for you. Maybe they'll even be able to find someone who can fix him."

"What about E88?" Othala asked.

"Dismantled entirely," Skitter answered. "In prison, dead, or so deep in hiding that I'm not sure if even they know who they are."

"Purity and Crusader have joined the Protectorate in Houston," Minerva informed us. When did that happen? "Different names, of course. Purity's pretty generic, and it turns out Crusader's power can manifest almost any kind of outfit and melee weapon for his projections. He's got this whole cowboy theme going on with lassos, now. All the others have either left the country or settled down to an under the radar lifestyle so effective that I haven't been able to track them. Either that or they got themselves dead. Can't rule that out."

"You're a healer, Othala," Skitter continued. "One of the best ones on the planet, actually. Even if we ignore everything else you can do, that makes you invaluable."

She looked back down at the unresponsive Victor. "Fuck. You can promise they'll look after him?"
"I can promise a very fair and reasonable PRT Director who would meet you halfway," I answered. "Your power's too versatile and too useful. I'd be lying if I claimed to know exactly what you'll get offered. Directors will probably argue for weeks over where to assign you." Mostly who gets the credit or the blame, depending on who you ask. "Still, one way or another, Victor's going to be at the mercy of the state. At least this way you can ensure he gets the best possible medical care."

"She'll recover," Aceso announced, exiting the back room while carrying a very tall blond covered in nothing but a blanket. "Atrophy and substandard health care will be an issue, but ultimately a minor one. She should remain sedated for now, and allowed to recover slowly in a proper facility. Nothing more than a week or two. We can speed it up to about three days."

I constructed some outfits out of Yggdrasil and had them shunted over to my Dryad. "Let's get all of you into better clothes," I offered, handing Othala the set for her and Victor. She's his wife, so we were content to let her dress him while we worked to get Fenja clothed.

Meanwhile, our real selves were still debating on how to handle our captives. Victor, of course, was useless. He'd be the carrot that kept Othala in line. We'd already agreed on testing how Fenja's enlargement power legitimately worked. She might have useful powers that may or may not prove valuable. The really interesting question was if she could use her power on, say, one of our ultralisks. We could build a literally hundred foot tall monster for Taylor to command. Bring that into the next Endbringer fight.

And now, we were on to the criminals.

"Leet's got some promise for us," Lisa was discussing with Taylor, who was dead set on not taking any of the people who had done this. It feels good to know I'm still on her side most of the time. "But, honestly, if we could, I would really like to swing a way to get him straight into Dragon's personal control. That would be the absolutely ideal outcome. Leaving the kind of goodwill this kind of favor would generate with her, I've been comparing a few things, and I'm pretty sure I know what her tinker specialty is."

"Really?" I asked. I was actually interested in this.

"I think her power lets her understand other tinkers' technology," Lisa continued. "She isn't quite perfect at reverse engineering, but with each new piece of tech she picks up, she multiplies her options. It's likely she'll eventually reach a point where she can explain tinker tech in such a way that ordinary people can understand and build or improve upon it. But that's only a 'maybe', and not what I'm concerned with. What matters is that if Emma's a grab-bag-tinker, then Dragon is a trump-tinker."

"That is broken as fuck," Taylor muttered.

Riley simply nodded in agreement.
"No wonder she's so eager to buy almost everything we offer," Chariot responded. "I thought she was being nice to us for political reasons. But if you're right, then even the junky tech can be invaluable to her, as long as it's something she's never seen before. Or even if it is something she's seen before, just done in a different way."

"Holy shit!" Emma exclaimed. "You're talking about putting her in the same room as the guy who can build practically anything that can actually exist. Christ, give them a year and she might even be able to solve the Entity problem for us."

"That is exactly what I'm hoping for."

==============

A/N- Munchkining!
Dammit, Brian. I ignored the need to cry, looking at the state of his victims. Othala was reasonably healthy, though certainly not in good shape. After a bit of time, we'd decided that the only thing that had kept Fenja and Victor alive was liberal applications of Othala's powers. Part of what made her such a powerful healer is that it was 'no cost'. Or, at least, the Passenger was footing the bill instead of the laws of nature or physics. It worked like Lung, generating the mass and energy from seemingly nowhere. Instead of like Amelia, who needed to draw resources from somewhere and put concentration into it.

With Brian and his new 'friends' disabled, we could finally arrive in person, shunting our Changelings back over. Amelia had a sort of auto system that would take them back home. Most of the group was focused on finding equipment to confiscate. Whatever they used to blind me and my bugs was... I really wanted to know how that worked, and how to overcome it. I also, honestly, didn't want Dragon to rebuild a copy to use against me. Just because I happened to like her, that didn't mean I was willing to let her have that kind of power over me.

Speaking of... I glanced over at Amelia. She's beautiful. I looked away. God damn it, the world couldn't let have just that one thing, could it?

I walked over to Emma, currently in yellow mode, who was busy examining one of the larger devices. "So, what's this one?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Seems to be their teleportation device. Kinda insane, it's going to take us weeks to figure it out."

"Sell it to Dragon?" I suggested.

"Eventually," she responded. "This thing's giving me ideas, a way to transfer power from one area to another without it having to actually travel through the space between, and I'm sure Trevor will have some of his own. He's too busy on the stable point wormhole right now."

Fucking tinkers. "Okay, keep up the good work," I responded. Emma smiled far too happily at the minor praise. My own significantly less cute and horrifying version of Bonesaw, I thought. Of course, if she starts calling me 'big sister', I'm going to stab her in the kidneys. I walked away.

Ordinarily, right now Amelia and I would be holding hands and just... discussing. It was our post combat cooldown, taking the time to let the adrenaline wear off. Right now, after seeing what happened to Victor, I would have loved such a comfort. There was nothing of him left but a shell. I once again affirmed to myself that I would rather die than for that to ever happened to me. I had to hope that, if it did, someone would be kind enough to kill me.
Meanwhile, I spied with my bugs, listening in on the other conversations. Atropos and Clotho were off in a corner, doing exactly what I would have done with Amelia. I tried hard not to be resentful that they were so happy together. I chose not to listen in on them, except to ensure they weren't too upset with us over Coil.

Theo was with Lachesis, and they had approached the mostly passive Othala. She wasn't doing anything right now but trying to comfort her husband. My heart went out to her. I couldn't even imagine what she was going through. "Hello, ma'am," Theo said to his father's former employee. "I'm... I'm sorry about what happened to Victor."

Othala paused for a second. "Theo?" she asked. "Is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "Please don't spread it around to anyone else. I'm Horus, in costume. A hero."

"Kaiser was beginning to suspect you would never get your powers," Othala responded. "Instead you seem to have gotten the best ones out of your family."

"My father was wrong about a lot of things," Theo answered, letting a bit of distaste into his voice. Enough to show he has an edge, without making him sound needlessly angry or unstable. I was impressed. He'll be a brilliant leader, some day.

Miss Militia arrived with the PRT, someone else that I felt sorry for. I had a hard time imagining what her life was like these days. The last remaining Protectorate member in Brockton Bay. Yes, most of the others were nearby, but she was the only one here. After Piggot and Armsmaster... well, guilt by association. She may or may not deserve it, but her career was functionally dead. They couldn't demote or fire her, but they would never place her in charge of anything important.

"Don't bother sending your guys in yet," Lisa said, intercepting Miss Militia. "We're still itemizing the tech. Leet left behind some traps. We're combing the interior to make sure everything's been disabled."

"You mean to make certain you've stripped everything of value," Miss Militia countered.

"Spoils of war," Lisa dismissed. "Private organization, we don't get a fat government budget. Don't worry, we'll be selling it to your bosses eventually, I'm certain. Wouldn't want anyone to accuse us of some kind of cover up."

She frowned. The 'spoils' system was... messy, from a legal standpoint. What was valid, what was not. Especially when it came to tinker technology, which by all rights always went to the PRT and then the claimant would simply be paid for the equipment. Much the way firearms and drugs were
treated. Dead to all rights, we could not legally do what we were doing. It was also a shady area of borderline legal, so if no one told us to stop... we didn't have to stop.

"Are we going to have another custody argument about the prisoners?" Miss Militia asked, choosing a different battle. She sounded tired. Resigned, even. She would have won the spoils battle, at least in the short term. And, in the process, given the PRT access to technology that might just be able to shut down my power entirely. Instead she chose not to, knowing that she didn't have the political clout to keep what remained of her career should she piss us off. *Did she feel this way when she let Piggot firebomb my friends?* I wondered. *I certainly hope so.*

"Depends on who you want in custody," Lisa responded. "Othala, Victor and Fenja are victims, here. We didn't capture them, we rescued them after they'd been kept in captivity for weeks and used as a power supply. We won't be turning them over to your custody. However, Othala's willing to discuss the terms of her own surrender. And the possibility of joining the Protectorate. Be nice to her, and she goes home with you tonight."

*God damn it, Lisa, you did that on purpose.*

Miss Militia didn't respond to the comment. Considering she wasn't native to this country, she may not have gotten the joke. Then again, she dealt with Assault and Clockblocker on a regular basis, so it was just as likely that she developed a skill for ignoring that kind of thing. "The other two?"

"Victor's... well, you'll see for yourself," Lisa continued. "He's not in a condition to be making decisions for himself, and likely never will be again. Fenja's injured. We will be taking care of her until she's rehabilitated. It'll take a week at most. After that... it's really up to her to decide what comes next."

"The others, the actual criminals here. Responsible for the attack on former Director Piggot, the attempted assassination of Director Calvert, at least three other murders, kidnapping, crimes against humanity, conspiracy to commit a bunch of other crimes, and possibly treason. You should be thanking us... you were on his list, too. So was Legend, although I personally doubt he could have succeeded at that." *So was Costa-Brown, aka Alexandria... that would have gone poorly for him as well.* "I'm sure the prosecution will come up with a few other things to add to the list... they're all yours."

"Really?" Miss Militia sounded shocked. "No argument, no surprises?"

"Well... we do have to insist that Dragon take personal custody of Grue," she added. "His powers are... weird, now. We're not sure you have the facilities to hold him. We're not completely certain we have facilities to hold him. We had to use our Endslayers to put him down the first time."

"And he survived?"
"Well, we weren't trying to kill him," Minerva countered. "Look. He has had access to a lot of powers, and he's somehow even managed to keep the ones he got from Crawler. We don't know for certain what he can do now, and it's everything Gaea can do to keep his adaptive regeneration suppressed."

"A couple more hours of this and I won't be able to keep him unconscious anymore," Amelia confirmed. "After that, Theo might be able to hold him, if he doesn't have a power that can let him escape. If we don't have a better solution by then..." She'll have to kill him, I added mentally. I wanted to laugh and cry. One of my exes might kill the other. And then I had to chide myself. Brian and I were never an 'item' to make him an ex, and Amelia wouldn't be killing anyone. More likely, Atropos would have to kill him. Hers was the only power we could rely upon to no-sell his regenerative abilities.

Meanwhile, I was drawing my new breed of shunt capable units into the area. I was the only one here, other than Riley, who legitimately had blood on their hands. I can add more, if it means no one else has to. It's not like it really matters to me.

=================

A/N- being part of my story is suffering.

Also: I use "of course" *waaaay* too much in my writing. I've been deleting a lot of those because it's fucking annoying.

Why did no one ever point that habit out to me? It's a bad one and needs to die. In a fire. Made of bees.
Taylor didn't even look at me when she walked in. She was wearing her old silk costume, instead of her newer armor system, which meant she had walked home. There was a time when I would have been worried sick about her out alone at night. Coupled with how quiet she'd been the last couple days... and, for that matter, how she was coming home instead of staying at their base... I had good reason to be worried. "Hey kiddo," I started. "What are you doing home?"

"Sorry," she answered. "I know it's getting pretty late, but we didn't get finished until late. Then we had to deal with the PRT and Dragon and I'm completely exhausted."

"Usually you stay at your base, especially after one of your missions," I pointed out. "C'mon, Taylor, I'm not completely oblivious. I know I haven't really been there for you when you needed it, but I'm trying to make up for that. What's wrong? Is it a problem with Emma?" It didn't seem likely, but I didn't have a lot to go on, either. I had my problems with them working together, but I trusted Taylor when she insisted that it wasn't going to be like before. Still, this...

"No," Taylor sighed. "It's not Emma. If anything, she's been too nice. Bordering on the pathetic. Like 'I wish I were a more horrible person so I could enjoy this instead of feeling pity' type... fuck, I don't even know."

I wasn't a fan of the language, but I let it slide. Now isn't the time for that. "So, what's bothering you?"

"A lot of things," she admitted. "It's a work night, I don't want to keep you up."

It was an obvious avoidance, something I was painfully familiar with. She'd done it for years, and so had I. It was something I thought was behind us, after she joined Pantheon. She was like a different person after she and Amelia started seeing one another. A couple months ago, I would have let her behavior right now go. A couple months ago, both my daughter and I were miserable, and I didn't have Sarah giving me advice on how to deal with teenage girls.

"Okay," I agreed. "But tomorrow, we're meeting up for lunch, and we'll have that conversation."

She hesitated, probably looking for a way out of it. "I have work, too," she started. "We have a pretty big op planned for Friday morning."

"Bigger than Chicago?" I asked. It's Wednesday, now, so that only leaves one more day.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Lots bigger. This is going to make people think Chicago was a vacation day.
"Then we talk right after you get back," I stated. I hated negotiating spending time with my child, it was simply depressing. *She's a busy girl,* I reminded myself. *Important on a national level. International, even. In the last week she's spoken with the Triumvirate and most of the leaders of the PRT. Dragon. A half dozen political leaders.* I tried not to focus too much on how she declared all out war with some of the most dangerous psychopaths in the world.*You told Sarah she should accept that her daughter's grown up and making her own place in the world. Time to take your own advice, Danny, however much it hurts.*

"I'm not sure when that'll be," Taylor answered. "It could take days before everything's concluded."

"Okay, but then we talk about everything," I insisted.

She shrugged. "Okay, I can do that. Just, not right now. I need to get some sleep if I want to be useful when I go to work tomorrow. Logistics are going to be a nightmare, and we have to figure out how to best distribute our people. A couple of our most valuable are also our least cooperative..." She complained as she went to her room.

I smiled to myself. *Not so different from her old man, then.*

...

The doorbell rang. Too late at night to be business. I checked from the window. Amy was standing there, in her armor. *She rarely goes anywhere without wearing it,* I'd realized. I rushed to the door and opened it.

"Hey, Carol," Amy said as I opened the door. *She still doesn't call me mom,* I thought for what must have been the dozenth time in the last few days. I suppose I really can't expect anything more, all considered. "Mind if I come in?"

"Of course not, sweetie," I said. Then I mentally slapped myself. *Sweetie? Really, Carol, that's the best you can do?* "What's the problem?"

"That obvious?" she asked, smiling sadly as she stepped into the house. A fairly empty house, since Mark wasn't here right now. Hopefully Amy wouldn't notice, I really didn't feel like explaining that to her. I also didn't want her to think that I was reconciling with her out of loneliness.

"You're here, aren't you?" I pointed out.
"Yeah," she sighed. "Sorry I haven't come by sooner. Caught up in all kinds of stuff."

"It has only been a couple days since I extended the invitation," I consoled. "I honestly expected it'd take a bit longer. Maybe we might get together for dinner this weekend. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're here. You don't have to feel bad about it." When did she go from blaming me for everything in her life to apologizing? "Now, tell me what happened?"

"Taylor broke up with me," she answered. Oh, that kind of problem.

"No, that's not fair. We got into a fight over something she did. Then I did something worse. And I was the one who broke up with her. We both over reacted. I apologized the next day, and now she says she loves me, but can't trust me not to do that again. I have no idea what to do."

I hugged her. "I'm sorry," I said. "Relationships are hard to give good advice on." Made more difficult by the things you're not telling me, like what the fight was really about. "Lord knows I've proven I'm not very good at them. Are you still working together?"

"Yes," she answered.

"That's good," I tried to offer her a confident smile. "Having shared goals helps. You can keep working together, and that means you're still close. The same things that brought you together as a couple the first time can do it again."

She looked down. "I... don't think that's going to be possible. Taylor has... a lot of trust issues." Well, that's one thing I have in common with the girl. "In a way, it's amazing that she ever let me get close enough to hurt her in the first place. I doubt she'll ever make the mistake of trusting me like that a second time."

Mistake to trust her? "Amy, why-"

She kept speaking, interrupting my question. "Then we ran into her ex and he..."

Oh. Oh! This definitely isn't good. "Are you afraid they're going to get back together?"

"What? No!" Amy exclaimed. "He went full psycho. Kill order type stuff. Remember the E88 members we couldn't find? He had them chained in a makeshift prison."

I tensed, trying to force myself to not think about what happened to me so many years ago. It's in the past. They're dead. They can't hurt you anymore.

"Yeah, it's that bad," Amy confirmed. That's right, she is still in contact with me. Which means she
can identify my emotions. She doesn't know why I feel so strongly. "Turns out, he has a power that lets him drain powers from other people. He was using them as batteries. He drained Victor so completely that he was pretty much a zombie. It was the stuff of fucking nightmares... I'm not even sure what part's got me most messed up right now."


"Part of it was how Victor and Othala were," Amy responded. "I could see how much she loved him... almost anyone could. Except Victor. He was so dead inside that he couldn't recognize who she was. Every part of their memories together are missing. It... no one should have to go through that."

I simply nodded. I didn't think much for the idea of feeling sorry for Nazis, but if there was ever time for an exception, it was now.

"Then there was Taylor..." Amy shuddered. "She acted almost like Victor did. Empty, nonresponsive. It's how her power works, when she lets it. She coordinates so many things all the time that sometimes she forgets to act like a person. Especially when she's upset. It's terrifying to see her like that, especially comparing it to him."

"That's creepy, but at least she was upset, right?" I asked. I'd run into enough power based oddities to not judge things like that. Especially when it comes to the ones with Thinker powers. "Not being good at showing your emotions isn't the same as not having them."

"No," Amy sighed. "That's just part of it. She tried to hide it from me, I think. When we had her ex in custody, there was a pretty good chance he could escape if something went wrong. He has a top tier power. Maybe not Triumvirate level, but pretty close. She brought some of our anti-Endbringer weapons to use if he managed to break free of the other restraints."

"That's pretty smart of her," I stated, but there was a sense of dread forming in my stomach.

"They're killing weapons only, Mom," Amy disclosed. "She was ready to kill him. Someone she used to love. And that's not even the worst part. The worst part is how she looked at him like she didn't even see him. The way Victor looked at Othala. The way Taylor looks at me, now."

I hugged her tight. I had no advice to give.
I woke to Lily kissing the back of my neck. "Mmm," I turned and smiled. "When did you get here?"

"I only live three doors away, you know," she laughed. That was true enough. Lily and I were trying very hard to not be 'uhaul lesbians'. Neither of us wanted to live in the base the way about half of Pantheon did, either. We didn't want that even before knowing that fucking Bonesaw lived there. I pushed that thought out of my mind; they were right, she was too damn useful to get rid of, no matter how much I hated to admit it. So, instead, we lived in the 'refugee apartments' near the northern edge. It was mostly empty, now, as people received their government aid money and houses were repaired or rebuilt. A virtual ghost town. If a building could be called that.

"You have a point," I admitted, turning toward my lover, then sitting up. I didn't bother covering myself. After all, nothing she hadn't seen before. "Give me a chance to shower and clean up before we start talking business."

"I'll join you, Lily offered, starting to shed her clothes. I didn't object.

....

"Are you sure about coming with?" she asked me, after we'd managed to get dressed. "You don't have to."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "I've been doing nothing but making costumes lately. Don't get me wrong, I love the job, except I really don't, but the money is amazing and I certainly don't hate it. "But I could use some more excitement, y'know. Chicago was such a rush. I'm looking forward to doing it again." Even if it puts me in the same team as her.

She shrugged. "Yeah, I'm feeling kinda restless, myself." I ignored everything she didn't say. I knew she left New York for a reason. It made sense that they have her lead our team for that mission, she knew the way things worked there. Now she was going back. To old friends and enemies. To those who might feel betrayed by her shift of allegiances. And of course the villains that were now our allies. I could imagine how uncomfortable that was even without thinking about what happened to New Delhi.

I should probably distract her from thinking about all that, I decided. I smiled in what I hoped was a seductive fashion. "Besides, you're going to be in charge this time. I can't wait to find out what orders you'll give me."

....
"First stop, Boston!" Lachesis announced, letting that team off. It included our heaviest and most versatile forces. The ones that were going to bring down the Butcher. I understood how important that was. We could crush the rest of the Teeth as many times as we wanted, it wouldn't make much difference if the leader still remained. Still, they were sending all our primary team leadership. They weren't exaggerating when they said Lily was going to be in charge of this, she and I were easily the eldest members, and I made it pretty clear that I didn't want to be in charge of anything.

They also weren't kidding when they said we needed help to make it work. The five of us were powerful, but we weren't unbeatable, and we were lacking in a few departments. Especially when it came to a city like New York, which had a massive number of people. It was like looking for a needle in a stack of needles.

I tried to avoid glancing at the girl beside me. The one that had spit acid in my face only a few months ago. Talking to her would achieve nothing, and she had the good sense not to try, preferring to spend her time with Lachesis and Horus. Instead of thinking about that too much, I concentrated on filling my suit with power. Not too much, I didn't want to waste the energy. Systems started lighting up as they were charged. The anti-materiel blaster was one of the team's favorite weapons. Capable of destroying almost any equipment, with no risk to anyone wearing that equipment. Every so often they'd ask me to demonstrate my power again, as they tried to invent a weapon that could imitate that effect.

What seemed like only a few footsteps later, we found ourselves at our destination. We shunted over, right into a cleared out area of Central Park. Right between the Adept and the Protectorate. Three of each. I recognized Assault and Battery, but not the third guy. I didn't recognize either girl, or the guy from the Adept. They didn't look terribly happy with each other. They didn't seem very happy to see us, either.

"Fancy seeing you here," a man's voice spoke from the Adept's side of the line. Lily- Atropos, we're in costume now- turned toward him immediately, Azrael's wings fanned out and angled forward toward the speaker, in response to her body language. This is the combat stance. Coupling that suit with her power meant she could put twenty rounds a second through anything, natural or parahuman, with damn near perfect accuracy right now. This is why we keep Bonesaw alive, I realized.

"Shaman," a woman spoke, sounding less than pleased. "I suggest you shut up." She looked over to us. "Sorry about that, Pantheon."

Atropos laughed. "Don't worry about it," she insisted. "We have a... history together. So, 'Shaman', do your bosses know you named yourself after your favorite class from a tabletop RPG?"

"You bitch!" he muttered. Now that I had a chance to get a look- he wasn't that old. Probably younger than me. Maybe younger than Lily, though he was pretty tall. "But since we're on the subject of sharing personal information with strangers... here's some more: We dated for six months before she cheated on me."
I blinked. *What?*

"No. I dumped you and then started dating her," Lily argued back. "And you couldn't handle that, so you got her drunk and slept with her when she was too wasted to turn you down!"

"Guys!" Lachesis shouted. "This is not the time! We have more important shit to worry about. You can hash out your personal problems in private, later. I'm sure everyone here would rather work out how to deal with the Teeth."

There was a cough from the heroes' side, we all looked at the source: Assault. "I think I speak for anyone when I say that this is fascinating and I am perfectly okay with letting it c-ooof." He gripped his side where Battery elbowed him.

"You're right," Atropos said, presumably to Lachesis. "Sorry. Let's start with powersets. I already know the heroes. Shaman is a breaker that can imbue various objects with special properties. I trust he's picked up a few tricks since joining the Adepts?"

The woman nodded. "Bag of sawdust. Uses it to create shields by infusing the material and causing it to lock in place."

"I've seen him use that trick with dirt," Lily confirmed. "So what's your name and power?"

"Scry," she answered, then glanced at the others. "I'd rather not let my powers be known. I'm a thinker."

"You're amongst allies, here," Lily countered. "Need to know what you're capable of. Especially since you're the one we're relying on to give us much of our information, here. How you got it is important."

"Postcognition," she answered, after pausing for a minute. "I can look into a reflective surface and view anything it reflected for up to two weeks. Usually mirrors, but pools of water, tv screens, and windows will also work." *That is kind of terrifying.* "In addition, I can look into one mirror and see out of another in real time. It has a few limitations. I have to set the mirror in question, and can only keep one at a time. I've been tracking the teeth for a while. I want to see them dead. Promise me we're not going to hold back."

"Trust me, we're going all out for this one," Lily answered with an almost sadistic tone. "In fact, we're about to reveal one of our own secrets for this. You are listening in, right, Khepri?"

The voice rose up around us, a chorus of clicking and chirping to mimic human speech. "Loud and
clear," it stated. I shuddered involuntarily. Giving away the fact that Khepri's range was capable of covering both Boston and New York simultaneously was a big fucking step, one of those things that potentially changes everything. I knew that, but all I could think about was how fucking creepy that disembodied voice was.

Scry cringed and Battery was scratching at her side. Almost everyone on both sides glanced around looking for the speaker. *That's good,* I thought. *I'd feel like such a child if I was the only one freaked out by that trick of hers.*

==============

A/N- You can't prove any of this isn't true to canon!

And, yes, Shaman is the other Sting user. Shaker variant instead of Striker/pseudo-blaster.
We had a few hotel rooms rented when we arrived in Boston, which we went to almost immediately after our meeting with the Protectorate and the Ambassadors. They'd coordinated everything with the Boston heroes and villains already, so there wasn't any real difficulty there. Simply the usual final agreements bullshit. I didn't pay much attention.

"So, what's the plan?" I asked, following Taylor into her suite. It really was a suite, too. Really fancy, two bedrooms and everything. Had to cost some good money to rent this thing, let alone three of them.

"You'd know if you put as much effort into paying attention as you did pretending to sleep during meetings," Taylor chided me. "Seriously, why do you do stuff like that? We all know you don't actually sleep, ever. You're fooling absolutely no one."

I smiled. "I wasn't pretending to sleep," I told her. "I was picturing that beautiful little love nest Amelia built for the two of you. Specifically, with the two of you already spending a romantic evening in it. Seems so sad that it's going to waste."

"You..." she paused. "Wait. Why are you in my room?"

"There were only three rooms rented. I got one, Crystal and Lisa got one, and everyone just assumed you and Amelia would get the other," I answered, flopping down on the couch. "I traded with her, so this is now our room for the night. Wow, this couch is insanely comfortable. You could make out for hours on this thing. Seriously, like world record snogging sessions could be achieved here. I'll get the camera and the stopwatch, you go get Amelia."

"Fuck me, why can't you people stay out of our business?" Taylor opted to sit in one of the chairs.

"I know it comes as a surprise to loner types like us," I said, stretching out across the luxurious piece of furniture. "But this is what having friends is like. It means you're never alone because there's always some asshole taking up space on your furniture and trying to help you get laid. Do you think the hotel will let me keep this baby? Or at least tell me where to find one of my own?"

"You remind me of someone I used to know," she said. "No, that's not a compliment. At least he had the good graces to at least not poke around in my business. In all seriousness, it's not your problem. It's not anyone's problem. Why can't you people mind your own business?"

"For real?" I asked.
"Yes, for real," Taylor insisted.

"Dunno why I'm about to tell you this... must be the couch..." I tilted my head back and sighed. "Fuck, grab your note pad and pen. This stays between us. I'm not scared of you like some other people are. I can and will make your life suck if you speak of this to anyone."

"Fine, complete confidentiality" she agreed. "Let's hear it. What gives you such a need to prod around in my life?"

I closed my eyes and compelled myself. "Her name was Erica," I started. "Six days older than me... beautiful, smart, friendly, nice to everyone... we were best friends. I don't remember a time from my childhood when I didn't know her. I loved her before I even understood what love was."

Taylor said nothing, so I continued. "Maybe I'm looking back through rose colored glasses. I dunno. She had her faults. Namely, men. She always had the worst imaginable luck with men. Starting with her sack of shit father, and that set the tone for everyone she ever dated." I started crying, though I was at an angle that kept Taylor from seeing my eyes. "The fuck nineteen and twenty year olds thought they were doing, dating a twelve year old, I don't even want to imagine."

"And her father?" Taylor asked, her voice radiating her anger.

"You mean, did he touch her? Like that?" I asked. "I don't know. I do know he hit her. And, no, there's nothing we can do about him... he didn't live through Leviathan. Neither did she."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think..."

"I do go out of my way to not let people know," I pointed out. "I can hardly blame people because I succeeded at it, right?"

"I guess..." she agreed reluctantly.

"All of that? That's the stuff I could probably live with," I continued. "I was just a child, y'know. For all my fantasies of rescuing her and running away? I know that would never have happened. What really eats at me. The part that I can't forgive myself for. I never even told her how I felt. Not once. Would things have been different if I had? If she felt the same way, it could have saved her from a lot of her god damn 'boyfriends', at least. If she'd just been with me when the Endbringer sirens went off, then she would probably still be alive today. That's the shit I could have done something about. If nothing else, at least she would have known someone cared about her. That's something she deserved, and I failed to give her."

"Wow," Taylor muttered. "I'm so sorry."
"Don't be," I insisted. "Sorry won't change a damn thing. It won't make me feel better, it won't help her at all. You want to prove this story means a damn thing to you? Then don't do what I did. You have a real chance to be happy right now. More importantly, you have a chance to make someone else happy. Take it, take it and don't you dare look back. Life's too short to do justify anything else. I don't care if you're immortal, life's still too short."

"You're right," she sighed. "You're absolutely right."

"Good," I said. "I'll go get the camera and the stopwatch. You get Amelia."

"No," she stood up. "Not tonight. We need to be up at like three in the morning. Amelia needs her sleep, and so do I. We can't afford to be anything but our best tomorrow, not against the Butcher. All the happy makeup sessions in the world won't make any fucking difference if we screw up and get ourselves dead the next day."

"I guess that's fair," I relented. "Promise me that you're serious, though. I mean right after. The rest of us take care of dropping off the captives and looking good for the press. Meanwhile, you and Amelia will run off to that grotto she made and be elbow deep in each others' pants."

"Know what?" Taylor smiled. "I'll do my absolute best to do exactly that."

"Good," I said. "And remember, it has to be the grotto. That's where I put all the hidden cameras."

Taylor shook her head slowly. "I'm going to bed. Try not to get dust all over the couch." She turned and walked to one of the bedrooms. I spent my time looking for something interesting on television.

....

Four in the morning is early for most people. It's even earlier for assholes who spend all night being psychopathic fucks. They likely didn't wake up early very often. I imagine they woke up hung over a lot. Some of them have probably woken up screaming before. I bet some of them had even done both at the same time. I really doubt any of them woke up covered in terrifying mutant bugs that inject a drug designed by the world's most powerful biotinker so that all it does is inflict pain. Today, they got to do all those things.

And I was happy to let them.

"She's been flushed out," Khepri announced over the com. "She'll be looking for us, do your thing."
"On it," I responded, trying to fly in a passable copy of Khepri's armor. I was doing a pretty poor job of it. Clearly not too awful, however, as evidenced by a spear impaling my gut. The world vanished for less than a blink of an eye, and I was restored to normal. The fake-Khepri outfit continued to fall. I teleported near Butcher, and she vanished. That we had expected. A quick activation of my suicide switch, and I had a fully charged suit once again.

"Fuck, she spotted me," I said over the com.

"Othello says she's in the building," Minerva announced. I had no idea who 'Othello' was. One of the other teams' capes, I guessed. "She's checking up on her people. She's very very pissed. She'll be back out in a moment."

"Left!" Khepri shouted, and I turned immediately. In time to catch another oversized crossbow bolt to the face.

I teleported behind her a heartbeat later. She spun and stabbed at me with another spearlike bolt. It appeared to be made of brick, somehow. I managed to touch her hand before she shoved the weapon into my stomach. I reappeared. A half second later, she also reappeared right beside me. Confused and nude. I had seen how she moved- there was no fucking way I could touch her if she didn't want me to. I'd have to make her touch me.

I said the first words that came to mind. "Nice tits."

She punched me in the face, letting me tag her again. She vanished, and I pulled her back. "No, seriously. Those can't be real." This time, she clotheslined my neck before vanishing. She didn't get far.

"Or is regeneration plus durability the parahuman wonderbra?" Butcher grabbed my mouth, lifted me off the ground and slammed my head into the roof hard enough to crack the tiles.

A second later, we had both resumed our prior positioning. "You really should trim, though," I taunted, and she broke my neck for it. She didn't even try to teleport away this time, opting instead to decapitate me with a sword she got from somewhere. "Need a machete to even find anything." A sideways slash that got both of my lungs. "Just because you're a deranged bitch." And that would be my heart. "Doesn't mean you can't take the time to shave." She kneed me hard in the crotch. I was glad that pain didn't carry over between restorations.

"What do I have to do to kill you!?" she shouted, finally getting frustrated.

"Well I dunno maybe you could bitch at me, how about that?" I suggested, at which point she attempted to use some power on me. I wasn't sure which one, it didn't work except to trip my
"Seems that's all you appear to be good for these days, huh?" Another power attack, apparently, made me respawn again. "Are you trying to use your bitch-fu on me?" I asked. She stomped into my shin, and would have shattered my leg if I didn't reform before the damage was much more than superficial.

"Bitcher, that's what they should call you," I continued my memorized rant. It was easier than being spontaneous, especially when every fucking thing she hit me with hurt like hell. Speaking of, she just kicked me in the head hard enough to crush my skull.

"Seriously, five ancient sages of bitch gathered atop the peaks of Mount Bitch to proclaim your birth," I kept going, and was rewarded with an elbow to the chest that sent me flying. I rematerialized almost twenty feet away from her. She was still tagged, however, so I just stood there. "And a hundred years later, when all the bitch stars had aligned," she teleported. I almost brought her back, when a fist punched through the back of my neck.

"You were born and made everyone's life around you a living hell," Wait... Did she just uppercut me in the ass?

"Because you are SUCH a BITCH!" She didn't attack, and I felt the teleport. I brought her back, and she vanished again, only a few feet away, however.

While I had been distracting her, Khepri's swarm had been gathering. Butcher's teleportation had limits. Mass distribution- if there was too much other stuff in the way, she couldn't teleport into it. The sky had gone so dark that even the infravision setting on my armor couldn't see the sun.

"THERE IS NOWHERE FOR YOU TO RUN," the world around me announced. I mentally reassessed last night's claim that Taylor didn't scare me.

A/N- Wanna hear something REALLY depressing? "Based on a true story, used with permission."

Also. Zach gets a crowning moment of something, at least.

And THIS, ladies, gentlemen, and others... is the chapter that got me in trouble on SB. Everything else was apparently cool. This got me a one day mute.

Wanna take a stab at which line, specifically, it was?
"Two day vacation, huh?" I smiled. *Mom is going to flip her shit over this one.

"Yup," Clarice confirmed cheerfully. "Like Chicago, only without all the adult supervision. Too bad we're not going after the entire criminal underworld this time. That was so much fun"

"Only the worst of them," was my response. This really was exciting, and Clarice's energy was infectious, even if I knew she wasn't actually real. Riley was busy with other stuff. Like breaking the Taboo. Something that would likely take a lot of time. "So, how's Trevor doing?" I asked. In spite of him being a mole, he was one of the only people who actually took the time to try to get to know me in the Wards. Him and Weld. I worried about them both, sometimes.

"He's doing great," Clarice said happily. "Still playing with that wormhole. Says he has an idea for allowing us to use our powers across dimensions without needing an actual gate. It might be what we need to go after the real target." *By which she means Scion's true body.*

"So who's on our team?" I asked.

"Clotho, Theo, and Atropos gets to be in charge." she pouted. She still hadn't gotten over Lily getting to take that name, when she didn't get to give it to Bella. I smiled, it really was easy to forget how young she was sometimes. "They think she's best to put in charge because she was a Ward in New York and knows the landscape better."

"Makes sense," I stated. "Probably need the senior members to deal with Butcher directly. And of course they'd want to keep me, you, and Theo on the same team since we rock the house every time we're together." I, on the other, was more worried about Lily's lack of professionalism. She reacted far too much on really dumb impulses without stopping to actually figure out the situation. *There is a reason she was never put in charge of the wards despite the PRT's stupid seniority system, oh brilliant leaders.*

She brightened up. "Okay, that's going to be fun, at least."

....

Hopefully Khepri's display would distract everyone from Atropos', I thought. I felt more than a little humiliated that I had to look the leaders of two separate professional teams in the eyes and admit 'yes, she is our team leader'. *Maybe next time they'll just put me in charge.*

"Aren't you suppose to be in Boston?" Battery asked the swarm. *Smart,* I thought approvingly. She
was trying to discern the limits of Taylor's power. No doubt there's already a pre-approved kill order waiting for a moment like 'interstate range'. *If only they knew.*

"We confiscated a piece of tinker tech recently," Khepri answered. "Some sort of portable wormhole that powers can travel through. I'm carrying one, Aceso's carrying the other. Functionally, it means I have my range around her as well as where I'm at. Minus a few feet."

"I see," acknowledged Adamant, the leader of the Protectorate at this location. His powerset was mostly defensive. Lowest grade brute, plus immunity to all powers. Literally any kind of power stops where he starts. Mind control, precognition, lasers, forcefields, invulnerability, super strength, none of it worked on him. Unfortunately for him and others, that didn't include bullet fire. Or Endbringers, apparently. I wasn't sure how it would apply to my powers, or Clarice's abilities, or an 'absolute' power like Atropos or Clockblocker... but none of that was likely to come up on this job.

"We're hoping to find a way to maintain the device," Khepri continued explaining to Adamant. "But it's Leet's tech, so it's anyone's guess whether we'll ever be able to fix it when it breaks. May as well take advantage of it while it still works."

Then there was the last of the Adepts. I was disappointed, but not surprised, that Atropos didn't bother to ask her what her power was. Instead, I texted the question to Riley. She spoke via the com to all of us. "The last Adept is called Alchemy. Breaker/shaker. Anything she touches can be attuned to her, so all attacks directed at her transfer harm that object instead. She's close to indestructible thanks to this, and she can extend that durability to objects she holds. One of the survivors at New Delhi."

I saw Atropos tense, as did Clotho. She sent the information to them as well, but they're not too happy with the idea of Riley being the one that sent the information.

"Thanks for the info," Khepri said over the coms. "Horus... talk with Alchemy, maybe your powers will interact. Aceso, I want you with the Adepts as well. The rest of you go with the Protectorate. How Lachesis and Adamant interact, power wise, needs to be tested in detail before we go to battle."

*They're breaking me away from the rest of my team? Fuck. I knew the reason was sound, but still... fuck.*

"So what's the strategy?" Scry asked, once she had recovered from the creepy swarm voice that still caused me to shiver, despite all the times I had dealt with Taylor. I had nightmares from the times I'd fought her as Skitter.

....

The plan, it turns out, was 'the bugs go in first'. The new pepper flies. Basically just large houseflies
that detonate into a cloud of capsaicin- or some tinker built chemical that did the same thing, only better. One was guaranteed to clear a room in a matter of seconds. We had about ten thousand of them. There couldn't have been so many that it was any kind of necessary, but that's what we did. I was more than a little disappointed, honestly. *Why even show up if we were just going to watch Taylor and Amelia play with our toys?*

I watched the bedlam through my people-sense, as they ran for cover that wouldn't be available, or tried to work their way to an exit while blinded and struggling with other blinded and desperate people. *Okay, I had to admit, this is kinda fun.* Then a cloud of light purple smoke. billowed out of one of their buildings.

"That's Haze," Clarice announced over the coms. "Stay above the cloud at any cost." I recalled back to our briefing. Haze's power is illusionary, not chemical. He can pick who's influenced and how, and physical barriers mean nothing.

I gave the tug, and Calysta leapt into the air, folding her wings in to maximize the antigravity. It was one hell of a weird feeling, falling upward, but we had practiced with it a lot. Theo's power rippled into existence, coating the two of us and our Pegasus in indestructible metal.

All of us took to the air with our respective abilities, except Adamant, who was immune to powers-including, presumably, Haze's. And Clarice, who was of course not an actual person to begin with.

A yellowish gunk splashed against our metal shield, and quickly slid off. More shots fired upward, forcing others to avoid the attack. Shaman extended his hand casually, and the goo targeting him dissolved into nothing. "That's Plague," he announced. "Do not let that stuff touch you, it's lethal if you're lucky."

Another from the briefing, his power ranged from Crawler-type-acid to 'cancer of the everywhere' to fast acting ebola. The one saving grace was none of his afflictions were contagious, but Shaman wasn't exaggerating. Death was what happened to the fortunate. We were pretty sure our armor systems could counter the stuff, but there was no reason to tempt fate.

"Khepri, can you guide my aim?" I asked. There was no answer. "Khepri's not responding," I announced to the group. "We're on our own, here."

Another burst of acid traveled up. Atropos dived in front of it, protecting Clotho. Her power destroyed the goo. Several more bursts traveled upward, but we all had our defenses in place. Unfortunately, we were only able to defend. Especially since we couldn't risk being inside that cloud.

I was watching the ground with my power, pulling and pushing in minor fluctuations that allowed me to locate the likely source of the attacks. Setting Singularity to its lowest attack state, I fired straight at the target. Direct hit in the gut. I... may have used my power to cheat a little, making my
attack the equivalent of a point blank shot. He doubled over, in what I hoped was a lot of pain. I found myself wishing I could have used 'stage three' on that sadistic bastard.

"Plague is down," I announced. "I'm watching to make sure he doesn't get back up." I hesitated, *I'm not in charge here.* "Atropos?"

"What?" the older girl asked, and I felt the need to either facepalm or slap her.

"You're in charge, what are the orders?"

She hesitated. "Can you clear that fog away with your power?" she asked.

"No," I answered, ignoring the desire to point out that if I could, I already would have. "It's not really there. A function of the power. I can't bend it any more than I can bend Khepri's control radius."

"I can move in," Adamant volunteered. "All I have to do is find Haze and I can take him out."

"Okay," Atropos readily agreed. "Go with that."

I activated the private com line to Riley. "Send Aceso in with him," I instructed my friend. "He's not strong enough to go in there alone, immunity to powers be damned. Don't tell Atropos about this."

"Understood," Riley agreed. I was a little more at ease, now. She was younger than me, if only by a year and a half. She also had at least that year and a half more combat experience than I did. I could trust her to handle her own.

I felt the distortion right before a shriek came from Clotho. A six armed monster had appeared in front of her and tried to claw her with some wicked looking serrated talons. It didn't work, fortunately. Tapestry was almost as indestructible as Singularity. We could trade punches with Endbringers without much problem, so chances were pretty good there wasn't a physical attack on the planet that could hurt either of us. The monster vanished only moments later, leaving a very startled, but unharmed, Clotho.

"The fuck was that?" Atropos asked.

"Don't know, not in the briefing," I responded. I sent a video over to Riley, along with another private message. "Any clues?"

"Don't recognize it," Riley answered. "Moves like it's real, so most likely a Case 53 or shapeshifter,
possibly some kind of construct. Almost certainly not an illusion or projection. I'm running it through the database. Clearly has brute and mover powers, recommend you step up to stage two."

There was a thud against Horus’ defensive shell. The spider monster had attacked us, but failed miserably. It vanished.

"Oh no..." Riley muttered from the private channel neither of us had switched away from. Clarice's voice went over the standard com. "Haze isn't an illusionist!" she announced. "He's a reality changer, like Labyrinth! Everyone fall back! Retreat!"

I was about to command Calysta to move when I felt a sudden sharp pain in my chest. I looked down, and could see the blood pouring out of me, out of the destroyed portions of both Theo's power and my own armor. *Huh, I didn't-*
The Butcher was surrounded by enough insects that there literally was nowhere for her to move, beyond a small bubble of space in the middle. I idly wondered if she still needed oxygen, because there simply wasn't a lot of air. If these were natural insects, they would all be dying en mass right now. And, in fact, most of them were dying, only to be held in place by the antigravity latticework put together by Chariot and Emma. Who'd have though Emma, of all people, would be one of my best allies? I smiled grimly. Fucking Tinkers.

"You can't beat me with bugs," Butcher growled at me.

"LET'S TEST THAT, SHALL WE?" was my response. A dozen shock-beetles flew in at her, along with over a thousand other similarly sized cockroaches. Who were amongst the few bugs that could survive the rapidly depleting oxygen levels. She slashed the shock-beetles out of the air with a sword made from concrete and ignored the roaches entirely.

So, her combat sense is effective enough to identify which bugs are a threat, and which are not. That makes this harder.

Some of the modified hummingbird moths charged in next. They couldn't last long, but they didn't need to. Another slash, and they were destroyed. But her blade was now melting. She tossed it aside before it could reach her hand. Then bolted straight into the mass of bugs.

She didn't dive into any of the deadly ones. That would be too much to hope for. I covered her body with biting, stinging creatures in masses dense enough that they could have chewed their way through a normal human body in minutes at most. Butcher wasn't most bodies, however. Too durable for the bugs to cut through anything. I tried the eyes, next, but she was fighting with them closed. Not that surprising, it was too dark for her to see in there, anyway.

She teleported. It was less than a foot, but it was enough for every insect near her to be consumed in the explosive firestorm her power left behind. *God damnit, I thought I had that covered.* I rapidly plugged the holes left by her movement, no sense in giving her a chance to teleport back to the spot she just came from. I couldn't stop her, but I could make her work for it.

She coughed, now that she was free of attacking bugs. *Good, the air quality is poor enough to make it a problem for her.*

The bugs converged again. This time, I wasn't as interested in going for the obvious weak points. These bugs swarmed into her mouth and nose, trying to fight their way down her throat. She clamped her mouth shut and started chewing the insects, crushing and grinding them with her teeth and tongue. There was not a moment of hesitation in her actions. She bolted again, then teleported back to her starting point. I just couldn't flood the area with bugs fast enough to block her return effect.
Zach was moving to get in close, and I provided the swarm of bugs needed to keep him cloaked on his way closer to the madwoman.

She dropped and pulled a makeshift spear out of the roof, throwing it toward the boy with perfect accuracy to strike his heart. "Bugs don't block her ability to sense blood and veins," I noted aloud to the team, through their armor. It wasn't something we had expected to work, which was why we were using Osiris to test the chance. "We can't use them for striking cover."

"Fuck," Minerva muttered.

"Doesn't matter," I responded. "I'm wearing her down fast. I might not need help."

"You'll need help," Minerva insisted. "You might be able to tire her out, but there's no way in hell you can take her down without killing her."

"You're right," I agreed. "But the more I can soften her up, the better off we are." I drew almost all the shock beetles and had them dive in to form a bubble around her. They activated their power surge a half second before converging on her body. Not quite as good as having them make contact, but at least this way they actually did something before they died.

She stumbled, heat and smoke pouring off her body from the rough equivalent of getting struck by lightning twice. I pressed the swarm in, trusting that her body could withstand the initial blow without killing her or even disabling her. I was not disappointed.

"Got a plan," Emma stated. "Gaea, I need you to make more of the shock beetles, but with only a hundredth of the electrical power."

"I can do that," Gaea agreed. I let myself indulge in the music of her voice for a second. "It'll take a few minutes."

"Still got her on the ropes," I reminded. "I can keep her there, but don't stop feeding more reinforcements, we've already killed half the usable insects in Boston here." It was true, too. She couldn't fight me, but this was becoming a war of attrition. Between her durability and her regeneration, she would win that war.

She had another idea however, manifesting a throwing knife of stone, she launched it at absurd speeds, where it flew out of my bug cloud and kept traveling, impaling a pedestrian that had come out to gawk at the spectacle.

"See that?" she gasped, fighting for the limited supply of oxygen that my bugs were consuming far faster than she could. "I can keep doing that. How many lives am I worth to you, hero?"
I hesitated for all of a heartbeat. *However many are necessary.* "WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'M A HERO?" My swarm asked, as another stream of acid moths dived toward the unarmed Butcher. One even managed to clip her arm before she teleported, annihilating the rest. She didn't seem as bothered as I would have expected, frankly. *Oh, right, one of her powers is supposedly an inability to experience pain.* I wondered if that was a real power, or merely a side effect of her insanity.

I didn't have any actual eyes on the scene, and the junk bugs were dying quickly, so I could only make approximate guesses at Butcher's condition as she continued to fight. She was slowing down, but even still she was faster and stronger than any normal person. With her various regeneration powers and the precognition, and my bug cloud being held together by antigravity instead of their own power anymore... I had another minute or two before she worked free.

"Got the new bugs," Gaea announced. I almost sighed with relief.

"Eki, I need you to shunt in next to Osiris," Emma instructed. "T-Khepri, when they shunt through, cover her in them. Don't activate them, they should slip under her danger sense. For a little while, at least."

They appeared a few seconds later. *Good, they don't rely upon oxygen, I noted. That makes this easier.* They were tiny, this new batch. Mosquito sized. Butcher really didn't notice them as they found purchases in her singed hair and across a body that was charred and crisped in several areas. *How is she still standing?*

Eki appeared in my full awareness, as opposed to the somewhat dimmer perception across the dimensional barrier.

"Ready?" Emma asked.

"Ready," I answered.

"Taylor, I need you to take control of Eki's suit. The weapon's already ready. Fire a half second after you discharge the smaller flies, got it?" Emma asked.

"Understood," I answered, and followed the instructions.

Butcher, of course, teleported the moment before Eki's weapon fired, but the lightning arced and struck her anyway. Burning its way through a good portion of my insect cloud. For a moment, it must have looked like one of those plasma globes as the electricity discharged itself across my swarm.
She collapsed to the ground, her body battered to the point of uselessness. For a second, I wondered if we might have accidentally killed her, thus passing on that curse to me or Eki. That could have been disastrous. But then the psychopath managed to force herself to her feet. Right arm hanging limp and useless, and the rest of her so damaged that it was hard to imagine she wasn't some kind of zombie. She teleported in a burst of flame.

Only to reappear right next to Osiris, who instantly disintegrated and Eki, who started screaming in blood curdling agony. She dropped to her knees, gripping her hand around her lightning weapon. Eki struggled to catch her breath as Osiris disintegrated again in response to getting too close to the madwoman. Eki roared in inarticulate rage as she brought her weapon up and fired it directly into Butcher's gut. The psychopath gripped Eki's arm with her one good hand, holding the the energy weapon against herself. A third shot went off, and Butcher's hair caught fire from the released heat from the electricity.

"Fuck!" Minerva shouted. "Butcher's given up! She's trying to escape by forcing Eki to kill her!"
"Haze isn't an illusionist!" Clarice shouted over the com. "He's a reality changer, like Labyrinth! Everyone fall back! Retreat!"

Moments later, I felt a sudden sharp pain in my side. I tried to cry out, but the pain and shock had taken my breath away. Then Missy slumped forward. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.* I gripped Calysta's reins with the arm that wasn't holding Missy. I forced my power tight around the injury in my side, trying to staunch the blood flow. "Aceso," I managed to gasp. "Lachesis is unconscious."

I brought Calysta up and back, landing her on a rooftop a couple blocks from the mission location. Atropos and Clotho followed, with Shaman trailing behind. I could feel my armor working itself into my wound, both back and front. It was patching itself in, relieving pain and providing for my biological needs as best it could understand. Injecting what passed for its blood into my bloodstream. Missy's armor would be doing the same, but it her case it would do more harm than good.

A series of explosions sounded in the purple fog, detected and amplified by my suit's systems. It was dimmer than the usual perfect clarity it typically grants. Whether that was because the suit was putting too much of its effort into keeping me functional, or because I was injured enough to lose hearing, I didn't know.

I laid Missy flat on the roof. "I'm going to stabilize her and then shunt her over," I insisted. "This is really bad." I called upon the memories that had been installed thanks to the memory tech. Six years of medical college from Rey, plus a few updates provided by Riley and Emma. Tinker knowledge didn't translate, unfortunately, but I had first rate skills and then some. *Who gives a fuck if I didn't earn them?*

"Not from a rooftop," Riley insisted. "You know the shunts are geoanalogous."

"Just... just buy time in there for us, okay? I don't want them attacking us while I'm working on her."

Atropos landed first. "Is she okay?"

"Cut open her armor," I instructed, speaking slowly so as to not strain my own injury. "Neck to crotch."

Atropos didn't argue, slipping a clawed finger into the armor and splitting the high durability living armor like it was gossamer. Deep red fluid sloshed out in a way that would make you think the armor itself was bleeding. *Too much blood,* my unfamiliar knowledge told me. I tore open her shirt before thinking about it.
The human male part of my brain apparently spent too much time around Zach, because I couldn't help but think that I was now looking at my girlfriend topless. Unfamiliar programmed instincts screamed at me that I didn't have gloves. Not things I care about right now, I instructed my mind, but that was probably my own shock and blood loss speaking. Alongside the certainty that she was far beyond my ability to help.

"The fuck happened?" Shaman asked, after he landed. "Holy shit!"

"Not your business," Atropos told him, still staring at Missy.

"The fuck were you thinking!?" he continued, yelling at her. "You knew they had an illusionist and you fired a lethal attack!"

"It wasn't my fault!" Atropos yelled at him. Meanwhile, another series of explosions went off in the clouds.

"Nothing ever is, is it?" Shaman retorted.

"Will you two just shut up and fuck already!" I screamed at them. They looked at me, and a small part of my mind once again confirmed that I spent too much time around Zach. Another small part of me was terrified. A good amount was in pain. The overwhelming majority, however, was pissed. "We're in a god damn war zone right now, and you two are arguing while one of our own is dying in front of you! Learn some fucking priorities!"

None of them spoke up. "Clotho," I instructed, as I started to push Missy's armor back together. It needed to seal so the shunt would work on her. "You're the most vulnerable of us. Take Lachesis and shunt her. We'll coordinate from there. Then you're to go support Battery's team at the other location." Missy got shot because your girlfriend was too busy looking after you to think about the team, I added mentally. That won't happen again.

"Isn't that dangerous in her..." Clotho started.

"At this point, it doesn't matter," I interrupted. "She'll die before we get her anywhere, and the only place with facilities that can help is on the other side of our teleportation. Take her and go." A few lies, there. We didn't want Shaman to know about our side dimension. And I didn't want to tell anyone, even myself, that Missy had already died. That shot pierced her heart.

Atropos spoke up. "You don't get to make that call," she insisted. "You're sending her to..." she paused, glancing toward Shaman. Bonesaw, that's the name you can't say.
"The fuck I don't," I started coughing, and felt the metallic tasting fluids coming up. *Blood*, I realized. *Must have pierced my lung. Fuck it, I only need one of them.* "Someone needs to take command here. You have a problem with that, take it up with Khepri and Gaea when we get back. Our suits have recordings for a reason, I'm sure they'll be fair in their evaluation. Of both of us."

"It... it's fine," Clotho said timidly, her ribbons moving to wrap around Missy gently and firmly. *She has the same medical 'training' as I do. She'll handle everything with proper professional care. "Saving her takes priority. I'll be back soon." At least one other person here is competent."

There was another explosion in the mist.

"Fuck!" Riley shouted. *Wow, first time she's ever sworn. Now is not the time to focus on that. I had to wonder about how much my mind was wandering. Probably a function of the anesthetics the armor uses. "Lost Clarice. Sorry I couldn't buy you more time.""

"Aceso's down," I wheezed. Talking so much with only one lung sucks. "Clotho, go. We'll take care of ourselves."

She hovered slightly and then vanished over to the other side. Smart choice, establishing flight before teleporting.

I forced myself to stand, using my armor to do much of the work. It was laborious to work my way back onto Calysta, despite the antigrav built into my armor, and my metal shaping to help me. "Okay, now we're going back in."

"What for?" Shaman asked.

"Rescue operation," I said grimly. "This mission's fucked already, but I'm not about to lose someone." *Else.*

"You're going in there for Aceso?" Atropos asked incredulously, which of course earned a look from Shaman.

"Don't forget Adamant," I reminded her. "Aceso can take care of herself, but he's barely more than baseline human."

"Once we're in there, we won't be able to trust anything we see," Shaman pointed out.

"I know," I agreed. "That's why we make a plan now. We know Adamant's power will cancel any of ours. Pretty simple to verify that it's him, that way, just have anyone claiming to be him touch your
armor, and see if they lose a hand. Whoever finds Adamant is responsible for escaping with. Once they're out, our... mission control... will activate the emergency shunt and bring the rest of us to our home base. There is exactly zero other goals.

"You're going to show him our..." Atropos hissed. "You can't trust him with that."

"Oh, sure, the cheat says I'm the one who can't be trusted," he scoffed.

"Can't believe I'm thinking this, but I wish Zach was here." Horus to Clotho," I said over our com. "Tell our mission control to contact me."

"Uh... mission control?" she asked.

"Yeah," I insisted. "She should be the only other person except Lachesis there with you right now."

"Oh, right," she agreed. "I'll let her know."

A few seconds later, Riley's voice spoke into the coms. "Kinda busy, what do you need?"

"Turn on Shaman and Atropos' lie detection systems for me," I requested. Why they didn't already have them active, I thought. Know what? Don't care.

"Done," she answered.

"There," I said. "Now, Atropos, did you cheat on him?"

"No," she answered, her voice hard.

"That's a start," I sighed.

"He still got my girlfriend drunk to sleep with her," she continued.

"No I didn't!" he insisted. "Yeah, I slept with her. A bunch of times, actually, but she was sober! Most of the time, at least."

"Then why did..." Atropos started.
"Doesn't matter," I interrupted. "You guys can go find your mutual ex and have a heart to heart when people aren't trying to *fucking murder us all."

"Fine, whatever," Shaman agreed. "Now what?"

"We split up and follow different paths. Keep your powers active, trust no one and nothing you see. Don't use any ranged attacks. We're immune to almost anything that matters, and we're no longer trying to win this battle. Just find our ally, cut our losses, and hope the other teams succeeded where we failed. No other goals. And remember that Clarice got out already. You see her, it's a fake." I struggled to get a deep breath. Who'd have thought running on one lung was such a pain in the ass. "If we see each other, we don't bother speaking. That's our code: there is no code. If the other talks, we know it's a fake. But don't attack... just ignore it and go back to the search. Com silence as well, we can't trust what we hear over it."

....

I was glad to have Calysta. I was glad to have a mission. I kept thinking about Missy. *Sure, she had the memory scan... but was that still her? Or just a really convincing copy? Would I be able to tell the difference? Would I care?* It would be easier if Riley could save her. No hard questions.

"H-help," a voice croaked. I turned my head. *Clarice? No, that doesn't make sense.* But there she was, partially trapped under some rubble. "Horus, I'm so happy to see you!" she smiled, and tears ran across her beautiful face. "Please, help me. It hurts." I felt a pang of sympathy and a desire to protect her. *She's one of my friends, the one who introduced me to Missy. I owe her so much.*

I knew it was a fake. I knew it was a fake for a bunch of reasons. *Clarice is a remote control doll for Riley, who was safe. Clarice is designed to shunt over if damaged. If that fails, she self-destructs entirely to prevent anyone from reverse engineering the tech inside her. Clarice doesn't have tear ducts. Clarice can't feel pain.*

Despite that, I moved toward her. "How can I know it's you?" I asked.

"I don't know," she admitted, her voice going soft and timid. I wanted to hug and comfort her so much it hurt. "My armor's damaged, the com broke. I can tell you something only people you trust would know. Like your name?"

She blinked. "Well, nevermind then," she sighed, extracting her leg from the rubble and climbing to her feet. "Don't know how you're so resistant. I'm not picking up any power interference. Doesn't really matter, though. You may know I'm not 'Clarice', but my power works on the subliminal. You still believe I'm her, despite your awareness. You can't hurt me, and you will trust me. Now would you mind letting down your armor so I can climb onto the horse?"

_She's right, _I realized with a slowly dawning horror. _I know better, and it doesn't make a difference._ She approached the side of Calysta, walking seductively. I wanted her body against mine. _No, that's not true. Yes, I think Clarice looks attractive, it's hard not to considering she was built like that on purpose. But this is artificial._ As I was fighting my warring emotions, I caught sight of the knife she wielded. _Fuck, I know it's going to happen and I can't change it. Except... "I know something you don't know," _I stated.

"Do tell," she said with a confident smile.

I answered with two metal spears, formed from my armor on the side of Calysta's body. They lanced out at her, spearing in the left shin and right kneecap. She dropped screaming, and the spell was more or less broken. _Must be one of the ones that require concentration._ "Something like that wouldn't have hurt Clarice," I informed her as I quickly retreated from the fake that I didn't believe was a fake, forcefully crushing the emotions she played on. _I love Missy,_ I was forced to remind myself. _Not Clarice._ It helped that I knew Clarice was really Riley's automaton, and I didn't feel that way toward Riley. Knowing didn't stop me from crying at the loss.

As it turns out, I probably could have spared myself the trouble of looking. It was Shaman who found and escaped with Adamant. A fact I only discovered after being shunted, painfully, into our alternate world. I gasped in agony from the sudden distortion of momentum as I was brought across the dimensional barrier.

"We got everyone out," Riley announced, and I was glad for that. "And I've managed to stabilize Missy." I smiled, but my heart wasn't in it.

==============

A/N- Ah, one of the chapters I kinda wished I could have ended on a cliffhanger. Right around the point where she pulled the knife. Que Sera, Sera.
Rebecca, Rapture, sighed wearily.

It had been a difficult month, to put things simply.

It had also been a busy few months. She'd been primarily occupied with the numerous children Heartbreaker had spawned through his numerous unions, rapes, with his enslaved 'wives.' She'd had her work cut out for her as one of the few qualified capes able to counsel, console, and untangle the various psyches involved. One of the few blessings that could be salvaged from the utter disaster that was the Simurgh's death throes was that there was, for once, enough psychiatric personnel in the Protectorate's employ to spare a few for extraneous operations like seeing to the needs of dozens of mentally and emotionally damaged individuals.

She was particularly thankful for the loan of a gifted psychologist, Yamada-something, that had spent the last week relieving her of a few of her more...problematic cases.

"Rapture? You still with us?" Narwhal probed.

"Yes, just...what was the topic again?" Rebecca asked, taking another deep pull from her coffee mug.

Narwhal gave her a look, the likes of which she could read even without her power helping. “You need sleep, Rapture. Don't make me ask Defiant to slip you decaf again.”

Rebecca scowled.

“I'm fine,” she replied, with what she knew a half-second later was unnecessary harshness. Sighing again, she palmed her eyes tiredly. “Okay, I'm not fine. I'll head to bed after this meeting, I promise, I just...”

Narwhal cocked her head, worried, “...you just?”

Rapture shook her head. “It's...personal. Something I don't like to talk about.”

Narwhal, though she looked somewhat more worried than before, nodded. “As long as you're talking to someone about it. That's what the other shrinks say, right? You need to talk to someone, don't keep it bottled up.”

“Yeah,” Rapture agreed faintly. “That's what they say...and, well, I'm calling Yum Kaax almost nightly now.” It felt good to be that honest with someone who was rapidly becoming one of the few she'd call 'friends.' Rey, of course, was topping that list rather quickly himself. Although their long-distance relationship was far from ideal, it did allow both of them to take it slowly and give them the space they'd become accustomed to in their single lives.

Honestly, she was a bit glad for that space these days. Dealing with the mess Heartbreaker had left behind had hit her unexpectedly hard, reminding her of the 'bad old days' when she'd just gotten her powers and when she'd had to reverse a lot of the damage she'd caused after joining Haven. Her temper had frayed especially with one child whose power was somehow interfering with her own, making him difficult to read. It was like his body was saying one thing and he was thinking another...perhaps he had some undocumented Stranger power?
“Good,” Narwhal smiled, inadvertently breaking her musings, then paused.

Rapture knew the question before it was asked, but tolerated it all the same.

“...so, is it true what they're saying about Pantheon and Chicago?” She finally queried.

“I honestly couldn't say, but I think it's likely enough,” Rapture replied. “After all, Chicago was that hardest hit by New Dehli.”

“I suppose,” Narwhal sighed. “It's just difficult to accept that the Protectorate might be ceding control of a city like this, even as hard-pressed and short-handed as they are.”

“Pantheon is competent enough,” Rapture assured her fellow hero, despite the other thoughts she might have on the subject. Sure, Pantheon was competent, but they also had their fair share of skeletons in the closet, and far more than their share of emotional, social, mental issues to go around. In short, they were dangerous, but appeared to have cobbled together enough of a semblance of order to aim their various disorders at the far more dangerous and vile members of society.

Only time would tell if the cure would prove worse than the disease.

“So, how is progress?”

It was some Canadian official speaking, someone suitably high-profile who'd co-opted praise for 'Breaking Heartbreaker' that he'd managed to land himself nominally 'in charge' of the efforts to actually save the people they'd physically and mentally removed from Heartbreaker's influence. She never actually managed to summon up enough desire to remember the bootlicker's name, but it started with 'T'-something, she was sure.

“Well enough,” Rapture began. “I think we're past the 'attempted suicide' phase that several of Niko's 'wives' went through once his control over them was gone. A few of them never even got that far and slipped into non-responsive coma-like states where they can only rock themselves and cry.”

Which he would have known had he actually read the reports, given what her power told her. “Normally, I'd recommend remanding them to the custody of a psychiatric facility, save for the fact that most of these women have parahuman abilities which could cause significant damage if they managed to escape...or be removed by a third party, which is actually the greater concern in this case.”

The annoying man made affirmative sounds in all the right places, a habit born of long practice.

“The wives who are actually in something resembling a normative mental state are a mixed bag,” Rapture continued, more for the other attendee's benefit than their 'government oversight.' “The ones who are responsive and can handle it, mostly those without powers, I'd recommend sending home to be with their families, this would likely speed their mental and emotional recovery.”

Another pause. Dragon's avatar nodded, probably making notes on whatever computer she was situated behind. Defiant, the woman's significant other, was not present, but likely listening in through the comms. The rest of the Guild were there in some capacity, looking grim over the overall assessment of what the press had dubbed 'The Heartbroken.' A few of the psychiatrists and psychologists were in attendance too, though she'd likely be the only one speaking today. Even Yamada was there, when rightfully she probably should have been using the meeting as cover to get some sleep, especially since her presence wasn't necessary. Hopefully, they could exchange notes on
that one specific 'problem case' after things wound down, Yamada should have had a recent session
with him.

Coughing once to buy a second to order her thoughts, Rapture shuffled a few papers in front of her.
“The parahumans who are...operable, are of course a different matter. Many of them have expressed
desires ranging from returning to whatever life they had before Niko Vasil, to joining up with the
Guild, the Protectorate, Haven, or other independent hero organizations.”

Notably, she didn't name Pantheon, but she didn't have to.

It wasn't one of the options many were trying for, but a few of The Heartbroken had expressed
interest in Pantheon, if only because they had co-developed the 'cure' for Master-class parahumans
with Haven.
Another pause, this one somewhat longer.

“As for the children...” Rapture trailed off. “I have no idea.”

There was silence for a moment as that sank in. Dragon cleared her throat.

“If you could elaborate, Rapture?”

Rebecca sighed, dropping her head into her hands to emphasize her helplessness on this cause.
“None of them will likely ever lead normal live. They are, to a lesser or greater extent, functional
sociopaths on top of being predominantly parahumans. Precious few of them have a mother in
Heartbreaker's harem who is willing and able, both, to care for them. Likely, they'll all be remanded
as wards of the state, the problem being...”

“...the state doesn't have the resources, wherewithall, or specialized skills to adequately deal with
children this disturbed who have super powers...in these numbers, at least.” T-something finished,
surprising several of the heroes at the table by actually contributing usefully to the discussion for
once.
“So, suggestions?” He continued, rubbing at his face tiredly. “Is the Guild willing to accept any of
the Heartbroken on a more permanent basis? The children or the women?”

“Regrettably, we don't have the resources either,” Dragon replied. “Personally, I think the best option
would be to consult with the Protectorate. They have several Wards teams which could serve as the
closest thing to normative socializing these children could have, all the while placing them under the
supervision of the more senior members of the Protectorate.”

“Allowing this many Canadian nationals to join the Protectorate or Wards,” the official took a deep
breath, “is tantamount to admitting Canada can't look after it's own. I can only imagine the field day
the press would have if we simply turned over that many children to the Wards without so much as
trying for an alternate solution. Then there's the recent PR nightmare concerning that Ward...what
was her name? Shadow Stalker? The case could be made that the Wards aren't a suitable
environment at all for these children and I really don't want to have to explain to the PM why we're
looking at a civil suit from the Youth Guard; overall, it would be a massive headache.”

“What about Haven...or Pantheon?”

All heads swiveled towards Mrs. Jessica Yamada as the discussion paused for a long moment.

The Canadian official looked towards Rapture, “That is a thought...would Haven be able to
accommodate even a few of the Heartbroken children?"

Rapture sighed, her eyes turning heaven-ward for a time. “I...can't say. Theoretically, yes, but it's not
my call to make. I'll have to contact Halo and see what he says, at the very least, before committing
to anything.”

“And Pantheon?” The official pressed. “I understand you've worked with them before?”

Rapture allowed herself a brief moment to ponder the thought of handing over even one of the most
unstable children she'd ever met to Pantheon. Idly, she wondered if the ensuing visions of destruction
and fire were God's way of telling her this was a 'bad idea.' She moved to speak, but Yamada was
already talking.

“Even while she was nominally a 'villain,' Skitter provided food and shelter for a number of
orphaned children from Leviathan, which more than demonstrates their ability to care for traumatized
children. Also, some members of Pantheon have experience with the Heartbroken.” Jessica Yamada
continued.

The government man perked up at this, shuffling through several reams of paper. “Really? I hadn't
seen anything about that...wait, there was the girl, Cherie...ah, Cherish, who was a member of the
Slaughterhouse before Pantheon removed them. Is that really applicable?”

Yamada's eyebrows creased and, distantly, Rapture felt the voice of her instincts, not her power,
begin to wail in alarm.

There was something wrong here.

“Not Cherie,” Yamada refuted. “Jean-Paul Vasil, aka Hijack, aka Regent of the Undersiders.”

Rapture frowned. Why would Yamada be going to bat for Pantheon like this? Recruiting for them?
She was, too, even though everything her power was telling her said that the argument she was
making was completely impartial. Her choice of words, the way she was stating facts, it indicated an
obvious bias towards Pantheon. Then there was the fact that she was even citing Regent as an
example...that showed she'd put some level of thought or research into building a case for Pantheon...

There was something very wrong here.

“I wasn't aware,” Narwhal commented, “That the two were one and the same. How did you come
by this information, Mrs. Yamada?”

“I was in Brockton Bay when he Mastered Shadow Stalker, an event which former Director Piggot
thought was indicative of him back-sliding to old habits, however, with the recent information leak
regarding Sophia Hess' behavior towards Taylor Hebert, now Kephri, it can be inferred that Jean-
Paul's time with the Undersiders engendered some level of camaraderie, perhaps even feelings of
loyalty towards his teammates, which run contrary to the supposed mental state of a sociopath.”
Yamada explained...

...no, Rapture faintly realized. It wasn't Yamada.

The leaps of logic she was making could hardly be called professional, and if Yamada was anything
in the short time they'd known each other, it was professional.
One of the Heartbroken must have gotten to her. Rapture divined. Whichever one it is, they're trying to make a case to be sent to Pantheon. Why? To Master them? To try for asylum? Yamada has almost certainly heard of their aggressive stance on recruiting villains...

The thought of Pantheon in the hands of one of the Heartbroken made her shiver, even as the conversation continued on around her. Discretely, she caught Dragon's eyes through her webcam, then began to blink, pausing carefully as Rapture typed out a message in Morse code.

Only a moment later, a gray haze began to seep into the room. Chairs squealed against the floor as people stood in a sudden panic before they realized it was the anti-master 'cure.' Rapture's attention, though, was focused solely on Jessica Yamada as her eyes darted around in alarm.

Then their gazes met and Yamada's eyes widened further.

Rapture's hand moved to seize a non-lethal countermeasure, the tinker in her already spitting out possibilities regarding why the cure hadn't worked.

“I haven't hurt her!” Yamada shouted out, raising her hands defensively.

The room stilled as the capes settled into positions between the Mastered psychologist and the civilians. Rapture stepped up, holding what was essentially an advanced taser pointed at the woman, who was still disturbingly resistant to the Thinker aspect of her own power.

...just like the 'problem case' child I'd been trying to help, she realized.

“Who are you?” Rapture demanded, filing that realization aside.

“Reggie,” Yamada's voice replied, her posture still one of surrender.

“I have a match,” Dragon spoke through her armor. “Reginald Wilkins, son of Amanda Wilkins, a woman Heartbreaker abducted some six years ago. Reggie would have been four, and records indicate he went missing at the same time. His mother died two years ago in an altercation with the Adepts, she was a cape with low-level bio-manipulation powers, similar to Gaea's, but limited to humans in scope and incapable of doing anything other than repairing minor wounds. We'd believed both to be dead when he wasn't discovered among the children during the takeover of Heartbreaker's compound. Be aware he may have some Stranger power which has allowed him to stay hidden until this point.”

Which explains why the cure didn't work on him, we don't have his DNA on file, only Heartbreaker's and, therefore, his close relatives.

“We need you to let Jessica Yamada go,” Rapture said softly, trying to remember that this was a ten-year-old child she was dealing with.

“I'm sorry I took her,” 'Reggie' spoke through Yamada's body. “I just...I don't want to be here anymore. I...Mrs. Yamada knew that Jean-Paul went to Brockton Bay, that he made friends there. He was the only one that was nice to me. I...wanted to go be with them.”

“Whatever the case may be,” Rapture stated, “you need to let Mrs. Yamada go. You might be hurting her...and you need to tell us where you are. If you do that, we can talk about getting you to Pantheon. I know Kephri and Minerva, the surviving Undersiders, and they might be willing to take you. I can't promise anything, but you're only hurting your case by keeping Mrs. Yamada under your
control.”

A tense moment passed as uncertainty flashed over Yamada's face.

“Okay...I'll let her go.”

Before she could start to be relieved, Yamada's body had dropped to its knees and the seam along the back of her shirt began to tear, revealing a sudden growth of skin that was rapidly emerging from her body. Within seconds, long enough for a few of the civilians to release their stomachs, the 'growth,' fully emerged as a young boy with brown hair, blue eyes, and a complete lack of clothing.

“Reggie?” Rapture forced herself to ask, even as Narwhal stepped in to slowly move Yamada away, careful of alarming the parahuman and doubtless getting her medical attention.

The boy nodded, “They...called me Parasite. Can I go see Jean-Paul's friends now?”

*~*~*~*

PRT/ GUILD ID FILE - Parasite:

Striker/Breaker 3 – Capable of entirely displacing his own body mass as he 'merges' with a host organism. Requires physical contact with a suitable 'host' organism.

Sub-rating: Changer 5 – Capable of appearing as any person, animal, or otherwise organic being that he 'merges' with. Slightly enhances the 'host' organism, granting the host a low-level brute rating complete with low-level regeneration, greater physical strength, and improved reflexes.

Master 3 – Capable of controlling a single organic being at a time, only while 'merged' with it. While merged, Parasite induces a coma-like state in the host. Affected individuals feel as though no time has passed, though Parasite is capable of drawing on the host body's natural reflexes, physical skills, and subconscious ticks to pass even close inspection by some thinkers. Rating subject to change as it is not known whether Parasite can use other parahuman powers through 'proxies' after he has possessed a host organism.

Stranger 3 – Capable of utilizing the knowledge, skills, and instincts of the organic being he is merged with, to the point that, to untrained individuals Parasite will appear completely identical to the 'host' organism he is currently inhabiting.

Subject, alias Reginald 'Reggie' Wilkins, is ten years of age, having spent the last six years of his life as a resident of the Heartbreaker compound in Montreal, Canada. Speculated to have triggered soon after or at the time of his mother's death, the exact circumstances around the event are unknown. His parahuman abilities have demonstrated the classical 'inheritance' of attributes from parahuman parents. In this case, aspects of his power are representative of his mother's limited bio-manipulation abilities as well as the well-known Master powers exhibited by the Heartbroken, although he bears no known biological relation to Niko Vasil. Subject initially escaped observation by hiding within one of his 'siblings,' but attempted escape through one Jessica Yamada. Neither individual has retained any memories of their time under Parasite's control. Subject has expressed a strong desire to be placed under the custody of the independent hero team Pantheon owing to his good relationship with former Undersiders member Regent, aka Jean-Paul Vasil.

Custody decision is undergoing further discussion at this time.
Alright, so as per author-fiat, this omake is a canon one, and introduces an OC of my own design. Owing to the fact that TanaNari has no shortage of characters at this time, it is unlikely that Reggie will see any screen time in the main story for a while, if ever.

Personality-wise, I designed Reggie to be much like canon Taylor was at the beginning of the story, only with less 'heroic resolve.' In other words, he's primarily a quiet introvert who would rather hide than involve himself in confrontation. Not being one of the biological children of Niko Vasil, he was probably also bullied by some of the other children. Reggie liked Alec/Jean-Paul mainly because Alec didn't bother him and, as one of the older children, could serve as a shield from their bullying.

If anyone wants to co-op Reggie for another fic, all I ask is a little citation about having created him.
DANGERDEATHRUN Three cried. Two watched as our blood began to boil inside. Seven struggled against the damage, mending where it could. Fourteen screamed at her impending death, my death, I am fourteen, I am Quarrel.

We cannot let ourselves be taken, One insisted. We must fight.

HateRageMurder, Nine screamed into the mind of the blond that would be our new host, forcing her to keep attacking. Desperate stupid ploy Three cried out. Worked before, Ten insisted, adding its voice to the will of Butcher.

The annoying boy that I couldn't kill charged in, and I focused One's pain aura on him. He vanished, only to appear again. I kept the aura active, if anything the pain only drove my enraged victim to fight that much harder to kill me. The boy couldn't get to me, and somehow he lost his ability to teleport me away from her. I didn't know why.

Suddenly an unexpected surge of power lanced out from the girl's weapon. Regeneration impossible! DeathdeathdeathDEATHdeathDeathDEATH.

Seconds later, I was whole again. ShockPainAngerLossRemorseRageHopeShameGlorySuccess.

"Taylor?" a girl's voice spoke. TaylorTAYLOR.

"I... I'm here," I answered. "I'm okay."


"The Butcher?" I answered sadly. I AM THE BUTCHER! "Yeah... she's dead... how long do you figure I have left?" Yes, tell us how long until fifteen breaks and submits to the will of the whole.

"Not sure," Minerva responded. "The third host managed to hold out for weeks. But there was only two previous hosts, then. You've got seven times that many to deal with. Then there's your powers, which might help you, or it might hurt you. No way to know until we see it."

I looked at Amelia. I focused on my love for her. If anything, anyone, could help me fight this.

Betrayer! Five shouted. The irony, her being the one that got the position by
poisoning meherthemFourhim in his sleep, was not lost. The only host that wasn't a parahuman. Five rebelled against the thoughts. You forced me! Used me! Tortured me! Five was always troublesome, able to resist the Butcher better than all the others.

I crumpled to the ground under the conflicting thoughts and the horrific memories of sadistic abuse inflicted upon me. By me. No, her. Him! Four and Five! Not me. I'm not them. I'm not the Butcher. I'm... I'm...

Amelia was crying, moving toward me. I took flight. "Don't come closer," I commanded.

"Please, Taylor," Amelia requested. "Let me touch you. I can make you sleep. Keep you unconscious until we find a way to remove the Butcher's influence."

"Won't work," I countered. Grief and certainty of victory warred with equal measure in my mind. "Can't work. It's been tried. If you succeed, it just means you're the new host." The idea of Amelia being trapped in this filled me with grief and joy. Her powers combined with mine-hers-mine-no! It is incomprehensible. It is thrilling. It is the stuff of horror.

Don't fight, I reminded myself. You've been through this before. Accept and push through. I breathed deeply.

"We'll figure out some way," Lisa insisted. "Rapture's technology. Riley's. We have options!"

"STOP TRYING TO CONTROL ME YOU MEDDLERSOME BITCH!" I shouted at her. Much of my armor dissolved itself and reformed into a magnificent ebon colored rapier. I paused for a second, smiling as she stepped back. KillherProtectherControlherBreakherSavether. I looked away and closed my eyes. The voices had a harder time envisioning a goal if I wasn't looking at it. It's the bugs, I realized. They're having trouble distinguishing my senses from the bugs. "Sorry... I'm... that wasn't me."

"Yes it was," Minerva replied, sadly. "Maybe you wouldn't have said it like that. But that was still you."

I called on my swarms and found a target. A lot of targets. My insects poured through sewers, finding and slaughtering rodent populations en masse. I wasn't efficient about it, I didn't want to be. I needed to draw it out. Distracting the minds inside me by inflicting suffering on a target that wasn't human. I was not clean, I was not merciful, and the minds within me were mollified. Or at least distracted temporarily. In the long run, this would probably make their influence stronger. I don't care about the long run.
"You're probably right," I admitted. "I'm sorry. Now I need you to listen to me."

"We're listening," Amelia agreed.

"I know I don't have a lot of room to talk when it comes to trust," I continued. "I've done a lot of soul searching in the last few days. None of that really matters right now, but I want you to know that I'm sorry for everything. I was going to talk to you. Apologize for everything. Talk about maybe renewing the empathic bond. That's... none of it's going to be possible now."

Her eyes were tearing up, but she didn't cry. She was being strongStupidBeautifulCowardTraitorPervertBeloved. I cringed. It was getting worse. I faltered, barely managing to keep aloft. I can't keep them at bay forever. More rodents were sacrificed at the altar of petty sadistic amusement. To my surprise, I was actually running out. How does New York City run out of sewer rats? I allowed my slaughter to make its way into the empty alleyways, away from prying eyes. I had to upgrade the carnage to stray cats and dogs.

"I want you to know I love you," I smiled, painfully. It was hard to focus on tender feelings when I was torturing animals a million at a time.

"I know," she agreed.

"When... when you awaken my copy..."

"Don't talk like that!" she insisted. "We can save you, if you let us."

"Too much risk," I told her. "Like I was saying, you have to trust me on this. When you awaken her. Me. She'll want the empathic bond restored. She won't know why it's missing. I want you to give that to her. Will you do that for me?"

"I..." Amelia looked away. "I don't know that I can."

"Just do what I say you dumb bi-" I bit down on my tongue hard enough to sever it. I spit the chunk of flesh out of my mouth, where of course it was caught in the mask. I wasn't so sure what I thought of the inability to feel pain, right now.

"Sorry," I said through the armor suits that were linked to my mind. I considered it a perverse victory that the voices may have been able to control my body, at least to a degree, but they couldn't control the voices of my power or the actions of my swarm. "It's getting worse by the second."

"It took me two weeks simply to be able to control my power," my physical body muttered, speaking
more to myself- both Taylor and Butcher- than to my audience of friends. My words weren't intelligible anyway. The bleeding had stopped and my tongue was growing back, but it hadn't gotten there yet. "I controlled, maybe, a square mile back then. Now... now I control a fucking world. Let me know how long it takes you to do the same."

VAST. All my gates came down, every barrier I'd placed between my power and my mind collapsed. Right now, I was tapped into three cities. Boston, New York, and Brockton Bay. Millions of people. Hundreds of thousands of active voices. More when you added every television and radio. I could handle that. They could not. I felt the twinges and breaking as I discovered I couldn't handle it, either. Thanks to their powers, I was aware of the damage I was doing to my body and my brain. Two, Three and Seven issued their meek warnings that the only reason I hadn't given myself a fatal stroke was thanks to my newly acquired durability and healing.

"Okay," I croaked. "I've bought time. Don't know how much."

"We can still help," Amelia insisted.

"I know you would try," I agreed. I was getting tired. Slow. Winning the war inside me was impossible. "I don't want you to. Butcher dies today. That price is worth the last week of my life. I can't say I enjoyed it much, anyway. Just promise me you won't let my copy suffer for the things I've done. Treat her well. And don't listen when other people try to say what is right for us from now on, okay?"

She closed her eyes, fighting the tears. "I promise."

"Thanks," I didn't bother smiling. She wouldn't be able to see it through my mask, or all the blood. "I love you."

"Love you, too," she sobbed.

I didn't look at Lisa. I didn't want to give her any more clues than this last one would provide. It had been hard enough getting this far. I brushed my hand over the weapon I'd extracted from Zach's kamikaze Raptor. I crushed its containment system.

A/N- If you were hoping for a 'satisfying' conclusion to their breakup... well, too bad. Life doesn't work that way. I won't disrespect the story like that.
I woke up slowly. *Strange, this isn't my room.* I couldn't move, so I must still be sleeping. It was peaceful, quiet. Quieter than I could ever remember it being. I was floating in emptiness. *No... no terrain? No bugs. No Amelia!* My eyes snapped open, and I tried desperately to sit up. I was in a room I didn't recognize, even if it was clearly in the Yggdrasil. Amelia, Lisa, Emma and Riley were all there watching me. I could feel Amelia's power throughout my body.

"What happened?!" I exclaimed, trying to move. I couldn't. I wasn't merely restrained, my body was paralyzed. I was reminded of Leviathan, and the hospital after. I wasn't alone this time, but I was still frozen. It was easier not to panic than I would have expected, but

"It's a bit of a story," Lisa smiled warily. "Let's start with the last thing you remember, if you please."

I took a slow breath. *Amelia and I talking. Emma's apology. The transfer tech's true nature.* "I'm the backup copy, aren't I." It wasn't a question. There wasn't any other kind of logical conclusion here. "Guess that's not much of a surprise. What's the date?"

"August twenty eight," Emma informed me. Everyone else seemed too busy staring at me to answer any questions.

"Really?" I probably would have sounded more shocked if I wasn't completely locked down. "I didn't last very long, did I?" The false bravado was not likely to fool anyone in this room, but it was easier than thinking about this in a serious manner. *Huh, wonder if this is what Zach feels like all the god damn time. No wonder he acts like such a dumbass sometimes.* "So... what happened? I'm guessing it wasn't an Endbringer. Did one of those would be assassins manage to get me?"

"You don't remember that we were going to fight the Butcher?" Lisa asked.

"Ah," that did explain it. "I killed her, didn't I?"

"You did," Lisa confirmed. "We did a lot of damage and she was trying to force Crystal to kill her. Probably would have succeeded, too, but you used the system override and finished the job. Taking 'credit' for the kill, so to speak."

"Guess that explains the paralysis," I replied. "And the attention. You're making sure Butcher didn't come back with me."

"Something like that," Lisa agreed. "Now stop dodging the question. Why is your last memory from a week ago?
I frowned. It went badly, didn't it? "Can I talk to Amelia?" I asked.

"Not yet," Lisa insisted. "We're still running our tests. Asking questions, making sure there's nothing that went wrong. We have to keep Amelia away from you just in case Butcher manifests itself. The rest of us are only here in changeling form, but we need her present to control the facility and keep you under control. You can talk to your lover after we're done with all the tests."

Lover? My stomach would have clenched if it could actually respond to my thoughts. *Maybe things did work out. But then why wouldn't I update myself... Or, well, I guess the question is really why wouldn't she have updated... uh... me? Future me?*

"I thought so," Lisa answered. And I would have slapped her if I could. She probably figured it out before they ever woke me up.

Okay, prior self, how badly did you fuck things up? Scale of one to ten?

"Emma, Riley, would you mind leaving so we can have a private conversation?" Lisa asked the other two girls. *Oh, that's at least a nine.* I watched as the pair retreated without any objection. *Nine and a half.* Lisa turned toward me and smiled an ever so saccharine grin. *Ten, definitely ten.* "So, why don't you tell me how long you've been planning to kill yourself to get out of your mistakes?"

*Oh, fuck you, me.* "I... don't think that I was?" I answered. "Wouldn't your power be able to figure it out?" *Seriously, Taylor, what the fuck is wrong with you? Me? I'm going to need therapy for this, aren't I? I might need it just from trying to figure out the pronouns."

"Taylor," she sighed, sitting down on one of the chairs jutting out of the floor. "If there's anything I've learned from you in the time we've known each other. It's that you're incredibly good at finding ways to jam my powers. Moreso thanks to that whole 'Taylia' thing."

"Speaking of which, why isn't that working?" I asked. "I can't sense anything at all. I've never been completely blinded since I've had my powers."

"We sorta started the Exodus project a bit ahead of schedule," Lisa answered. "This is another dead world. Near as we can figure, life never happened here in the first place. If your stupid ploy to remove the Butcher actually works, then we will end up bequeathing this planet to Dragon using a cute little bylaw in the international Endbringer treaties about weapons research and some crap about space exploitation that was written, badly, in the sixties."

"Well, that's good news," I agreed. "So, what would have happened if it carried over and I was still the Butcher?"
"What makes you so sure you're not?" she asked. "What will happen, if you still have those powers... well, here's some facts. Somewhere in this dimension, possibly at the bottom of the ocean or in high orbit, is a gateway the size of a human eye. The only other way in is through shunting tech. If you're still the Butcher, we abandon this world and have Labyrinth change the portal destination. The atmosphere outside of this underground building is unlivable. It could take a century for the Yggdrasil to change that on its own."

"So basically, a prison that makes the Birdcage look fun?"

"Are you saying you wouldn't just open the door and walk out to die again?"

I blinked. *Again*, I chewed over the word. It didn't sit with me. I might do just that, just to ensure the Butcher was disabled. "That... I didn't do that," I muttered, looking at the ceiling. I really didn't have many other places to point my eyes, after all. "From my perspective it's a week ago. Amelia and I just got done making some kind of pseudo-reconciliations with our past bugbears, and I decided..." I froze. *Does she know? That's kinda private, even for me to share with Lisa.*

"You decided to make yourself attracted to Amelia," Lisa finished for me.

"Guess I'm not surprised that you know," I closed my eyes. "She did that, after the backup... after I was made. If it didn't work out, then this... I don't have that trait. I decided on that being the first legitimate difference between us."

"You did plan to kill yourself," Lisa accused.

"No!" I insisted. "No. I just... accepted the odds. We live dangerous lives, and we're not immortal." *What the fuck did that other me do? You know what happened better than I do right now. Did she change so much in just a week? Do you believe she was attempting suicide?*

Lisa just looked at me, studying my mostly numb face. I had to wonder how much body language one could read from 'paralyzed and wrapped in a living blanket'. "No, I guess not," Lisa answered. "Okay, she's cleared. You're safe to come out now."

I felt Amelia's power let go, and I had control of my body again. I moved my arms for... well, the first time ever. It was difficult. Coordination was built into the brain, not the muscles. Contrary to what people sometimes believed about 'muscle memory'. I knew how to use my body, but that was just the thing. I knew how to use *my* body. And this body I was in now wasn't really mine. The inside of my mouth felt funny because my teeth weren't quite in the same alignment. Calluses weren't there. I was willing to bet my fingerprints were different. Everything was just close enough to feel familiar, without being close enough to be familiar.

"This is going to take a little time to get used to." I said as I slowly worked myself to a sitting
position. I decided to wait a little while before attempting to walk. At least they included some kind of clothing, I noted. I guess it doesn't really matter. Semi-public nudity is better than being dead, but I was glad for the outfit nonetheless.

The wall opened and Amelia stepped through. "Hi," she said. She was nervous. Shy, even.

I, on the other hand, was just glad to see my best friend. "Hello," I answered. "I'd get up, but I'm still getting used to moving around. How long until that wears off, by the way?" Dammit, Taylor, why are you being so awkward? I asked myself. Oh, right, because something bad happened and all I know is that they're not telling me.

"Riley says an hour or two," Amelia smiled cautiously, walking toward me slowly. "Are you upset that I had to imprison you like that? Or that I was spying on your conversation with Lisa? I'm sorry if it was a unpleasant. I tried to make it as comfortable as possible."

"No," I answered. "I mean, I'd really prefer not to make a habit of it. Being paralyzed like that isn't fun. But I get why you did it. It was the right decision. I'd have recommended the exact same thing, if it were someone else who got possessed."

"Good," she managed to move next to the bed I was sitting on. "I was worried it might bring back some ugly memories. I also might have mixed in a little mood stabilizing to keep you from getting too upset. That should wear off soon."

"It's fine," I repeated. "Special circumstances. You've stopped doing it now, right?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "You're not mad?" Seriously, what the ever loving FUCK did other-me do? I was beginning to be glad that she was dead.

"Not at all," I insisted in the most reassuring tone I could, as I reached out shakily and brushed my fingers across her hand. She tensed, and I pretended not to notice even though there was no way I could hide that from her while we were in contact. She pretended that I succeeded in hiding what I'd noticed. It wasn't the ideal reaction, but it was enough for us, for now. "We're partners," I insisted, pushing the emotion. We didn't have the link active, clearly for good reason, but she could see my every emotion through her power, since we were in contact. "I trust you."

She hugged herself tight against me and started crying. I wrapped my arms around her as I felt the flicker of awareness blossoming. One point of knowledge when I was used to a world's worth of constant information. And yet, somehow, that one spark meant more all of the rest combined.

ReliefJoy.

Also: THIS chapter. Remember the whole "twilight zone" thing talked about during the Emma arc? Hehe. The foreshadowing paid off.
"Just promise me you won't let my copy suffer for the things I've done. Treat her well. And don't listen when other people try to say what is right for us from now on, okay?"

I fought back the tears. She means Lisa. "I promise."

"Thanks," Taylor said through the armor. It didn't carry vocal inflections, which I knew meant she was struggling to control it at all. She was normally very good at making her override sound convincingly normal. I could only imagine how hard she must have been fighting. "I love you."

"Love you, too," I sobbed, looking up at her hovering in the air. She reached her hand into the pack she kept with her, and a half second later she was concealed in ice and plummeting to the ground, trailing steam and smoke.

*One of the ice weapons that Emma had designed*, I realized, even as I focused my power into the Yggdrasil. I pulled the mass back, while forcing it to spew as much fluid into the hole as possible. I had only seconds, however. Not nearly enough time to create a pool deep enough. She collided hard enough to shatter. Explosively, thanks to the insanely cold temperatures of the ice exposed to the much warmer Yggdrasil. Liquid nitrogen and oxygen splashed across the Yggdrasil.

I just stood there, stunned. *She's dead,* I struggled to comprehend what that meant. *So many things I should have said. Not just now, but before. Things I would never have a chance to say. Unless.*

"Call Coil," I commanded Lisa. "Undo this."

She didn't say anything, she simply pulled out her phone and pressed a few buttons. Then she stood there watching the screen.

"Did you know she was going to do this?" I demanded to know.

"No," Lisa answered coldly. "I didn't."

"How the fuck did she sneak something like that past your power?" I may have phrased it as a question, but it was an accusation. "She had a god damn Tinker suicide bomb in her purse! How could you miss something like that?"

"Because of your god damn link!" Lisa yelled back.
I glared. "Explain."

"I can't read Taylia!" she exclaimed. "No one can! I've paid other Thinkers while pretending to be someone trying to spy on Pantheon, just to see how it pans out. It's laughable how wrong they are. Dinah comes closest, and her predictions lose accuracy in a matter of days at best. I'm pretty much convinced that even Coil's power doesn't actually work on you, but there's no fucking way to confirm or deny that because Schrodinger's Snake takes its secrets to the grave with it. And since my power doesn't work on you, either, all the stuff I hear from Coil that sounds wrong to my power might be because I don't understand you."

"Taylia hasn't been around for a week," I reminded her, bitterly. My one source of happiness in this world, and I gave it up because I thought it was hurting Taylor. Then I lose her anyway. I ruin lives no matter what I do.

"Hasn't it?" she sighed. "Yeah, you don't have the link active, but you're already hard to predict thanks to your 'third trigger', and Taylor can offload so much of her mind and personality into her swarm that if she wants to block me out, then the only thing my power tells me is that she's deliberately blocking me out. Something she started doing the moment you two broke up, and hadn't stopped doing since. A talent she only got better at thanks to her practice with Taylia."

I didn't say anything. I knew our link was, functionally, a Taboo unto itself. We all did, of course. I just hadn't realized that it was as effective as that. Lisa hadn't told me that we'd blinded her power. I suppose it's no surprise she'd keep that weakness to herself.

"Both of you have been fucking around with your Passengers so hard that I..." Lisa paused, searching for words. "I was finally just barely starting to understand 'Taylia' enough to work around it and predict its influence. And even that was patchwork at best. Then you go and surprise me by turning off the fucking bond!"

"You wanted us to do that from fucking beginning!" I yelled back. "Don't blame me when you get what you want!"

"Did I get what I wanted?" Lisa asked. "Taylor just said she was planning to ask you to restore the link, and I don't need my power to know you'd jump on that like the lovestarved puppy that you are. We also know that Taylor's copy never lost the link in the first place. Then there's her really flashy self sacrifice suicide ploy, complete with dying wish. There's no fucking way your bond won't be up and running the minute she wakes up. You can't give it up, and neither can she."

I broke eye contact, looking back over at the ice fog pouring from Taylor's remains. "I don't know," I admitted. "Taylor's dead. I don't know if I can look at her replacement and have the same feelings. That I'll be able to look at the copy and see her as the same as the original."
"You will," Lisa sighed miserably. "You can't help yourself, and if you do, somehow, resist the impulse... well, Taylor will find a way to make that the only option in the long run. It's easiest just to let you both have your way. I failed, the damage I hoped to prevent has already happened. Heads you win, tails I lose."

"Does that mean you'll tell me the real problem you had with our link in the first place?"

She paused. I had to wonder if she was thinking about it, or looking for a way to change the subject. Probably the latter, and fate conspired to help her as her cell blipped at her. She looked at it. "Fuck," she muttered. "We have to keep this timeline."

No! I cried out internally. "No," I gasped, trying to force the word to be an order.

"It looks like Butcher managed to transfer to Crystal in that one," Lisa continued. "She's still fighting, and it's tearing Boston to pieces."

"God damn it," I whimpered. Choosing between Taylor and Crystal. Plus however many civilians are dying in the battle. Butcher "only" managed to kill one person, here. Two, including Taylor. Radiant could kill a city block every three minutes.

"We can't keep that timeline," Lisa consoled.

"What about the other teams?" I asked, grasping at straws. "Did anything go wrong in those missions?" Lisa is right, as it stands we can't allow something like Radiant into enemy hands. It was an anti-Endbringer artillery platform with so many features I couldn't begin to imagine the damage it could do if someone really wanted to go all out with it. Combined with Butcher's powers... the Triumvirate might not be enough to stop it.

"Okay," Lisa replied, her voice showing no signs of hope. "Hecate, status report?"

"We're golden," Emma answered. "Scry's intel is awesome, and Assault and Battery's combat systems are working better than anticipated. If we get the time, I'd really like to see if I can upgrade them to named suits. The normals are basically mopped up, and there's this breaker that is made out of water being a pain in the behind." Behind? I wondered. Emma's probably spending too much time around Riley. "He can't do much, but he's really durable. We're having trouble hitting him hard enough to hurt him, without accidentally killing him. And frankly, I think our combat team is showboating a bit. Other than that, there's nothing to worry about."

"Thanks," Lisa answered. "Tell them that the other missions are almost done, and they're going to be last if they don't hurry up." Lisa switch communications without waiting for Emma to respond. "Aceso, status report?"
"Not good," Riley answered. *Riley, not Clarice, that's bad.* I realized then how happy I was to hear it was bad news. "We found Haze." *Oh, he's one of the bad ones.* "His powers are a lot stronger than anything our intel suggested. Missy's been injured. I've stabilized her, but even with healing, she won't be able to contribute for the rest of the battle. Clarice has been destroyed. Theo's declared the mission a failure and is running a rescue mission to pull Adamant out of the battlefield."

"Understood," Lisa answered. She looked over at me. "Both those missions went well in the other timeline. But..." she didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to, I knew what she was saying.

"You said Coil's power doesn't work right on us, didn't you?" I begged. "You don't know..."

"We know enough," Lisa said softly. "Butcher going to Taylor instead of Crystal was probably as much luck as it was anything else. A moment of hesitation might have been all it took for Taylor to be too late. Even if we don't know that Coil's right, that means it's just as likely that Taylor did the same thing in that reality as she did in this one. She was counting on this, you know. Taylor gets what she wants, no matter what it takes."

I smiled sadly. "She really does, doesn't she?" Warm tears came to my eyes. One of the things I loved most about her. One of the things I hated most as well. "It's still my command to give, isn't it?"

Lisa didn't say anything, she knew that I already knew that. That amount of lives lost was not an option.

I spent several minutes watching the fog cloud slowly dissipating. There wouldn't even be enough identifiable material to call what we buried a body.*Damn you, Taylor.* "Tell Coil we're keeping this timeline."

====================

A/N- Not a lot to comment on with this one.
"Tell Coil we're keeping this timeline," Amelia managed to choke out. I was almost tempted to hug her. To apologize for my failure to see this coming. *How did I miss something so important? Taylor hid behaviors, power forced to rely upon models instead of indicators. Models inaccurate due to influence of Taylia on personality corrupting the behavior. Greater personality regression than anticipated. Impossible to predict.* I tried to take solace in the knowledge that I couldn't do anything, but if anything it only made me feel worse.

I called Coil. Or, more properly, I called the line where the Directors were waiting for news. Calvert was amongst them, at the Boston site, alongside the various political leaders and whatnot. Both cities would have speeches and press conferences and all that stuff ready for the evening news. They probably wrote everything days ago, right after I contacted them.

"Minerva here," I said over the phone to their teleconferences. "Primary mission successful. Butcher has been successfully removed to classified location. All parahuman resistance at Boston site has been eliminated. You're clear to move in. Be prepared for the possibility of nonpowered resistance. Secondary New York missions are still ongoing."

There was cheering in the background. It was Butcher that was the biggest problem. The rest of the gang would be demoralized and likely fairly easy to break up and take down in smaller missions over the course of the next few days, if they were't beaten immediately. I would also need to consult Accord about the missions his Ambassadors were sent on. Lowest risk missions, mopping up drug and prostitution rings. But, ultimately, even if everything else was a failure, they'd call this mission a success.

How New York's location went wrong, I wasn't terribly surprised. We had been torn on that one. It was the worst odds, with only a 75% chance of success. Still no risk of any permanent harm to our team. Or at least that's what Dinah had said. She also said we'd get out of this one without losing anyone. *Power works by sampling possible futures. Power works based upon her mental imagery. Cannot parse something she doesn't personally comprehend. Needs concepts or faces to perceive events related to them. Dinah would have no means to realize clones even existed. Perception does not view clones as different people.*

I cringed. *Well, that's one mystery down.*

....

"Okay, first is how we divide our teams," I told the gathered forces of Pantheon. "We have a very narrow margin of time for this mission, Dinah's models place our best odds at Friday, between 4 and 4:30. After that, they plummet down to the levels they were last week. We may never get another shot at this. Amelia, you're going to be on the anti-Butcher team. To provide additional ordinance if Taylor runs out during the battle and to keep Butcher thoroughly unconscious once she's disabled."
There's no sense in having both our healers at the same location, so Aceso is assigned to New York."

"Makes sense," Taylor agreed. "I'll be going to Boston as well." Concerned for Amelia's safety. Asserting position before argument can be made to countermand it. Wants to be part of the main mission. "Naturally my power means I'll be providing command support in both locations, but Butcher is a dangerous opponent... you won't be able to rely on me once I've engaged her."

"All the Moirai are going to New York," I continued. Lily is frustrated at the lack of influence, similar to Taylor, wants to be on important mission, views secondary mission as 'beneath her'. Already resentful due to a lack of being consulted beforehand. "We can't risk our precog-disruption suits potentially interfering with Dinah's predictions. Not with such high likelihood of success. And I think we can all agree that the further away from Atropos that the Butcher remains, the safer the whole world will feel."

Sabah looked over to Lily, rightfully worried, and wrapped her arm around her girlfriend. Everyone else was no doubt running the same thoughts through their head. The Butcher. In Azrael. There were no words for how terrifying that was. It partially mollified the pair, at least. "Lily, you know New York better than any of us, you'll be a team leader, probably with the Adepts, if you're okay with that."

"I can handle that," Lily agreed. Happy with decision, glad to be in a position of trust. Still dislikes being part of a secondary goal, but properly intimidated by the prospect of becoming host to Butcher. This wasn't going to be a permanent solution, of course, but it was a good patch for now. Hopefully it would allow Lily to feel less like an outsider.

"Zach's respawning power and the new teleportation tech is integral to locking the Butcher down long enough to defeat her," I continued. "And Crystal's the only heavy hitter we have that can be relied upon to disable the Butcher without accidentally inheriting her powers." No arguments from that part of the plan.

"Theo, you'll go to New York," I continued. That made him and Missy very happy. "Your durability won't mean anything to Butcher's powers. Your powers will be put to better use against the Teeth's heavy hitters in that area."

"Emma... you and I are the wildcards," I continued. "You could be an asset to the Butcher team, looking for tells in her power and giving Amelia ideas. So could I, in a similar but different manner. I'll have to consult with Dinah about which gives the best odds. Either way, be prepared to listen in, even if you're in the New York team. So I'll need you at all detailed mission planning for both teams." That wasn't true. Coil's split timelines would let us use both plans simultaneously.

"I can do that," Emma agreed eagerly. Still desperate to please, feels guilty over her indirect part in Amelia and Taylor's breakup. Insecure and worried about being blamed. Worried that she may be legitimately responsible, hopes to find a way to fix the problem.
"Now, Chariot, I'd like you to work with Accord's team..." I continued.

....

_I made the difference_, I realized. I was there. Probably because I alerted Taylor to Butcher attempting to compel Crystal into murdering her. Taylor must not have realized the danger in time, in the other timeline.

I called Riley. "Are you free to talk?" I asked. "When you are, I need a full mission briefing."

"Yes," she answered. "Haze isn't an illusionist. His power is similar to Labyrinth. They're mostly immaterial, but still fully 'there' according to all of Clarice's senses. They even interfered with Adaman, who we had expected to also be immune. It'll be in my report to the PRT, along with a recommendation to raise him from a six to an eight."

I sighed. There wasn't anything my power would tell me on that angle, but chances were good that if I were there, I could have adapted to the discovery. I could picture how I would have made the difference in that mission by simple imagination. "That's good to know, please go on."

"His power also seems to extend outside the cloud he generates. I don't know if the cloud is even necessary at all, or something he does to bluff his enemies," she added. _Unnecessary detail, providing it to put next detail into context_. "In the confusion of the battle, he managed to trick Atropos into shooting Lachesis and Horus with an empowered bolt."

_Oh fuck_. "You said something about her being stable?"

"I fixed her, for the most part," Riley explained. "She could recover naturally, now. But I'd like my big sister to speed the process._ Doesn't need to make that request, there's no doubt that Amelia would heal Missy at earliest opportunity. Missy was hurt more badly than Riley's words would indicate. Riley is upset and angry. Blames Lily. Afraid of her thoughts and impulses. Correction: Afraid of how Amelia or Missy will respond. Feels lost. Needs comfort and guidance._"

I looked over Amelia, who just stared blankly at scene where Taylor died. _Not an option_._ I..._ do not tell Riley that Taylor died. "I'm afraid Amelia's still dealing with Butcher's defeat," I informed the girl. It was true enough to beat any lie detector. Riley knew how we needed Amelia to make sure Butcher stayed under control. "Is Missy conscious?"

"No," Riley admitted reluctantly. I already knew that would be the answer.

"Okay," I said. "Put her in one of the generic Yggdrasil outfits. Talk to Emma to see who can spare
one. Then Amelia will be able to do her thing at range. It's the best we'll be able to do until Missy's able to set up her warp tunnels."

"Okay," Riley agreed.

I contacted Emma immediately. "So, everything cleared up?"

"Yeah," Emma answered. "Your advice worked perfectly. Riley's calling, want me to put her on with us?"

About damn time something went right. "No. She's really upset right now. Missy's wounded and Amelia's really distracted. Do your best to make her feel better. Consider this the most important job you've had all day."

"Uh..." Emma hesitated. "Oh. Oh fuck."

Say what you will about her, she knew how to figure out social subtext quickly. Even if her presence on the team is what ensured that Riley and Taylor were competing for second place in any theoretical contest for most fucked up psyche in Pantheon. I cut the com so she could talk to Riley. Hopefully that'll be enough. How did everything go this wrong?

I went back to those thoughts. I didn't have much choice, did I? My best friend killed herself. Like my brother killed himself. I tried to help her, like I tried to help him. He pushed me away, she pushed me away. I failed. I failed miserably. I need to know why.

It's my fault, I knew that much. If I hadn't been here, Taylor wouldn't have done this. Taylor claimed she planned to apologize and make up with Amelia. Would have restored Taylia. Would not have been willing to self sacrifice. Would have tried, but hesitated. Taylia could have been restored sooner, was delayed because of Butcher mission. Reason success existed in such a narrow margin.

Dinah's numbers changed the day Amelia and Taylor broke up. Changed back the day Taylor and Amelia would have reconciled. Had they reconciled sooner, predictions would have reverted to failure of Butcher mission.

Dinah should not be able to anticipate Taylia. Doesn't need to. Dinah's power works around the Taboo by technicality. Uses a different method than other precognition powers. Accidental consequence of shard's true function being corrupted. Unanticipated by the Entities. Partially unfettered power. Dinah can be used to fight Scion directly, despite Taboo.

That was amazingly useful information, and somehow I couldn't force myself to care. Taylia could have saved my best friend. If it were active, then Dinah never would have given this mission a
chance at success. I was responsible for taking that away. Her death is my fault.

I didn't scream, I didn't cry, I didn't weep. Those were things that other people did. I wasn't sure I even knew how to express myself openly, even in a situation like this. I broke quietly, looking at what little remained of my closest, arguably only real, friend. Everything went black.

=================

A/N- Aaand THIS chapter.
We were magnificent. We could not appreciate it, but we were magnificent. A mere moment of our cosmic dance would require centuries to express to a human mind, and all its glory meant nothing to us.

I fell to my knees, rocked with the vision. It was the first time I could remember seeing them. Breaking the Taboo meant I kept new memories, it offered nothing to allow me to restore ones I'd lost before. More than just that, I'd seen me. Correction: It. My Passenger at work. My human mind couldn't truly handle it. It was so complete, so significant, so connected into an incomprehensibly beautiful whole.

And yet it felt so meaningless and alone. Even here, grieving over Taylor. Even losing Victoria, both times. Even at my worst day, I still felt like I was more than my Passenger. At least I was. Just that. Was. Am. Its sense of self could be compared to that of a cheap gas station lighter, and that might be an insult to the lighter.

I shuddered as I pulled my mind back to the awareness of my own body, and my power as it expressed itself. I was connected to a world, a tiny world that compared to an Entity the way a golf ball compares to a human. There were less than ten people on this world, and yet that made it more meaningful than the Entities and their singular, rapacious, purpose could ever be. I was never so certain of what needed to be done, even if I was less certain of how to achieve that goal than ever before.

There was laughter behind me, a hysterical, pained sound. I turned to see Lisa, on her back and holding her hands over her face.

I wasn't sturdy enough to climb to my feet, so at a thought the Yggdrasil rose and swelled, pushing me to my feet. Still unsteady, I walked over to her. "Did you see that? Do you remember it?"

She calmed herself, and removed her hands to look at me. "I remember it," she confirmed, and I was relieved at that news. She is past the Taboo. She slowly sat up. "I remember every. Fucking. Thing."

I didn't know what to say, but her behavior was starting to frighten me.

"You just saw a Second Trigger," Lisa laughed darkly. "And probably a Third as well. Was it as as wonderful for you as it was for me?"

I cringed at the memories. None of them were good, although they certainly inspired a lot of wonder. "Terrific," I answered dryly. I meant that in every sense of the word, especially the archaic. I trusted Lisa would be smart enough to get the meaning. Good god, she triggered over this.
I knew triggers were harsh. Mine was ugly. Victoria's was, too, even if she liked to laugh it off and pretend it was less of a deal than it really was. And I knew second triggers were even worse. The fact that I didn't get one when I saw Victoria's... body... left me dreading what it would take to push me over. And Lisa just had one over Taylor's death. I didn't even know how to react.

"Riley's going to be fucking thrilled," Lisa continued. "Imagine all that data she'll have. Parahuman brain scan, then three hours later a Trigger. She'll forget all about how Atropos shot Missy and Theo, and we'll have to use a spatula to peel her off my backup recording."

"Wait, back up," I said. "Lily shot them? Why?"

"Stupidity," Lisa answered. "Remember how she was all 'grr, you hide things from me' and we were 'sorry, won't happen again' and it happened again and she was royally pissed and I thought 'hey, let's put her in charge of something that doesn't really matter so she feels important'?"

"Yeah," I prompted her to continue.

"Well, turns out she cracks under pressure," Lisa answered. "Okay, that's not entirely fair to her. She was under the influence of mind altering powers coupled with a scary spider monster that she believed was quite literally eating her girlfriend's face."

"Fuck," I muttered. "Wait, how do you know that?"

"That's my new power at work," she answered, the hysterical rambling energy slowly draining from her voice. "I can tell you what happened to this planet. Or make a guess, at least. My money's on giant fucking solar flare. I'm actually watching the sky burn right now, as we speak. It'd be beautiful if it wasn't a planet on fire around me."

I reached my hand out to help her up. She looked at me, probably judging intentions. She reached out and took it, allowing me to pull her up, while I melded our armors so that I could make actual contact, assessing her condition. It wasn't quite what I had with Taylor, but I could still pick out emotions this way. The colors of grief, in all its stages, ran through her.

"Aren't you suppose to ask permission before you pull something like that?" she asked. It wasn't a friendly comment, but it lacked any real conviction of anger. Mostly she just felt tired. The blend of denial, depression and acceptance that comes from someone who has given up entirely.

"Sorry," I said, still peeking around inside her. I stopped to look at her brain, the patterns of her gemma and pollentia. The changes weren't subtle, they did outright damage to the portions of the brain around them. *Swelling and bruising, but patterned and clearly artificial. Done with a purpose.*
"Find what you're looking for?" she asked.

"Yeah," I answered. "I know what a second trigger looks like, now. I... I might even be able to
induce them on purpose. Even push them beyond. A legitimate third trigger, instead of breaking the
memory blocks."

Her smile was anything but happy. "Well, lucky everyone who doesn't go through it the natural
way."

"That can wait," I said. "Right now I need to make sure you're okay."

"You don't care about me," Lisa retorted. She wasn't wrong.

"You're Taylor's friend," I answered. "That's more than enough reason for me to care. Right now,
we need to be strong. For her. And if that means helping each other, then you better believe we're
going to help each other."

"Fine," she agreed. "Now could you please remove your hand. My power's... well, if I thought it
was easy to get too much information before? I'm learning things about what you do with your hands
that I already could have figured out, but now I can watch it happening."

Oh. Oh! Eww! I blushed and looked away as I pulled my hand back as fast as the fused armor
systems would allow me. "Sorry."

"We will never speak of it again," Lisa insisted. "Ever."

"I can live with that," I still couldn't look at her. "What are we going to do about... about Taylor..."

"Privately? I don't know," Lisa replied. "We will have her backup to deal with. You'll have to decide
how much you want to share with her. We can't keep the Butcher a secret from her, she's too smart
and that's going to be all over every media until the next time we do something high profile and
supposedly impossible. She'll figure out what happened, at least in a general sense."

I nodded. That was definitely true. Hiding her death from her copy would be idiotic and impossible.
"The real question is what we tell her about her personal life," Lisa continued. "How bad your fight was. The Taylia link being broken. Our suspicion that her suicide was planned and on purpose. I don't have any answers for that. You know this Taylor better than I have ever known anyone. I'm conceding that I fucked up and can't be trusted with this. It's all going to be on you from now on."

I swallowed, coating my throat with some much needed moisture. She's not admitting she was wrong, so much as saying she's given up, I realized. She's stopped caring. I couldn't bring myself to call her on that... there was still so much more to worry about. "What about what we tell everyone else?"

"Cover it up. Cover it up like Stormtiger covers up his Brazilian ancestry," she replied. "We'll even hide it from our team, where possible. Emma and Riley will need to know. If at all possible, no one else ever finds out. We use the excuse that containing Butcher took more effort than we anticipated, requiring us to spend all our efforts keeping her contained until we could imprison her properly on that so-called 'prison planet' we found. That'll buy us a few days of relative silence. We then pray that Taylor's clone doesn't inherit our mutual best friend's spare guests when she wakes up."

"And if she does?" I asked.

"Then unless your newfound brain knowledge proves useful, we do what we promised to do, and leave her there to die alone," Lisa whispered so softly that only my armor's systems let me hear the words. It was like a punch in the stomach.

"Fuck," I felt myself trying to cry, but I'd long ago run out of tears to shed. "God damn it, Taylor. Why did you do this to m... us?"

Lisa rested a hand on my shoulder, separated by two sets of bullet proof battle armor. "You will probably never know the real answer to that question," she told me. If this was Lisa trying to be comforting, then she had a worse bedside manner than I did.

==============

A/N- Clearly Lisa's talking about being able to see Amelia wiping herself after going to the bathroom.
I examined Missy's body with my power, even though it was difficult from this kind of distance. Maybe if I were in a better headspace. But after Taylor's death, and Lisa's second trigger, I just wasn't able to concentrate. *She's lost a lot of blood*, I realized first. *And over half the blood she does have isn't even her own, it's a combination of blood substitute and a uniquely modified blood type I'd only ever seen in one person.* That's how I was able to piece together the scenario. *Riley is using herself as a life support machine.*

I started the mending process, restoring Missy's punctured heart. Converting the material from her suit's life support layer into extra protein and raw material. Drawing upon the oxygenated blood substitute and converting it to natural, human, blood. Filtering out between her and Riley would be impossible, I'd have to trust Riley to know when things had progressed far enough for her to extract herself from whatever system she cobbled together.

I moved on to the other, incidental, damage. There was minor oxygen loss to the brain, but nothing likely to be dangerous. Especially given our neural repair technology, and the memory backups. If she woke up any time soon, it would be with a truly legendary headache, but otherwise fine. Then there were a number of other dents and injuries to worry about. Some old enough that I had to wonder why she never had me fix them before. The girl was virtually covered in scars and old injuries. I chose not to undo those, but I'd have to ask her why she never asked me to fix them.

It was during this that Zach and Crystal shunted back over.

Lisa had retired to sitting, waiting for news from the other fronts. Theo was still running the rescue mission, and that made theirs the last that was still running ongoing.

Crystal simply plopped down on the Yggdrasil, making no attempt to talk. It was comfortable enough to use as a bed, and clean enough, too. She looked exhausted, and since it was my power telling me this, I trusted its judgment. Even Zach looked tired.

"So," Zach started. "Mind telling us what the fuck just happened? Crystal was freaking out so hard about how she thought she was going to go insane that I thought she was about to go insane. And you didn't even notice that our systems were damaged by that attack that killed the Butcher."

I cringed. *It was true, we forgot all about them.* "Sorry," I said with absolutely no feeling.

Zach reached into the container pouch and pulled out a burnt human leg. I probably should have been upset by that, but I'd just watched by best friend explode. "I brought the body," he continued. "There was more, but I got hungry while waiting. Apparently Taylor did, too, because she got to everything else, including the bones."
I smiled at that. Taylor had the funniest ways of being being thoughtful, and making sure no one could find Butcher's body when none of the rest of us were even thinking about such things was insanely helpful. "Taylor's dead."

"Fuck me," Zach swore. "What happened?"

"She overrode my suit," Crystal finally spoke. "I was too messed up to notice, but she did, didn't she? That's why I didn't become the Butcher, because she did it first. She sacrificed herself for me."

I couldn't think of what to say to that. *Fuck, that has to be... "No," I finally spoke. "Taylor had her own reasons for doing what she did. She wasn't really thinking about you when she did it." She wasn't thinking about anyone other than me.*

Crystal didn't say anything. I doubted she was convinced.

"She had her backup, right?" Zach asked. "She'll back up and running as her usual self in no time. We'll just have to wake her up tell her that she shared a room with me for a night, and a brain with a bunch of psychopaths for a few minutes. Like a wild night of binge drinking. Just with a lower chance of STDs."

"A week," Lisa corrected. "She apparently decided that she wasn't going to update her copy since she was so upset with how last week had gone for her, so she's missed out on the last week."

"Okay," Zach hesitated. "Well, what happened this week? She missed out on her ex boyfriend being a fucktard."

"Not an ex," I corrected instinctively. *Defensively.* "They never dated, which means he can't be her ex." I didn't need Lisa to tell me why I felt I had to correct him of that. And only part of it was my feelings for her. I saw what he had become. The less we had in common, the happier I was.

"Fair enough," he responded. "And... we killed the Butcher. You made a really sexy grotto, but that's fine since you haven't broken it in yet so she didn't miss out on anything fun. Was this before or after she decided to be all friendly with Emma? Because if it was before... she's gonna think we're punking the shit out of her. All in all, not a big deal. Hey, we should totally make weird shit up that she won't believe. Maybe wear monkey costumes and pretend humans are our slaves."

I didn't say anything. Zach was ignoring the important parts, and both of us knew it. Just that conversation we had the other day alone was huge and left completely unsaid. Probably better that way. I simply nodded. Zach had just told me that he wouldn't say anything important about what happened over this week to Taylor, without actually saying anything. I'd have to find a way to thank him.
He sat down next to Crystal. "So... now what?"

"Lachesis got injured, so we won't be relying on space warping to get us around," Lisa answered. "We could ask Dragon to give us a ride, or we could take a more traditional mode of transit. Not a whole lot for us to do, really."

"Probably gonna have to shunt back over and chat with the locals," I sighed. "We're trying to keep Taylor's death a secret. Don't need the media hearing about it. Should probably keep it from the rest of the team, too. Story is, she and I are keeping Butcher contained for now."

"Which isn't completely untrue," Lisa added.

"We can buy a couple more days just by, well, me not being seen much," I added. "Let people draw the obvious conclusions."

"You two do have a pattern of vanishing from the public eye for a few days every time we have an important success," Crystal volunteered. "PHO has a meme or two hundred implying that your idea of romance involves violent conflicts. They phrase it a little differently, however."

I sighed. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"Well, to be fair, the story does sorta write itself," Zach added. "Normal romance: start a conversation while waiting in a bank. Pantheon romance: start a conversation while robbing a bank. Normal first date: going to a movie with friends. Pantheon first date: going to an Endbringer with friends."

"There's dozens of them," Crystal confirmed. "More if you include the ones about New Delhi that keep getting banned. You can thank Clarice for that little 'kill Endbringers, then get married' blurb to the press. It's been translated into almost as many languages as the bible. Mostly after we proved we could actually back up the words with results."

"Why does she get all the credit?" Zach pouted. "I was the one who posted a six page article culminating in mathematical proof that for their fifth wedding anniversary, they would conquer Russia in the middle of December. A lot of work went into that!"

What? I determined that my method of thanking Zach for earlier would be by not dissolving his armor and forcing him to walk back to Brockton Bay. And even that might be overly generous. "Okay," I said dryly. "So while all of that is both convenient and horrible. One of us should really talk to the authorities. This is kind of a big deal and all."
"I'm not up for it," Crystal sighed. "Does Butcher's mind power have any long term side effects?"

I really wasn't ready to talk to the public, either, even without my convenient excuse of needing to stay hidden for now. And I knew for a certainty that Lisa wasn't.

"I can do it," Zach volunteered.

"It can wait," Lisa muttered. "Calvert will be more than happy to play spokesperson and brag about whatever. In fact, the more limelight we give to the PRT and politicos, the happier all of them will be. I'll let them think we're doing them a 'personal favor' and play on it for some future considerations. Meanwhile, we can play on Pantheon's rep for being elusive and mysterious. Win-win for all involved."

_God knows we could use more of those_, I thought.
The plan was always for us to stay behind after the battles, to meet with the heroes and our assimilated villain-cum-hero allies. The plan always implied it was likely I wouldn't be part of the group that did those visits. Keeping the Butcher disabled before pickup was something no one could object to, and almost no one other than I could achieve. And so, gratefully, I stayed behind. With my thoughts. On an almost literally empty world. Our world, now. Legally.

Shunting Butcher off to a prison dimension was a secret part of the plan that only a few knew about: Costa-Brown, Dragon, and a handful of heads of state. Not even the other Directors, all they knew was we had a plan to neutralize her powers and keep her contained. But now our inter-dimensional travel secret was, at least unofficially, out of the bag. We'd soon have to debate what to do with our portal tech, how to petition off worlds to the various nations that might need it. Namely, all of them. The initial agreements included two things: a single new world, with hundreds of portals, which would acknowledge the same legal boundaries as our own planet. And that we would never open gates to worlds with humans without unanimous agreement.

There would be debates, of course. Negotiations. Treaties. Bribes and backstabbing. Possibly even wars of the literally inter-dimensional variety. Lisa had assured me that Pantheon's world being acknowledged as its own sovereign nation would be approved. Especially since that was, functionally, all that we asked. It meant we could claim other worlds during all future arrangements, as well.

Crystal, at least, stayed with me. She was also my 'flight home', after all. Boston wasn't that far away from Brockton Bay, we didn't really need Missy for that. Of course, now I had armor that could fly on its own, which was beyond awesome, but I didn't have Crystal's speed. Very few of us did, and my armor needed a lot of disposable mass associated with it to really exploit my powers, so she had a hand gripped onto my back and was, functionally, pushing me along.

"Or, really, guiding my fall. Antigravity is a weird flight system."

"How are you holding up?" she asked me as we started along.

"Badly," I admitted. "We're going home to replace my dead sorta-ex sorta-girlfriend with a copy of her made when we were still together, sorta. I am not prepared to deal with this kind of weirdness. No one is. Except maybe Zach."

"That kid reads the strangest stuff," Crystal agreed. "He got me hooked on this one asian comic that has a guy who turns into a girl whenever he's splashed with cold water. And his dad's a panda, and that's actually the least strange part of the story."

"Some weird cape story?" I asked. I'd heard of a few crazy ones, but like most parahumans I hated
reading them. They were just mind numbingly stupid and clearly written by people who didn't even ask a cape what things are really like.

"No," she replied. "No capes, just magic. Pretty much pretends parahumans don't exist. Also pretends police officers don't exist. And, for that matter, all laws of both man and nature. Or the very idea of consequences for your actions. It's really god awful by any and all literary standards, but it's fucking addictive both as a comedy and a will-they/won't-they romance. Just as long as you don't allow yourself to think about it."

"Sounds like something Victoria would read religiously," I tried to smile.

"Yeah... are you guys really going to be able to bring her back?" Crystal asked.

"Got permission from mom and dad to at least try a few days ago," I confirmed. "There's still legal mumbo jumbo, with the whole exhuming thing. Normally that would take months to work out. But it's being fast tracked by the PRT and Protectorate. They are really hoping this works. Some of their own are glassed, too. Plus others who've been transformed by other means. If this works, there will be a couple dozen others to bring back."

"Makes sense," Crystal agreed.

"And it implies we'll be able to make our resurrection tech available to others," I added. "Which is its own fucking ethical nightmare. We literally cannot do this for everyone, so how do we decide who deserves it and who doesn't? Heroes are one thing, sounds easy enough. What of the villains who fight to do something noble despite being horrible? Like Kaiser? He was there for Leviathan. Would we have extended the backup tech to him, if we had it then? Then we move to civilians. Billionaires and Heads of State with serial immortality? Is that the world we're going to create?"

"Fuck," Crystal muttered. "That's terrifying. This technology really does change everything, doesn't it? At least we won't have to ask ourself about giving it to sickos like Jack Slash and Genoscythe the Eye Raper, right? They can fucking remain in hell."

"That's better than nothing, I guess," I sighed. "So... how about you? Are you okay?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Butcher really scared me. The pain was insane, but that wasn't really the bad part. Nothing I haven't been through before. I've never been so angry before in my life. I've never been so afraid. I knew what I was doing, the whole time. That I was killing her, and what would happen when I succeeded. But I just couldn't bring myself to care about it. If... if I didn't have her there as a target, I would have found and killed someone with my bare hands and loved every second of it."

"Yeah, I know I'm 'backed up' and all," Crystal continued. "But I keep asking myself questions. What if something went wrong? What if what comes out isn't right? Fuck, even if everything is correct, I can't really think of that copy as 'me', y'know?"

"I know," I agreed. Crystal must have heard the worry in my voice.

"Fuck!" she muttered. "That was beyond insensitive. I'm sure she'll be..."

"Don't worry about it," I interrupted. "We all knew there was a risk, even if it was a small one thanks to Dinah. If it wasn't now, there's next time. Or the time after. If nothing else, there are still more Endbringers. Simurgh made it pretty fucking clear we're not immortal."

"Y... yeah," Crystal mumbled.

"And now I'm being beyond insensitive," I apologized. "It's easy to forget there are emotional consequences, even if we make it out physically."

"I remember when this used to be fun," Crystal sighed. "Go out, zap Hookwolf in the face a few times, he runs off, day is saved. Even if you lose, he's not going to do anything more than talk shit to his skinhead buddies and let you limp away with your bruises and cuts. It was... like a game, y'know? I know it sounds stupid when you say it like that, but it really was. Now? We have an 'undo death' option, and weapons that put us in the same conversations as the Triumvirate. But I've never been this fucking terrified in a fight before."

"The Unwritten Rules," I suggested. "Lisa could explain it better, but basically heroes and villains had their fights, but they're all pretty minor. Everyone pulls their punches. Except for a few rare psychos like the Slaughterhouse Nine, no one wants to rock the boat for fear of sinking the whole ship and ruining things for everyone. Sounded so goddamn naive and trite when she said it, I just dismissed it at her trying to justify being a supervillain like it didn't really make her a criminal."

"I could really go for some of that right about now," Crystal sighed. "What happened? When did it all change? When did our lives become so fucked up that I'd rather be fighting Hookwolf in my underwear, than even going out in costume wearing an armor that gives me all the functional powers of a god? Even Leviathan wasn't this frightening. I knew I would be there and do my job, but I wasn't important enough to honestly matter in that battle. No expectations that I could make the difference."

I happened, I thought. The Entities didn't want us destroying ourselves, it doesn't give them enough time to gather results. The plan was a slow burning cold war. I got past their controls, went forward without thinking about consequences, found a partner like Taylor with a similar inability to consider consequences, and by the time anyone knew what we were doing, we were too strong to put down.
Now we're in freefall and there's nowhere left to go but forward. None of that was anything I could say to my cousin.

"I think this is what the Simurgh planned as the result of New Delhi," I suggested. *Not untrue, really.* "The Rules no longer apply and this country is heading face first into a parahuman civil war on a scale that threatens to end the United States as a nation."

"Sounds like the Simurgh," Crystal agreed. "Who else would think they could destroy the United States by setting India on fire?"

"We have to run damage control," I continued. "We might not be able to stop the war, but at the very least we keep things from getting so bad that they collapse entirely. And to do that, we have to keep breaking those rules. Hitting so hard that no one dares fuck with us."

"Is this what they mean by 'peacekeeping' in the military?" Crystal sighed. "Do you think Alexandria thinks about shit like this?"


"She's been doing this for like twenty years, now," Crystal muttered. "No wonder she's such an irritable uptight bitch."

_I hadn't thought about it that way, before._ "I guess Taylor and I are the same way," I agreed. "Doing what we have to do, no matter how much damage we cause in the process. Fuck, look at New Delhi. Even when we thought each Endbringer was a continental suicide bomb waiting to go off, we were still thinking about killing the other two. A couple billion or so more lives, half our planet pretty much destroyed. That... that we could even contemplate such an act."

"You wouldn't have done it," Crystal insisted. "We'd have found another way, like pushing them through to already dead worlds and killing them there. Or just closing the doorway and leaving them trapped there."

"Maybe," I said. But if we didn't have a solution by the time the next one came around, if the portals didn't work on Endbringers the way almost nothing seemed to work on them. We would have gone through with killing them the normal way. "What about Scion?"

"Can't you do the same thing?" she asked.

"No," I sighed. "He's like Eidolon, but without limitations. Any power he wants, as long as it exists. Including a few that are so unbelievably dangerous that he would never give them to us. It's likely any battle with him is going to cost us multiple worlds. Dinah says we'll lose billions."
"Dinah also said we'd walk away with the Butcher trapped in another dimension, and all our friends alive and well," Crystal reminded me. "I'm pretty sure none of that worked out, either."

"Didn't it?" I asked. "We got Butcher removed from our dimension. Missy's death was easily reversed. Taylor's death is... to us, she loses the last week of her life and everything that implies about our breakup and possible makeup. To her she wakes up from a dream to a bunch of people who have memories of things she never did and never will do... to us, that makes her dead. To Dinah, she's incapacitated for a day or two at the most."

"This is all so fucked up," Crystal concluded.

"We might be able to stop," I added. "There is the chance that Dragon or Cauldron piece together the winning resources. Or someone else. Dinah's predictions say there are five possible contestants at the end with strength enough to be the ones that end the threat that is Scion. We can back out and trust the others."

"No we can't," Crystal corrected. "It may be physically possible. But you and Taylor aren't the types that can let others be responsible for anything. This is the fate of the world, of every world, at stake. The whole fucking universe if what you know about their life cycle is true. It makes you some of the most important people in the fucking multiverse just being on the list of people that might find a way to stop it. People like me, we can't handle that kind of pressure. People like the two of you can't handle anything less."
Missy arrived with Emma and an incredibly concerned looking Riley and Theo in tow. I could tell Theo was injured, probably fairly badly. He's going to be in a lot of pain without Amelia's help, I realized. And our need to keep Taylor's death a secret means he'll be going a while without that help. I felt bad, but there wasn't much choice.

I looked at Missy, extending my new power to her, first. I paid enough for it, may as well play a bit. Bits and pieces of data filtered in. Images in the form of concept more than something audio or visual. Argument with her mother before coming, too faded to pick up details. Her injury, but very little surrounding the event. Those didn't stick out as much as her date with Theo last week. A kiss on the cheek? I could see the moment when she quit the Wards so clearly that it was like it happened then and there. I smiled as Piggot's fat rolled while she tumbled to the ground. There's an image I am going to cherish for a long time.

Missy's trigger event, which I chose not to actually look at, stood out like an inferno. Why? I wondered, then turned my original power on the question. Postcognition is extension of usual inference powerset. Postcognition locates and refines data based upon interactions with the environment. Senses events of significant emotional impact. Correction, significant formative impact. Greater impacts leave longer and clearer data trails.

I accepted that that made sense. I could see the death of this world, despite it being millions of years ago, because it was the death of a world. Trigger events, too, would be huge details. My power accidentally gives me the ability to detect parahumans, I realized. Not accidental. Second trigger relates to a need to correct flaw in power resulting in emotional reaction identical to primary trigger. Primary trigger related to helplessness at losing brother to suicide.

Current stress related to parahumans and parahuman abilities, primarily the 'Taylia' link. Power refined to respond to parahuman threats. Trump ability. Trump abilities common in second triggers. Trump abilities result from trigger events caused by parahumans. Second trigger resultant from Taylor's suicide and need to understand the reasons. Second trigger cause identical to primary trigger cause in all cases.

I was floored. My power just gave me direct insight into how the Passengers operated. A lot of insight, actually. Things that, in retrospect, should have been obvious. Things that must have triggered Taboo, before. I actually smiled. Even as I started to cry, I was smiling. Congratulations, Taylor, you'd probably consider this final proof that you did the right thing by killing yourself.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked. I did NOT point my new power at Riley. That was something I don't think my mind could handle, seeing Riley 'at work'. I thanked every star that I had to deliberately look to use my postcognition. The fact that it was pushing me toward a tinker headache after mere minutes worth of actual use made me a little less happy, but I could live with that.
"I'll cope," I replied to Riley's question. I turned my usual power on the new one again. Range limitation exists. Manton Effect. Large population of living variables greatly diminishes power's range and detail. Likely to be limited to days on Bet, save for trigger events. "The mission didn't go quite as well as we hoped. We'll need to send Emma back to base as soon as possible, then we can go back."

"Was someone else hurt?" Missy asked.

"Not seriously," I lied, willing Riley to keep the secret. I could beat the standard suit lie detection, but I doubted I could fool Riley. Fortunately she didn't say anything about it. I knew she'd ask later. "We had a few complications involving the Butcher and could use her skills. I've extended my apologies to Director Calvert about us abandoning Boston after the fight. They were understanding of our need to deal with Butcher and the... less than successful mission in New York."

My power shared all four of their opinions on how badly Atropos fucked up. There was a damn good chance Riley might do something about it, and likely only Theo would try to talk her out of it. "I'm going to review all the recordings to figure out what happened, of course," I informed them. That wasn't strictly true, in that I probably didn't need to. Postcog worked faster. But I might have to, I had maybe a single dip into it for the day. I probably overtaxed it, already, all considered. I still needed my normal power, and they both ran off the same battery.

"Good," Missy responded. "So, need a trip back to New York?"

"Yes, please," I replied. "After getting Emma where she needs to go."

....

"I fucked up," Lily stated as soon as I walked into the room. She looked exhausted, miserable even. Well, that makes things enormously easier. She and Sabah were in their civilian clothing and sitting together, on a couch, although they rose immediately after Lily spoke up.

"Pretty badly, yeah," I agreed. Sugar coating things wasn't something I was good at. Maybe if I were, then Taylor... no. No. That was not a helpful road to go down. We won a fucking victory here, a lot of victories. Taylor didn't sacrifice her life, she sacrificed a week of memories. That's virtually nothing, in the grand scheme of things. Especially for a girl whose girlfriend can just keep adding new decades whenever she feels like it. "You'll understand if we don't put you in charge of any more missions, won't you?"

She closed her eyes. "No, that's fine," she agreed. Sabah held her, offering comfort. "I'm not cut out for leadership. I don't think there are many people on the team that would volunteer to be on a team I led, anyway. Just point me in the right direction and let me wreck some faces."
"We'll keep the worst of it quiet," I offered. "You can be forgiven for the shot that... wounded Theo and Missy. Your behavior around Shaman, on the other hand. That's the sort of thing I'd expect Zach to do." *Except not, because Zach's actually shockingly good at being an idiot without being stupid about it.*

"I know," she agreed. "Can... can we just go home now? I really don't want to be here anymore."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Our job's almost done here. The failure to remove one out of three major Teeth holdings in New York isn't a huge black mark on our organization. Butcher's been removed, and that's all the news is going to focus on. The remainders will need to face both the Adept and Protectorate, both of whom are equipped with our armor suits. They could be difficult, but nothing the locals can't handle. Get some rest for a couple hours while I hammer out the various political garbage.

....

"You know what happened better than I do right now," Taylor mumbled through her partially paralyzed mouth. "Did she change so much in just a week? Do you believe she was attempting suicide?" *She*. *Is distinguishing between herself and the Taylor who died to stop the Butcher.* Confused. Afraid. Worried we're angry. Taylor really did change a lot in that week where Taylia was removed. Almost as completely as she had in the the first week where Taylia was activated. To call her a different person was not an understatement.*Worried about my opinion. Worried about our friendship. Still friends.*

I extended my new power to her. Reaching for her past. That week was missing, of course, but I didn't need it. I'd been in Taylor's room. I'd examined her week. Punishing herself physically and mentally. Even paralyzed, this Taylor in front of me was more alive than that one had been. I looked further. Into the Taylor I had known amongst the Undersiders.*Fuck, I couldn't even lie to myself and pretend Taylor had ever been happy, even for a moment, as part of our gang.* We gave her goals, a sense of purpose, something to accomplish. We gave her her goals, a sense of purpose, something to accomplish. All things that she craved. I could even rest assured that she saw us, or most of us at least, as friends that she could trust. Regent being an unsurprising exception. She was not, however, happy. At any point.

Still, even like this she was my friend. And she wanted to remain my friend, which was far better for me than her 'other' self had been. "No, I guess not," I lied, or as close as I was willing to lie to her. "Okay, she's cleared. You're safe to come out now."

Amelia opened her passage and stepped out, looking timid. Afraid to be disappointed like I had been disappointed. Taylor was overjoyed to see her. She hadn't looked at me like that when I talked to her. I don't know if anyone ever had, or ever would, look at me like that. I didn't use my power to find out. Neither of them noticed as I left the room. Not especially surprising, either.

....
I made my usual call to Dinah. She already got the report. The flaws our Butcher mission revealed in her powers. I had to tell her about our cloning tech and alternate dimension access, simply because it was the only way to prevent this kind of travesty from happening again. We'd still need clones in the future. At the very least, there were still Endbringers, who Dinah could not read in any significant fashion. But I wanted to prevent us from needing them any time soon.

"How do you like your gryffon?" I asked the girl.

"Typha is more than satisfactory," she answered. **Tired, physically exhausted, physically sore. Spends several hours a day playing with or riding the creature. Sacrificing sleep.** I smiled.

"Glad to hear it," I said. "Usual first question."

"Point zero four percent chance there is a credible attempt on the life of a member of Pantheon or its priority allies in the next twenty four hours, point zero six percent chance of a credible attempt on the life of a member of Pantheon or its priority allies in the next week."

"That's good," I answered. "Chances the latest attack model on the Fallen in Houston and the surrounding region will prove successful."

"Ninety four point four percent chance of total victory, ninety nine point seven percent chance of acceptable levels of mission failure. Zero percent chance of significant harm to Pantheon members during mission."

That was the change to the question, 'significant harm' covered anything that took more than a day to recover from, including our powers as a factor. That wouldn't have stopped Missy's injury, but still, it would have caught Taylor's suicide. No surprise that no harm came in that mission, it amounted to 'everyone has lunch while Taylor cuts loose on the people who planned the murder of her children'.

"Eighty seven point four four percent chance of unacceptable long term fallout," Dinah concluded. **Okay, back to the drawing board on that one**, I marked on the notes. About a five percent improvement from last time. The problem with Houston's Fallen is they had a couple of the most powerful parahumans on their team, including the low powered biokinetic/stranger, brute and mover calling himself Baal. He could have been a direct relative of the old Slaughterhouse Nine member known as 'King'. Touching people and turning them into a biological armor suit surrounding his body. A lot like Amelia's Dryad, but made from still living human flesh. More, he could use the material on his own body, healing injuries and boosting his physical and mental abilities temporarily.

Deploying anyone else put them in serious danger of fighting him. Putting everything on Taylor's shoulders resulted in huge casualties as Baal subsumed people en masse to fuel his power's need for biomass. I'd thrown a few ideas at the problem, but he was just too damn durable and versatile for an easy victory. That and his girlfriend Lilith was a precog didn't help matters in the slightest. Weaker than Dinah by far, but too strong to just sneak up on. Her powerset was a lot like what we pretended
Aceso's powerset was. Either way, that continued to be a bust.

"How about the Tennessee Fallen?"

"Ninety eight percent chance of success, twelve percent chance of long term fallout, no risk," Dinah answered. That one was worth attempting, through the safety net that was Coil's power. I marked that down.

"Chances that Dragon's latest Ellisburg quarantine features prevent the post-Nilbog cataclysm?"

"Twenty seven thousand casualties within seventy two hours of any successful mission to eliminate Nilbog," Dinah stated. Nilbog was something of a weird case as well. Killing him was easy. So was subduing him and throwing him in a prison world. Honesty, even our plan to just send in a small army of M6s was nothing less than 90% successful. The problem was that within days of his removal, people started dying in huge numbers, and we weren't quite sure why. Whatever it was, every plan failed. Including the one where we buried the city in Yggdrasil and had Amelia just sit on it consuming every living thing it touched until the whole city was gone.

"So that's still a bust," I sighed. "Pity, we could really have used that one."

"Umm," Dinah spoke. "Far be it from me to question your ideas... but have you thought of maybe asking him to leave nicely?"

I blinked "What?"

"Well, yeah," she continued. "He hasn't left Ellisburg in, like, ten years. Maybe if you just offer to give him somewhere for him and his monsters to play, he'll want to leave. Voluntarily."

I closed my eyes. "A wager," I muttered. "If this idea of yours works, I'll pay you double. If not, it's a free question."

"Triple," she replied. "And you have to mean it when you ask the question, no planning to throw on purpose."

"Fine," I agreed. "Odds of being able to remove Nilbog from Ellisburg by offering him a suitable chunk of land in another dimension, assume all plans involve no attempt at harming him. Include any sudden rise in deaths from his removal next. No plan right now, just wide spectrum idea."

"Seventy seven point three five percent chance of success, zero percent chance of increases in deaths within seventy two hour after mission, regardless of success. So long as mission does not include"
violence."

"Sounds like we have ourselves a winner," I stated. It would take some more time, some more planning, and some more questions. Of course it would require all those things. But it was an amazing opportunity to consider.


A/N- Also, Lisa needs hugs. All the hugs. Ever.
Everyone was so tired and glum when I got back, it was like none of them had even slept in that week I was gone. Lisa had retreated to her office before Amelia and I ever left the pocket prison. Wherever the portal was built, the actual prison was in Brockton Bay, or that dimension's geoanalogue. I found myself on our front lawn when we shunted over. No one was there to greet me, which suited me better than a crowd.

"I'm going to get dressed in real clothes," I informed Amelia. "And a shower. And something to eat. I'm starving." Makes sense, I decided. This new body hasn't ever eaten any actual food.

LonelyWorried. "Okay," she forced a smile. "You should talk to Riley or Emma before the food, you'll probably need some specific care for a little while."

I smiled. She was always the thoughtful one. I leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Thanks," I replied. JoyDesireGuilt. I walked to my room, more carried by Matriarch than under the power of my own limbs. I was still having trouble walking, though far less now than before. I stepped into my room and slipped out of Matriarch. A sudden draft informed me that I came out entirely naked. My armor ate my makeshift Yggdrasil hospital gown. Oh well, I wasn't planning to keep it.

Showering was difficult, with my lack of coordination, but somehow I managed to not stab myself in the eye with my fingers or my comb. Hmm, my clothes feel uncomfortable. Too tight in... wait a second... I sighed. Well, I needed to talk to Emma anyway.

I slipped back into Matriarch, solely because at this point I still couldn't quite move correctly.

I entered the lab. Emma was there alone. "Hey Taylor," she said with a level of cheer that I couldn't decide was a result of being genuinely happy to see me, a forced energy to hide her actual feelings, or being the result of spending too long picking up habits from Riley.

"So," I smiled back. "I'm told I may need some dietary advice."

"Oh, right," she said. "The growing system negates much of the problem, adding proper intestinal flora is built right in. I'd advise eating a good amount of yogurt and to avoid eating large amounts of meat for the next few days at least. Just to help things even out. You'll be back to your old self in no time."

"Speaking of," I said dryly. "Is there a reason that none of my bras fit, anymore?"

"Oh, that," Emma smiled. "The system may have accidentally put a little bit too much in when it was
emulating the new body's puberty growth cycle. It's a very complicated process, reading your DNA and extrapolating patterns. All very involved tinker stuff that we'd be spending hours talking about. It's not really that surprising that something went a teensy bit wrong, right?" She continued smiling the whole time, and then she winked. "We've already fixed the error, but it was too late to undo the growth process without causing all kinds of other problems. We couldn't fix it, but Amelia certainly can."

_Uh huh. Mistake. Sure, Emma, whatever you say. _"So, any other surprises I need to worry about?"

"Shouldn't be," she replied. "The growth process is keyed to make you pretty much a match for Olympic level athletes in every physical way, and better in most, but if you don't train, then that it'll go away pretty quickly. So enjoy it while it lasts. You may have insomnia for a bit as your body reworks its circadian rhythm, and don't be surprised if you dislike salty or strongly flavored foods for a while. Your taste buds are brand new, after all."

"I meant about everything else," I responded. "Everyone's been acting weird around me. What happened?"

"Oh, that," she looked down. "Well, for starters, the only people who know you died were either there when you woke up, or Zach and Crystal, everyone else just has their own problems to worry about right now. Kinda hiding that whole 'death' thing from the public. And the team, I guess. The Butcher fight... it went pretty bad for everyone. Crystal almost became the Butcher after being hit by that rage power. You apparently activated the suit override and killed her first."

"Why didn't I just shunt Crystal out?" I asked.

"Too soon, hadn't recharged," Emma replied. I frowned. Crystal's suit had Crystal herself as a battery charger, but it was also the armor with the most energy intensive systems. It recharged in whatever order Crystal told it to, just by default. If all she cared about was killing the Butcher... well, that was a stupid question to ask.

"Okay," I agreed. "What about everyone else?"

"Lisa blames herself for asking Dinah the wrong questions," Emma continued. "Crystal's upset thanks to the whole nearly-being-possessed thing, and how you sacrificed yourself to save her. Everyone in New York blames Lily for fucking up her mission. Missy was killed, but Riley fixed that. Riley now hates Lily. Missy and Theo aren't fans, either, but Missy's too professional and Theo's too nice to let it show. And basically everything's fucked."

_Well, god damn it. _"And normally this is the stuff Lisa would handle, but she's upset too, right?" I asked. _Crystal probably blames herself, too. Fuck my life. Or past life. Whatever._
"Pretty much," Emma agreed. "I'd try to do something, but, well, I come with baggage and no one wants to be near me, much less listen to my advice. You and Riley are the closest things I have to actual friends. Which puts a certain perspective on my life that I'm not all that pleased with."

"And what about the rest of the week?" I asked. "Lisa and Amelia are on eggshells around me, and I don't know why."

She looked away. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yeah," I responded. "Of course."

"Your past self preferred not to update for a reason," Emma continued. "You, she, knew that she'd be happier losing that part forever. You and Amelia got into a big blowout, and both of you were miserable, and it made other people miserable. You've been given a chance to undo that. I can't lie, I'm kinda jealous. I wish I had that option, I really do."

"I doubt your past self would appreciate the mess you left her with," I replied. A fight between me and Amelia? That explains a lot, but not why we had the fight. I had chosen to get the update before altering my sexuality, for a number of reasons. But if it didn't work out and upset Amelia that I made the change, I had expected to just use the old pattern to replace the new one. A simple enough fix, all considered.

"Guess I'm still a selfish bitch like that," she smiled sadly. "I know I keep saying this, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Damn it. I stepped forward and put my arms around her, pulling into as tight a hug as I could without activating Matriarch's strength boosters. Her hair was cool on my face. That's right, part of her Case 53 traits means she doesn't generate body heat. "For what it's worth, it means more that you're trying to make up for it than if you had simply erased you memories of it in order to play innocent."

"Thanks," she mumbled into my shoulder.

....

I walked into Lisa's office. "How are you holding up?"

She jumped. "Oh, jeez, how do you move that quietly?"

"Antigrav system," I answered. "Still getting used to the new legs and all."
"Do you need something?" she asked, sliding back into her position in front of her computer.

"Just wanted to talk to you," I replied.

"About?"

"You," I answered. "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate everything you do. I don't say it nearly often enough, but I really do."

She closed her eyes. "I know," she answered. "My power at work, it's hard for anyone to hide what they think of me."

"Still, you deserve to hear it said more often," I insisted. "Not just from me, for that matter."

She shrugged. "I don't exactly make it easy for people," she pointed out. "You're only here because you're under the emotional influence of a psychic link and a post-death experience. And that's fine, I don't like all that mushy stuff to begin with. Just be sure and praise my brilliance to the masses. You know how much I love that."

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied. "But you're not getting out of this that easily." I walked/glided over to her.

"Dammit, Taylor," she muttered, but she stood anyway, allowing me to hug her without anything more than her complaints to stop me. "You're completely ruining both of our images as a badass warrior goddess right now. I hope you realize that."

"Doesn't matter," I dismissed. "You'll just write up some crazy new scheme and next week we'll stomp some psychopath's face until we're back to being the scariest girls on the planet yet again."

"Speaking of, I have ideas for our next mission," she added. "And there's absolutely nothing that can go wrong with this one. I'll explain it at the morning meeting. But I've got a couple speeches to write, and some outlines to run past Dinah."

"I'll be there," I agreed, leaving her to her work.

I headed straight for Amelia's room after leaving Lisa. RecognitionJoy.

I paused and looked at her. I considered asking her what happened last week. Whatever it was, my
other self decided it wasn't worth keeping. I also considered Emma's advice. Other-Me chose this, having a week erased. A week that might have become months, had it come down to it. Endbringer battles are generally the only time it was likely for us to die. Honestly, now that we could carry my power across dimensions, we no longer had a reason to be near them in order to fight them. She couldn't have been hoping for someone to kill her, she had to know it might take years for something to succeed. Right?

ConcernWorry. "Taylor, are you okay?"

"Still decompressing," I answered. That is certainly true. "Everyone's acting so differently, and I just found out I was dead. It's going to take a little time to get used to, is all. I'm also still trying to figure out what happened this week."

FearLonelinessGuilt. "I... I can fill you in," she offered as I started to work my way out of the armor. She stood and moved behind me to keep me steady so I didn't accidentally fall. I stumbled back, only partially on purpose, into her arms.

"Maybe later," I answered. "I've decided it doesn't matter right now. Maybe later I'll want to know more, but for right now? I'm happy just being happy. Or I will be when I don't feel like I'm trying to walk on stilts all the time, at least." ReliefConcern.

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll be here whenever you need."

I turned and hugged her tight.

SafeRealizationShockDesire. "Umm... Taylor... you're not wearing a bra."

============

A/N- So, apparently being dead for a few days makes you all mushy.

And man, on rereading this chapter... Taylor's kind of a hypocrite with absolutely no self awareness. I think that means I caught her character perfectly.
"Clarice, Zach and Theo have no other guardians?" Principal Howell asked.

"I'm afraid not," my mother responded. "While Theo does have a living step mother, she is currently on the run from the law. The courts have acknowledged his legal emancipation, on condition that he continues to prove he is able to conduct himself responsibly."

_AnnoyanceConcernAppreciation. And that would be Taylor, spending time with her father. Their lunch date to talk about her problems. Problems Taylor didn't even remember. I pushed what peaceful emotions that I could through the link. CalmWarmthLove._

"Which includes remaining in school," Howell concluded. "And, Theo, is Pantheon providing for you?"

"No, ma'am," he replied. Not technically true- he did live in our fortress full time, after all, but from a legal standpoint he was able to provide for himself. "My family has money. It's in a trust, Mrs. Dallon can explain it better."

My mom nodded. "I am on retainer as his advocate, and one of my senior associates specializes in corporate law, and serves his interests there. He has a trust and a monthly allowance to live on."

"I see," the principal agreed. "What of Clarice?"

"They have no immediate relatives capable of caring for them," my mom answered. "Clarice lost her family to the Slaughterhouse Nine."

Clarice hugged me. "I have my Big Sister!" she insisted.

"... and has connected emotionally to my daughter," she finished. "While she is technically considered a ward of the state at this point, I don't need to explain to you that the current conditions of Brockton Bay are still straining the child welfare systems. The city has no objection to her remaining in Pantheon's custody, although the final legalities are not yet finalized. Amelia will assume legal guardianship when she turns eighteen in two months."

"I presume Zachariah is much the same?"

"His mother and father also died to the S9," mom replied. "Other relatives were lost during Leviathan or the chaos afterward. His only adult relative is obviously unfit to care for a minor..."
"Translation," Zach interrupted. "My uncle hasn't been sober since the mid eighties."

Howell looked through the paperwork. "This seems to be in order," she concluded, then looked at me. "Is that everything?"

"Almost," mom responded. "There are two other students that are attending here that Pantheon will be paying tuition for, despite not being their legal guardians."

"The former Wards, I presume," Principal Howell asked.

"Yes," I nodded as I handed over the small stack of checks. "That should cover everything."

"Thank you," she responded. I got up, leaving with the three 'kids'. Mom remained behind to make one last arrangement.

....

I met up with Taylor and Mister Hebert after the meeting. The others went to do their own thing- we were only a mile or so away from home, after all. Clarice, thanks to the miracle of public identities, had Bella with her. I didn't worry too much about who went where, and walked the short couple blocks to one of the new outdoor diners being set up in this area. A chill reminded me that it would be winter soon. I was glad I had the Yggdrasil fully integrated to the version on the other side of our doorway. Trying to keep plants alive in winter, especially ones of the scale as mine, was damn near impossible. But this one had access to massive amounts of raw material and a uniquely warm sun.

"Hello, Mister Hebert," I said with a smile as I sat next to Taylor. A waitress got there at almost the same moment, with one of those giant pizza slices. "Are you sure you don't have a power for perfect timing?" I asked Taylor as I sat down to my lunch. AmusementPride. Taylor had opted for a vegetable soup, about as mild a dish as possible.

"I'm contractually obligated to not admit to any high end thinker powers," Taylor responded. "On grounds that it'd make Lisa cry if she had any competition."

"How did everything go during admissions?" Mister Hebert asked.

"School's been sorted out," I informed him. "Ms. Howell was really understanding about everything, and mom helped."
"I still think you girls should be going as well," he added.

*AnnoyanceExasperation.* "Dad, you know why we can't."

"The world isn't your responsibility, Taylor," he insisted. "You should let the adults deal with things while you get your education and a good foundation for your future careers. The world and all its problems will still be here for you when you graduate."

"Like the adults handled Lung and E88 and Butcher?" Taylor asked. "We could ask the Simurgh what she thinks."

"You have a point," her dad sighed. "I just want to make sure my little girl lives up to her potential. You're so smart, you should stay in school and take advantage of that mind of yours. You can easily be anything you want."

"I want to kill a couple more Endbringers and then retire to a quiet, peaceful life somewhere that no one knows who I am," Taylor responded. "That's not really an option for me, dad. Even if I wanted to, I can't ignore my responsibilities. And school just gets in the way of that. It was nice to go back, to prove I was good enough, that I was stronger than the trio. I did that, already. Now I need to prove to the Simurgh that people are stronger than her, by keeping everything from falling apart."

I reached over and put my hand on Taylor's leg, giving a squeeze and offering my emotional support. *GratitudeSafePride.* "Everything that she just said," I added. "Hopefully she recorded all of that so I can show it to my mom."

"There are others who can do that," Danny insisted. "The Triumvirate, for example. Let them fight this fight. That's their job, and they're good at it."

"They need help," I told him. "There's too much going on, and they can't be everywhere at once. Pantheon, on the other hand... thanks to Taylor's power, we really can be everywhere. And because of my powers, we can do it safely. I promise I'll keep her safe." *From now on, at least,* I added in my head. *I will never allow myself to lose her again.*

The answer didn't seem to make him any happier. He simply sighed. "Teenagers sure have changed since my day."

*AmusementAnticipation.* "Hey, look at it this way," she said with a smile that somehow managed to chill my spine and warm my heart at the same time. "At least we're not dropping out because of an unexpected pregnancy."
"Are you sure it worked?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Emma responded. "There's going to be a bit of difficulty at first, but yes."

I nodded, my hand trembling as I reached over and gripping Taylor's. She squeezed back. SupportLove.

"Okay, let's do this," I said, as I put my hand on the pod and finished the last step to allow her back to awareness.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Amy?" she asked, after focusing on my face. "Wha... what's going on here?"

I had to imagine I looked a lot different than the last time she saw me. Looking at her, I felt she looked a lot different, too. She was still beautiful, but she wasn't the icon, the living goddess, of my dreams and memories. She was frightened and confused. She was human and vulnerable. But, more important than all of that, she was alive.

"Hey," I said smiling, the tears running freely down my face. "It's a long story, Vicky."

=========

A/N- See. Other than Danny experiencing a nearly fatal heart attack, which Amelia quickly healed, no one suffered in this episode. I didn't write that part in because it isn't important due to how easily fixed it was. Also because it didn't actually happen.
"What's with the audience?" Victoria asked, her bright blue darting between Emma and Taylor. No one else was in the room with us, for various reasons ranging from 'why would they be' to 'worst idea ever, of all time'. The only other person on the team who had a reason would be Crystal, who was currently with my parents and Rey, him being an actual doctor and all put him in position to help explain things to them better than the rest of us might.

"That's Emma," I introduced the one that would take the least amount of explaining. "She's a tinker that made much of the tech we used to restore you."

"What?" Victoria asked, eying the girl warily. "You mean you're a biotinker like Bonesaw or Blasto."

"Not exactly," I replied. "They're not far away, though. I've kinda started my own hero team. Emma's one of them. This is another." I stepped to the side and gestured to Taylor, knowing I was radiating a nervousness that my partner was kind enough to pretended not to notice. "Taylor, my partner."

Victoria sized up the tall girl to my right. "Huh, guess I'm a little woozy," she smiled a little. "When you said 'partner' I coulda swore you meant..."

"She did," Taylor answered. "ProtectiveTerritorial. She gripped my hand. "We work together, and I'm also her fiancée."

"Well, that explains why you were never interested in any of the guys I set up with," Victoria joked. AnnoyedConcerned. "Victoria doesn't understand what she was saying, I tried to mentally remind Taylor. And myself. "Why didn't you tell me? You know I wouldn't have a problem with it, right? I dated that one guy for three months, or at least pretended to, until he finally worked up the courage to come out to his folks."

I froze, how the hell was I suppose to answer that question? 'No, Victoria, I don't think you would have been okay with your sister having a bizarre incestuous fixation on you that is entirely your power's fault' didn't seem like such a great conversation idea. Taylor came to my rescue. "She just hadn't found the right person," she volunteered. "You know how much trouble Amelia has with people. We only got to know each other through being part of the same team."

"Amelia?" Vicky asked, her eyes focused on me.

"I... felt it was time for a change," I replied. "Amy sounds so childish."
"Christ, Ames..." she paused. "Using your full name, and an engagement? How long was I out?"

"About three months," I answered.

"You got engaged after only three months?" She asked. "Are you sure that's such a good idea, Amy?" PrideProtective.

"Never been more certain about anything," I answered. Victoria just looked at me like I had grown a second head. I suppose I had, actually. In a way that was just shy of being literal. Note to self, never let Riley hear that figure of speech.

"Usually your healing power doesn't take this much getting used to," Victoria offered a brave smile, slowly sitting up. I was grateful that she chose to drop the subject. I could tell it would be a source of disagreement in the future. More when she realized Taylor was Skitter. I really did not want to deal with that headache, ever. I knew that putting it off probably wasn't the best plan, either, but maybe with a little time for her to get used to things and see how happy Taylor and I were together, she would be able to accept it.

"That's because it was our healing tinker tech that did the work," Emma explained to Victoria for me. "Your injuries were... beyond what Amelia was capable of working with. Tell me, what is the last thing you can recall? A date or major event?"

"Umm..." she closed her eyes, thinking. "I remember Leviathan. Neil and Eric's funeral. After that it's all bits and pieces. How bad was I hurt?"

I didn't want to upset her too much more, so I answered in a way she would be able to work with. "You got into a boxing match with Crawler," I informed her, almost cavalierly. "You were doing okay for a while, but he cheats."

She smiled. "Well, good to know I didn't go down like a punk." She paused and a worried frown started. "Wait. Crawler? You mean the Slaughterhouse Fucking Nine were here?"

"Yeah," Taylor answered. "Amelia here was so upset that she hunted down and killed Jack Slash. It was, sorta kinda our first date." ChagrinConcern. Oh, I must have reacted to that. I didn't like thinking about my fight with Jack. I didn't really want Victoria to think about my powers like that. HesitationConcernSupport. Taylor gave my hand a squeeze. "She recruited me after I killed the Siberian, to go after the rest of the group."

"Really?" Victoria asked, returning to her assessment of Taylor. "You killed the Siberian? Amy fought the S9?" Dammit Taylor, what are you doing?
"All that and more," Taylor continued. "The whole group is dead. Amelia got Jack and Bonesaw. The others were killed one or two at a time by a bunch of people. You can look it up later if you don't believe me, but they really weren't that tough once you figured out how to hit them."

"Bullshit," Victoria replied, slowly and unsteadily working herself to a standing position.

"Oh, that's not even the half of it," Taylor responded. ConfidentConfrontational. "Then next week we got bored, so we stomped all over E88. I'm not exaggerating, it wasn't even close to a fair fight. That was our second and third date, though I don't think either of us really figured that out at that point."

Victoria stared at Taylor.

"Their engagement party was suppose to be the Behemoth attack, in case you're wondering," Emma joined in, feeding the fire that Taylor had started. "But then the Simurgh had to be an attention whore and crash the party. So we killed that bitch."

Victoria just gaped. "You're fucking with me," she muttered.

"No, that's what really happened," I admitted. "It was a lot harder than they make it sound. We put lots of planning into all those missions. Thinker backup, including possibly the single most powerful precog in the entire world. Tinkertech weaponry. Days of prep work leading up to merely a few minutes of actual combat. Months of work for the Endbringer battle."

"What? And you had me in a coma all this time?" Victoria asked.

"It was... a little more than that," I answered. "Would you like like to see mom and dad now? They're waiting outside with Crystal and one of the doctors."

She looked at me warily. "Sure... umm, can I have actual clothes, first? Hospital gown isn't exactly the fashion statement I wanna make."

I pulsed my thoughts through the Yggdrasil, encasing her in the material before she even had a chance to react. "What the fuck!" she shouted, and then the mass pulled away, leaving her in her new clothing. Which, while admittedly looking like something you'd wear to a construction job, were both fully functional and comfortable.

"Uh... sorry, didn't think about how that might frighten you," I answered. "I've been practicing with my powers."
"I can tell," Victoria muttered, lifting her arm. "This outfit doesn't even have seams, but you really need to work on your fashion sense."

"Oh god, you have absolutely no idea," Emma remarked. "You should see the amount of effort Crystal and Lisa put into making sure these two wear something nice. If it were up to these two, there'd be no way for people be sure they're not amorphous blobs."

"Really?" Victoria smirked. "They needed Crystal for that? She doesn't know the difference between Gucci and Walmart."

"I heard that," Crystal said from behind us.

"I know," Victoria answered. "I, unlike you, am not blind."

"Stop teasing your cousin," Carol replied, sounding far less stern than her words may have implied.

"Hey, mom," Vicky smiled. "Dad. How are things?"

"Pretty good, firecracker," he answered, moving around us. "She's not going to break if we touch her or anything, is she?"

"She's fine," Emma answered. "Yum Kaax told you the basics. You don't have to worry about hurting her."

Dad moved in first, hugging her, and mom followed quickly after, hugging their daughter that had been dead for three months. I started moving forward, to join in the group hug that was quickly forming, when Vicky spoke.

"You're crushing me," she gasped, as much in surprise as pain. "Oh god, I don't have my powers!"

=============

A/N- Territorial Taylor is best Taylor.
"Sorry, Victoria," Amelia said, her voice full of concern. Mom and dad didn't stop holding onto me. "It was a risk of the process."

"The fuck was the 'process', Ames?" I asked. "I know how powers work. What did you have to do to me? Brain surgery?"

"We had to construct a new body," the yellow colored girl with red hair answered. I forgot her name already. "We didn't have your exact DNA, so we got as close as we possibly could, using the resources we had at our disposal."

My eyes narrowed. "New body?"

Mom interrupted. "We were going to wait until you recovered some, first. Let you have a chance to rest," she said, putting her hand on my cheek and turning my head, gently, toward her. "Vicky, you weren't unconscious. You died."

"Show me," I demanded.

....

My corpse really is beautiful, in a horrifying way, I decided as I gazed at the contorted figure. The glass was pristine, a statue of impossible detail and complexity. It would take a sculptor years simply to get the detail of my hand. It also depicted something out of a nightmare. Flesh melted away, half my skull exposed to air. I could believe that my damaged memories were just from me not wanting to remember what going through that was like.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" mom asked, but I ignored her as I stepped up to the crystalline statue that was my... remains. My costume had almost completely melted off, and my modesty was spared solely because my skin and most of my flesh were missing as well. Half my face, one of my arms, completely skeletal. My hair had clearly chipped and broken in pieces after being reduced to glass, or whatever material I was made out of. I brushed my hand over a portion that had somehow survived this long. It splintered easily. Traces of crimson were left behind, where the sharp edges had cut my fingers. *I can bleed, now.* That's when the reality of my lack of powers really hit me.

My parents couldn't even bring themselves to look at the body. I didn't have that problem. Maybe it was the same way you could faint looking at someone else's blood, but be perfectly fine seeing your own. *Not that I have to worry about my own very often. Had,* I corrected myself. *Past tense. Now I'm as vulnerable as anyone else.*
The damage extended everywhere, I could see where large patches of my belly were missing. "Crawler had acid powers," Amy spoke up softly. "He covered you, and then hit you hard enough to get through your forcefield. The only reason you could be brought back was because you were turned into... that..."

"Without getting too technical, It's a form of silicate allotrope," the yellow girl volunteered as I caressed my own mutilated face. "Like you take coal or graphite and turn it to diamond, but this starts with sand, glass or quartz and gets something that can't exist according to molecular physics as we understand the science. Because of its properties, it flash-froze your mind. Inorganic cryogenics. Just extract the data and transfer it back over."

"We had to build you a new body, Vicky," Amy insisted. "We couldn't figure out a way to do that and still be sure you'd get your powers back. There was a chance you would, but there was a greater chance you wouldn't. I'm sorry."

"N-no," I sighed, finally pulling my eyes away from the body. "Don't be sorry. You did everything you could. You saved my life."

....

"Why's dad driving in a different car?" I asked my mother on my way home.

"He... doesn't stay in our house, anymore," she answered reluctantly.

What? "What?"

"Things have been stressed after... well, after Leviathan," she added. "You know how you and Crystal were talking about joining the Wards full time, and even your aunt Sarah was considering it?"

I concentrated, trying to find the details. Memories after Leviathan were blurry, and got worse as we got closer to... to my death. "Yeah, I recall," I lied. Then I added the part that I knew would sell it. "You kinda flipped your shit over that."

"Language," mom chastised me. The lie was believed, even though it was just minor deduction. I was pretty sure my mom would have poisoned us in our sleep before letting us join the Protectorate. "It seems your father agreed with you and Crystal. He signed up with them a couple weeks ago. He's still in Brockton Bay for now, but they'll transfer him sooner or later."

"Transfer?" I asked. "Why would he need to be transfered?"
"The city's changed, Victoria," mom sighed, stopping at a red light. "Your sister and her friends have incredible powers. Imagine what it would be like if the whole Triumvirate just decided one day that it'd be fun to vacation in Brockton Bay for a weekend, and started smacking Nazis around for fun. There's nothing left here for the Protectorate to do."

"Are you saying Pantheon is equal to the Triumvirate?" I asked, incredulously. I mean, sure, Amy had shown off some impressive stuff, but nothing I'd say let her compare to Legend, even. Much less Alexandria or Eidolon.

"Equal?" she laughed. "No, Pantheon's not equal to the Triumvirate. They make the Triumvirate look like a joke by comparison. They've taken the whole 'war on crime' crime thing to a whole new level. Even convinced the Adepts and Ambassadors that it was easier to switch sides than risk pissing them off."

"Aren't those in other cities?" I asked, a little confused. *Maybe they tried to take territory in Brockton Bay after E88 was removed?*

"They are," mom acknowledged. "Pantheon's been moving on other cities every week or so. They already cleared out everything in Brockton bay. And I do mean everything. Taylor's power lets her find all drugs and violent crimes from anywhere in the city. And Amy can make almost anything."

She took her foot off the brake and started driving again.

"Like that weird tree thing," I volunteered. "That igg-whatever."

"Yggdrasil," mom supplied.

"Yeah, that," I agreed. "Wait... what's Taylor's power?"

"She telepathically controls and can see and hear and smell through bugs," mom answered. "Her power also works on whatever weird monsters Amy makes out of bugs."

Oh god, I froze as the realization hit me. Taylor is Skitter. "My sister's dating that cunt!?" I shouted.

"Victoria!"

....

"I still don't know how mom got me registered for school while I was dead," I complained to Amy
over my cell phone. "No, seriously, something about that seems really, really off. I know she's a lawyer and all, but still. How does that even make sense?"

"Don't ask me," she answered. "Powers kicking physics in the nuts, that's a thing that makes sense to me. What mom does to the legal system? I'm hopeless."

"Why aren't you here?" I asked.

"Summer classes," she answered. "I graduated." Oh, right, I reminded myself. She didn't stop living just because I did.

"This is going to suck," I muttered.

"Can't be that bad," she replied. "You've only got to complete a single semester. You'll be out by Christmas."

"I know, but..." I didn't know how to explain it to her. "Now I know I'm stuck here. I know I won't be getting any alerts to run off and smack around some assholes robbing a bank." I wouldn't call my reminder subtle, but I still didn't get how my sister was dating a fucking supervillain. 'Reformed' or 'undercover' or whatever bullshit was being sold this week.

She was fighting crime, and not just the playing around crime fighting. Amy was on the national stage. International, even. Her engagement was talked about constantly. VS. speculations pit her up against Eidolon, and aside from some diehard fans, most people couldn't decide. Usually splitting it up and calling Eidolon the more powerful cape, but Amy the more versatile and creative one.

What almost no one had any doubt about was that Pantheon as a team could go up against the Triumvirate and their teams, and win every time. The Triumvirate had fought the Endbringers dozens of times and called the clusterfuck known as Brocton Bay a 'victory'. Pantheon goes out and kills the fucking Simurgh on their first fight. Apparently, people had called their kill of the Slaughterhouse Nine 'getting lucky' or 'they only did part of it. But the Simurgh? That was all them and everyone knew it.

"Hey, are you still there?" Amy asked.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Sorry, must have lost the signal for a second." That was a lie. I just didn't want to listen to her defend Taylor's former career as a bank robber. "I'm almost at Arcadia, so I should probably go now."

"Okay," she agreed. "Hey, what do you say about me picking you up after school. We can hang out, I'll even let you take me shopping for clothes."
"Sure, that could be fun," I agreed.

A boy approached me as I walked in. I, subtly of course, checked him out. Kinda short, a little shorter than me actually, but clearly young enough that he hadn’t had that final growth spurt than boys get before becoming men. Other than that, he was hot. Sandy brown hair, decently tanned skin, green eyes, and in really good shape. Can't fault people for their height, but a body like that only comes to those who work for it.

"You're Victoria, right? Dallon?" He smiled. Perfect teeth, too.

"Y-yeah," I replied, smiling right back. Powers or not, I still had a rep, and I still have a great figure of my own. Really, I had an absurdly good body right now. Probably classed as a Brute one or two, on merit of the clone body alone. "Sorry, you kinda surprised me. I didn't expect to be recognized so soon."

"I'll keep it quiet, if you like," he offered. "I know how much of a pain those public identities can be." He offered his hand. I took it. Very strong hand. "I'm Zach. Osiris, in costume. I work for your sister."

God dammit, I thought. Oh well, I can still work with that. Hopefully this one doesn't turn out to be gay.

A girl on crutches came up. "Are you going to introduce me to your friend?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," he smiled at her. "Erica, this is Victoria. She's not really a friend. I haven't actually met her before today. She's my boss's sister. Victoria, this is Erica, my girlfriend."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," I said cheerfully as I extended my hand to her. God fucking dammit.

=============

A/N- Yes. Yes I did just do that. Feed me your delicious speculation. And/or hate. That's tasty, too.

Reread A/N: Oh the fucking foreshadowing.
I quickly decided that it was painfully awkward at school. There were others in the same boat as I, who only needed to complete a single semester to graduate, or at least be bumped up to the next grade level. Most of the underclassmen were simply given a denser schedule that'd let them catch up to their peers who had gotten into the summer classes. I imagined it was an expensive project for the school, but, money was being thrown at the problem.

I had taken a class or two on economics, and Brockton Bay's taxes hadn't changed while millions of dollars weren't being spent on stuff like the sewers and waste management, thanks to Pantheon's work. Part of that, at the very least, was going into the school system.

So I spent my day around a bunch of people who were the grade below mine. With only two other students, neither of which I was friends with, from my own year.

There was a time when I had been a celebrity in this school, and it was much the same for me now, but Pantheon were more than celebrities... they were icons. Like the gods they named themselves after, it wouldn't be a stretch to say they were worshiped. Maybe not in a religious sense, but it was eerily similar. It made for an uncomfortable lunch line, being asked all these questions about things I didn't know. Like Pantheon's next big mission, or what denomination Minerva was.

"Hey," a voice said. "Wanna come sit with us?" I turned to see Zach there, along with that girl. Erica.

"Depends," I replied. "Are you sure I wouldn't be intruding?"

"Don't worry," Erica responded. "You won't be a third wheel. Theo and, uh... I think his name's Trevor? He's really more Zach's friend."

"I really don't know him that well, either," Zach admitted. "He's kinda a techy type. Still fun to hang around if you keep the conversation away from cars and planes. But you really gotta work at keeping it far, far away from there."

I let myself be led along by them. I didn't want to intrude on their alone time, but if there was already going to be a group of people, then that was fine.

"This is Theo," Zach said, introducing him to me. Theo, it turns out, was another hottie, if again younger. This time of the blond hair blue eyed variety. "Theo, meet Gaea's sister, Victoria."

"Hello, ma'am," Theo said politely. He glanced at Erica, as if confused about something.
"Zach may be cute, but he's not very subtle, I thought. He may as well just announce to the world that Theo is part of the team. Which probably meant Trevor was as well. I forgave him, however. Just because a cape... a former cape, I reminded myself... figured it out, doesn't mean normal people would.

"And this is Trevor," Zach introduced the other boy. Trevor was darker toned, with black hair. Obviously hispanic. One of the skinny geeky types that wore the status on his sleeve, a lot like Kid Win did. I wondered, and not for the first time, if that was just a tinker thing. But then there were examples like Armsmaster. He may have been a bigger tool than his overcompensation rod, but he was focused on things that mattered, like kicking bad guy butt.

"Hello, guys," I said, sitting down near them, opposite to Zach and Erica. Something about her was strange, and I could not put my finger on what it was. "Don't let me ruin your conversation."

"So, Theo," Erica started. "I saw Clarice chatting with a couple guys in her class about a date. Aren't you two an item?"

Theo frowned, looking away. "No, I'm seeing Missy." The way he said that made me worry. Relationship issues there. "The two are pretty close friends, though. Maybe you got them confused."

"That must be it," she smiled. No, no it's not, you bitch. You knew exactly what you were doing before you sat down at the table.

"So, how long have you and Missy been dating?" I asked. I know it's not what Erica was going for, so I may as well toss the wrench in. Besides, I was pretty sure I knew who 'Missy' was. Vista and I weren't what one would call close, but I liked the kid. Even if she had such a painfully obvious crush on my boyfriend. I didn't exactly feel guilty about that, but I did sorta feel bad for her. She found someone, and I was happy for her. That and I really wanted to feed Erica her own teeth.

"A couple months, now," Theo answered. "Kind of. We met at a dance. I don't know when we became 'official' or anything."

"I know how that goes," I said with a smile. "Relationships are complicated. I've found that, ultimately, it's all about communication. Y'know, talking to each other. Especially if there's something wrong."

Theo nodded. "Thanks for the advice, ma'am." Good, I thought. That's a step in the right direction, like I had with Dean. Sure, an outsider might think our relationship was just constant arguing. They'd even be right. But that's how we communicated, and so we would always be together in the end. Or would have. Fuck you, Leviathan. Can't wait for Amy to cut you into pieces."
"Please don't call me ma'am," I replied. Makes me feel old.

"So how about you two?" I smiled, looking at Zach and Erica.

"A couple days," Zach answered, at the same time Erica answered "Years."

She paused. "Oh, umm, we've known each other for years. Only started dating a little while ago."

"Oh, one of those childhood friendships things?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "I suppose it's not an uncommon story."

"Why haven't you asked for Amy to fix your legs?" I asked. She fidgeted. Because you haven't been here long enough to get a chance.

"I... didn't want to impose," she said. "She probably has people pestering her for stuff like that all the time."

"No imposition, I assure you," I said. "In fact, I'll talk to her after school and see what she thinks. Get you patched up tomorrow, if that's okay."

"Umm... sure, if you insist," she smiled.

"I do," I smiled broadly. "Now I'd better get going. Want to clean up before class. See you later, guys."

They said their goodbyes as I walked away. "So, bug girl, did you catch all that?" I asked a nearby garbage can. It's where the bugs would be, right? A ladybug landed on the back of my hand. "That girl creeps the hell outa me. Point whatever master/stranger shit you've got at her. You used it to take down Heartbreaker, right?" The bug flew away. She didn't say anything, but I had my answer.

Teach that bimbo to underestimate me.

=================

A/N- Strangely enough, I think Vicky is the go to favorite character in my story.
I landed on the roof of Arcadia, where Victoria was already waiting. She looked at my costume, clearly not terribly happy with it. "I thought you meant for a normal ride. Or, maybe, walking."

"I did, at first," I answered cheerfully. "Then I decided this would be more fun. I've kinda always wanted to do this." It was true, too. Ever since Victoria got her powers, I'd wished, fantasized even, about being the one carrying her in my arms. The romantic desire might not be there anymore, but this was still something I wanted to be able to do.

She hesitated as I held out my arms. Or my armor's arms, as redundant as that sounds. My own actual limbs were inside the core of the body. She cooperated, allowing me to pick her up and carry her bridal style, and I took off. She squealed and gripped hard around the suit.

"You act like this is your first time flying," I teased.

"I'm not flying!" she cried. "I'm being carried around by someone wearing a suit made out of vines!"

"Oh, stop being a baby," I laughed. More fun than I ever imagined! AmusementCuriosity. I decided that I'd have to tell Taylor about this one. She promised not to peak in on my conversations with Victoria, but it did make her upset. I would have to find some way to make it up to her. "Now I know why you carried me around all the time. This is hilarious."

"If you drop me, I swear I'll trigger as a ghost and haunt you forever!" She yelled over the wind rushing past us. She didn't have to, the suit's armor could hear her just fine. "This is not flying! This is falling in the wrong direction!"

Somehow, she managed to not have a heart attack on the trip. We touched down, safely, only about five minutes after we took flight. "See, was that so bad?" I asked as I watched her catch her breath. I then shed my armor, sending most of the mass into the sewer system. The armor would be transported back to base using automated systems. I was left with only the bracer. Victoria simply stood there gawking at me, and I became a little self-conscious. "What?" I asked.

"I don't even know," she admitted. "I mean, I remember having trouble convincing you to do anything but fix up a few cuts and bruises, and now here you are showing powers I didn't even know were possible."

"Things have changed," I said softly. "A lot of things."

"Like your supervillain girlfriend?" Oh god damn it Victoria.
"Do we really have to have this conversation?" I fought back the urge to yell. **ConcernSupport.** I took a deep breath, taking comfort from the link. "I just want to have a nice day at the mall with my sister. Eat junk food, pretend everything's normal for a change. Could you please not get on my case over my girlfriend?"

She frowned. "I seem to remember a few guys you encouraged me to leave and never look back."

I froze. **Fuck.** I had no way to respond to that. **SupportLoveAnxiety.** I sighed, I would need to do so much explaining to Taylor after this was over. "I know," I finally spoke. "I know, and I was wrong. You have every right to be pissed about every time I did that. I'm sorry."

She blinked. "Actually, I was going to use it as an example of how you should listen to me," she elaborated. "Y'know... I was being an idiot and you tried to help. Now you're being an idiot and I'm trying to help."

"Is it too much to ask that you accept that I'm happy? Because I am. Taylor makes me happy. Let's just drop it there."

"You never dropped it when you had a problem with what I was doing," she insisted. "Your girlfriend threatened you with deadly spiders," she insisted. "And shot me. And fed me to bees."

"You hurt people too, Victoria," I met her eyes, drawing on all the tips I'd learned about at least pretending to be confident. **SupportConfidencePride.** I didn't know what Taylor was getting off my side, not for certain, but it was good to know she was there. "She also nearly died fighting Leviathan, and stood beside me during the worst period of my life. She's sorry for all the bad things she's done. You don't have to accept her, or her apology. I wish you would, but you don't have to. You do have to accept that I have."

She just looked right back at me.

"Please, Vicky?"

She sighed. "Fine, but I'm going to call this in next time you don't like something I do."

I frowned. "That's really not how that sorta thing is suppose to work."

"Too bad," she smiled. "I'm supposed to be the irresponsible sister. Deal with it."
"Fine," I rolled my eyes. "I forgot what a colossal pain in the ass you are at times."

We spent much some time shopping. She needed new outfits, and so did I. She was more than happy to find out I was footing the bill, and as weird as it sounds, I'd stopped caring about money. Maybe this was what Dean felt like, when Vicky always talked him into buying everything. Didn't matter to him, and made her happy. And she seemed happy enough, flitting about. Apparently a few months is enough time for the fashion world to reshape itself into an alien landscape, to hear her talk about it. Meanwhile, I simply browsed for a few things and let her talk me into buying whatever.

"So," I asked when looking at a dark blue coat I recognized. "Would it be creepy of me to buy a coat, if my girlfriend already has one just like it?"

Vicky paused. "Probably?" she answered. "I've never had to ask that question before. I don't think it's your color, though. You need something brighter. Like this."

"Vicky, I'm not wearing pink," I said dryly.

"It's not pink, it's watermelon red."

"Which is the same color as pink."

"Whatever, we both know you're going to buy something green by the end of this argument, anyway," she countered. She's probably right, I decided.

....

"So, Dad's got a bit of time," Victoria said after putting away her cell. "We should talk to him. He's been acting really weird lately."

"Mom says he's been acting weird ever since..." I rebuilt his brain under duress from Bonesaw. "He was healed."

"Kinda reminds of when we were kids," Vicky replied. "Kinda goofy. Which was nice when we were six or seven, but it's really hard to know what to do with considering we're not little anymore."

"I know," I agreed. I was kinda avoiding him for that reason. I followed along as she led me out, to find him waiting in his car.

"Did you girls walk here?" He asked, as we got in. Victoria took the front seat, as usual.
"Amy flew us over," Vicky replied, sounding less than enthused about that. "She's terrible. I fear for the roads if she drives even half that bad."

"Hey!" I argued. "At least I've never run into a flock of seagulls."

"It was dark," Victoria countered. "And I was in a hurry."

Dad laughed. "I remember that one. You came home dripping with blood and mom almost had a heart attack when she saw you."

"Then when she found out it wasn't mine, she made me wash off in the back yard with a watering hose," Vicky muttered. "Ruined my dress, too. Worst junior prom ever."

"Not so bad," he said. "Gulls are the blind pedestrians of the skies. You had to have made at least five hundred points up there."

Vicky offered a light chuckle as Dad joked at her expense. That was something that hadn't happened in years, and we both probably felt that same blend of discomfort and happiness. He didn't act like his usual self, but he seemed happy. Despite no longer being with Mom. Then again, if I was being honest with myself, I was only happy after moving out, myself. So maybe it was just being around her. Just because I'd managed to reconcile with her, didn't mean I forgot what an unpleasant person she was to be around.

"So, Dad," Vicky started. "How long has it been since you last talked to Mom?"

"The other day, when we got you back," he answered.

"I don't think that counts," she replied. "I mean when have you actually talked to her."

"Oh... a while, I guess." About a month, I supplied in my head. Their last conversation would have been... the day of the Simurgh battle, if I recalled correctly. "What for?"

"I was thinking we should get together for a family thing," Vicky offered. "The whole family, just to catch up. It'd be nice."

"That sounds great," Dad replied. "Amelia, you should bring Taylor."
"I don-"

"And we should have Danny and Sarah come, too." He continued, interrupting me.

"Umm... who's Danny?" Victoria asked. Oh, fuck. I knew we forgot to tell her something.

A/N- Still love the chapters with Vicky in them.
"So, how do you like the first day back?" Missy smiled as we left the school. "As if I even need to ask."

"It's awesome!" I exclaimed. "Even better than before. I have to bring my scarf tomorrow, all the boys want to play our game again!"

"Of course they do," Missy sighed. "They're trying to get you to be their girlfriend."

"Really?" I asked. "Boys are weird."

Missy just looked at me. Or my changeling, at least. "Yes. Yes they are," she agreed. "Speaking of, I see Theo."

I glanced over at him. He was with Zach and some girl I didn't recognize. She looks a little old to be a highschool student. Clarice's analysis system instantly scanned her, identifying wounds to her knee and shin, fixed with rather inefficient medical knowledge. My own tinker knowledge filled in the blanks. Approximately thirty years old, female, scars and damage from a number of injuries over the course of years. Bullet and knife wounds included. Two pregnancies, second ended in miscarriage or abortion.

"Who's your friend?" I asked them as they approach. Another alert flared- the really expensive one that I kept in the most insulated portion of the Clarice system. Rapture's master/stranger system. Although to call it that was a misnomer. It worked on a number of other things, including many illusion powers. And it failed to work on a lot of master or stranger powers- such as Taylor's or Clarice's. It was working this time, however, alerting me to the altered dynamics.

"This is Erica," Zach replied. "She's my girlfriend. Erica, this is Clarice and Missy."

"I remember," Missy replied. The personality profile alerted me to what I already knew, she was being influenced. Rapture's tech started profiling details, and I told it to detect and tell me how to respond to the influence. It was a 'soft' effect, meaning it wouldn't alter my personality. It would simply make me believe I could trust this girl, and attempt to use the brain's naturally unreliable memory structures to fill in blanks.

"Oh, right," I said. "Zach mentioned you a couple times. It's good to meet you."

"I've heard a lot about you, too," the woman said with a less than healthy smile. Obvious smoker, I noted. Other drug use as well. "You're pretty famous in school. Did you really use an invisibility
power to walk around the cafeteria in nothing but your socks?"

"Sorta," I answered. "It was really a rapid shifting camouflage. My powers give me internal and external shapeshifting." A number of notices flared, as I was warned that my friends were about to tell her I lied. They knew Clarice was a fake and thus had no real powers. Drat! "Or that's the simple answer. It's really far more complex than that," I quickly added. Then I started talking 'tinker'. They wouldn't be able to call me a liar if they had absolutely no idea what I was saying.

I activated the com system in my outfit. "Taylor, I need you to do something important," I started. I knew she'd hear me, she didn't have a choice in the matter. An exploitable weakness, if you were smart enough to harness it. "Could you get a blood sample from that girl with Zach?"

"You mean Erica?" she asked. "Why would I do that?" Her, too? Darn it!

I hesitated. Big Sister wouldn't want me to lie, especially to Taylor. But she wouldn't want a Stranger hurting people. "My instruments think she might be sick, and I want to make sure without scaring her." I lied smoothly and easily.

"Oh, okay," Taylor responded. I could rely on a sample in fifteen minutes or so. Until then, I would buy time.

"Wow, that's really something," Erica said, unsure of how to approach the situation. The alerts let me know what she knew she couldn't reach me with her power. I wasn't behaving close enough to what was expected, and this model of Clarice didn't have an imitation human brain to trick thinkers.

"It is," I agreed. "But we have to rush, Zach. Minerva needs to talk to us at the base. The three of you will have to stay here."

"Really?" she asked. "What about?" There was a spike of apprehension and fear, more at the mention of the base than anything. She was afraid of something there, though I couldn't be certain of what exactly. More importantly, it was clear she knew Missy and Theo were parahumans. Secondary power? Did Zach tell her? Was it simple deduction? I had no way of knowing that, either.

"Our next mission," I answered, then glanced around to make sure no one else was in earshot. "We're planning to eliminating Nilbog." I whispered. It was a safe enough thing to admit. What's the worse she could do with that? Tell Nilbog? Even if she were to report this to some unknown leader, it was of minimum value. What really worried me was how she managed to work past Dinah's powers. Then again, her power worked on Taylor through her bugs, so apparently it carried over sensory powers.

"That's... wow..." Erica smiled. "Can you tell me what you're planning?"
Zach was about to speak up, but I interrupted again. Keeping the conversation between me and Stranger-girl. "Not sure," I answered. "That's why we need the meeting. Minerva's a really powerful Thinker and has been talking to a bunch of other powerful Thinkers. It's a really big operation, kinda like the one where we stopped Butcher." Bingo, I caught the response. She's attached to Butcher, somehow. "You can come with if you like," I offered, knowing full well she'd refuse.

"No, that's okay," she said. "I need to get home anyway. Us non-parahumans don't get homework passes. Call me after the meeting, okay?" she kissed Zach, and they held their moment of PDA for a few seconds. It gave me a chance to read more of her body language. It seemed to mold itself into the role she was playing, though Rapture's tech said the mind disagreed. Her power was rather disquieting. If she hadn't activated the power when approaching us, I wouldn't have known it existed.

I, meanwhile, called Lisa. "We have a Master/Stranger problem," I told her. "One I'm pretty sure has influenced Dinah and Taylor. It might hit you, too, if you use your powers the wrong way."

"Fuck!" Lisa exclaimed, and I sighed internally. So immature. "What do you have?"

"Already got the blood sample, anti-master drug will be released shortly. I need you to hold a meeting about the Nilbog plan, for Zach and my benefit. Missy and Theo will probably be there as well. Don't tell them anything you're worried will go public."

"Riley, I don't have enough to make a meeting out of that," she replied.

"Then make up another reason!" I exclaimed. "Buy an hour or two."

"Okay," she answered. "I can put together something."

....

The anti-master drug had been refined since its early days. No longer leaving any sign that could be detected. It was invisible and odorless. Even Amelia wouldn't know it was released. It didn't require her help, anymore. I did everything on my own. No one except Lisa even realized it had occurred, and in her case only because I told her. And then I snuck out of the lab, wearing one of Emma's new power systems and my stealth tech.

Tracking 'Erica' was easy enough. She was on the phone talking to Zach. It appeared she used her powers on the actual residents of an apartment to convince her they belonged there. They were easy enough to render unconscious. The woman seemed only mildly surprised. "Umm... I've gotta go. The 'rents are uptight about the homework. Love you too."
"Hello, Dream Girl," I growled.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The real body behind Clarice," I answered. I knew she already knew. "And you should know that you're the second person in my life that's ever actually managed to make me angry. You hurt my friends, and for that you have to pay."

"Is that so?" she smirked. "You should know my power-"

"Works by influencing the subconscious, forcefully associating yourself with the subconscious emotions of the victim. Making you into whatever female person the victim longs to see the most. Someone they miss. For lack of a better term, a 'nostalgia' effect." That took the smile off her face in a hurry. "Complete with low level Thinker and Stranger powers to achieve a more perfect imitation."

"You're not immune to my power," she stammered. "No one is."

"No, I'm not," I answered. "And right now, I'm giving you permission to use your power on me in full. Go ahead, I'll even give you the minutes you need to make it work in its entirety."

My internal alarms went off as she accessed my mind and memories. Her eyes widened, and her lips quivered as her power caught a mental association to Siberian. It was strange. I could still tell the difference between this girl's appearance, and what I knew for a fact Siberian looked like. But I still believed she was, in fact, the same person, despite every insulation between the truth and this lie. Including knowing it was a lie.

"Now you know," I said. "Tell me, how do you reverse your power? Our anti-master drug doesn't work. And don't lie, I have equipment that will know."

"It doesn't reverse," she stuttered. "Alterations are permanent."

I knew she was telling the truth. "That makes it more difficult," I replied as I moved toward her. She collapsed, paralyzed by the influences of the drugs in the air. "But there are still ways to coax a specific result."

The mental association changed, replacing her with a face I thought I'd forgotten. Or maybe I had forgotten, and her power, or perhaps simple retroactive interference, filled in the blanks. "No!" she exclaimed. "Riley, you can't! You're a good girl!"
"No I'm not."

A/N- Damn this is a dark chapter.

Also. Predicted a hundred and fifty five chapters ago. See the Cherish Interlude.
I sighed. *Dream Girl was right.* Her power, depending on how you looked at it, either did not work, or could not be turned off. It wasn't mind control, it wasn't a memory rewrite. Or, at least, her primary power worked that way. The secondary powers that detected or exploited those emotional bonds were far more active. I could break that part. I couldn't break the long term influence. She exploited feelings and emotions that already existed. Bringing them to the forefront. It was, as I said to her, a 'nostalgia' power. Lost loves, memories of happier times. Only reversible with a hard rewrite of their brain chemistry.

I doubted my friends would appreciate that plan.

They would have to recover naturally.

*I would have to recover naturally.*

The alterations I made to her brain were far more overt. Easier to undo, easier to detect, but far more powerful in their ability to influence the victim. I watched from a rooftop six blocks away as she casually strolled into the ocean from a deserted stretch of beach and rubble. Tracking tech confirmed everything. The hypoxia would eliminate any evidence of my manipulations. I turned off my emotions, this one time. "Goodbye mommy," I said with artificial cheer. Then I returned to my home. To a family I choose, and friends that loved me. Friends who needed my help now more than ever. Friends that I needed.


"You'd have done it differently?" I asked. There was no way to hide secrets from her anymore. I might be able to beat her 'perfect guesses' power, but there was no possible nonviolent defense against her new ability. It was easier just to work with her, instead. As my Big Sister and her fiancée put it: 'don't fight, accept and push through'. They were so smart, even if they were dumb sometimes.

"I don't know," she replied, shivering. "Had to stop looking. You're sure?"

"Completely," I answered. *I had her monitored until death, then encouraged some of the scavengers to find her early. She's quite literally fish food.*

Lisa read my body language. I wanted her to, which made it easier.

"Good," she said with a hard voice.
"Now what?" I asked.

She sighed. "We pick up the pieces. The power wears off naturally. Time healing wounds, and all that utter tripe. Dinah and Taylor weren't influenced enough for it to matter. No emotional investment, no notable impact. So it's the four of you. How are you holding up?"

"Not even the worst thing I've done in the last six months," I answered with absolute honesty. "Worry about the others."

"Okay," she agreed. "Theo and Zach are the big ones. Zach... tries to ignore problems. He'll pretend he's immune and do everything possible to make us believe it. We should find a suitable distraction. I'm thinking we throw Emma at him. She'll love it, and he's not gonna be feeling terribly picky."

I frowned. "That doesn't seem..."

"Don't worry," she interrupted. "I can handle that part. You are going to have to worry about Missy and Theo. Invite them somewhere after school. In person... Clarice isn't the person they should be talking to for this."

"Okay," I agreed.

....

School went by slowly, but I had let both Theo and Missy know that we needed to talk after school before it was out. Specifically, that I needed to in person. Naturally, they had my company on the way to the base, through Clarice, but I refused to say anything about it.

"Okay, Riley, you're starting to worry me," Missy said as she entered my bedroom. I set Fluffy aside, and he scuttled back to where he belonged as my pillow. Missy took it in stride- she's the one who has a flying horse made of pretty much the same material, after all.

"Okay, Riley, you're starting to worry me," Missy said as she entered my bedroom. I set Fluffy aside, and he scuttled back to where he belonged as my pillow. Missy took it in stride- she's the one who has a flying horse made of pretty much the same material, after all.

"We need to talk about the mission in New York," I replied. Both of them fidgeted. We didn't really talk about New York. We'd been assured that we'd no longer be put on missions with Atropos, and that she wouldn't be in charge of any missions any time soon. Beyond that, we'd have to trust the judgment of others. Of course, I knew my Big Sister would do what was best. "I learned a few things about the Stranger that Theo encountered."

"Really?" Theo asked.
"Yes," I answered. "She decided to imitate Zach's dead friend."

"She was Erica, wasn't she?" Missy asked. "That's why she wasn't at school."

I nodded. "She's been caught and won't be an issue any longer."

"Did... did you develop an anti-master cure?" Theo asked eagerly.

"Sorry," I looked away. "Her power alters neural connections manually. If you have the drug already in your system, you're immune, but you can't undo what's been done without rewiring the brain. It would take Amelia's power, and knowledge of what your brain was like before."

"Theo..." Missy asked. "What's wrong?"

He sighed. "Her power... it's weird... it made me have... feelings... for Clarice."

My heart jumped in my chest. *Really?*

"You mean Riley?" Missy asked, sounding more worried by the second.

"No," he answered. "Clarice, specifically. I can look at Riley and it doesn't do anything like that at all." And just like that, my stomach clenched. *The warm feeling had died.*

"That... is really strange," Missy replied. "Sorry, that sounded worse than I meant it to. I just mean..."

"Her power works on feelings toward people we've lost," I volunteered. "Fond emotions and memories that aren't attached to anyone."

Theo offered a half smile. "Guess that explains it. I did have a kinda crush on Clarice, before finding out what she was. Before knowing about you at all, Riley. I was a little disappointed when I found out that Clarice wasn't real. But I got over it. I didn't think it was that intense."

"That's understandable," Missy said, reluctantly. "I mean... Clarice is kinda designed to be the perfect girl. And don't you dare try to pretend otherwise, Riley. She's fit, well proportioned, I'm pretty sure her face is some kind of perfect blend of human features that you spent a weeks designing. And your doll has the voice of a goddess."
"Four and a half months," I admitted. "And I... may have used recordings of Canary to mode her vocal cords. It doesn't convey any of her powers, of course, but I did pick her because I like her voice. I wish I had a chance to talk to her before she got in trouble." I really did, too.

"See?" Missy answered. "And then you got mind whammied by that bitch. It's not your fault. Any more than it was those children's fault that Valefor used them as suicide bombers. That was his fault, and I'll punch anyone who says otherwise. This is her fault. You don't have to feel bad about it."

"Thanks," Theo smiled softly at her, and I suppressed a need to whimper. "You're the best." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"I know," Missy replied with a bright smile. "You just be sure to let everyone know it."

"I can do that," Theo agreed. Then he paused for a second. "So, uh... she also messed with Zach. Like... way worse than me."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "She used his dead childhood friend on him."

"I now regret letting her live after the first time," Theo replied darkly. "What are we going to do about this."

"Lisa said something about 'throwing' Emma at him," I answered.

"What?" Missy gasped. "That's awful!" Good, I thought. I'm not the only person who thinks so.

"I'm gonna go talk to Zach. Y'know, guy stuff. Maybe a good boxing match or something," Theo said to us, standing. "I'm sorry, I know I promised, but..." He is so good to his friends, I sighed inwardly.

"No," Missy insisted. "You're absolutely right. This is more important. You do that. I'm going to have a talk with Tattletale. There might be some boxing involved. It's going to be incredibly one sided. Riley, do you mind?"

"No, it's fine," I answered. "I have stuff to keep me busy."

I watched them leave, and then issued the low whistle that brought Fluffy to me. The dog sized spider shaped living stuffed animal crawled right back and wrapped itself around me. Four pairs of limbs for four times the hugging power. It was even internally heated. I flopped down on my bed, held by the delightfully comfortable pet. It purred happily at the movement and pressure as I squeezed back.
Should have added more arms, I decided as I stared at the ceiling.

A/N- The final chapter as seen on Spacebattles. From now on, all you folks who read it there but didn't make the move to QQ? This is where the new stuff begins.
"No, I'm absolutely serious," I insisted to Vicky on the phone. "I was. Even got the dumbass to waive all their stupid 'tests'. And then I became their leader like five minutes later."

"You? Really?" Vicky laughed.

"Didn't really matter since they were all dead by then," I added. I felt a little bad, lying to her about Riley, but as much as I loved my sister I couldn't imagine her taking the news that I had quasi-adopted Bonesaw well. "But I earned leadership the official way."

"I'm so putting that in my autobiography," she teased.

_FrustrationDisdain_. I blinked and looked over at Taylor. _Is she still jealous?_

"Lisa's being a bitch again," she sighed. 

_Oh, of course she is._ "Sorry, Vicky, can I have a sec?" I asked.

"Uh, sure," she responded.

"What is she doing this time?" I asked Taylor.

"Remember how they chased off that one Stranger? Dream Girl?"

"Yeah..." I recalled. It was terrifying to think that there was a stranger out there that could slip past both Taylor and Dinah, as well as Zach's natural defense against all things mind and body altering. Except possibly the Simurgh, he didn't respond by disintegrating when hit with her song. Then again, maybe she never bothered trying to target him. Fortunately we destroyed her before the time limit anyway.

"Turns out, Lisa's plan for making Zach feel better is, and I quote 'throw Emma at him'," she sighed. "And, apparently, Missy just found out."

I cringed. "Sorry, Victoria, I have to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Oh, okay," she sighed. "I should do my homework, anyway."
"Bye," I said, and turned off the phone, then sat up from my position laying on my bed. "Okay, let's go."

Missy looked pissed when we got to the living area. Taylor's modified bugs, the ones that don't get eaten by Yggdrasil, had taking position between her and Lisa.

"Alright, what the hell?" I asked.

"Lisa's being a bitch again," Missy started.

"What?" Lisa insisted. "It's a good idea. Emma won't mind in the slightest, and Zach will appreciate it, too. It's a win for everyone."

"It's toying with people's hearts," Missy growled. "It's not right to use people like that." I found myself agreeing with Missy on this one, and judging by the emotions in Taylor, she was on my side with that assessment.

"Lisa," Taylor sighed. "There are lines, and this crosses them. Zach's been through enough manipulative bullshit, and I know Emma's not exactly my favorite person, but seriously... she doesn't deserve to be treated like little more than a prostitute."

"Come on," Lisa insisted. "It's a perfect plan! They get back together, she stops moping about like a lost puppy, he stops desperately overcompensating for his feelings by pretending to be a complete fucking idiot, and we go back to worrying about things that actually matter."

"Maybe if you squinted, it would hold up for fifteen minutes, but in the end it'd just wind up hurting Emma," RealizationIncredulity. Taylor didn't elaborate, but I'm pretty sure Lisa and I, at least, figured out her surprise.

"They broke up for a reason," Missy countered. "If they get back together, then fine. But Zach's my friend and I won't let you treat him like this."

"Lisa... maybe you should just get a boyfriend," I finally suggested. Everyone stopped and looked at me.

"Doesn't work like that," Lisa replied. "Asexual, remember?"

"Then go hook up with another asexual," I suggested. "Weld's still in Boston, and he's a great guy. Bonus points for you since he's about as clean as anyone can possibly be. I'm sure he can be convinced. As long as you tone down the 'bitch' around him."
"I'm not interested in romance," Lisa insisted.

"Then why do all of your ideas lead in that direction?" I asked. "Your idea for helping Taylor? First you tried to hook her up with Brian."NostalgiaDisgustAnger."And when that didn't work, you tried to hook her up with me."

"I did not try to hook the two of you up," Lisa insisted. "I recognized that the two of you were a lot alike, and encouraged you to be friends. That's all I ever thought would happen. I never intended for it to become romantic. I sure as fuck didn't intend for you to create an empathic link! How was I suppose to know that was even possible? A link that's the only reason you ever got romantically involved in the first place."

"And me and Theo," Missy added. We all looked toward her. WorryRegret. "What? I'm not stupid and I'm not a child," the thirteen year old insisted. "I knew what you were trying to pull the moment Aceso showed up with the flying horse. After that, I just rolled my eyes and played along."

"Sorry about that," I said sheepishly.

"Don't be," she replied. "I got an awesome best friend and an amazing boyfriend and I'm on a team that values my input. I got to kill an Endbriner. I got battle armor that's too badass to be described in words. Plus I have yet to be forced to go to some public event to be gawked at by people I wish I was allowed to punch. If you had just come out and offered that last line as your main selling point, I probably would have taken you up on the deal. That and being able to tell Miss Piggy to go to hell. I wanted to do that for years."

"See, it worked out great," Lisa insisted. "And this will, too."

"How about, instead, we support our friends the old fashioned way?" Taylor asked. "I mean this as a friend, Lisa, but you can't keep doing this. I know neither of them are really your friends. Really, past me and maybe-kind Crystal, you don't have any friends here."

"I prefer keeping things professional," Lisa answered. "It's easier that way."

_AnnoyanceRegret._ "Yeah, I thought that way once," she sighed. "Lisa, maybe this started like that... but we're friends here. Most of us are, one way or another, a family. I have Amelia, and you, right?"

"Of course!" Lisa insisted. "Don't you dare doubt that."

"And Amelia has me and Crystal and Riley," she continued. "Crystal's a bit standoffish, and even
she's pretty close to Zach and you. Which is weird, because you two are easily the hardest people in this group to get along with."

"She has years of experience dealing with me and Victoria," I reminded. "Plus Aunt Sarah's awesome with people, and Crystal takes after her mom."

"Then Riley's got Missy and Emma and even Theo and Zach a bit," Taylor continued. "Theo gets along pretty well with Zach despite them seeming almost nothing like each other at all."

"I have Theo and Riley, of course," Missy added. "And Chariot. Trevor's a great guy, if a bit of a loner. But that's how Tinkers are, y'know. He'll probably be a 'less a-hole' version of Armsmaster. Not the highest bar in the world to set, of course."

"The list goes on. Rey's the only one who's not really 'close' to any of us," Taylor concluded. "He treats this whole thing as a job. Which is fine, I'm not sure that there can be a non-creepy way for the thirty year old pothead to be friends with a bunch of teenagers. He's not causing any drama and has his own life outside of work to worry about. You, on the other hand... I know you've been in a slump, lately. I'd like to help you out of it, we all would."

"Umm..." Lisa frowned. "Are you holding an intervention, now?"

*ShockAmusement*. "Well, it didn't start that way, but I guess so," she agreed. "We just want you to start concerning yourself with how your actions actually impact people. We're more than cogs in a machine here, Lisa. And so are you. Please remember that."

She sighed. "You're right," she finally admitted.

"The 'Emma' plan wouldn't work anyway," another voice spoke up. Everyone except Taylor looked. Emma was standing in the doorway. "Don't get me wrong, I wish it would. But it won't. Thanks for looking out for my feelings, Missy." She smiled at Missy. "And thanks for the alert, Taylor."

Taylor shrugged. *PleasedSad.*

"What we need," I suggested. "Is a party. A group get together that has nothing to do with work. At all. Just having fun together. Last time we did anything like that was the fourth of July, and that doesn't count because it was a public gathering."

"That actually sounds like a really good idea," Taylor agreed. Everyone else looked around. "Now we just need an excuse. Something relatively innocent."
"I may have a suggestion," Emma volunteered.

------------------

A/N- And Missy didn't even get to punch anyone.

We waited in silence as Riley walked in. A quick mental instruction, and the walls unfurled. "Surprise!" we shouted in unison, causing the girl to jump like a bomb went off. "Happy birthday!"

"But it's not my birthday!" she exclaimed, both confused and smiling.

"Makes it easier to surprise you, doesn’t it?" Missy pointed out, having warped around behind her friend, causing her to jump again.

Emma spoke next. "I remember you saying you don't remember your actual birthday, so we decided to pick one for you. Because we can do that kinda thing. Plus we have to do it before it gets too cold to properly appreciate ice cream."

"Plus nine, nine sounded like as good a number as any," Zach added. "Now let's all get fat on ice cream. Except me, I have a power related exemption to obesity. The rest of you are just going to have to live with it."

"Okay, Clarice," I said, glancing over at Vicky. Lucky us, she really had no idea of what Bonesaw looked like. Clarice was a 'known' low level shapeshifter, after all, so the black haired girl could easily be the same person, no questions asked.

Of course, all the 'kids' of our group, Zach and Theo and Missy and Trevor, were here. And the 'adults', meaning the other core members. Except Rey, Sabah and Lily. There was no reason to involve them in this. The former had found an exciting new idea for his evolution project, and the others really didn't interact well with Riley. "So it's up to you. Food first, or cake?"

Riley was all smiles. "What's the food?"

"Pizza," I answered.

"Pizza," Riley agreed.

"My poor figure," Vicky moaned in mock grief.

....
The various cliques formed up as expected. Emma and Trevor managed to trip across some kind of Tinker topic, and suddenly the rest of the party didn't exist to them. Taylor and I managed to back ourselves out of the center of attention, and somehow Lisa was chatting with Vicky and Crystal. I, meanwhile, thanked every star that Vicky had no idea she was talking to the girl formerly known as Tattletale.

"Oh god damn it," Taylor sighed. Annoyance | Amusement. "Remember when you said we needed to get Lisa laid? And then we forgot to do it?"

A sense of dread hit me. "What is she trying to do this time?"

"Let's put it this way... how would you like to have an immortal brother in law?"

"You cannot possibly be serious," I groaned. "Honestly? Has Crystal mentioned how Zach keeps hitting on her?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was in on it with Lisa," Taylor elaborated. "Come to think of it, I actually don't know better. Do you think your cousin would hook Zach up with your sister?"

"Yes, I totally see that happening," I acknowledged, rubbing my hand over my eyes. "I am going to kill them both. Then I am going to have Riley raise them from the dead. Then I am going to turn them into cows and feed them to Dinah's griffon."

"Don't you have a mass limitation? Pretty sure they're significantly smaller than a cow," Taylor joked.

Then I'll turn them both into a single small cow," I corrected. "Happy now?"

"I'll get the steak sauce," she offered. Amused | Mischievous. "And maybe some chocolate sauce for later," she added in a low voice. I blushed, and then leaned against her.

"You're a horrible tease," I informed her yet again.

....

"Time for the cake!" Zach announced, carrying the tray it was on. What he set down was, amusingly enough, shaped like a mushroom. Some red toadstool looking thing with large black dots for eyes on the stem.
"You are such a geek," Missy informed him.

"Guilty," he agreed. "And it took me forever to find a bakery that could figure out what I was talking about. So show proper gratitude."

"I love it!" Riley declared, smiling broadly. "I've never had a custom cake before!"

**Compassion Pity Sad.** I glanced over at Taylor. She was right, it was sad. The poor girl had lived with a group of traveling monsters. If they even cared about her birthday, it was as a sick game by Jack. Riley was so happy every time she go to do something that was normal to the point of boring. And I was still thinking about that while singing her birthday song, and feeling sorry that we couldn't use her real name for it. Not for the first time, I wished I had made Jack's death take longer.

"Blow out the candles and make a birthday wish," Missy instructed. Riley, smiling, did as instructed and took out all twelve candles in a single blow, to the cheers of everyone present. Some were probably more about being polite than anything, but it made her happy.

Lisa stayed away from the cake, though she did grab some chocolate ice cream. I opted to approach her then, when she was alone for a minute. "Y'know, if you keep putting all this effort into getting Zach laid," I started. "I'm going to start to suspect you have a crush on him."

She looked at me. "And if I deny it, you're just going to claim I'm in denial, huh?"

"You did the same thing to me and Taylor for weeks, even knowing there was nothing at all between us," I pointed out.

"Yep," she said with a 'pop' sound on the 'p'. "And that's why I'm not going to fall for the trap."

"You do realize that I can create a disease that only works on you, right?" I asked. "That's my sister."

"She thinks Zach's hot," Lisa informed my dismissive. "That's not my fault."

"You don't have to encourage it," I insisted.

"All I did was point out that he's surprisingly insightful for a moron," she insisted. "Crystal's the one who did most of the work."

I just stood there, letting the skepticism drip from my stance.
"... after I prompted her," Lisa admitted. "Besides, tell me your sister doesn't need someone with a sense of humor. Or, for that matter, the ability to actually understand other people. Something that seems genetically impossible for your family and everyone they're romantically interested in."

"Don't see her going after a younger guy," I countered. I didn't bother arguing the second part of that. It was, after all, painfully true.

"Only a bit over a year, there," Lisa corrected. "Less if you subtract the three months for not existing."

"Well, at least he's an improvement over Dean," I finally conceded. "Do you have any idea how an empath could be so damn dense when it comes to people?"

"As often as you've dealt with Lisa doing basically the same dumb things," Crystal spoke up from where she'd come up behind me. "You'd think you'd have figured it out by now. Thinkers are actually stupid."

"Oh, fuck you, too," Lisa replied.

....

"And now the most important part," I said. "Gifts!"

Riley was, of course, still having the time of her life. It was something of a pity there weren't more kids around her age available for this. Not that she had a real lack of options.


"Love Bug!" she exclaimed, showing the picture on the pack. I kinda worried about her dealing with kids making fun of her for such obviously childish loves, but Clarice was already weird enough that a little more would only help her persona.

Taylor handed hers over next. "Sort of a matching set," she said as Riley pulled out her brand new coat, same show theme. Granted, Clarice didn't need it and I was pretty sure Riley had added cybernetics that meant she didn't need it, either. "Hard to find one in a size that'd fit, but you've got it."

Riley quickly put it on, despite it not being nearly cold enough for that yet. "It's perfect, thank you!"
"We all had to pitch in on this one," Missy handed over hers. Riley opened it, pulling out a red and white outfit that was too small to be for her. It had extra arms, too. "We had Clotho put together a Christmas outfit for Fluffy."

"We were originally thinking a Halloween costume, but then we thought he doesn't need help for that," Theo spoke up.

"I voted for Valentine's Day, myself," Zach added. "But I was overruled."

"We'll have to show off mine later," Emma replied. "It isn't here yet."

"Okay, I'm next," Victoria stated. I didn't even know she brought a gift. She waited for Riley to pull the wrapping off. Another outfit. "It's an equestrian outfit. For when you ride Bella."
"Cool!" Riley pulled out the dark blue jacket.

"It's from both of us," Crystal added.

"My idea," Victoria claimed.

"You didn't even know her size," Crystal argued back. "Plus I bought the boots, which are the best part."

"Whatever," Victoria replied.

"And I'm last," Lisa spoke up, handing over hers. "I figured everyone else would do clothes. I got you a book. Complete works of Edgar Allen Poe. I was gonna get you some Lovecraft, but then I decided that my sanity has suffered enough, already."

=========

A/N- A Waff chapter. I figured we were due for one.

I'll get around to Moar Suffering! later.
"That was a nice thing you did for Riley," I said to Emma. It still bothered me, talking to her. Remembering our first few years of our life together. Then remembering the last few. Still, I had to admit she’d done everything possible to help the team. To help me. And I did promise her to at least try to be friends again.

"Thanks," she responded. "She deserved it, after everything she's done for the team."

I frowned. Riley was not what I would call my favorite person. For all she tried to make up for everything, she was still Bonesaw. She still vivisected Brian, which at least partially led to... to everything he'd done to his captives. I read the mission summary: parahuman batteries, deliberate Crawler based mutations. Over a dozen confirmed homocides.

Emma realized her mistake quickly enough. She always did know how to read me, I reminded myself. "Sorry, sometimes it's really easy to forget. Or hard to remember that she's the one who did... everything else she's done."

"I know," I replied. It really, really was.

"It is kinda... I don't know... encouraging?" Emma continued. "If someone like her can find forgiveness, and even friends and happiness. Do something good with her life. That means there's hope for almost everyone, doesn't it?"

"Maybe," I offered. I wasn't sure I believed it, but the idea was comforting.

....

AmusementWorry. "Jeez, Taylor, you weren't half this nervous when we were waiting for the Endbringer," Amelia teased.

"Endbringers are easy," I defended myself. "See it, and either run from it or do everything you can to kill it. Either you succeed or you fail, then end. This, on the other hand... I'm about to meet my future mother and father and sister in laws..."

"You're assuming I'm still going to accept your proposal," Amelia teased.

"MY proposal," I mock-scoffed. "You're the one who keeps checking out my backside. And my rack, now that I have one. Still don't know if I should thank Emma for that, or punch her in the face a
"I could always fix that for you," Amelia pointed out. "Speaking of, I've yet to see you in that bikini."

"Oh, as if it would fit now," I countered.

AmusementDesire. "That is a selling point, actually" she replied in a rather sultry voice. I blushed.

"And then there's everyone else at this get together," I pointed out to her. "I get to meet my future aunt-in-law slash potential future step mother and future cousin-in-law slash teammate slash potential step sister. I still don't know how to process that."

"Crystal said she's pretty sure Sarah's never gonna get remarried," Amelia informed me. I shrugged. I didn't think dad would ever remarry, either.

"So, yeah, no matter how you look at this," I continued. "Definitely harder to handle than Enbringers. With them, the rules are simple- you win or they kill you." ConcernDismay. "Err... sorry, I keep forgetting that I, uh..." I didn't know what to say. Or at least, not how to say it. I died, I reminded myself again. Or she died and I'm the backup. It wasn't a thing either of us wanted to talk about. Easier for us to ignore that it happened.

She hugged me from behind, and I pushed back against her. "It's okay," she insisted, pushing her feelings into the link. "I love you." My heart jumped. NervousConcern. "Taylor? Are you okay? I shouldn't have said that, should I?"

"No!" I replied, turning to face her. "No. It was just a bit of a shock. I mean, I already knew. The link and all. It's just the first time you've actually said it." ApprehensionWorry. I blinked. Oh. "It... it's not, is it?" I asked.

"No, it's not," she reluctantly admitted.

I pulled her tight against me. "Well, that's fine," I told her. "In case you had any doubts, I love you, too."

"I know", she agreed. I thought about repeating the sexuality alteration... but, no. It didn't go well last time, and I didn't want to bring it up. My own notes left for me by my other self didn't say much on the subject, simply that it was 'a bad plan, don't do it'. That part of my life was quite literally over, and it was best simply to allow it to stay that way. I am happy like this.
Amelia and I arrived at the restaurant, driven by my dad.

"Thanks, Danny," Amelia said as we arrived.

"Not a problem, girls," my father said cheerfully. He had dressed in an actual suit for this. At some point, someone had decided to make this a particularly fancy get together, complete with getting a private room at a high end restaurant. The kind of place that we'd probably have to sign up on a waiting list for, normally. Luckily, we didn't have that problem. I preferred to imagine it had more to do with the owner being a long term friend of Carol's than anything else.

The greeter was all smiles, and led us to our section.

Carol and Vicky were already here, as well as Sarah and Crystal. Vicky gave me a rather unhappy look. Amelia glanced between us and simply sighed. I put my hand on the small of her back and gave a slight rub. Despite the sheer irrationality of it, on any number of levels, I was still jealous of Victoria. She had looks on her side, and she was Amelia's first crush. It didn't help that she was flat out hostile toward me, not that I could fault her for it. What I did to her was pretty unforgivable.

Danny followed in behind us, and glanced across the room. "Hello, Carol," he said with a practiced neutrality that he'd been forced to use an awful lot of late, having to deal with the Mayor and other political types. He often complained that he spent more time talking to those assholes than his own people, these days.

"Good to see you again, Danny," she offered a winning smile. Amy's family has absurdly good genes, I decided for not the first time. "I'm afraid I probably made a poor impression the last time we spoke."

"It's fine," he answered. "I know what it's like to be in a difficult place."

"Hopefully I'll do better this time around," she offered.

Sarah was visibly relieved, as she walked forward to wrap her arm around Dad's. This wasn't the first time I'd seen them together, but it was the first time during an 'official' date. ConcernComfort, Amelia transmitted to me. I smiled, just letting myself be happy that Dad was happy.

"So, this is the famous and elusive Taylor," a man spoke cheerfully from behind me.
I knew he was coming, of course, and made the guess that it was Mark. I turned toward him. "Mister Dallon, I presume?"

"Please, don't call me that," he smiled broadly. "Makes me feel old. Besides, you're engaged to my daughter. You can call me Mark, or even Dad, whichever you prefer."

I don't know who was made least comfortable by that suggestion, but it probably wasn't me. ShockEmbarrassmentConcern. "I'll keep that in mind, Mark," I said after a moment. If Amelia's Dad noticed any of our discomfort, he pretended not to, instead opting to give Amelia a hug and then make his way over to Victoria. The rest of us simply looked at each other awkwardly.

....

The meal went well enough, and fortunately or no it was Mark that made things both more and less awkward. More by encouraging all of us to be more familiar with each other than most of us were willing to be, and less by at least breaking the ice. Eventually, it got the adults sharing stories about how the city 'use to be', back when the other half of us were in grade school. They made it sound a lot nicer than I believed possible.

This allowed Crystal and Victoria to talk with each other about their lives. Meanwhile, Amelia and I got to eat quietly, being the wallflowers that we naturally preferred to be. Sure, we were stronger now, and with the benefits of our bond to give us confidence, we could handle the spotlight. But we didn't like it the way most of the others in this room did. We chose to let the others have their fun.

'Taylor?' Lisa's voice spoke into her armor. 'Sorry to interrupt. Grue was broken out of containment, along with a handful of other captives.'

'Anything that we can do about it now?' I asked. Dammit, I thought. I knew that even, especially, those who are destined for the Birdcage needed a trial... but it left way too many chances for the criminal to escape. You're going to have a kill order next time we find you, aren't you Brian? I didn't know if I could handle killing someone I loved, once. Or thought I loved, at least. It was a childish crush with someone who wouldn't have been interested to begin with. Like Amelia and Victoria, I added. That made me feel a little better.

'Afraid not,' she answered. 'I'll probably go there tomorrow to help investigate some. We don't know that it was even Brian they were after, but he's one of the escapees.'

"Taylor?" Amelia asked. "Is something wrong?" I noted that the others had noticed that I'd gotten tense.

'Do you think he'll come back here?' I asked Lisa.
"Uh, sorta," I replied. "Work related, but nothing we have to worry about right now. Better to just not let it ruin dinner."

'Probably not,' Lisa answered. 'He has a specific vendetta against those he holds responsible for Aisha's death. We didn't cause that. Calvert might still be a target, but I highly doubt he'll try that again any time soon.'

'Understood,' I transmitted. Dammit, Brian. At least I already ate most of my food, because my appetite was ruined for the night.

==============

A/N- Because, that's why. I did go out of my way to make it more clear about what Taylor would know from her lost week.

... And, yes, the next chapter is the start of the next Endbringer arc.
"By the way," Crystal said as she walked in. "Mom says thank you for the armor. And I say go to hell, I had to spend all freakin' yesterday teaching her how to use the equipment. You're not planning to recruit her, are you?"

"Not really," I responded. "All we really did was give her one of your hand-me-downs. Do you think she'd accept if we offered her a spot on the team?"

"Probably," Crystal responded. "I don't think she'd last long. Basement Bonesaws... I know I'm almost nineteen and could just move in here, but she'd still find a way to ground me for the rest of my life. Then there's all the other horrible stuff we do. If she found out the Nilbog plan, we-"

Our phones' emergency alert went off simultaneously. Crystal, in her armor already, could read it through that interface before I could get to mine. She only had one word to say. "Endbringer."

"A month early?" I asked. FearConfusionDetermination.

"That or Dragon's tech is broken," Crystal defended.

I had gotten up already and was running to my room. I needed my armor. Taylor had hers at home. I held still as the biosuit worked its way over my body, sealing itself. I'd need my second layer, of course, but I was now wearing the indispensable systems, at least.

I didn't bother with stairs, simply forcing the floor of my bedroom to open, so I could drop into the next layer. "Everything important ready?" I asked Emma as I levitated down. Of course I knew not everything was ready. The early attack screwed up our plans.

"Everything essential," Emma answered. "A lot of the Raptors are underdeveloped right now. They'll do what Taylor needs them to do, but they won't be as good. We also have to leave a lot of the new zerglings behind." Of course, since she and I were both suited, Taylor would hear every word we spoke.

"Fuck," I muttered. "Will it be enough?" I found my Dryad, now upgraded with tinker tech to get a 'v3' tacked on. Still wasn't as good as any of the other named suits, but it was designed specifically with me in mind.

"Twice the numbers we had last time," Emma informed. "Half of what we wanted. At least all the new armor systems are fully operational?" she offered.
"That'll do," I replied.

Riley rushed in, wearing her own set of bioarmor. Wasn't even close to the same capability as the rest of our, but it was meant for sensory tech and medical function, not a combat model. Clarice v16 was her combat model. Both designs were Emma's present to Riley, a joint project between her and Defiant. "The school knows," she announced. "I'm going to use Clarice fourteen to shunt everyone over. Faster that way, I can fix her later."

Part of the standard protocol for Endbringer battles is that all schools were canceled during attacks, nationwide. It was good policy, for Wards to be able to participate, and also fairly redundant, since what were the possible odds that anyone would do anything productive anyway? I slipped into the pilot position of my armor. It wasn't a match for most of the other suits, but it was still my suit.

"Got the newsfeeds," Taylor informed us over the communications. "Mexico City. Recent parahuman civil war seems to be the lure." One of the many, I thought darkly. "No prediction on which."

"Makes sense," Crystal spoke. "After what happened in New Delhi, they probably don't trust the prediction software."

"I'm not so certain," Lisa replied.

Riley, meanwhile, had rushed over to the armor storage bays, and had shunted over Singularity and the other armor systems for Zach and Theo, as well as her combat variant of Clarice. Then she climbed into my Dryad, into the compartment that was actually built for her this time.

Most of our members had assembled on the other side of our personal world already. The zerg armies had assembled, pulling themselves out of their burrowed hibernation. Many were older models- we had functionally infinite raw material, so there was no need to recycle anything unless it was a failure to begin with.

Taylor was the last one to arrive physically, looking splendid in her armor. Missy didn't ask, and we watched as space folded and bent before us. Not for the first time, I wished we had a way to shunt things without the hassle of containment fields. We could draw Endbringers here and kill them on our terms.

Missy didn't wait for permission, she simply stepped forward. Her own power, plus all the tech in her suit, let her pinpoint exactly where we needed to go without outside help. Space bent and twisted itself to her whims, creating a distortion of light. The formation was so vast that electricity danced around the corners due to the stresses the air was being pushed through. Relatively minor, our sensors didn't even register it as a threat. Not that it mattered, the Gargants went through first, collecting as much power as they could and clearing the energy.
We walked through, followed by the zergling armies.

Chariot pulled out a device and planted it in the mass of Yggdrasil. Several teleports later, using the tech that Kid Win originally created, the area had its own control platform. We had learned our lesson from last time. If at all possible, we would stay on this side of the dimensional barrier. Riley sent over Clarice with our Shadowcats, for search and rescue.

We were there ahead of schedule, if only by a few minutes. It was all locals. Zerg started shunting through, taking their positions. Capes were startled at first, but our reputations proceeded us, making it possible to warn them. Lisa's changeling shunted over to their control center. Taylor's shunted in with the flyers. Zach shunted in his brand new suicide-bomber Raptor. Supposedly, it was the most destructive weapon ever made by human hands. Our tinkers were stationed in the portable control system.

The scenery around us flickered and shifted, providing the ghostly impression of a city abandoned by normal men. Only parahumans, and our biomonsters, existed here. It was illusory, a visual illusion created for our benefit, that we could see what was happening on Bet from the comfort and safety of our alternate dimension. The rest of us, waited and watched.

"Behemoth, probably," Rey spoke to Emma. She probably asked about the Endbringer, I decided. "Way too far from the shore to be Leviathan."

"I'll bet you money it's not Behemoth," Lisa responded.

"What makes you think Leviathan would come here?" Rey asked.

"I don't," Lisa answered. "I think we're about to see a fourth Endbringer." *Apprehension* *Realization*. "Taylor, fan the Zerg out to as many locations as possible. I've started issuing commands to the locals to avoid engaging the Endbringer. When this fight starts, we're going to be relying upon you alone. Force the new Endbringer to show as many of its tricks as possible before committing actual people to the battle."

*Certainty* *Anticipation*. "I can do that," she agreed.

A sonic boom announced the first Dragon battle suit arriving. Others, the bulkier and slower ones, would arrive eventually. Many carrying parahuman reinforcements. None would be in time to coordinate with the local. The Endbringer picked that moment to arrive. It came from nowhere, without warning or fanfare, one moment there was nothing and the next it stood in the midst of the defensive line.
It was only about twelve feet tall, significantly shorter than the nearest Gargant. It was, however, the biggest Endbringer in total mass, as it was a quadruped. The beast was black, not merely a dark color, but a total absence of light. It was impossible to determine features, but it could have been a wolf, in the same way Behemoth was a parody of a body builder, and Simurgh a parody of a woman. Nine long, almost swordlike spines extended from its back and shoulders. Three tails extended from it, each possessing a nasty, scythelike blade at the end.

A gargant slammed into its size, taking heavy damage as it impaled itself on a shoulder spike. The new Endbringer's scythe-tales wrapped around the gargant and flensed it, peeling flesh and external armor plating from Taylor's weapon. FocusDeterminationAnger.

"Well, we know it has a nasty close range weapon. All the others have had something that let them hurt outside a close range kill radius, what should we expect from this one?"

"Whatever features it has, it's likely to be safe from the weapons we used to destroy the Simurgh," Lisa spoke as we watched the holographic representation of the clash. Wow, that looks incredibly lifelike, I thought to myself.

"What makes you think that?" Rey asked.

"Because it's what I would do," she replied.
After shredding the Gargant, the beast vanished. *ConfusionWorry*. We didn't have long to wait, alerted by screaming. The buildings not-exactly-around-us exploded into rubble that rained down, and the monster appeared again in the ranks of the defensive line, its tails lashing out and killing nine capes.

"Destructive Teleporter?" Taylor asked.

"Space warper," Trevor responded. "It travels through the space between where it disappears and reappears."

"It's using my power," Missy concluded. "Only different. No Manton limit, to begin with."

"Not just yours," Lisa added. "All three of the Moirai. Its powerset is a combination. The tails are, functionally, the ribbon weapon we made for the cannon. It can use space warping to attack at any possible range. I bet it sees the way Lachesis can see through her power."

*DoubtDetermination*. "Then you'll just have to tell us how to beat your power," Taylor replied to Missy.

"Let me go in," Lily replied. "We know my power bypasses hers. I can fight that fucker in direct combat."

"Not yet," Lisa commanded. "It still has at least one more trick it hasn't revealed. If you go in now, it will kill you. Missy, help Zach. We'll see if that weapon works first. Taylor, same theory with the Razorbats." Lisa took flight, getting above the holographic battlefield.

Meanwhile, the creature had moved again, leaving another swath of destruction, and another nine dead.

The Razorbats were a nasty new weapon that I really wished we had time to build more of, and they started shunting through, near the creature. "Surround the area," Missy instructed. "Space them two feet apart and have them all detonate the moment it vanishes."

"Got it," Taylor replied, ignoring the dozen more that were slaughtered. I couldn't help but stare. There are no wounding strikes, I realized. Every attack is precise, each resulting in the decapitation of the victim. Not a single exception.
The creature vanished, and the Razorbats blossomed into a gray mist of nanothorns, disintegrating much of the area around them. I watched the cloud distort and part, leaving a disruptive imprint. The newest Endbringer manifested again, this time covered in rents, visible only in profile. Its insides were as dark as its skin layer. *ExcitementSatisfaction*. It then slaughtered another nine nearby capes.

The defenders had manage to orient themselves, and a dozen streams of energy caught the monster. There was no explosion, no reaction at all from the beast. All the energy vanished into nowhere.

The attackers didn't let up, as a pair of Gargants got into attack range, slamming into it from both sides with enough force that their nanofiber tusks sank into its flesh. Thankfully held in place, that left an opening, and Dragon's new anti-Endbringer artillery ship fired its Gatling cannons down on the trapped monster. Each had a short nanothorn explosion built in. They decimated the area, as the monster twisted to avoid them and break its grip. Both Gargants were chewed to pieces by the fire, but that was acceptable. They were disposable.

Freed of the Gargants, the Endbringer jumped again. It reappeared, this time missing one of its tails. With the remaining pair it lashed out and claimed six more capes the exact same way. *RealizationHorrorDisgust*.

"That telefragging fuck!" Zach cursed.

"Let me in this fight," Lily insisted. "My backup is only ten hours old, I'm not afraid of to play test dummy here."

"Not yet," Lisa insisted. "Trust me."

"Alexandria present," Dragon's com announced. We didn't have armbands, but we did have our mobile command center.

"Alexandria," Lisa spoke into her system. "It waits just slightly more than half a minute between jumps, you have about six seconds. Wait for its jump. Hit it immediately after Osiris. Osiris, sending coordinates. I want you there, expect it to appear almost right below you."

"Got it," Zach answered

They moved into position, and Lisa proved correct. Six more names came across the the announcements. I tried not to think too hard about the loss of lives, and how Lisa didn't warn the victims of their coming fate. Zach collided into the creature, releasing the single most powerful Nanothorn weapon ever designed. Reluctantly loaned to us by Defiant, after we demonstrated that we, at least, could use it more than once. A cylinder of grey mist thirty feet wide formed instantly vanished. The monster fell downward into the hundred foot deep hole left behind. *It can't fly, good to know.*
Alexandria plunged into the hole, holding her spear and trailed by a fifty foot long ivory colored rope. One of the weapons we'd built for her, using her own genetic material. A chain made of her own, cloned, bone tissue. Formed into a chain thin enough to be used for jewelry, and every bit as indestructible as she was. As long as she was holding it, at least. Once no longer in contact with her skin, it was as frail as anyone else's would have been.

Fortunately, we built her a system that let her grow as many of them as she needed, and hooked her up with the same kind of tech that Crystal had for her weapon summoning. It wasn't the best weapons we'd ever built, but it was the only real way we had to improve on Alexandria.

I couldn't see what happened inside the pit, but I was still holding my breath when she came out tugging on the chain several seconds later, the other end wrapped around this new Endbringer and the spear plunged deep into its throat. We could watch as the monster regenerated, where the white bone rope was being covered by newly generated solid black Endbringer tissue.

"Four seconds until it jumps again," Lisa announced. A stream of lasers hit the Endbringer, to no effect. Legend had arrived. The beast moved again, and Alexandria found herself dragged along with it. Six more died.

There was a brief glow around Alexandria and she skyrocketed into the air, carrying the Endbringer with her. *What kind of power was that?* Zach took the hint and followed, again detonating against the creature. We had, however, cut as deep as that weapon could allow. After a certain point, Endbringers became tougher than Alexandria, and we had confirmed that her weapons weren't damageable by the thorns.

Alexandria kept flying straight upward, pulling the monster as far above the city as possible. It was one of our agreed upon strategies for use of the chain, simply dragging the creatures from the battlefield.

"Can I go, yet?" Lily asked eagerly.

"No," Lisa answered. "The fucker is still holding back its trump card. Wait until it needs to jump again."

*Confusion* *Concern. "Needs to?" Taylor asked.

"It always jumps at the same moment, each time. It claims a set number of lives. What happens when that's impossible? What will it do?"

I blinked. *Good question*, I realized. I looked upward at the captive Endbringer above us. *We'll find
Blue lightning launched from the monster, dancing across the sky and trailing up the bone chain. *Legend Deceased. Alexandria Deceased*, Dragon’s system announced. The bone weaponry shattered, and the monster claimed three more lives.

==============

A/N- Endbringers: "because fuck you".
"Fuck me," Lily muttered. "Well, we've seen its fucking secret weapon, are you happy now?"

"No, there's still more," Lisa answered.

"How the fuck can there be more!?" Lily asked. "It just killed Legend and Alexandria!"

"Alexandria's not dead," Lisa replied. "Not yet, at least. Aceso, you'll have to clear a bit of ice out of her lungs, but she's alive, as long as you can get to her quickly."

"On it," Riley answered. "Khepri, I need you to help with a couple of the shadowcats."

"Thus far, this one's only been targeting capes," she continued. "It's not doing the kind of overall damage an Endbringer tends to do. It also proves a few things I've suspected about the Endbringers for a while now. Don't worry, I'll fill you in later."

Meanwhile the Endbringer had again been swarmed by the zerg. Taylor had stopped any semblance of holding back, throwing everything she had at it just to bury it under disposable bodies. It didn't appear to be working all that well, as the waves of frustration off Taylor indicated. It was easily fast enough to outrun any of the monsters we had available, and was powerful enough to kill them with relative ease, even down to one tail.

It vanished again, reappearing to kill three more capes. "Oh fucking christ no," Lisa muttered. She forgot to turn off our com before switching on the other. "Everyone! Fall back, take cover!" she shouted through the changeling. "Khepri, activate all the energy shunts!" _DreadDetermination._

The various anti-Behemoth systems, which had largely gone to waste in New Delhi, were deployed, blanketing the area with fans and sails and strings. The Endbringer then burst into a pulse of destructive energy, unleashing fire and electricity and sonic energy across the battlefield. Our hologram flickered out.

"Clarice is still functional," Riley announced to us. "Collecting all kinds of data. Heavy on the light spectrum, some other exotic energy effects. And a high power sonic effect that I'm having trouble interpreting.

"Transfer your feed," Emma instructed. "Let me have a look."

"The Endbringer appears to be gone," Taylor informed us. "It's hard to be certain, given its powers, but I think it retreated."
"Not a retreat," Lisa answered. "It did exactly what it came here to do. That's how this one will function every time. A battle lasting exactly five minutes and thirty three seconds. Fifty four capes decapitated. And then a fuck you bomb right at the end. It was following a script so obvious that everyone watching could figure it out. It's letting us know that they leave when they choose to leave, not because of anything we have done to force them to.

**HorrorDisgust.** I didn't say a thing. I couldn't think of any words to say.

....

Hundreds of gallons of Yggdrasil mass were shunted into the city, designed to squelch fires and reinforce streets. The city was damaged, but this wasn't like New Delhi. This could be rebuilt. A lot of capes were wounded, but not as many as one might have expected. The Protectorate hadn't even managed to deploy most of its forces, much less got them here on time. Dragon's personal ship hadn't even arrived, only a couple of her fast response drones.

"I remember during the Brockton Bay fight," Taylor spoke. "When they called Leviathan a 'good day' against an Endbringer. By that standard, this was the best Endbringer battle in history. Not enough people even managed to arrive here for the explosion to be really bad."

Eidolon arrived as we finally started shunting across.

Lisa looked at him. "You chose to sit this one out?" she asked.

"I... decided on a different course," he sighed. "Limited power, remember? I have to apply it where I can do the most actual good. Not knowing what this new Endbringer could do, I couldn't trust to select the right types of powers to fight it. Instead, I found one for the aftermath," he took to the sky as a bright blue green aura surrounded him. His arms outstretch, he waited until he was brighter then the sun, then clapped his hands together. The light burst washed over the city.

I felt the sudden presence of life amongst the people that my Yggdrasil had covered. "Holy fuck... he just brought back the dead," I informed the others. "All of them, as far as I can tell. Everyone the new Endbringer just killed."

**JoyRelief.** Taylor smiled for the first time since the battle started. "Then we can consider this one a real victory," she declared.

"In more ways than one," Lisa agreed.
"You figured something out, didn't you?" I asked.

"A few things," Lisa answered. "But I'd really prefer to not have to repeat myself. Let's wait for Dragon and the others."

....

We had managed, eventually, to gather the more directly important forces. Alexandria and the rest of the Triumvirate. Chevalier, who was the new head of the Protectorate. I wasn't sure what his powers were, but he carried an impressive as looking sword and armor of pristine white. And of course Dragon, Defiant and Narwhal from the Guild. It was staggering to imagine the kind of influence and power we were hosting right now.

"Impressive," Alexandria declared, looking across the area. "And am I wrong to believe that you've completely covered this world in Yggdrasil? No other forms of life on the entire planet but that which you've created for it?"

I felt a little self conscious at the clear S-class grade power that I had demonstrated. "It was a dead world when we found it," I offered lamely.

"You don't have to pretend you're surprised," Lisa replied. "We know you've spied on our planet before, maybe even crossed over into it. Right now, I suspect we're not the only groups on the planet truly capable of interdimensional travel, but we are both capable of it."

Alexandria nodded "Very well, I won't insult you by pretending otherwise," she agreed. "You were saying you determined something valuable about the Endbringers?"

"I can confirm they're controlled by a human intelligence," Lisa answered. HorrorAnger. "Maybe not in the literal sense. Probably more similar to Dragon's droneships than to our own bioconstructs."

"And you know this because?" Alexandria asked.

"I trust Eidolon's shared what he learned from us?" Lisa asked.

"About what you are calling Passengers, right?" Alexandria answered. Dragon shared a glance toward Defiant and then Narwhal.

"What 'Passengers'?" Chevalier asked.
"They are the source of all powers," Lisa answered. "Every parahuman has a Passenger."

"The Protectorate's researchers call them Agents," Alexandria added. "Although our understanding of them seems to differ from Pantheon's, we have come to a number of the same conclusions. Unfortunately, the information we do have is functionally useless."

"Is that what I see when I look at parahumans?" he asked. "These Passengers?"

_Shock/Curiousity_. "Wait, you can see our powers?"

"Not exactly," he replied. "It's a... like visual symbolism. An abstract of what the power can achieve, in a humanoid representation and left for me to try to interpret."

"What does my power look like?" I blurted out, before stopping to think.

"... Distracting..." he answered, looking away. "Yours and hers," he gestured at Taylor. "I'm not sure what my power is trying to tell me about your powers, but I can tell you that I'm trying very hard not to look." _Mortification/Worry/Pride_.

"I'd really like to study your power," Emma spoke up. The fact that Clarice was standing next to her prodding at her may have had something to do with it. "We're doing our best to learn more about how the Passengers function, and your ability would probably help a great deal."

"My power sight is, technically, classified," he answered. "I mentioned it only because you already seem to know more on the subject than I do."

"I'll bring the matter up with the Directors," Alexandria spoke. "I have some leverage. There may be some negotiations, but I suspect they'll demand that you share every scrap of information you learn on this matter with them. Now, let us move on to what you believe about the Endbringers."

"Initially I suspected that the Endbringers were Passengers as well. We know they're not human and do not think like humans. They can't comprehend most ideas that are instinctual to us. Although, to be fair, I doubt we could grasp the ebbs and flows of reality and dimensions, or all the insane complexities that our powers can perform. Different doesn't necessarily mean worse, and in this case probably means far superior."

"But it does mean that behaviors would change," Alexandria agreed. "It's the 'Rule of Three' that made you certain, wasn't it?"

"Of course," Lisa answered. "The thing waited exactly thirty three and a third seconds between its
jump attacks. Killing three people per tail per jump. Shedding a tail after every third jump, detonating after the ninth. The total length of the battle was exactly three hundred and thirty three seconds. That's hardly a coincidence. In addition, the Endbringer prediction software. If they were truly alien, if they came from the source of powers, it couldn't work on them.”

"Makes sense,” Dragon replied. "It might also explain why Rapture's technology was so valuable in improving our predictive software."

"In addition, they're still currently active,” she responded. "They watched our battle with the Simurgh. I might even suspect they were there during the battle, given the obvious Rule of Three pattern, and how the killing weapon was powered by three parahumans. But it's more likely they were watching through some remote viewing technology built into the Simurgh."

"Do you have any suspects on who the Endbringers' creator or creators might be?” Alexandria asked. "Or what they're trying to accomplish?"

"Not as such, no,” Lisa admitted.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

A/N- Yay! Chevalier! And one step closer to solving all the mysteries.
"So now that that's out of the way," Dragon responded. "We have to ask ourselves another set of questions. Namely: do we keep killing Endbringers? Clearly, when one dies, another is born to take its place. It poses a risk, to destroy one and risk that the next be even more deadly."

*ConcernDreadDetermination.* "We keep killing them," Taylor spoke with certainty. "Whatever force made them must have limits. The first two came a few years from each other, then the next a few more years later. This one almost a decade after that. They keep building them, we'll keep breaking them until they run out of whatever it is they need to build more."

"I am inclined to agree," Alexandria responded. "Even discounting the possibility of an endless stream of the creatures, this new Endbringer follows the trend of each being less destructive than the last. If the new Endbringers continue in that direction, it benefits all of humanity."

"The politicians won't see it that way," Lisa pointed out.

"Fuck them," Narwhal responded, speaking for the first time. I didn't know a lot about the giant of a woman, clothed only in her forcefields, but she seemed content to let Chevalier and Dragon speak for her. "If politicians want to complain, they can come out here and fight those monsters for themselves. Until then, they don't have the right to tell us what to do."

*AgreementCertainty.*

"We run a risk of an even more deadly Endbringer than the ones we've faced before, however," Chevalier pointed out.

"Then we destroy that one," Taylor countered. "We keep the weaker ones alive for now. Go after Behemoth and Leviathan. Leave... what are we calling this monster, anyway? It probably needs a name."

"A cursory internet search suggests the most suitable designations would be Fenrir or Barghest," Dragon responded. "Fenrir is a Norse myth, a giant wolf that was fated to slay Odin and be instrumental in their apocalypse mythology."

"I'd rather not give the Neo-Nazis the satisfaction of having one of their favorite naming sources validated with an Endbringer," I responded. Sure, we destroyed E88's largest chapter in the states, but the bastards were still out there with dozens of other teams and names. At least they opted to lay low after New Delhi, for the most part. "I'm voting for Barghest, and I don't even know what it is."
"I believe our PR guys would agree with you," Alexandria added. "I'd suggest we avoid any names of beings that succeed in destroying the world."

"Sometimes called the Black Hound, devil dog, and hellhound," Dragon informed us. "It's a spirit, known to hunt travelers and, much like ravens in North American lore, is strongly associated with death, both past and future."

"Appropriate," Alexandria agreed. There weren't any other suggestions offered, so we unofficially, at least, had our name.

"And now I have two questions," Lisa replied. "First... Eidolon's newfound power to raise the dead. What is it capable of?"

"I was inspired by Osiris' ability, for what I am sure are obvious reasons," he answered. "Naturally, I looked to see if I had something that might prove similar. I found one, and it's remarkably low energy considering what it's capable of."

"It has usage limits, I presume?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I have to 'tag' the people I wish to save ahead of time, though there doesn't seem to be an upper limit on how many I can select as long as they're all parahumans. It won't work on normal people, for whatever reason. Once I've selected the first target, the power waits exactly eight minutes, then instantly restores everyone I've tagged to the state they were in when I tagged them. After that, I lose grip on the power and have to wait for it to recharge. It's good exactly once per day."

"You can access it more than once?" Lisa asked.

"Yes," he replied. "It's not one of my high energy cost powers, and your tech is keeping it charged just enough that I won't lose access as long as it's dedicated to that power alone. This is one ability I don't intend to ever let go of, now that I have it."

"That's good to know," Lisa replied. InterestApproval. "Now, the next question is for Chevalier. Why is your sword made out of Simurgh parts?"

"How did you know that?" Chevalier asked.

"I didn't for sure until I asked," Lisa replied. "But it's immune to sensory powers, which limits it to Endbringers, and a number of parahumans I could count on one hand. Given its solid white coloration, and how none of the rest of you is immune, I made the most obvious guess."
"It's the strongest material known to exist," Chevalier answered. "Of course we'd make use of it."

"But how did you talk someone into letting you?" she replied.

"Classified," Chevalier replied.

"It's nothing she won't figure out on her own, if she hasn't already," Alexandria informed Chevalier, before turning back toward Lisa. "The Protectorate is learning from you. This concept of power synergies and customized tech to augment powers may be a novel one, I'll grant you. But now that we know it's possible, we've dedicated a fair amount of resources to achieving similar results on our own. With fewer capes and greater pressures than ever before, we either adapt or die."

"Well, they do say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," Lisa smiled. "Of course, this implies Chevalier's power interacts with Endbringer tissue. In addition to his power-sight. Making him, to my knowledge, the only parahuman on the planet that can do that." RealizationExcitementHope. I glanced over at Taylor.

"EEEEEEEeeeeeeeee." 

"Riley," I whispered into my suit's com. "Could you please stop squeeing?"

"Err... sorry..." she responded.

"What, exactly, is your power?" Lisa continued to talk to Chevalier as I dealt with Riley's imitation of a teakettle.

"I can overlay properties of one object onto another," he answered. "Giving it the size of one, the strength of another, the weight of a third and the shape of a fourth. I can also subtly adjust those properties to anywhere between the three," he lifted his sword, which was more decorative than practical, with a gun built into the hilt. Then it shimmered, growing in mass, though he seemed to have no trouble holding it up. "Some things take more effort than others, made easier the more similar the objects are. I have an easier time using a fifty foot long sword and my rapier than I would trying to cross, say, a fork and a hammer. In addition, it only seems to apply to solid nonliving tissue."

"And Endbringers," Lisa interrupted.

"Pardon?" Chevalier replied.
"And Endbringers," she repeated. "All evidence prior indicated they followed the normal rules of the Manton Effect, except they were treated as both living and nonliving, whichever was more beneficial to them. In addition, they have a large number of other immunities to shield them from certain powers. Like precognition, and any effects that might alter their bodies or powers. probably means our pipe dream of being able to teleport them to another dimension could never work. Not that we're going to stop trying, of course. You, somehow, have a power that bypasses something we had believed to be absolute."

"I... hadn't thought of it like that before..." Chevalier eventually spoke.

At some point during the conversation, Lisa locked eyes with Alexandria. *Pulling a Taylia, wasn't that what they called it? "I trust you recognize the importance of Chevalier's power,"* Lisa spoke.

"Yes, I do," Alexandria replied. "I'll do everything in my power to see that you get approval to run your tests."

==================

A/N- No. Seriously. Chevalier's power is the only canon power shown to work directly on Endbringers. It also straight up *lolnope'd* one of Scion's attacks.
"Only lost a total of fifty units," Taylor informed as as she started lining her forces back up. "Most of them directly against Barghest. The rest were the shunting units, a lot of which burned out during the attack. If it wasn't for the fact that they're the hardest ones to replace, I'd call this a net gain. Oh, and I'm almost done dragging all the corpses back. I should be able to use the remaining zerg to carry back the dead."

"Good," I replied. "Regrowing them enough 'muscle' that they can haul themselves back to base is a pain," I answered. It really was, too. I wouldn't even be doing this, except that a lot of their insides were tinkertech alloys. Stuff that I had been assured was really expensive and slow to make. Especially since there was no way to build an organic device to do it for us. The purely organic parts could be made easily and with no effort. But without the tinkertech, they weren't even fit to call decoy targets in a battle against an Endbringer.

"I got readings off of Clarice," Emma informed us, as she worked with Rey, Chariot and Clarice to pack up the mobile command center. The tinkers didn't want the rest of us touching their 'sensitive equipment', so we were mostly limited to watching. "That detonation was loosely ten kilotons. If we hadn't insulated the region, it would have been as destructive as a small atom bomb."

"Fucking christ," Lily muttered. "And every time that thing shows up, it's going to do the same thing? Kill fifty four people and drop a nuke in the middle of a city? All in five and a half minutes after its arrival?"

"That's the gist of it," Lisa agreed.

"And this is the one we're considering allowing it to live for fear that the next one will be worse?"

"I'm afraid so," Lisa answered. "Don't get me wrong, we're going to do our best to kill it. But that kill can't be done by any of the Moirai." *WorryConfusion.*

"Why? How is it suppose to stop me?" Lily asked.

"I don't know," Lisa admitted. "But this one was designed with you and your powers specifically in mind. Its design sacrificed a lot of other potential offensive abilities, making it the most apparently weak Endbringer. Solely so it could have a method to protect itself from your power. Knowing how Endbringers tend to function, that secret weapon would guarantee that if you were present on the battlefield, a lot of people would die. We know your power easily nullifies Zach's, and I'm fairly certain it would work equally well against Eidolon's resurrection. We cannot allow Barghast to get anywhere near you, for fear of what might happen."
Lily fell silent at that, and leaned into Sabah, who had rested an armored hand on her shoulder. I wasn't sure I could imagine how huge that was. The idea that an Endbringer may have been created with the sole purpose of being a counter to her.

"So, how long until you announce the engagement?" I asked Lisa as we started making our way back.

"What?" Crystal asked, and it earned the attention of everyone else.

Lisa just sighed. "Really?" she asked. "Nevermind, of course you would."

"Would what?" Missy asked.

Lisa turned toward the girl. "Amelia is implying that, because Alexandria and I can use our thinker powers to communicate rapidly with one another in a way that appears, in the most superficial of visual manners, to be similar to the Taylia bond, that that means I am somehow destined to become romantically involved with the woman," she explained in a dismissive tone. "Despite the fact that all possible logical thought disagrees."

Crystal laughed. "Actually, that sounds about perfect for you."

"It really doesn't," Lisa replied.

"No, it totally does," Crystal insisted. "She's possibly the only person on the planet that could out-smug you. Or is that the reason you can't be with her? Because you're afraid of having a relationship with someone who might actually be smarter than you think you are?"

"She's not smarter than me," Lisa insisted. "She just has a really unfair power that gives her the advantage."

_AmusementDismissal._ "Hey, Riley," Taylor spoke up. "Tell me something. Do you still have some of that anti-power drug?"

"I can make some more really easy," she answered. "We just haven't had much reason to use it. It doesn't even really work against people with the powers that are any kind of problem for our team to fight."
"I'm just thinking we give Lisa a dose, and see how smart she really is on a fair playing field," Taylor continued. I could hear the smile in her voice.

"Not that I'd mind," Riley responded. "But that's not a good idea. The drug can cause permanent damage that interferes with power use."

"She wasn't really going to do it anyway," Lisa informed us.

AmusedAnnoyed. "I might change my mind," Taylor suggested. "Still, I think you and Alexandria would be an adorable couple. You could just stand there and stare at each other for a couple minutes, then go back to your day smug in the knowledge that you just had a romantic moment worthy of an epic poem using nothing but body language so subtle that no one else on earth would know anything even happened. Truly a love story for the ages."

"Speaking of epic love stories," Lisa's smile broadened. "Did you notice Amelia checking out Narwhal?"

"I did not!" I insisted.

IrritationCertainty. "She didn't," Taylor supported me immediately. "And we all know I would have known if she had. Now stop trying to deflect attention away from yourself. Or at least try to do it in a less obvious and insulting way."

"Exactly," Lisa answered happily. "Your confirmed lesbian girlfriend was in the presence of a seven foot tall naked woman with the figure of an actual goddess, and she didn't even think to take good look at her? Out of the thirteen of us, only five can honestly say they didn't try for as much of an eyeful as they could possibly get away with. Incidentally, a few of you should be aware that I'm probably going to blackmail the piss out of you later. Just for fun."

RealizationLoveHappiness. I smiled, and fidgeted uncomfortably at the attention. "I... guess you have a point," I admitted. I looked over at Taylor and did allow myself to, as Lisa put it, 'get an eyeful'. PleasedConfident.

"Fifty bonus relationship points to my big sister."

"Riley, I can hear you on the com," I told her. "Who are you talking to?" Zach started laughing, followed quickly by Theo and Emma. Missy held out the longest, but she started laughing as well.

"Nevermind, I think I figured it out," I sighed.
The trip itself was both subjectively short and uneventful, merely slow. At least our conversation distracted us long enough for Taylor to send all her zerg through Missy's space warp to our base. There, the damaged ones would feed on Yggdrasil and regrow, while the ones that had been destroyed- whether temporarily or permanently- would be recycled and rebuilt. Possibly with improvements in mind. An additional Endbringer, and the potential threat of more meant we'd need to be even more battle ready than ever before.

....

*Confusion*Concern. I looked over at Taylor. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I think," she answered. "I think your sister wants to have a chat with you, however. She's waiting in the lounge."

I frowned. I have neglected her, lately, I admitted to myself. "Well, we had planned for the fight and cleanup to take a few hours. I suppose I could spend the extra time with Victoria. You don't mind, do you?"

*Confidence*Peace. "No, it's fine," she smiled. "I'll call Epoch and tell him how things went. He's probably as confused as everyone else who was hoping for a major show of force against the Endbringers."

"The Adept's really have been hoping to show off the full capabilities of their new armor systems, haven't they?" I smiled.

"I'm thinking we see if they want to cut loose against the Teeth," Taylor added as we approached the entrance to our base. I opened the direct path that would allow us enter the labs without bothering with the normal pathways. "It might even be better that way, showing that Pantheon and its allies are more than just a ceasefire arrangement. That we trust them to handle trouble on their own. Yeah, that sounds good."

We all stopped in the labs to take our armors off, and put the changelings back where they belonged. Some needed repairs, but every system needed stored away. Except Lily and Sabah, who just took theirs home with them.

Freed of the armor suits, Taylor gave me a peck on the cheek, and I headed up to talk to Victoria. By the time I got there, Zach, Theo and Missy had made it first and were talking to her. The four of them, along with Trevor and Clarice, had gotten to know each other pretty well at school. Not well enough to share Clarice's true identity, of course. But it was something. I paused when I saw Victoria. She was wearing her Glory Girl costume.*Curious*Concern.

"Hey, sis," Victoria smiled. "Guess what I can do!" she started to glow.
A/N- The plot twist that literally no one didn't see coming.
"Suckiest part about my powers is I can't even play in any sports," Zach complained. "Sure, I take a
gym class and it's the easiest credit in the world, but I'm not allowed to join anything because unfair
advantage." He emphasized the last words in the most sarcastic way possible.

"I know!" I exclaimed. "Sorry, you can benchpress a small car, therefore we can't let you play goalie
on a soccer team," I added my own mocking voice. *I don't even have my powers anymore, I added
silently. And I'm still forbidden from any sports.*

"Know what would be great?" he laughed. "All parahuman team. Then no one can bitch about
anything."

"Where are we going to find a ball that could survive that?" I asked.

"I heard something about people using decapitated heads on battlefields," he started.

"That's disgusting," I interrupted.

"Yeah, but we can use Endbringer heads," he suggested. "Most badass sport ever, of all time. Admit
it."

"That would be pretty badass," I admitted. I looked at the clock. *Almost six thirty.* "So, think Amy's
up and ready?" I asked. It had been a few days since I'd spoken to her. She always had something
else to worry about these days.

"Sorry," Zach replied. "She's probably still asleep. Today it'll be the morning meeting as always,
then a ten minute makeout session with Taylor, then chatting with R-ey and the rest of the nerd herd.
Then she'll probably have to have a phone call with the Mayor or the Commissioner or the Director
or whomever. I doubt she'll be free until this evening."

I frowned. "Doesn't anyone else do any of that?" I asked. "Isn't that Minerva's job? Isn't Taylor
suppose to share half the workload?" There's three of them, I wanted to add. I be she finds time to
just hang out with her girlfriend and replacement sister.

"Not really," Zach answered. "Minerva's doing her thing with Dinah and the new recruits from
Boston.* Meaning the fucking supervillains that my sister spends so much of her time with. "And
Taylor's got something to do with city planning. Everyone's busy. Except for us mooks who just
show up to do the fighting. For most of us, it's boring as fuck. I can tell Amy that you called,
though."
"You don't have to, I understand that she's busy," I lied. "Hey, since you have so much spare time, we should stick around after school and have a one on one game. I haven't played a game in forever, and I'm afraid I'll lose my skills if I don't get to some practice."


"And you can literally never get tired," I countered. "Sure, I'll score a lot more in the early game. But I'll start to slow down eventually, and if we keep going for an hour or so, you have a good chance of coming out ahead. All you have to do is wear me out, and then you can beat me easy."

"You do know how that sounds, don't you?" he teased. Boys.

"Yes," I deadpanned. "Now are you gonna be there or not? Or would you rather miss out on seeing my, as you just put it, 'perfect body' sweaty and panting?"

"Well, when you put it that way, how could I possibly say no?" he laughed.

"I thought you'd see it my way," I teased. "See you after school." Then I hung up and started getting dressed for school.

Zach was a good guy, smartass or not. I should talk to Theo and the others about doing something nice for him as a group. The winged bitch had ruined his birthday by showing up a week before it happened, and as much as he pretended it didn't matter to him, I didn't believe that for a second. Clarice got a surprise birthday in the wrong month, so why not Zach?

Yeah, I smiled. I'll talk to Trevor at lunch and let have him help with the planning. He could even help me pick out a birthday gift. Zach was into video games, and I didn't know jack about them, so that was perfect. Of course, then I'd have to do something to thank Trevor. Hmm... Mandy's single, maybe she'd be interested. She was kinda a bookworm type, reminded me a lot of Amy, back before everything changed so drastically. Then they could live happily ever after and make tons of nerdling babies.

....

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked as I stood in the doorway of the living room and talked to Dad. I hesitated to approach him. He didn't like to be bothered, on his bad days. He was never mean to me, and I never for a second was afraid of him. Mom would rip him in half if he did anything that would have hurt me or Amy physically. I could have dealt with that. What really hurt was how he didn't seem to care about me, or anything else for that matter.
He just... ignored me. There were days, sometimes even weeks, where he would barely even look at us. He sometimes didn't have the energy to go out and patrol. He used to love that, and would come back with all the exciting stories of how he punched one of Allfather's goons or blew up a Merchant drug stash. Then he'd play with me and Amy and let us pretend to be superheroes and he would pretend to be a bad guy. We'd play wrestle until it was time for dinner.

That almost never happened, anymore. Most days, he couldn't even pull up the energy needed to smile at me. He'd just mope about, or watch television, or spend twelve hours sleeping. Then he'd have insomnia that night and be too tired to pay attention to me or Amy in the morning. I did my best to remember what Mom told us. That he was sick, that it wasn't anything I did wrong. And I prayed each night that he'd get better, but he never did.

He smiled, and my heart jumped. "Sure," he said. "Come have a seat," He patted his knee. I happily ran in and sat on his leg. This is one of his good days. "So, what has you in such a tizzy?" he asked, laughing at my barely contained excitement.

"We made the championships!" I exclaimed.

"That's wonderful!" he declared.

"You'll be at the game right, Daddy?" I asked. I knew I was too old to be acting so childish, but I was really excited, and if that meant playing up the cute card to get him to show up and watch, then I was okay with that. I always was a daddy's girl. And when my own was too tired, I'd often spend time with Uncle Neil. "It's the championship game. You have to be there to cheer for me."
"Of course, firecracker," he smiled. "I'll be there."

I ran off to tell mom the news.

....

My phone beeped with a text. Not a lot of people had this number, so despite a rather disapproving look from my World History teacher, Mister Sloan, I pulled it out and read it. Zach had sent me the message.

'EB, ?loc'.

Fuck. I stood up and collected my books.

"Where are you going?" the teacher asked.
"Class is canceled," I told him as I rushed out the door. I didn't bother explaining. *An Endbringer? Now? It's way too soon for that*, I thought. They killed Simurgh in mid August, and it was now only late September. *A month and a half too early.*

I was almost to the front door when the principal made the announcement. A lot of the students would stay in school. Arcadia was well equipped enough to have televisions in the classrooms. Mostly for video presentations, but they could receive outside channels. The teachers would be watching the news, along with the many kids whose parents couldn't come for them. School may have been canceled, but that didn't mean all jobs were. Although the ones that stayed open probably wouldn't get much business done.

I didn't see any of the Pantheon kids leave through the front door, and there was no cell response. *They already left without me.* I turned and walked to my new sports car. Not nearly as fun as flying, but at least dad bought me a nice ride.

*With the signing bonus he got for leaving us,* I reminded myself. Suddenly, I liked my car an awful lot less.

==============

**A/N-** Chapter got way away from me. Is now a two parter.
"Aunt Sarah, what are you wearing?" I asked as I walked into the living room and saw her. She was in costume. Not even her own costume, but one that started yellow around her shoulders, shifted to light blue and and slowly transitioned to dark green by the time it reached her feet.

"Like it?" she asked. "It's one of Crystal's old suits, with a bit of a refit."

"Are you joining Pantheon, now?" I asked.

She laughed. "No, I don't think so. They don't need an old hag like me slowing them down. They just asked me to keep an eye out, in case someone tried to start trouble while they were gone."

"You could always try it on for size," Khepri's father suggested. "I even thought of a name for you." He leaned in close and whispered something. She laughed and then gave him a friendly slap across the chest with the back of her hand. I frowned. Uncle Neil was always my favorite. The one who'd been there for me when my own father couldn't. *He's gone, and Aunt Sarah had already replaced him. More than that, the father of the girl who had stolen my sister from me.*

I moved into the living room, to see my Mom and Dad sitting together on the couch. It was almost a happy moment, until I realized the pair of them were seated at opposite ends of a piece of furniture meant to hold five.

"Shouldn't you be going to the fight?" I asked Dad as I sat in the couch between the two. *Does this mean he changed his mind about the Protectorate?* I dared to hope.

"They're instituting new policies," he answered. "After New Delhi, well, the rules are changing. They're only sending the top tier capes, like the Triumvirate, to this one. Pantheon can build their disposable shock troops, and then let them die by the hundreds without blinking. Unless you rate a seven or eight, chances are they're not taking you. Your old man's barely a five. So I have to stay home and watch the fight on the news."

"When did they start showing Endbringer battles fights on the news?" I asked as I sat down between them.

"When your sister proved they can die," Dad answered with pride. I fought back the tears. I remember when he talked about me like that.

The cameras were high quality, but not well positioned.
An announcer spoke while we watched various giant monsters appear across the battlefield. Amy's creations, I recognized. Controlled in full by her girlfriend's power. "Channel Nine would like the audience to be aware that the images you are about to witness are likely to be extremely violent and disturbing to all audiences. Due to the nature of the footage, we will be unable to edit or censor any details. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.

"They're really covering their asses on this one, aren't they?" Dad laughed.

"Given the number of lawsuits there were last time?" Aunt Sarah replied. "Seems like the only person who's not suing is Pantheon."

"I'm surprised they were even willing to do it at all," Mom added. "Don't get me wrong, I am glad they're doing it, but I'm surprised. Most of the lawsuits were frivolous, but they were still funded and backed by government action. The PRT was blatantly punishing news organizations for showing the footage. Bullying them for showing what really happens, instead of cooperating with whatever garbage the bureaucrats wanted to sell people today."

_Not subtle, Mom_, I thought as I glanced over at Dad. He pretended not to notice. Or maybe he really didn't notice, I couldn't tell.

The television announcer was going on and on about how the zerg resembled, and how they differed from, the ones New Delhi fight. Mostly focused on how there were so many more this time than last. Then the Endbringer appeared.

"We have spotted an unknown creature on the field," the anchor spoke excitedly. "We are unsure what it is, but-." The monster vanished, reappearing near the camera. I watched as several people fell, their heads separated from their bodies. The anchorwoman shrieked in surprise.

Mom gasped, and Dad sat up, leaning toward the screen. "Sarah, Danny, it's started."

"The hell is that?" Khepri's father asked.

"It's a new Endbringer," I answered. _How could he be so dense? _"They killed the Simurgh, this is her replacement."

"-unknown creature," the reporter spoke. "Given the circumstances, it seems likely that this is a new, never before witnessed Endbringer. Its powers are currently unknown, but appear to include teleportation and superhuman reaction speed."

I watched as the Ultralisks collided into the sides of the monster, which seemed to do much less
damage to the monster than it did to the zerg. I gripped the cushion I was sitting on. *I should be out there. I should be helping them.* It vanished again, and there was more death.

"It's the fastest Endbringer," Sarah volunteered. "I thought Leviathan was fast, but I think this one's truly built to be a speedster."

"They all have some kind of mover powers," Carol added. "But this one does seem dedicated to it."

No one spoke until the gray mist bomb went off.

"What was that?" Dad asked. I smiled, *I know what that is, at least.*

"It's one of their new weapons," Khepri's father spoke before I had a chance. "Something they cooked up working with Dragon."

I kept quiet. I guess it didn't surprise me that she was telling her dad what they were up to.

We watched as it kept teleporting, and kept killing. Then the cameras exploded into fire.

"Fuck!" Mom exclaimed. This is the first time I can remember hearing her curse like that, I realized. "It's New Delhi all over again!"

My eyes went wide. *If that happened in Mexico City, the devastation could hit a large chunk of the United States.*

"They made it through last time," Aunt Sara spoke, her voice trembling. "They can do it again."

"That's right," Dad agreed. "They'll be fine."

The news went immediately to satellite images after the loss of the camera feed, showing the city from above. Not even close to as bad as New Delhi, I realized with relief. So did the news reporters, who were now speculating on an EMP weapon being part of the new Endbringer's arsenal.

Aunt Sarah's phone rang, and she answered it right away. "Yeah," she said after a moment, smiling broadly. "Yeah, they're all here. I'll make sure they know what happened. Okay, so you'll be home in a couple hours? Yeah, I'll tell them. Love you too."

She closed her phone and looked at us. "That was Crystal," she informed us. "The fight's already
"Already?" Dad cheered, and patted Khepri's father on the back. "That's our girls. Endbringer shows up for breakfast, and they kill it by lunchtime." Yeah, I thought. That's my sister out there, living the ultimate dream.

"Everyone got through it safely, right?" Mom asked.

"They're all fine," Sarah told us. "They're having an after battle conversation with a few of the bigwigs, probably about how the fight turned out, and what they can do better next time. New enemies, new strategies needed."

"As long as they stop making promises so readily," Mom complained. "Sometimes I feel like I'm going to have to carve 'we need to consult with our lawyer first' on the inside of their eyelids."

Khepri's dad chuckled. "That's my daughter, alright. I could go on for hours, but I'm afraid they'd bore you."

"Nonsense," Dad answered back. "You should hear some of the stuff Victoria's done. We should get together for a beer sometime and swap war stories."

Done, not does, I thought while watching the screen. Has done. Has been. I'm nothing, now. I don't matter. Dad has a new favorite, Uncle Neil's gone, Aunt Sarah has a new man. My family's either dead, or has moved on and left me behind. They don't care about me. Why should they? I'm worthless. I'm already dead.

....

"Get your head in the game, Dallon!" Becky shouted at me. I looked away from the stands. He's not here, I told myself. Dad's not coming.

I had to work extra hard to compete, being a freshman on the varsity team. In a school with a lot of competition. I was taller than a lot of the junior girls, and I trained harder and was in better shape than almost all of them. Of course I was. I was training for when I got my powers, and my competition was only training to be good at a sport.

We had gotten this far on so much hard work, I had gotten this far. And Dad couldn't even bother to show up for the championship game. It didn't help that it was an away game. It didn't help that the school we were up against was twice our size, and so could afford to be twice as picky over who they could put on their team. Almost all of them were seniors, and I suspected a couple of them were held back a year. We were holding on, just barely. I tried to smile, it would be one hell of an
underdog story, wouldn't it? I could do this.

The ball passed to me, and I managed dribble past one of the older girls on the other team. The next girl up to guard me was one I'd dealt with before. Not the most effective player, I was confident I could get past her..

Then she stepped into me, deliberately. Her shoulder catching me hard in the jaw. I dropped hard. "Watch it, shrimp," the girl mocked me as I sat there on the floor. I glanced over to the refs, but they didn't call the foul. Of course not, they're on the other team's side. There wasn't enough time on the clock I glanced back at the audience. They not on my side, either. Dad wasn't there for me, and he would never be. There's no reason to keep fighting.

....

The world collapsed around me. Them. A trail of impossibly beautiful gemstones, dancing in the void. I've seen them before. I know them. I know... what did I know?

"Sarah?" Khepri's dad asked, helping my Aunt, who had fallen in the excitement. Dizzy spell brought on by... something... no long term risk. "Sarah, are you okay? What happened?"

I looked around. Mom and Dad shook their heads. Mom's been overworking herself, I realized. Probably not sleeping much. Dad's in okay shape. Aunt Sarah... eww, I didn't need to know about that. I'd never be able to look her in the eyes again in my life.

Wait? How the fuck did I know all that? Oh, I realized. It happened again.

====================

A/N- And there you have it. "Fouled in basketball" resulting in a "Shaker" powerset (two of them, actually- both the aura/forcefield that sources all her other powers), and shakers are, according to WoG, "Environmental danger, ambient danger, often nonhuman or only abstractly human."

Debating over second gens aside, WoG makes it obvious there was more to Vicky's story than a Basketball foul- THAT would be a brute, striker, or maybe blaster power.
"Well, not Glory Girl's powers, no," she corrected as the light faded away. Her hair had changed colors to something more resembling a sunset, with yellows and oranges blending into blues and purples. "But yeah, Victoria is back and better than ever. I'll need a new name and probably a new costume and theme. The old one was nice and all, but... uh... Ames? Were you cut in half recently? Because it really looks like you were cut in half, and it's distracting me."

"Uh... blown up, actually," I admitted.

"Well, never let it be said we live in boring times," Vicky said cheerfully. "So where's your testing facility? I can't fly anymore, but I think I'm faster on foot now than I ever was in the air. We should totally find out."

"Uh... right this way," I answered, leading her to our gym area. It wasn't really a testing facility, but Clarice was pretty much a mobile analysis system. We'd just have to give her a place to work with.

"This is really neat," Clarice started. "So what are your powers?"

"Let's wait until L-Minerva's here to listen," I insisted. "She's our primary thinker, after all."

"I'm here," Lisa answered, coming into the room. She wasn't in costume. "Let's hear it."

"Combat thinker and war form," she answered happily. "I can sense weakpoints and I'm pretty sure I have short range precognition and some kind of echolocation, because I ran here with my eyes closed, and even dodged some traffic. And that was in my normal state."

Lisa's eyes narrowed. "Okay, nevermind the standard tests. Clarice, we're going to have a sparring match."

"This is going to be fun!" Clarice declared.

A half hour later, and the pair of them were still going at it. More than that, Victoria clearly had the
upper hand. To the point that it was a joke. Faster, stronger, and an overall better fighter. Eventually, Clarice simply froze and collapsed.

"I think I win," Vicky informed us smugly, standing on the collapsed changeling.

"So, umm, who did she get her power from?" Taylor asked.

Lisa frowned. "This is gonna sound insane, but, she got her powers from Clarice."


"Oh, don't worry," Vicky replied. "I knew she was fake the moment I saw her with my new eyes. Oh, by the way, I can hear you from over here. I also know you're fucking terrified of telling me who Clarice really is. I promise not to flip out. Seriously, Ames, you're already engaged to the bitch who fed me to bees," IrritationRegret. "And working alongside the even bigger bitch who shot me so the other one could feed me to bees. It can't possibly get any worse than... oh... fuck, it can get worse than that? How the fuck does it get worse than that?"

"I'd... really... Vicky, could you please not force me to answer?" I asked.

"It's better if you don't find out," Missy stepped up to defend me.

"Happened after my death," Victoria smirked. Her eyes were locked on Lisa's. "After the Slaughterhouse Nine. Connected to the Nine. Don't bother telling me when I figure it out, because I'm pretty sure my power works better than your power. Let's see, was already told Clarice was orphaned by the Nine. Okay, so that story happens to be true, but there's more to it than that."

"Bonesaw," Lisa sighed. "Clarice is a biomechanical puppet piloted by Bonesaw so she can interact with the world safely. The girl was kidnapped by the S9 when she was only six years old, and hadn't ever been able to experience what it's like to just live a normal life."

"Aww, and I was having so much fun doing the same thing to you that you did to me and Amy," Vicky pouted. "You remember that, don't you? Because I'm going to bet it hasn't sucked as much for you to be on the receiving end as it did for me."

"You might be surprised," Lisa retorted, looking down.

"Really?" Vicky's eyes widened in surprise before narrowing. "Good." She paused for a full thirty seconds. "Did you say Bonesaw?"
"Yes," Riley spoke up, walking into the room. "Hi, Vicky, it's nice to see you in person. I'd really prefer to be called Riley by the friends close enough to know who I really am. Hopefully you can be one of those friends?"

Vicky just stood there, staring at the girl. "Know what?" she laughed a little. "I think I just felt all the cares I have die simultaneously. Alderaan style. This is officially the weirdest possible thing in the universe, and the part of me that can be bothered by that has gone on vacation." She walked up to Riley and extended her hand. "It's good to meet you, Riley. Thank you for giving me my new powers."

"My pleasure," Riley responded and shook Vicky's hand like it was a perfectly normal business meeting.

"Okay, now what's this about her getting Clarice's powers, instead of, y'know, Riley's like would make logical sense?" Emma asked.

"I don't suppose any of you have heard of Acquired Characteristics theory?" she looked around, but none of us spoke up. "Figured. Basically, it was the theory of evolution before Darwin. The idea that an animal would do things. Like, say, a proto-giraffe reaching for leaves. And because of that, its offspring would inherit slightly longer necks for better reaching. Now, we've learned that doesn't work in normal earth life, because we run on genetics. But it's how Passengers evolve. They're shown how to do something by their hosts, then they reproduce and the offspring does something different. Incorporates those new ideas."

"That makes a lot of sense!" Emma declared excitedly. "Riley's Passenger is a biotinker... it knows how to be a biotinker. But thanks to Clarice, it was taught how to be a shapeshifting supersensory powered brute. So when it bred, the new Passenger was selected from those traits, to test the new evolutionary path."

"But don't Passengers choose people close to the original host?" Crystal asked. "Like family. Riley hasn't spent any time near Vicky."

"You need to redefine 'close'," Lisa smiled. "These things jump between dimensions like we change channels on the TV. They can reach to the other side of the world with no apparent effort while their real bodies remain hidden a thousand realities away from us. Do you really think physical proximity means anything to them? No, when they breed, they select a host that's close to the origin host on a mental level. So that they can protect and incubate their offspring directly. Riley's Passenger selected the living human that Riley paid the most attention to, cared the most about, that wasn't already a parahuman. Isn't that right, Riley?"

"Wasn't my power from Oni Lee?" Zach interrupted. "I'm pretty sure I never spent any time making friends with asian psychopaths."
"What Passengers do when a host dies is different," Lisa answered. "Then they just move on to a new one. This is about what happens when they breed. A baby Passenger set up to be guarded until it matures properly."

"It's true," Riley admitted. "She's my Big Sister's sister, after all. And Zach's friend. And my friend. And she's funny. Of course I am ready to protect her from harm. Plus I spent an awful lot of time figuring out all the details of her genetics from scratch. A tinker has to take pride in her work."

"Exactly," Lisa responded. "Now, her powers include a massive suite of sensory powers, including a few that you only include in some models because their energy and space requirements are too high to use together, and all the best of everything else you've ever packed into a Clarice body. Only better, because it's a Passenger doing the work instead of technology."

"What about her other power?" I asked. "The glow that accompanies her transformations?"

"Probably got it from one of the other Passengers. Whichever one, or ones, that Riley's selected as a 'mate'. Could be Zach's, he has a breaker state. Then there's her parents, Brandish and Flashbang are both are breakers as well. I'd put Brandish as the most likely. She transforms her body into energy. Victoria infuses her body with energy and uses that to manipulate and adjust details at will."

"So... I'm like if my mom had a baby with Bonesaw?" Vicky asked. "Know what? I lied. Now there is no way this day can get any weirder."

"This is awesome," Riley declared, smiling bright. She then glomped Victoria, hugging her hard as she could. "I always wanted to be a mommy!"

========

A/N- Riley will never stop being adorable.

Also- Tattletale isn't always right. Remember that, kids.
The 'kids' and the tinkers were distracting Vicky with all kinds of questions and plans. Which left us 'adults', minus Crystal and Rey, to compare notes.

"We can't keep her," Lisa said the moment we were sure we were out of earshot.

AgreementRelief. I gave an unhappy glance at Taylor. SheepishConcerned. And then locked my eyes back on Lisa. "Why the fuck not? She already knows the thing we need to be most afraid of getting out. That's how Emma got a pass. Or are you saying my own sister is less acceptable than Emma?"

Lisa smiled a lopsided grin. "Really? I think there's one more secret she has yet to ferret out. I also think it's the biggest one on the list, or I think Victoria will think that it is."

RealizationDread. "Yeah, that's the one," Lisa confirmed. "She has a cool power, sure. One that'd make her top tier on most teams. But it's not one we can really augment with our tech, and it's not good enough to be valid against Endbringers on its own. We can't use her, and she might decide to kill us someday."

I sighed. "Fuck," I muttered. Taylor put her hand on my shoulder. "We can't just tell her no," I argued. "You don't know my sister. She needs to be a hero. She'll fall apart without it. And that's without considering the whole Passenger mind fuckery."

"Then let her join the Protectorate," Lisa countered. "She's only got a few more months before she's eighteen, she can probably skip being a Ward entirely. They'd cry with joy to have her in New York or Chicago, even if the Teeth have been eliminated and the Adepts are nominally on their side now. Your dad's moving to Philadelphia, right? She can go with him. She's not good enough to be valid in the kind of wars that we fight, I don't care if she's basically Clarice on steroids, she's not good enough for this team."

I looked at Taylor. ConcernDread. "Taylor, please, she's my sister and she needs this."

"She's a security risk," Taylor said softly. "Plus she'll be an even bigger discipline nightmare than Lily. She hates me, she hates Lisa more. Maybe. She now has a thinker power and we all know how much of a pain in the ass thinkers can be when they think they're right. She remembers how you two used to be, and that means she may love you, but she sure as hell doesn't respect you. If we're lucky, she'll listen to Crystal. If we're lucky."

I sighed. "You're right," I admitted. ReliefSupport. "She's not going to be that effective. Plus, well, we don't do a lot of the kind of superhero stuff she likes. She's smarter than she pretends she is, but she's not what one would call a 'planner' in the field. We're all about spending days or weeks
planning, and then a few minutes of fighting. I doubt she'd be happy with how we do things.”

"Guys!" Riley spoke up through my com. "Vicky's power is awesome!"

ExasperationConcern. "Okay, what did you find out?" Taylor spoke

"She's a regenerative shapeshifter," she informed us. "Like Crawler, without all the icky bits. She's not quite on Crawler's level, but it makes her really really hard to kill. "

"And, more importantly," Emma added. "Her thinker power is 'easiest way to kill things', which is even more cool than it sounds since it applies to our bioconstructs. Seriously, she's pointing out so many weaknesses in our gear to be fixed. Especially since we also have Barghest to worry about. Proper reinforcement might make us better equipped for unit survival against it, and other Endbringers."

"And she can do the living battery thing, like Crystal," Riley interrupted. "Apparently she got my electrical attack mods, and they don't drain her batteries. But I can think of so many things we can use her for. You can totally put her on my team. Pleasepleaseplease."

AnnoyanceResignation. "No promises," I responded. I looked at the other two. "So... I don't think they're gonna give us much choice, are they?"

"Probably not," Lisa admitted. "Zach's hard to read, and Missy has finally started getting used to the idea of being more than just a child soldier. They both like Vicky a lot. Riley wouldn't push the issue, but Theo might, if prompted by the others. We know Crystal's going to argue on their side."

"Lily and Sabah are going to want to hear the reason we don't take her," Taylor added. "We could have used the discipline issue. I know they can spot how much Vicky doesn't like me, although I have to wonder if they wouldn't agree with her. After finding out about Bonesaw and Coil, well... we're going to have a hard enough time selling them on the Nilbog plan. And you know we don't have a choice but to tell them. If it were just the two of them, and if we could claim that Victoria's power wasn't good enough for us to use, we could get away with it. But strong power and we have enough members to break us up into teams and keep her away from our direct command."

"We really should consider creating dedicated teams," I agreed.

"So what do we do about your, uh, secret?" Taylor asked.

"Nothing, for now," Lisa sighed. "I think Taylia interferes with Vicky's new power. Maybe not the 'how to kill it' part, but the emotion reading side effect. She wasn't cold reading the two of you, she was reading me. Although that might have been to prove she could, quote, beat me at my own game,
I'm not certain. If she starts to suspect anything, well, we can improvise. Keep it a secret as long as possible, then tell her about how her aura fucked everything up. After that, she'll probably pretend nothing is wrong and never touch the subject again. The way she's doing for both of her trigger events."

*That's right, I realized. She just had a trigger, with all the trauma that comes with it.*

"Fuck," Taylor muttered. "She might be even better at compartmentalizing than I am."

*When you live with my family, you kinda have to be. I didn't say anything.*

....

"So, you girls have fun talking about me?" Vicky asked when we walked back in. "I know I'm not quite on par with the Endslayers or the Triumvirate or anything, but put me in the field and I can beat pretty much anything else."

"Yeah," I sighed. "Kinda talking about what team to put you on. You're probably going to be with Atropos and Clotho most of the time. You don't mind taking orders from Crystal, do you?"

"Hey, wait a second," Crystal responded. "When did I agree to be a team leader? Also, when did we start creating teams?"

"I thought I'd be on the team with Zach and Missy and the rest," Vicky argued.

"Clarice has about the same powers that you do," Taylor pointed out. "It would be redundant. And given their history, there's no way in hell we can put them on the same squad together. Having a thinker that can help make our blasters more effective on the field is incredibly valuable. Plus, you're the third member on the team that has a power that can let you double as a healer. Not nearly on Riley's level, but better than most."

"I don't have blaster powers," Vicky argued. "I can't even fly."

"Armor will take care of that," I pointed out. "You'll have a custom set pretty soon, I'm sure. Right, Riley?"

"I have sooo many ideas!" Riley practically sang. "We can give you a set of Radiant's weapons, but since you don't use a forcefield and have combat intuition, we can use that space to improve your speed and stealth features. I bet if I talk to Defiant I could find a way to miniaturize the shunt tech a little, and you could have two shunt drives for quick cross dimensional attacks. Maybe include a few
extra melee features. We could use more up close fighters."

"Why can't I work with my friends?" she pouted.

*Because that's why*, I thought. "We have to plan for effectiveness. I'm sure there will be plenty of missions where we put you together with one or more of your friends, but they can already do everything you can do. You're stronger with Crystal's team."

"When did I get a team?" Crystal asked again. "I thought Lisa was suppose to handle those two."

"Since we started getting more recruits," Lisa answered. "We have too many people to coordinate as a single unit. So now we have three. Four, if you include our tech team. We have the thinker group that stays back and coordinates. Then we have the blaster group. Then we have the frontline group. With a few people, like Riley and Taylor who do double or triple duty."

"And I get stuck with the group that can't be trusted to take care of themselves?" Crystal complained.

"Would you prefer to be the one in charge of the neurotic college kids, or the one in charge of the neurotic highschoolers?" Lisa asked.

"I'd rather not have to deal with being in charge at all," Crystal countered.

"It's cool, cuz," Vicky insisted. "You can let me handle everything and just say you're in charge. How's that sound?"

==============

A/N- Vicky: I'm halping!

Everyone else: know what? Fuck it. We don't even care anymore.
"You're the one with the combat precog, what kind of melee weapons do you think you'd be best with?" Riley asked cheerfully. "You can ribbon fighting like I do, or maybe something with an ax. No one use axes." Missy and Trevor had begged off a couple hours ago, insisting that they needed to get home before their respective parents went insane. Crystal said pretty much the same, going to deliver news of the Barghest fight to our family.

Zach and Theo remained here, of course. Talking about my new abilities and finding potential power synergies. Along with Emma, who I had never met before today. I'd seen her in pictures about Pantheon before, but we'd never been in the same room with each other. A Case 53 tinker, She was... distracting. Her physiology was a freakin' mess, and everything my power knew was telling me there was no way she should be alive, yet here she was, analyzing my power output and lifesigns while Riley discussed features for my armor.

Theo yawned loudly. "Sorry, guys," he said sheepishly. "But some of us actually need sleep. Riley, you should go to bed, too. Clarice acts weird... well, even more weird... when you pull an all nighter."

"Awww..." Riley whined. "But this is so cool! I almost never get to build new suits for my friends."

"I'll be here tomorrow," I smiled, giving her a pat on the head. The fuck? I am patting Bonesaw. When did this become my life? "But I need to go to bed, too," I lied. "I'm going to spend a few minutes with Amy and see about finding a bed somewhere. Then I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Okay," she agreed, sounding childishly unhappy about it.

I hopped off the chair they had me in for the testing, and headed for the exit. "So, uh, someone want to tell me where Amy's room is?"

"I got it," Zach volunteered. I smiled, and while my new sight wasn't telepathy or anything like that, I knew he wasn't entirely thinking with the head on top of his shoulders. No surprise there. We spent a lot of time together talking, and I knew I was a looker. My sight flickered back to Emma as she watched him rush to help me out. Oh, that's something I didn't expect.

"So, what's the story between you and Emma?" I asked the moment the door sealed. I watched his heartrate jump and the subtle release of natural drugs into his system.

"We dated for a week or two, but it turned out she's a horrible bitch so I dumped her," he said, and for the first time since I met him, he didn't have a smile on his face. Even after Dream Girl, I remembered, he managed to force a smile. "End of story."
"If you insist," I replied, following him. "She's really pretty," I added, measuring his emotional reactions.

"So are most of the girls on this team," Zach countered. "Besides, you were a total babe before you got shapeshifting powers. And now you have shapeshifting powers. You have no need to be jealous over anyone."

Wait, he thinks I'm jealous? Cute. Vaguely insulting. But cute. "Who said I was jealous?" I smirked. "Maybe my sister and I have more in common than you realized?"

He coughed a couple times, and then dusted. Reforming a heartbeat later. "That was a really dirty trick," he insisted. "Even if Emma was into girls, you'd be better off with just about anyone else."

"Shapeshifter, remember? She doesn't need to be into girls," I teased. "Now why do you have such a problem with Emma?"

"Here's Amelia's room," he changed the subject. "Now if you need me, I'll be playing video games all night." He left quickly, taking his conflicting emotions with him. There was a lot of story going on there. Victoria Dallon, super sleuth, would be on that job later.

The door opened before I even tapped on it. Taylor was there sitting with her on the bed. "I didn't interrupt anything, I hope?" My senses confirmed that, if I did, it was only a conversation. None of the obvious tells were present.

"Not at all," Taylor answered, hints of aggressive chemicals hit her bloodstream as she prepared for a confrontation against me. And then they stopped seemingly for no reason. That's not how humans work, I thought. Maybe it has something to do with how her body's been altered to superhuman fitness levels. "I was about to go home, actually."

"I thought you lived here?" I asked.

"Seems like it, sometimes," she answered. "But I still live with my dad. It makes him happy to have me around to take care of once in a while."

"See you tomorrow," Amy kissed Taylor on the cheek. Awfully chaste for people who are engaged, I decided. I stepped aside as Taylor left the room. She's nervous about something. Hiding something. So is Amy.

"So, wanna tell me what's up with Emma and Zach?" I asked. I registered Amy's relief at the
question. And then an entirely different form of apprehension. Christ, Amy, I thought you quit doing hospitals to reduce the stress in your life.

"Why do you want to know?" Amy asked suspiciously.

"I'm not allowed to worry about the wellbeing of the rest of my team?" I asked defensively. "I bet if you won't tell me, then Crystal would be happy to." Amy's emotions jumped. She was annoyed by something. \textit{I win}. I also needed a better word than 'I win'. Checkmate, maybe? \textit{That sounds way too pretentious}, I decided almost immediately. "Why are you afraid to tell me?"

"Seriously, Vicky," Amy sighed. "I just... we have enough drama around here. Could you please just leave it alone?"

"You know I can't," I replied. "Just tell me. What did Emma do to Zach?"

"Nothing," she answered. \textit{She's telling the truth.}

"Buuuut," I prompted.

"But he hates her because of what she did to Taylor," Amy admitted. She looked at me. "Oh, you didn't hear about that before? Emma was Taylor's childhood friend. Then, for reasons I doubt anyone will ever be able to explain to me... well, Emma decided to bully and torture Taylor until she had a trigger event. Two trigger events, actually."

"Two?" I blinked. "How does that even work?"

"It happens," Amy answered. "I can tell the difference between people who've only had one trigger, and those who've had two. Taylor's had two, and since she didn't even realize it, they must have happened almost back to back. Double triggers. Probably a lot more common than second triggers."

"And you're working alongside her?" I asked. "Taylor didn't seem like Emma's biggest fan, but fuck, if it were me... I'd have gone Carrie all over Emma's face and then buried her in a corn field somewhere in Indiana."

"She had some time getting used to Riley first," Amy explained. "Compared to that, Emma's pretty small time. And Taylor's been trying to be more forgiving. She feels pretty guilty over what she did as Skitter. And Emma's been bending over backwards to prove she's sorry and should be forgiven. It... well, we've all done some pretty bad things."

Amy's emotions spiked. \textit{Guilt, something that she regrets enough to border on the suicidal. She won't tell me if I ask}, I realized.
"I guess," I agreed. "And Zach isn't exactly the forgiving type, is he?"

"Not about this," Amy added. "He doesn't really like to talk about his own feelings much"

_Something we have in common, I guess._ "Good to know. Aren't you going to do anything to fix that mess?"

"Not my business," Amy dismissed. "They're both doing their jobs. Emma's more worried about being friends with Riley and Taylor, and even Taylor's at least willing to try to work it out," _Huh, is that why Taylor seemed so... disinterested... in Amy? Does she have feelings for Emma? I will punt that bitch into the middle of the ocean if she's leading my sister on like that. _Zach's moved on to hitting on Crystal..."

"Really?" I interrupted. "And here she seemed so eager to send him my way."

"The only girls on the team he hasn't hit on at least once are Missy, who's dating his best bud. Lily, who's a lesbian with a power we're pretty certain can kill him for real. And Sabah, who's dating Lily," Amy explained. "Crystal probably wants someone a bit more, well, not a jackass."

"Her loss then," I smiled.

"What?" Amy exclaimed. "You can't seriously be interested in-"

The door opened, and a tired looking Riley walked in. "The dreams are back," was her only explanation as she climbed into Amy's bed.

"We'll talk about this later," Amy insisted as she reached over and rubbed the girl's shoulder.

"Sure," I lied before leaving the room. I wandered into the living area, where Zach was playing some kind of fighting game.

"How'd the chat go?" he asked, as one of the characters on the screen bloodily decapitated another.

"Pretty good," I answered as I walked over and plopped down next to him. "She gave me some idea of the history between you and Emma. Thinks there's some secret of your past that makes you hate her a disproportionate amount."
He sighed. "You're not going to let this go, are you? Well, talk all you want, I don't have to answer any question you ask."

"I was thinking of beating it out of you," I added just a hint of tease to my voice.

"That won't really work, either," he countered.

"We'll have a duel on it," I offered. "Any competition you want to have. The loser has to do anything the winner wants. For an hour. No complaining, no resisting, no stalling. No matter what it is."

He looked at me. "I dunno, I can think of a lot of 'anythings' to do in an hour."

I smiled and licked my lips slowly. "Hit me with your best shot."

--------------

A/N- Rez! Vicky turns out to be really flirty.

Also: I am aware she met Emma before. Readers be aware my characters aren't infallible.
I glanced over at the clock. 5:22 in the morning. *Well, guess I wake up a little early today.*

I took the time to clean up in the shower and shave. It was actually nice having a private shower. Not that I ever had to worry about sharing bathrooms with anyone, considering my family's wealth. But I heard stories from Missy about the nightmare that was only having one bathroom for a family of five. Definitely one of those things I was glad I never had to worry about. Having cleaned up, I got dressed and walked out into the hall. *Maybe I could kill a little time with Zach before school.*

He wasn't in the lounge area. *Strange, he's almost always* - I paused as I overheard voices in one of the halls.

"I let you talk me into that," Emma panted softly, even though her tone of voice said she was happy. "I've been under so much stress lately with my work that I totally forgot about taking care of myself."

"Told you you'd love it," Vicky declared. "Now just accept that I'm always right. Makes things easier that way."

Zach's voice followed the two girls. "It was only meant to be an hour!"

"Quit bitching, you loved it at least as much as she did," Vicky crowed. I blinked. *What?*

"Yeah, seriously," Emma agreed. "Don't act like it was some kind of chore. You may have been able to argue that if you quit after the hour was up, but the next five hours, you stayed in it like a champ." *What?*

"With the two of you there to mock me for not being able to keep it up?" Zach accused. "We'd all die of old age before you got done teasing me." I felt a little uncomfortable. *Is this something I shouldn't be listening to?*

"What's the matter, big boy?" Emma teased. "Did us girls wear you out?"

"The hell are you talking about?" Zach retorted. "You needed my help to deal with her!" he gestured at Victoria.

"Hey, not my fault I didn't get superhuman stamina," Emma defended. "Yeah, maybe I'm tougher than most because I can regenerate. But I'm nothing compared to the two of you. It's not fair to expect me to keep up."
"Don't sell yourself short," Victoria replied. "You have some great moves. You definitely done that before, I don't care what you claimed earlier."

"You don't spend as much time around Sophia as I did without picking up a few tricks," Emma admitted. "But compared to you? Well, you'd have eaten her alive. You took the both of us on like it was nothing."

"The advantage of experience," Vicky argued. "You two make a great team. If we didn't have our powers, I wouldn't be able to walk right now. We should totally do it again tonight. I promise I'll make it worth your while."

"No!" Emma declared. "Not tonight. Please, I'm so sore already."

"I understand," Vicky shrugged. "Give it a few weeks and your body will get accustomed to it. The two of you have lots of potential, though. Maybe you should practice on each other when I'm not able to stay over? Give you something to do in the middle of the night other than video games and lab tests."

"I don't really stay here every night, either," Emma pointed out. "Just... after the Endbringer fight, there's so much new stuff to study."

"Well, how about if I give the two of you pointers, then give you a chance to try it out?" She suggested. "Then, like, on the weekend we can all get together and you can show me how much you've managed to improve. How's that sound?"

Emma glanced at Zach and smiled. Wasn't hard to tell her opinion on the subject. Zach hesitated for a moment before smiling. "You know what?" he finally replied. "That actually sounds really fun."

"I knew you'd like that idea," Vicky bragged. "Now I'm going to hit the shower before school. Let the others know I can take them to school, Zach?"

"Sure," Zach agreed, then he spotted me. He smiled and brushed some of his messy hair out of his face. **Maybe I should considered growing out my hair.** My father always insisted I keep my hair military regulation short. **I should ask Missy what she'd prefer.** "Hey, Theo, could you let Riley know we'll be going with Vicky? I know I'm not suppose to get tired. But I'm actually tired. Best bet I've ever lost."

"She crashed in Amy's room," Victoria informed me.
"Fuck," Emma muttered. "She'd been getting so much better about that, too."

I frowned. I didn't know a lot about Riley's nightmares, only pieces from overheard conversations. As much as I liked Riley, I mean I quite literally owed her my life and so did Missy. Of course I considered her my friend, but she was still very much Missy's bestie more than especially close to me. We just didn't have a great deal in common beyond Missy and work. Given her history, maybe I didn't want to know more about them. Still, I worried for her, especially if she was having nightmares again. I'd tell Missy about it first class we had together.

....

Zach and Clarice occupied the back seat of Vicky's sports car, while I rode in the passenger side. I concentrated on not looking back at Clarice. Even with everything out in the open, and Missy's more than understanding stance on the subject, I didn't feel right having the... feelings... that I did toward the construct that Riley piloted. Made me feel like I was a pervert. Then again, if I was, I shared the status with a solid half of the school.

It also made me feel like I was doing something wrong. Unfair to Missy. Not for the first time, I considered asking Riley to go in and manually fixing whatever it was that Dream Girl did to me. Along with my personal promise that if she ever returned, I'd kill her myself.

I pulled my mind away from that line of thought, and looked over at Vicky. She seemed more than a little unnerved for some reason. *Maybe it had something to do with what she did with Zach and Emma?* I couldn't imagine what else she could have done since then. "Are... are you okay? Did something happen?"

"I... why didn't anyone warn me about the shower in the lab?" Vicky whimpered. Oh. *Oh god.*

"You used the lab!?!" Zach exclaimed. "Why!"

"Because I remembered Riley mentioning it having a shower, and I didn't know where anything else was!" Vicky cried.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Clarice asked happily. "It's like being massaged by thousands of adorable kitty tongues."

"That's because it *is* being massaged by thousands of kitty tongues!" Vicky exclaimed.

"They're not really," Clarice argued. "They're imitations made from Yggdrasil. I did my best to get everything exactly right, but there's all kinds of flaws. They don't have proper body temperature distribution, for one."
"I couldn't tell the difference," Victoria informed us. "I have superhuman senses, and I couldn't tell the difference between that so-called shower, and being covered in thousands of moving, disembodied, kitten tongues."

"Thank you!" Clarice replied. "I worked really really hard on that."

"She did, too," Zach informed us. "You have to admit she did an incredible job on that thing."

"I have never felt more clean in my life," Victoria whimpered.

============= 

A/N- At first glance, this chapter offers no story substance whatsoever. At second glance, it offers some significant plot points.
"Seems like an awful large force for a scouting mission," Victoria spoke up, leaning against the wall. "Especially with the dimension jumping tech."

"We're trying to impress on Haven that we're serious about this," Lisa sighed. "Smoking out the occasional drug or prostitution den has kept them from being too annoyed with us, but they want a legitimate win, here. The Fallen are stronger than ever, and the longer we put this off, the more likely they are to think we don't give a damn about them. What's the point in being allies with someone who won't back you up when it matters, right?"

"Still seems like a big force," Victoria argued. "I get Skitter," Amy flushed with irritation through our bond. "And Missy is kinda our chauffeur. But do we really need all three Endslayers, half our Tinkers, and thirty zerglings."

"Shadowcats," Amelia corrected. AnnoyanceImpatience. I nodded and stepped a little closer to her. Useful powers or not, her sister was a pain in the ass. She got along well enough with the others. Even Riley, strangely enough. She was one of the few people on the team who did get along with Lily. But she was still a fucking headache, and it was starting to bother Amelia. I placed my hand on my partner's back.

"Okay, fine," Lisa sighed. "This is a scouting mission, but we're still unloading a force for future engagements. And we're all freakin' bored as hell right now. You're having fun with your new powers and new gear, but in case you hadn't noticed, most of the team is getting restless. And we don't need a bunch of triumvirate tier parahumans getting bored right now. New York's finally stable, so it's time to move on to the next project."

"It's true," Lily agreed, talking to Vicky. To my surprise, Lily had mellowed out lately. Still wasn't friendly with any of us, but New York had an impact on her. "It's nice playing with you, but I need a real fight or I'm gonna go nuts. I'll settle for scouting and going after peripherals if I have to"

Sabah frowned. She was one of the ones that didn't like the violence and conflict, but went along with it because her girlfriend loved it. Maybe she was a factor in Lily's slightly less abrasive attitude of late.

"Fairly good odds you'll be able to pick off a few of their parahuman support. Baal and Lilith are still off the table, but if you have a target more than a couple miles away that you think you can take without much fuss, you're pre authorized," Lisa informed the girl that was our only real weapon against the Endbringers.

"I could use a trip to the beach, anyway," Zach replied. "Think we can stop by Miami after we're done?"
"It's October, Zach," Theo pointed out.

"And?" he asked. "Florida should still be nice, right? That's like five feet away to Missy."

Amy leaned in on my shoulder and whispered. "I still have to see you in that bikini," she whispered. I blushed, in spite of myself. AmusementDesire. I signaled back with a combination of embarrassment and happiness.

....

"Just you and I, huh?" Victoria spoke up as we approached Baal's suspected lair. Or our geoanalogue to it, at least. He was one of the scary ones that you tried not to fight, much like Lung had been in Brocton Bay. Maybe alone he wouldn't have been such a problem, but his partner Lilith was a precog and they pretty much never left each others' sides. She was suspected to have other powers, as well, but no one had ever gotten through Baal and forced her to use them.

"Yes," I answered. TrepidationProtective. Amelia is listening in on this conversation.

"I need to know the story of what's going on between you and Amy," she insisted.

"Talk to her about that," I just kept walking forward. Really? She had to do this now? Why couldn't she have just pulled me aside when I was walking home or something? Then again, it was probably better for me that it happened here.

"We both know that if I do, you'll be listening to every word," she accused.

"Not if Amelia asks me not to," I countered. IrritationSupport.

"Amy might believe that, but she always was too trusting," she argued.

"I would never betray her trust," I finally turned toward Victoria. ConcernCaution. "But if you're going to be so pig headed about this, fine. What is it that's more important than dealing with these sick fucks?"

"First, you're not gay," she pointed out.

"Oh, is that all?" I scoffed. "Amelia knows about that. Fuck, almost everyone knows about that. She
insists that it doesn’t matter and she’s okay with it.”

"You expect me to buy that?" she smirked.

"Some relationships are built on more than mere attraction," my tone darkened. "But, since you're that concerned... the subject's come up. We do have the tech needed to alter sexuality. Right there in the databanks along with the medical training, martial arts, Spanish, Hindi, Japanese, Korean and English as known by native speakers, military and police procedure, and a code language that Riley and Lisa are cooking up for us to use. We can change my inclinations with ease. We choose not to." FearSupportLove.

"That makes no fucking sense!" Victoria declared.

"You're the one with the lie detector powers," I pointed out. "You know I'm telling the truth on this."

"That brings up another thing," she exclaimed. "The fuck is up with the two of you? I get why Emma's so damn hard to read. Riley, too, but she had tech to do that. You and Amy confuse the hell out of my power. Your emotions change for no reason all the time."

"That would be Taylia," I answered, starting to smile. It was one more validation of our bond, how well it protected us from thinker powers. "It's... uh... let's just say Amelia's power and mine are really friendly with each other. We can, for lack of a better term, share our emotions directly. It's kind of impossible to describe. But I wouldn't give it up for the world, and neither would Amelia." CertaintySupportPride.

Victoria paused for a second, and I realized that I might have made a mistake telling her about the bond. Even though she could have asked almost anyone about it and known already. "Wait... so you're saying you have a psychic link where you can force my sister to feel things?"

"It cuts both ways," I insisted. "She can influence me just as much. And she's the one whose power created the link. She can undo it just as easily." ConcernGuilt. Why does she feel guilt over that? I wondered. Probably feels bad that she has the advantage in this relationship. It wasn't the first time she'd blamed herself for things that couldn't possibly be her fault.

"I don't like the idea of you being able to fuck with my sister's feelings," Victoria growled.

I resisted the urge to say anything. Considering what she'd done as Glory Girl? Fuck! She can read that. The thoughts were quashed quickly, but not quickly enough.

Her eyes narrowed. "What was that?"
"Nothing you want to know about," I answered, turning away.

She appeared in front of me almost too fast for me to realize she had moved in the first place. "No, I really think I do."

"Ask Crystal," I sighed, falling back on old habits. "Fuck, this is why I wanted you on her team. You're not going to listen to any of the rest of us. Riley and Emma may have their issues, but at least they're able to obey fucking orders. We have a job to do here, don't fuck it up just because this is the first time you and I have been alone together and you want to start a fight."

"Fine, I'm gone," She turned around.

What? "What?"

"You don't want me here, and we both know you never did," she pointed out. "Amy might, but it's putting all kinds of stress on the rest of you. I can go home, right now. You can go back to whatever you had going on. I've got great new powers and a completely badass armor. Thank you for magicking me back to life, lemme know what the bill for all this shit is. I'm sure I'll find someone willing to pay it to have me on the team."

"You're bluffing," I insisted. FearLoss.

"I am," she admitted. "But I'm also a stubborn bitch. I will follow through out of spite, and you know it."

"Can you just trust me on this one thing?" I asked. "I know we're not friends. I doubt we'll ever be friends, but this is not something you want me telling you about."

"You know something fucking huge," she asserted, turning and stepping right up to my face. PanicProtective. I pushed calming emotions into the link. She didn't need to step in, not like this. "Something you're more afraid of than me finding out about you having Bonesaw in your basement. Even more than that crazy plan with fucking Nilbog. So, yeah, I am not just taking your word on this. Or are you gonna say you wouldn't do the same if the positions were reversed?"

She met my gaze, and I looked right back. Then I relented. "Know what? Fuck it. You've made your point. I won't stop you from leaving."

She gripped my armor and brought up her fist. "I can do a lot of damage to you and leave you in a condition that Amy can bring back," she threatened. "Do you think you can stop me?"
"Not really," I answered. *DisappointmentAngerCertainty.* "But, then, I really don't have to."

She let go and stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself. "What the fuck!" she shouted.

=================

A/N- Vicky just needed a hug.
I struggled against the armor, even as it tightened its restraints against me. I activated my combat senses, trying to find a way to break out, but this suit had been designed for me. Able to absorb the energy I unleashed, to power its batteries. Able to withstand my superhuman strength. I reshaped my fingers into claws to dig my way out, but the armor regenerated faster than I could cut through.

"Vicky, how could you?" a voice, Amy's voice, asked me.

My eyes focused on Skitter for a second. A combination of fear and hesitation. Secrets she's afraid I've discovered. "Amy," I started. "You have to listen to me. She's controlling you. Some kind of emotion manipulation."

There was a hesitation. "Is that what you think's going on?"

"Think about it, Amy," I said gently. "Remember how you were so afraid to use your powers? Right after you got them, you made Aunt Sarah's cat glow. And that was the only time you ever did anything. From then on you refused to be anything more than a healer."

"I was afraid of being seen as the next Nilbog," she argued.

"I know, I know," I agreed. "But then you just change your mind one day. Not only that, but you did it in such a spectacular way. You built a super tree and living weapons to fight the Slaughterhouse Nine with."

"They needed to be stopped," she argued.

"Then you started working with the two people you hated most in the world," I continued. "Plus fucking Bonesaw."

"Who's been nothing but helpful and cooperative, if a bit weird," Amy countered.

"Riley's so nice it'd be creepy even if she wasn't guilty of crimes against humanity," I agreed. "Which should be a hint, Ames. You have freakin' Bonesaw on the team. And Missy, who was all 'serious business child soldier', and the son of Kaiser, and whatever the fuck the story is with Emma. Sure, they're all nice kids, but it's pretty fucking suspicious."

"Your group has some seriously scary brain rewriting tech. You can't trust your memories here, so think about it logically. You're engaged to a hetero girl and seem to be okay with that for no apparent
reason. You're chained up to her with some weird emotion manipulation power. You have to see how they might have done something to your mind, right? You have to trust me. Let me go so I can help you."

"Vicky, if they were going to do that, why didn't they do it to you?"

"They probably figured that since I wasn't going to have powers, they wouldn't need to," I pointed out. "You told me that even the best precogs can't see trigger events, and thanks to my new powers I don't think they can rewrite my brain. Your girlfriend has been hostile toward me from the beginning."

"She'd probably be a bit nicer if you weren't constantly calling her a supervillain all the time," Amy argued.

"Because she is!" I shouted. "Dammit, Ames, listen to me. It's a lot more than her just not liking me. I can see her emotions, and she's... fuck, she's afraid of me on a level thats more than some worry I might punch her. She's... there's even some jealousy in there, like she needs to protect you from me. She's hiding one hell of a fucking secret, and this fits all the evidence. You're being controlled by them. Just let me go, and I can get you away from her influence. I can save you. Please."

"Vicky, she's not controlling me," Amy sighed.

"Then why would she be so afraid of having me around you?" I argued. "She refuses to say because she knows I can tell if she's lying."

"Fine," Amy snapped. "You really want to know what we've been trying to keep from you? Fine. Vicky, remember how you had that fucking emotion manipulation aura?"

"I remember it," I confirmed. Then I ran through my memories from after being awoken, just in case they did plant something in my mind. *Yeah, it was a thing.*

"And how we thought I was immune?" she added.

"You were exposed enough times to be resistant," I agreed. "Just like mom and dad. Even Aunt Sarah and Uncle Neil were able to ignore it after a few seconds."

"We weren't," she corrected. "Your aura has a residual effect. Depending on how much we'd been exposed. The reason we were able to function around your power is because it never wore off for us. For mom, it's part of why she was able to be nice to you, even though she was so cold to everyone else. Dad, well, I don't suppose you would have noticed that he only ever smiled when you were there. And me? I went through puberty with your power constantly telling me to love you."
Oh fuck, I realized with slowly dawning disgust and fear.

"You're not wrong about Taylor being jealous," Amy continued. "It's for the perfectly normal reasons that anyone should feel like that. She's afraid I might still be influenced by... those feelings."

"You mean..." please tell me I'm understanding her wrong.

"Yeah, she's afraid I might still be in love with you."

"And... and are you?" I had to ask. I didn't want to, but I had to.

"I'm trying not to be," she admitted. "It's a lot easier to ignore than it was before, with your aura active. But four years of power enforced unrequited love doesn't just go away in a few months. Taylor knows that, and has been more understanding than I could have hoped, and that's just one of the reasons I love her. I can't say she's been all that accepting toward you, but under the circumstances, can you blame her?"

"So... fuck... all that time?" I asked, hesitantly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" she scoffed. "Hey, sis, I just had my first wet dream. Guess what you were doing in it! Yeah, that would have gone over wonderfully. Carol would have triggered with the ability to go back in time and undo ever adopting me in the first place."

"Well, as far as pickup lines go, it's not even close to the worst I've ever heard," I attempted to add a little humor to the situation. "Now if I promise to play nice, will you please release your control over my armor? I'm not a fan of being tied up like this."

"Are you going to apologize to Taylor?" she asked.

"Hey, she could have just told me what I asked the first time," I insisted. "She's a supervillain with mind control tech who's engaged to my sister. The burden is on her to prove she's not using it to take advantage of you."

"She's not taking advantage of me," Amy insisted yet again. "We can prove it, if you like."

"How?" I asked, suspiciously.
"That bond between us can be turned off," she informed. "We like it being on, for all kinds of reasons. Not the least of which is because it fucks with Thinkers like you and Lisa. It even works on precogs like Dinah. You can talk to her, without the bond."


"Yeah, I overheard the conversation," she said without any shame at spying on something that should have been private. Although now I could see her emotions for what they were, instead of filtered through that bond. 'Taylia', they called it. She was angry, jealous and insecure. I wasn't a mind reader, I only knew what they were feeling, I had to guess the why. Although in that case it seemed pretty obvious.

"Amelia and I joined forces to kill the last of the Nine and get revenge for the death of half my team, and you." True. "Riley was her idea. Yes, we have used the mind altering tech, more than once." True. "Never on Amelia." True. "I love her," True. "And if you dare imply otherwise again, I'll kick you off this team just so she doesn't have to. Is that good enough for your lie detection power? Can we get back to the actual mission? Or do we need to have a conversation about the residual effects of your love-me-field and all the relationship issues it's causing between me and my fiancée?"

"No," I conceded. She's telling the truth. I watched her relax and her tumultuous angry feelings broke and dissolved into a much happier, though still guarded, state. That's what Taylia's capable of? I asked myself. No fucking wonder I can't read them. "So what now?" I asked.

"Now we pretend this never happened," she commanded. "And go use your power to figure out a way to stop one of the biggest assholes on the continent that isn't currently in the birdcage. That's what we do."

"Uh... yeah," I agreed. "I can do that."

=============

A/N- Fridge Horror: there's no way you can be sure Vicky's wrong about all this.

Bonus Fridge Horror: Vicky actually HAS heard worse pickup lines.
Skitter turned and didn't speak another word as she walked into the holographic simulation of Baal's lair. It wasn't really a hologram so much as a ghost imprint involving something to do with allowing light to cross dimensions or something like that. Trevor and Emma tried to explain it to me a couple times, but despite who I apparently inherited my power from, I still had to sum up the whole conversation as 'tinker bullshit' and be done with it.

What I wouldn't give for them trying to explain it again, so I could ignore the news I just got. Amy was in love with me. My old power forced it to happen. I had no words for how fucked up that was. No wonder they didn't want to talk about it. Well, that made the next part simple: we wouldn't talk about it. Now I just needed a way to not have to think about it. Smashing the faces of a bunch of Endbringer worshiping psychopaths would be an excellent way to do that.

"Holy shit," Skitter growled as we passed through the wall and into the side of their compound. There were bones hanging from the walls, and it didn't take my powers to identify them as human. "Are those fake?" she asked, sounding unnerved for the first time since I met her.

"No," I replied. "Very real."

There were a number of people here, all armed to the teeth. "Where the hell did they get military guns?" I asked. I wasn't really a firearms expert, but living in Brockton Bay, you pick up at least a general idea of most weapons.

"There are ways," Skitter answered. "All it takes is money and knowing the right people. These fuckers have a lot of money."

We kept moving through the halls, sticking our heads through walls to find more information where we could, the Zerglings taking flanking positions around us for reasons I was fairly certain were subconscious on her part. They didn't have dimension jumping, after all. I found a large storehouse full of munitions. "They've got enough explosives in here to destroy the whole compound," I exclaimed.

"I could shunt over a Razorbat and set them off," Skitter suggested. Not to me, I realized. I could tell by her reaction that she didn't like the response she got from whomever was at mission control this time. Probably Tattletale. "Fuck, they have captives."

Of course they do, I sighed inwardly.

"It's just a scouting mission, anyway," she reminded me. "We're only here to gather info and see if your power knows a way to beat them. Dinah's power only tells us the odds, and Lisa's only comes
up with ideas."

We worked our way through the ghostly imitation of the compound. It was fairly large, all considered, and built almost entirely out of concrete. A fortress capable of withstanding almost anything short of a military assault, or parahumans. "Can't you use your freaky bug powers to find who we're looking for?" I asked.

"Not without alerting them," she answered. "Minerva's tried that angle, and she's pretty sure Lilith's power would detect it if I tried. The other most likely possibility is that there's a third parahuman in the compound that would spot it. Same with using a mapping scanner. We're not certain why watching from here doesn't set them off. Probably because their thinker can't reach across dimensional layers or something. Dinah says we're safe, the rest is just guesswork."

"Split up?" I suggested. "Lots of space to cover, and I can go a lot faster if I don't have to stay near you."

"Fine, but I expect you to report back to me if you find anything," she insisted.

"Yeah, sure," I turned and bolted, trusting my boosted senses to keep me informed despite my moving at over sixty miles an hour. Most of the compound was boring. There was a good amount of farmland outside the first building we entered, surprisingly enough. I didn't recognize the crops in question, but I did recognize slave labor when I saw it. There wasn't any other reason to have men armed with assault rifles threatening the workers. Pity sound didn't carry over to the side we were viewing. There's an idea. I hit the com system. "Hey, Riley?" I started. "Could you get lip reading into those knowledge upgrades?"

"That's a really smart idea!" Riley exclaimed happily. "How's the mission going?"

I was already moving to what appeared to be the largest building in this fortress. "Nothing we didn't know already," I answered. "Still looking."

"Okay, should I tell the others to go ahead with their missions?" she asked.

"Probably better to wait," I replied. No sense in letting them know we were coming early. I entered the large building. It was a warehouse of some sort, containing large bags full of what I was pretty sure was drugs. I watched as people walked to and fro. A man dressed up in an outfit of solid black, with three long ropes coming off his shoulders stood there. They're already imitating Barghest? I thought. It's only been a week and a half.

"Unknown parahuman, male, late twenties to early thirties," I informed over the coms, adding Tattletale and Emma to the conversation. I let my power go. Offensive strategy: attack from behind, punch him in the back of the head, he dies. "No special defense against surprise attacks, not a high
end regenerator." Defensive strategy: avoid ropes, stay out of range of ropes, stay out of line of sight. "Blaster or shaker of some kind. His costume is built to be a weapon or improve his power somehow, I think. He needs line of sight on his powers. Maybe mover, my power doesn't want me staying still for long near him."

"Never heard of him," Emma replied. "Too generic a power description, and the picture makes me believe he changed costumes."

"See if there's any Simurgh imitators that might fit," Tattletale suggested.

"Only a couple dozen," Emma retorted.

The man in black touched a crate and then vanished, taking the crate with him. "Fuck!" I exclaimed. "Teleporter. Powerful one."

"Seire," Emma replied almost immediately. "Touch range telekinetic, not too different than your old power. Teleportation of up to five hundred miles, confirmed. Likely more. Can use it rapidly enough to be effective in combat. Manton limited, but uses his power to strengthen his costume. Likes to mutilate his victims without killing them. Shouldn't be able to get through our battle armor, though."

"My power thinks he can get through mine," I informed.

"Sending Horus as backup. He should be a hard counter," Tattletale added.

I smiled. Yeah, that would work. My power's strategy for getting through Theo's armor was 'no'.

"Found them," Skitter said over the com. Her voice fluctuated in a way that let me know she was incredibly upset. I turned and bolted back that direction. Seire might come back, but I needed a look at the bosses.

I arrived at a tunnel in the Yggdrasil, and a swarm of insects pointing at the hole. I followed it down, and the scenery changed. In the dark, it was easier to see the other world. I arrived in what was, for all intents and purposes, a throne room out of a depiction of hell. Complete with bone furniture. That, at least, was fake. Although many decorations on the wall were not. I continued following the tunnel into a side area. A large bedroom. Baal and Lilith were there. _She does not have the body to be wearing something like that_, I decided immediately. A Simurgh-themed 'chainmail bikini' costume didn't belong on a 5'6, 250 pound, 40 year old woman.

Baal, on the other hand, looked like something out of a barbarian movie. Muscular to the point of near absurdity, and covered in a dark red armor with bits of brownish bone plating. His armor is the real thing. And, if my power was any indicator, it's still alive. Reading his physiology convinced me
that guessing his age would be impossible.

There were two other men, guards, one leading a girl out of the room, and another bringing a new girl in. Lilith gazed at her. "This one in ready, m'lord," she said with an attempt at a sultry voice that she couldn't pull off well, either. My stomach dropped.

"Ready for what," I asked Skitter hesitantly. The hormone and physiology information already told me the answer.

"Breeding," she answered angrily. "It's a breeding program. Like Heartbreaker."

"She's barely fourteen years old!" I exclaimed.

"I know..."

"I'm going in," I said.

"Wait!" she shouted. "This is a scouting mission."

"I'm not going to watch a child get raped," I growled.

"Can you disable them?" she asked.

"Her? Yes," I answered. "Him, I'll have to kill."

Lilith's head turned toward us even as Skitter gave the command. "Do it."

I shunted before she had a chance to speak. She dodged a burst of laser light with a shocking swiftness considering her age and physique, but she wasn't the one I was concerned about. At the same moment, my leg came up as hard as my strength would allow, right between Baal's legs. There was a wet crunch, as my armored foot sank into his flesh. I almost laughed at him, after my power was kind enough to tell me that, while such an injury would be temporary for him, he still had the ability to feel pain.

I dropped to the ground and rolled backward as Lilith fired a shot from some kind of tinker weapon. I didn't know the details, but my power made it clear I didn't want to take a hit from it. A splash of gore dropped from the hole my foot had left in Baal.
Meanwhile, I was listening to shouting and assault rifle fire from across the compound. They had, if my guess was correct, about fifty guards. We had thirty zerglings and countless modified insects. I took a couple more pot shots at Lilith, who evaded them almost casually. She's a better precog than I am, I realized as I struggled to avoid a couple more shots from her gun. I was only doing this well because I had superhuman speed backing me up.

Baal, meanwhile, had regenerated. I swapped out to the ice lance, and shot him in the crotch again. Sadly, that attack didn't leave a lot of nerves behind. He screamed, however, as his power started to undo the tissue damage. My power kindly informed me that I still had almost six and a half tons worth of human biomass to destroy before I would actually be able to do lasting damage to him. More importantly, I had to keep him fighting that whole time. If he decided to retreat, he could escape me. Or my power believed he could.

I dodged a couple more of Lilith's shots, then swapped to sonic and fired a wide burst toward her. The guards had started firing on me as well, but my armor was entirely bulletproof. It was, however, a distraction and one of Lilith's shots caught me in the shoulder. Fuck, I didn't want to do this so soon. I activated my war form. The breaker state undid my injury and adjusted my physiology. It even infused into my armor, which the tinkers had somehow bullshitted my power into thinking was a part of me. I mended the damage, moved forward and punched Baal in the head, sending him flying back. I fired a laser shot into his genitals. They caught fire.

I might be having too much fun with that, I thought. Then I flipped back to avoid another stream of energy from Lilith's gun. I swapped to EMP setting and activated the burst. Lilith, the guards, and the poor girl that was still in the room all screamed in pain. Contrary to popular imagination, EMPs fucking hurt. Other people.

She gasped as I closed in for a hit, and then my power warned me, so I moved back. My power was afraid to touch her, even through the armor. I wasn't sure why, but I would rather not find out.

"Fuck," she spat as she struggled to her feet. "You're a precog, too?"

"Guilty as charged," I quipped, my eyes glancing over to Baal. I resisted the urge to smirk as he had put multiple extra layers of his bioarmor over his crotch. "Of course, you're better at it," I admitted. Hopefully you're stupid about it, too.

She pulled a sword out from her position behind the bed, then rushed me. She was unnervingly fast for her size, but I was fast for anyone. I avoided her easily, only to be forced to duck and roll when Baal nearly got me with a spined tendril made from his armor. Lilith followed up by swiping at my shoulder, the one she'd shot before. The blade got through the weakened armor and sank into my flesh. She let the weapon go. Fuck.

I gripped the blade and shunted it out. Then, ignoring the injury, I twisted sideways and kicked outward, breaking Baal's knee. Thanks to the additional armor he used to protect the family jewels, he was a lot slower than he should have been with his powers. Slow enough for me to keep up with,
as was the plan all along. Lilith pulled another sword from another hiding place. *How paranoid do you have to be to hide all these weapons in your bedroom?* I wondered briefly. Then I swapped for my sonic blaster again.

Lilith stepped to the side and pointed the blade at the teenage girl's throat. "You know I can kill her before you can stop me," she warned. It was true, of course. I hesitated as Baal got to his feet. *Fuck.* The girl just sat there in wide eyed horror. And then Seire appeared in the bedroom. *Well, fuck me then."

Missy shunted in, near the door. Along with Theo. Zach appeared right in front of Lilith, who slapped him. He disintegrated. From just a slap? She has to have a scary touch power. The child vanished into dust a half second later, as Theo bull-rushed Seire, using gravity manipulation to help. Baal's legs exploded from underneath him, and I took a couple more shots at Lilith.

She moved toward Missy, and space warped around. It wouldn't work. Lilith's power let her follow the warp perfectly, getting her in touch range, where she grabbed Missy's arm. Lilith's arm started sinking into Missy's costume. Not in the usual sense of it, but more like when Lily uses her power to phase an object through another. Then Lilith screamed and stumbled back. Her arm was missing up to the shoulder.

I shunted out, moved a few feet, and shunted back in behind Seire. Cost me both of my jumps, but that was fine. I brought my claws into the man's back, using the cryo effect to weaken his armor and let me cut through. He vanished. I turned and clotheslined him as he reappeared. I definitely preferred fighting non-precogs. I also liked knowing we had healers, because I was pretty sure I just put the asshole into a coma he wouldn't come out of without parahuman help.

I turned back toward Baal. "So, want to surrender?"

"Fck ff," he muttered from through his altered jaw.

"Oh, thank you so much for saying that," I smiled, and moved. I shunted Lilith's sword back into this reality, dipped low, and shoved the thing up into his crotch yet again. Although, with the angle I used, it really did more damage to the intestines than anywhere else. Then I hit the weapon with the full extend of my electrical generation. He screamed as best he could while the metal heated to the point where it melted inside of him. *Not a very high quality blade,* I decided.

But, he recovered quickly nonetheless, even as everyone else retreated from the room. Missy took the teenager, while Theo carried the badly bleeding Lilith and Zach dragged Seire. *Wonder who gave that command?* Oh well, *I was fine here with Baal."

I stepped back and grabbed the other sword. *Nope, these are all replicas,* I realized. I fired another sonic blast, this time at full concentration. The back wall cracked as he slammed into it. I shunted out and returned standing on the ceiling above him. I jumped off of it and used all that force to send the
second sword down his throat, followed by yet another electrical surge. He dropped. My power told me that he was almost out of power.

I swapped to the ice lance, and aimed right for his heart, waiting for him to recover just enough to be aware of what was coming. His insides were reduced to near absolute zero. His eyes just stared at me in shock, and I watched as his power used the remainder of the stolen biomass of other human beings to recover. He was beaten, completely. He could recover, but would take years for him to restore his strength enough to be much of a threat. *I guess I can take him in alive*, I realized.

*Fuck that noise.* I kicked him in the chest, and he shattered to pieces.

==============

A/N- Vicky has issues.
Vicky and Taylor shunted over together, on the helipad of the Houston PRT office where I was waiting. "Where are the others?" I asked.

"Horus has business to take care of," Taylor informed me. "Aceso, Lachesis and Osiris opted to stay with him." Oh, he must have found Purity during the cleanup. Of course they'd want to talk while they had the chance. Purity's new identity may have been squeaky clean, but she hadn't been able to make real contact with Theo for whatever reasons that seemed overly paranoid in my opinion. It was good to give them a chance to catch up.

"I guess that's okay," I replied, trying to sound disinterested in the situation. "They're not necessary for the debriefing, after all. You're still monitoring them in case of unexpected trouble, of course?"

"Of course," she agreed. All part of the act.

"Umm... Vicky, how are you holding up?" I asked. There was a lot of things between us right now.

"Shoulder's sore," was her answer. "I think Lilith did something that's keeping me from regenerating properly. It can wait until after the meeting."

"I meant-" You finding out about my attraction. Me trapping you in your own armor. What happened between you and Taylor. What you saw in that compound that horrified even Taylor. "You've never had to kill anyone before," I finally settled on the safest of all the things I wanted to say. Concern Support.


I frowned. This was just like Vicky. If she couldn't hit the problem, or yell at it until she got her way, she'd pretend it wasn't a problem at all. Like Dad's depression, and Mom's general bitchiness, and her make up to break up relationship with Dean. Now that I think about it, she hasn't even mentioned Dean since she was brought back from the dead. Maybe she was more like Zach than I realized.

We made our way to the meeting relatively silently, led by a couple PRT troopers, who politely left us to our silent contemplation with nothing more than a "Please follow us, ma'ams."

We walked into a rather spacious office. Houston was a big city, big enough to field three Protectorate teams, plus six of the Haven capes, and still remain understaffed. And that was before New Delhi. This base was understandably massive for those reasons. Already present was Halo and
Prophet. We didn't know his powerset, but it was likely some type of precognition or high end thinker, based on the name.

Then there was Ranger, one of the 'makes others better' trumps, gifting superhuman accuracy and timing. He was the new head of the Houston Protectorate after Eidolon's pseudo-retirement to dedicate himself to the anti Endbringer efforts. Then of course the Director Lane, a middle aged man who reminded me of a significantly less obese, and slightly less masculine, Piggot.

"This was intended to be a scouting mission," the Director said with an attempt at neutrality that didn't match the accusatory language. We hadn't even had a chance to find our seats. He looked toward Victoria. "You're the one who killed Baal?"

"Ye-" Vicky started, but was cut off.

"It was my command," Taylor interrupted. "She informed me that she was confident her power trumped Baal's, but only if she was authorized to use lethal force. I authorized lethal force."

"And what gave you the authority to murder a suspect during a scouting mission?" he, again, kept calm. "You are not authorized law enforcement, and even if you were, you have no jurisdiction in this state."

"The fucker was going to rape a child!" Vicky shouted.

"Miss Dallon," he sighed theatrically. "If you can't restrain your temper, either leave or be escorted out."

"As if you could make me do anything," Vicky smirked.

"Vicky," I looked at her. "Please. For me?"

"Fine," she muttered.

"He's hostile for political leverage," Lisa informed us over the coms. "Afraid our alliance with Haven will do in Houston what we did in Brockton Bay, and our alliances in Boston and New York are doing there. Wants to make us look bad to Halo so he isn't willing to be too closely associated with us. Frankly, he probably doesn't need a lot of convincing. Our team name doesn't exactly inspire him to love us. Be apologetic about this, but not so much that it looks like weakness, that would be even worse than being proud of it. Couldn't hurt to imply that Lane would have left that girl to be abused. Buy me a few, I'm gonna make some phone calls."
"It was regrettable," I started. "But our only alternative would have been to let Baal rape and impregnate a fourteen year old girl. Khepri made the right decision."

"What are your powers?" Prophet asked, looking at Victoria.

"Brute, mover, striker, and combat thinker," Vicky answered without hesitation. "I can sense you using your power on me, by the way. My power's telling me that the longer I let you do that, the harder it will be for me to fight you in the future. Power detector? Analyzer? Wow, glad you're on our side."

"I would have liked to keep that a secret," he sighed. "Ironic, I guess. And your power is what made you believe you had to kill Baal to beat him?"

"He could have recovered from anything less," she answered. "My power said no to using containment foam on them, and ruled out all our other disabling options. It insisted that my options were kill, or let him go."

"Which fits with intel from other fights against them, as well as what we could learn from our own thinkers," Taylor added quickly. "Baal's escaped from foam before, and we now know that Lilith generates some kind of disintegration field through her skin."

"And that's why you dismembered Lilith?"

"She did that to herself," Taylor answered. "She attacked Lachesis, whose specialized armor is designed to use dimensional warping to disable attacks. You'd have to talk to our tinkers for details, but you have records on Vista and her power. Singularity was custom built to harness that. It even includes an anti-precog effect that likely explains why Lilith didn't know better."

"Beats my combat precognition, too," Vicky added. "Seriously, her power is so unfair. She is one of the Endslayers for a reason."

"And Seire?" the Director reminded us.

"Didn't have much choice," Vicky answered dismissively. "I hit him as hard as I had to to keep him from teleporting away, or we would never have found him. Ames will patch him up. Right, sis?"

"Of course," I frowned. This reminds me an awful lot of the E88 thugs before Leviathan. SurpriseConfidence. "Umm, this may sound like a non sequitur, but what do you think of the Railroad Bandits?" Taylor spoke up.
"Bunch of second rate thugs and vandals," the Director told us dismissively. "Not worth bringing up at this meeting."

"They play up a sort of noble thieves image," Halo added. "It's right there in their name, romanticizing tales of the Wild West and emphasizing anti big business and big government sentiment. In the interest of avoiding a long winded history lesson, it's easiest just to call it a southwestern version of the Robin Hood mythology. The Director's right when he says they're unimportant. Mostly guilty of nuisance crimes, and only against companies or groups that are politically unpopular. Certain vocal minorities even call them heroes. Why do you ask?"

"They found out we were in town," Taylor informed. "And have decided to preemptively surrender and offer join up. Apparently they smoked out one of the Fallen's drug dens and came away with a couple of the capes we hadn't found yet. Something about handing them over as a welcoming party gift. Minerva and our own public policy says we accept both of their offers. You can arrange the legal steps needed, right?"

Director Lane's skin changed to a lovely shade of scarlet. "You can't be serious!" he exclaimed.

"Hey, don't look at me," Taylor shrugged. "All we came here for was the Fallen. Seems our reputation preceded us." SmugHappyAmused. I smiled. We put a lot of work into that rep, it's nice to see it pay off.

"Is there anything else, Director?" I asked.

"We still haven't settled the matter of your subordinate," he emphasized the word, and I could imagine Vicky's response would be ugly. "And her premeditated execution of a man. A criminal, I'll grant you, but we don't take kindly to vigilante justice."

ConfidentCertainty. "Actually, Director Lane, we've taken the liberty of presenting our findings to Chief Director Costa-Brown," Taylor spoke up. "You should be receiving a call in three... two..."

A phone rang. Not taking his eyes off of us, Lane answered. "Yes?" "Yes Ma'am." "No, Ma'am." "I understand." "Sorry for the inconvenience." "Thank you, Ma'am." He hung up, and still hadn't stopped looking at us, though his expression had gotten even more unhappy as he listened to the woman on the other side of the conversation.

"It seems the Chief Director has, after receiving and confirming evidence of a forced parahuman breeding program, issued a kill order on Baal, retroactively." He informed us. Somehow, he made it sound like he had just given Hitler the Congressional Medal of Honor.
"Awesome!" Vicky said happily. "So, I have a feeling you guys have a lot to talk about. Since I'm not needed anymore, can I go scout out the eateries? I promise to bring you back something delicious. I hear great things about ribs around here."

"That's probably a good idea," Taylor agreed. "You're dismissed."

"Thanks!" Vicky exclaimed, and then simply vanished from the room.

"Little sisters," I offered apologetically.
"Now there's the next issue," Taylor added after Victoria left. "How are you planning to contain Seire and Lilith? They can't be held by anything resembling a conventional prison. In fact, it's likely they could escape even from the Birdcage."

The Director frowned. "We developed a method," he answered. "You'll have to speak to the Chief Director again, if you want the details."

"Say exactly what I say," Lisa spoke into my com. I knew through the link that she wasn't speaking to Taylor. I nodded slightly and started reciting.

"You've found a new master cape," I repeated. "One of Heartbreaker's kids."


"Not someone like Cherish or Hijack," I kept on script. "Emotion control powers have limits, this is hard mind control that doesn't require the parahuman who inflicts it to be involved after the fact. Or much at all, past the control process."

Halo was the one who broke silence. "It's as ethical as we can possibly make it," he insisted.

ConfrontationAnger. "What, exactly, are you doing?" Taylor insisted.

The Director sighed. "One of the Vasil children has a power that forces a form of OCD behavior. The victims of the power must complete a ritual before being able to take a given action. Prior uses involved being forced to recite poems before crossing any doorway, and counting before taking a bite of food. Once inflicted, it can't be changed except by applying the anti-master drug to the victim."

WaryRelief. "That sounds fairly benign so far," Taylor admitted.

"The other half is somewhat worse," Halo admitted. "They'll be fitted with a device. A twenty digit code they must enter while speaking aloud thanks to the compulsion, in order to access their power. Every button press involves a progressively more painful reaction. If they can make it to the tenth, which is highly improbable, it then exposes them to a number of tinker derived drugs that renders them unconscious. The fifteenth button, if they make it that far, is lethal. It shouldn't be able to get that far, since activating any part of the code instantly alerts the guards."
"We've tested the effect on volunteers, both normal and parahuman," the Director offered. "The only thing that lets them bypass the command, even temporarily, is if they are under the influence of yet another master's power."

"At which point, you have something far more serious to be concerned with," Taylor volunteered. "I must admit, I really don't like hearing about it this way, but it's as elegant a solution as one could hope for under the circumstances."

Our allies are going behind our backs, I thought to myself. I can't imagine why I'd be surprised by that. "Will this become a common type of punishment?" I asked.

"That you will need the Chief Director to answer," Director Lane replied. "After she gets done talking to the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Frankly, I doubt it. Voter backlash. Too many 'slippery slope' arguments to be made against it."

I nodded. "I understand."

We were hesitant to reveal our knowledge implant tech for similar reasons. Our nerve damage regenerating technology even managed to ruffle the feathers of some groups. Not enough to stop us, of course, but I was surprised by the number of death threats we got for it. A lot of them from the Deaf community after finding out we could heal almost all of them through this equipment. Pity it was still a few years away from legal approval by the medical tech boards. Even if Carol assured me that it was being heavily fast tracked compared to most experimental treatments.

"Now we just confirm the final arrangements," Taylor added. "Pantheon will publicly take credit, or blame if you prefer, for the attack on the Fallen's main compound, and the injuries resultant from it. It was my orders that turned this from a harassment and scout mission with a vague hope for an ambush opportunity into a full scale assault, after all. Haven and the PRT can take credit for the peripheral targets. We give the Railroad Bandits credit for their part as well, of course."

"We can accept that," Lane agreed. Of course he did. That was a lot more generous than our prior arrangement, and they knew it.

Where before it would have been called a joint operation across the board, which probably would have benefited us more than them, this made it look like they deserved full credit for the dozen other attacks that happened across the city, regardless of how much of that was handled by our team as well. Especially our Thinkers and Tinkers. Oh well, Baal was to Houston what Lung was to Brockton Bay and Heartbreaker was to Montreal. Everyone wanted him gone, but removing him would have caused more damage than ignoring him.

ShockSurpriseConfidence. "The last part, of course, is Haven's association with Pantheon," Taylor replied. "I believe it serves us both well to make our alliance official."
"That's bold, I thought. What did Taylor just find out?"

"Your conditions?" Halo asked.

"Same as all our core allies," Taylor responded. "We test your members' powers, allowing us to to discover potential power synergies. Much like what Gaea and I possess, and the combination we discovered between the Endslayers. We suspect a potential interaction between Rosary and one of the Adept, known as Shaman. If it works coupled with one of the devices we've developed with Dragon, it's possible we could have another Endslayer combination. Beyond that, we ask you to contact us for any A or S class threat missions. Coordinate with us for such missions."

"In exchange," I continued. It had somehow become our pattern for Taylor to give the demands while I make the offers. I don't know how or when that happened, but it worked out that way. "We can provide the generic battle armor, plus advanced variants for certain powers. It's especially likely with energy generation and telekinetic or matter manipulating powers. Then there's access to our healing technology and powers," *Including the ones we don't share with the public*, I added mentally. "And, of course, our support in any major conflict. I believe our ability to coordinate our allies is one of our finest advantages."

"I note none of your allies are here," the Director pointed out.

"Didn't need them here," Taylor replied dismissively. "The Adept and Ambassadors, as well as most of our own team, were sent on a series of other missions. The Teeth are losing their holdings in Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina. Granted, we probably won't get everything, spread as thin as we are for this mission, but the Directors of those areas have authorized their respective Protectorate and PRT forces in joint operations not unlike this one."

"I didn't hear anything about this," Lane replied in shock.

Taylor shrugged. "I'm sure most of the other Directors would ask you why you didn't tell them you were working with us on this as well. As Gaea said, coordination. And being willing to commit the resources necessary for a decisive victory with a single encounter."

"You... you planned to kill Baal from the beginning!" he accused.

"Not to kill," Taylor corrected. "We had Dinah Alcott tell us the combinations we needed to guarantee victory against Baal. I guess we forgot to specify between capture and kill. Something to keep in mind for the future."

"You're attributing his death to such an obvious oversight?" the Director asked incredulously.
"If we'd planned to kill him, Lilith would have foreseen danger. It was always meant to be a scouting mission, but our own precog changed her mind. You know how precogs jam each other. *Unless that precog is trying to jam Dinah, because she's stronger than them.* That's how we managed to turn that into a victory. Speaking of, the Savannah team's just finished the mop up."

"So late?" I asked. "Isn't that the Ambassadors? Accord's going to be annoyed to find out his team was last to finish."

"I think he'll be inclined to be forgiving here," Taylor replied. "Apparently they ran into a drug smuggling crew offshore. Three unexpected capes they think are from Haiti. I don't know how they caught a Tinker tech submarine in the ocean. Especially one that had a water manipulator, a forcefield generator, and the Tinker who built the sub on board, but that's exactly what they just did."

I blinked. *How the fuck?* "Impressive," was the only word I could come up with that didn't involve profanities.

"And that is what you get when you ally yourself with Pantheon," Taylor said as she looked back toward Halo. "You don't have to, but I believe the opportunity to be part of operations like this one, to make a real difference instead of fighting a losing battle against entropy, is worth the extra effort. Don't you?"

"Rapture did say you girls were very good at getting what you wanted," he smiled and extended his hand.

=============

A/N- Because more than just Pantheon members deserve to be badasses in this story.
"Nervous?" I asked Theo.

"A little," he admitted. "Mostly I'm just sorry I won't get to see Aster. I mean, I'm grateful they even worked out this loophole in the first place so I could see K-P-her, I just..." he trailed off, shrugging.

I nodded, understanding. I knew how hard it could be to not be able to see your family. "I'm sure they feel just as strongly," I assured him, leaning my head against his shoulder. I smiled up at him, only slightly annoyed by the fact that I couldn't even put my head on his shoulder when we were both standing, I had to lean against it. "It's a shame you're not dating someone who can literally force space to bend over backwards for you. You'd probably be able to talk her into taking you to visit every weekend with nothin more than a smile."

"Really?" he sounded relieved, though I couldn't really see him through the armor. Riley's right, I decided, he is cute. Even if he is a derp sometimes. "That would be awesome."

"Still gotta get through the mission, first," I pointed out, accepting his arm as it wrapped around my side. He's really bulked up, I realized. Not quite as big as Zach, but then Zach's power had advantages.

"We're just backup," Zach complained. "Shoulda sent us in against Baal. Use the same tactic that took down Hookwolf, and walk away with a smile."

"Dinah gave that one a ninety nine and eighty two," Emma pointed out. To my surprise, Zach didn't immediately react with disgust at her. The numbers were, in order, the odds of us walking away with no serious harm to the group, and the odds of us winning the fight decisively. None of that stupid getting away shit like always happened when I was a Ward. "And another forty three on the unacceptable consequences list."

That last number was always the big killer in our strategies. Very few enemies had much chance of winning against us. Thus far, the Ash Beast was the only threat we asked about that was likely to actually walk away from any serious attempt by us at a takedown. Dragon, in hypotheticals where we had to fight, actually came to an almost fifty percent chance of winning against us, making the two of them the only that went beyond twenty percent. With all the other big missions, it was always things like 'plague released, kills Pennsylvania' and 'sure, if you don't mind Moscow being depopulated'.

Likely had a lot to do with the fact that Pantheon only ever seemed to move on A and S class threats, plus or minus lesser threats that were just too fucked up to ignore, like most of the Fallen.
"Based on what we know, it's probably Lilith's precognition. If we move against Baal, she'll know and they'll have enough warning to prep a defense. Baal's compound is crawling with soldiers, and potential hostages." Trevor supplied. "Scouting mission only. We'll hit him if he leaves his compound to protect any of the Fallen's holdings. We just can't afford to go after him at home."

Zach sighed. "I know, I'm just f-bored is all," he glanced over at Riley, who was currently piloting her Aceso doll somewhere near Memphis. She seemed to ignore his near slip into profanity to this time. Must be busy, I decided.

"We're the emergency team," I reminded him. Technically, Theo was in charge of this particular team, but he either didn't like to confront people, or he didn't see the complaining as needing to be curbed in situations like this. That was a concern I'd bring up by proxy, let the bosses handle it if they felt it needed handled at all. Like a professional. "We'll bail anyone who needs it out. Between the five of us and Khepri's monsters, we cover just about every possible scenario. We're the ones being trusted to be able to handle it if the other teams can't."

Theo squeezed me a bit tighter. Probably not professional to cuddle in the middle of a mission, either, I reminded myself. But Zach's not wrong, it's boring here. And we had to keep our face masks on. The planet might be safe, long as you stayed out of the ocean, but the air was not fun to breath. Survivable, sure, but uncomfortable.

"Those sick fucks," Emma growled. She looked toward us. "Promise me that, if you deploy, you hurt them extra bad for me."

"Why?" Theo asked. At least he knew not to take people at face value.

"Forced breeding," she hissed through her teeth.

Theo's metal started forming around him, and his grip might have been painful if not for the suits between us. "Understood," he answered darkly. He didn't add any more words, but his battlestaff formed a nasty looking serrated blade at the top.

Zach swapped over to his acid burst weapon. Not even close to his most deadly option, but probably the least pleasant to be on the receiving end. I simply flicked my blaster up a notch. Less visible than the boys' toys. "Brute protocol approved," I spoke solely to my suit.

It was another minute before Emma made another announcement. "Houston mission is on. T-Khepri is calling you to her location. All of you. She's approved Vicky to fight Baal."

"One half digested rapist, coming right up," Zach's tone was, perhaps, even darker than Theo's.

As it turns out, however, Zach didn't get to cover Baal in acid. He had to rescue a hostage. I was the one who got to do some real damage. Two shots, the first he ignored. It was enough to kill a normal
person, but Baal's power made him really tough. So I set it to a level that was ordinarily reserved for bringing down small houses. Or, in his case, turning his lower half into paste.

The child was crying as I pulled her out into the hall. I half expected her to vomit on seeing the damage Taylor had done to the guards. I knew she held back, given than when she went all out, there wouldn't be bodies left to identify. But looking at the shredded forms of these men had sustained, you'd think they met a pissed off Hookwolf.

"You'll be okay," I tried to tell the girl. She didn't seem to listen, too busy caught up in her borderline hysterics. She's younger than I am, I was disgusted to realize. I extended my power bubble around us, locating an area with a lot of people clustered together. Other captives, I realized quickly. I warped us nearby, used a dialed back shot from around the corner to drop both of them with what was probably nonlethal amounts of internal bruising. I kicked in the door without ever stepping away from the girl clinging to me.

"We're here to rescue you," I told them, activating the armor's voice amplifiers. "Stay here for right now while we clear out the rest of the Fallen. Look after her," I pushed the child toward them. It may have been harsh, but I had other things to worry about right now.

The rest of the mission would have made Sophia proud of me. Probably would have made Gallant cry. I didn't kill anyone, but only because I only aimed for arms and legs. Each shot did damage like a hit from a sledgehammer. By the time the PRT managed to get their men into the compound, I had managed to cripple thirty one Fallen. Sadly, it didn't make me feel any better, but at least I knew they'd never truly recover from those injuries.

.....

"Horus," Purity spoke hesitantly. Her costume had changed, to match her new identity. I had to wonder if the red hair was a wig or a dye job, but either way it looked absolutely natural and matched her new mostly orange costume design. I stood back a bit, this wasn't really my place get too involved. Around us, the PRT was going about the business of collecting criminals and reuniting families. Rather the opposite of what was going on in front of me.

"Ma'am," Theo responded. "Good to meet you."

"You've grown," she volunteered. "I bet the girls are all over you, now."

He looked down. "Not really," he was adorable when he was embarrassed. "I do have a girlfriend."

"Rune's gonna be disappointed," Crusader chuckled.
"I wouldn't know," Theo replied. He didn't sound happy about that conversation topic.

"So, who's the lucky lady?" Purity changed the subject. She obviously saw the same discomfort I did. "Anyone we know?"

I moved the several feet of distance with a single step. "You could say that," I gave a small wave.

"Can't say I expected that," Crusader joked. "So, you and Vista, huh? Max would have a cow."

"My father's opinion means nothing to me," Theo stood straight, this time. "Assuming he even notices me from whatever pit in hell he got dumped into, he should be grateful I didn't decide to get a boyfriend simply to spite him."

Crusader paused. "Uh... fair enough..."

I resisted the urge to laugh. Although, actually, now that I think about it, that's something I wouldn't mind seeing once or twice.

Purity, on the other hand, smiled. "I'm glad to see you've finally started standing up for yourself," she beamed. "I really mean that. I always knew you'd grow up to be a fine man."

"Thank you, ma'am," he went back to being shy. "How's Aster doing?"

"She said her first words a couple weeks ago," Purity responded with a level of pride that I pretended I wasn't jealous of. "And now that she's discovered words, she's a nonstop chatterbox."

"That's wonderful," Theo said excitedly, though I could hear a hint of sadness in his voice. I briefly wondered what Bobby was up to. "I, um, gathered a lot of her things together. And a some other stuff. They're at the farmhouse, in case..." he trailed off.

"Always the thoughtful one," Purity said approvingly. "We'll figure something out."

"Don't mean to cut this short," Crusader spoke up. "But we should probably get to work. You can only pretend to debrief for so long before it looks suspicious."

Theo's shoulder's slumped a little. "You're right," he admitted.

"I'll find a way to make contact, probation be damned," Purity insisted, then she looked over to me.
"You keep him from getting too full of himself," she instructed. "Don’t be afraid to put him in his place."

I smiled. "Don't worry," I replied. "I can handle that."

A/N- Missy hasn't had a chapter in a while. Also, were I a better planner, this might have been written before the last chapter. It doesn’t detract from the story to be second, but still, I think it would have flowed a bit better.

And not revealing their new cape names is my "subtle" way of punishing my readers for never once guessing at their names. Because I am a dick like that.
"Food, as promised," Victoria announced, handing me a cardboard container that had gone cold a while ago. She passed another one over to Taylor. "You should have told me you'd be having a press conference after the meeting."

We pulled open the boxes. She wasn't joking about the ribs plan. Lukewarm food wasn't exactly my favorite, but considering Pantheon's schedule, it was a pretty common part of our diet. Still better than hospital food, at least.

"Lisa still doing her announcement?" I asked.

"Yup," Taylor sighed. "Since we..." she glanced at Vicky. "Retroactive kill order notwithstanding, we have to consider Houston a failure from a PR perspective."

"Are you saying we should have let that fucker get away with..." Vicky's face went hard. She killed someone, I thought for at least the fiftieth time today. My sister straight up killed someone.

"No," Taylor interrupted. "Put me in that situation a thousand times, and I'd do the same thing every one of them. I would have killed him myself, if his power wasn't such a hard counter to mine. We did the right thing."

"So what's the problem?" she asked. "Because this is looking like a pretty mixed message right now."

"It is a mixed message. Even worse than that, it's politics," Taylor sighed. FrustrationDisgust. "We have to be strong, without making normal people get scared of us. We just reminded them that we can, and will, use lethal force. It's bad enough that we're flaunting our Class S status so hard as a means of intimidation. We just carried out a mission across four states in one afternoon, in a bigger show of force than most countries can unleash. And in the process, we killed one of those parahumans that's supposedly damn near unkillable. That scares people, and scared people do stupid things."

"Welcome to the world stage," I sighed. "Watched by millions, perhaps even billions... and if we fuck up even once, it could result in a civilization ending crisis."

"Well, I always did want to be famous," Vicky smiled. "So what do we do now?"

"As little as possible," Taylor replied. "Now we mostly support our allies. Let them do the job of subduing what remains of criminal elements in their areas. Maybe do some community outreach
stuff. Nice, safe, stuff that doesn't frighten people. Build up for the next Endbringer. Unless we absolutely have to, that's our next important mission."

"So more of that hurry up and wait shit, huh?" she sighed. She stood there for a couple minutes, not saying anything as we ate. "I... um... wanted to say thanks for standing up for me after I killed Baal."

"I gave the command," Taylor replied. "Makes it my responsibility."

"We both know I would have gone in without your permission," she insisted.

"And I would have given the command even if you would have listened," Taylor countered. "We both played our roles. Dinah's prediction came true, as they tend to do. Yeah, our image took a bit of a hit from this, but it's really not that bad. We picked up Haven as official allies, a handful of other indie hero and small time villain groups in several cities, and it got rid of one of the worst excuses for a human being left on the continent. Like I said, I'd do it a thousand times out of a thousand."

"You could have thrown me under the bus, either way," Vicky pointed out. "After..." she hesitated. "After what happened earlier, I wouldn't be surprised."

"You were just trying to protect Amelia," she dismissed. "I've done a lot worse for a lot less." I smiled, but opted not to say anything. I spoke through my link, telling Taylor just how grateful I was to her for this. She wouldn't hear words, of course, but the message would be clear.

"Well, that was enormously easier than I thought it'd be," Vicky smiled. "I kinda expected you to be more pissed off about all of that mess."

"Read the press release," Taylor offered. "Pantheon's all about second chances. We founded ourselves on that idea. If I can give one to Emma, and any of us can give one to Riley, then fuck it, you're not so bad."

"We should probably talk about that," I said to Vicky. "I'm sorry about hiding it."

"No need," she interrupted. "I knew you were keeping a secret, and I wanted to know what it was because I was afraid it might hurt you. Now I know better and we can all go back to normal. Life goes on."

"It doesn't bother you?" I asked hesitantly.

"Honestly, Ames?" she sighed. "Not right now. Yeah, it's weird and all... but I've got other things to think about. Like wondering if every time my parents hugged me, was it only because my power
forced them to? Which of my friends were really friends? Did Dean ever actually love me? Did anyone? No offense, but I really have no idea what to think anymore."

Oh fuck. "Wow... when you put it that way," I muttered. "God, I must sound so egotistical." I stood up and moved toward Vicky, pulling her into a hug. She didn't resist, but didn't really hug back. I was vaguely aware that I was making both Taylor and Vicky uncomfortable, which of course made me uncomfortable. "Sorry," I said as I let go.

"No, it's fine," Vicky replied. She was lying, and I knew that from our contact. "It's not your fault that my old power fucked with you like that. And everyone. I should be apologizing for what I did to you."

I cringed inwardly. And then there's what I did right back to her, and I'm still lying to her about. "It's fine," I said lamely. Vicky ignored the lie just as I ignored hers. It very much was not fine, but we seemed to come to an unspoken agreement to just let it go.

"Yeah," she offered a half hearted smile. "Well, now that that's settled, I'm going to go talk to Riley and Emma. That fight gave me a few ideas for the armor, then I'll spend the rest of the evening with Mom."

Vicky left the room in a rush, and I looked back at Taylor, not knowing what to say. She didn't have any words, either, simply offering me a pulse of support and trust through the link. It was a good thing to have, under the circumstances. I simply walked over to her. She tossed both our carry out boxes onto the floor in the corner, where the Yggdrasil ate them. I sat down next to her and lay down on her lap.

"Are you okay?" she asked me, stroking my hair.

"Not really," I sighed. "God, this whole time I was afraid of what she'd think about me after she found out. I didn't even think about what this would mean to her. Mom and Dad. Everyone else. Fuck, how selfish am I?"

"You're the least selfish person I've ever met," Taylor insisted.

"Then I'm just stupid," I argued.

"Hardly," she scoffed. "But your sister's good at hiding her thoughts. A lot like Zach."

"I really wish people would stop saying that," I muttered.
AmusementAnticipation. "I think I have a way to cheer you up," she informed me.

Uh oh. "What?" I turned my head to look up at her.

"Give me a few minutes," she smiled. A short while later, there was a knock on the door, which I opened on reflex. Taylor's changeling walked in.

"Umm... Taylor?" I asked, as the doll started taking off its shirt. I looked away, embarrassed.

"Well, we never thought to change my body double to match my new figure," she pointed out. "Which means," she grabbed my head and turned it back to where the changeling was wearing a rather skimpy two piece bikini.

I couldn't help it, I laughed.

"You know," she whispered. "I can think of a lot of things I can do with two of me."

I felt the doll's hand rest on my lower leg. I was no longer laughing. "Like what?" I whispered back. My leg was held by the changeling, and it pressed its thumbs into my foot, eliciting a popping sensation. I gasped, and she smiled.

"I've been reading up on massage therapy," Taylor informed me.

========

A/N- See. Everything was totally innocent. Taylor knew that Amelia's feet hurt, and is just being considerate.
"How's the garden, Mushroom?" I asked Riley casually as I walked in.

"Got a full schedule today," she answered. "We got Battery coming to try out her armor, and then Chevalier will be here for his first series of tests. He's bringing the SEB sample. We... might have to keep Rey away from it." SEB, in this case, was our code for Simurgh's tissue samples, which we were going to replicate if at all possible.

"What for?" I asked. Rey always seemed pretty safe, as far as tinkers went.

"He... mentioned something about trying to clone a fully functioning copy with new instincts bred in to let us control it," she informed me.

"Okay..." Never mind. "Is that even possible?"

"Lisa says it's not," Riley answered. "That the material can't function properly without a core attached. Everyone else decided we weren't going to risk it. Big Sis threatened to tell Rapture about his ideas if he ever so much as thought of it again."

"We'll still be growing the samples, though, correct?" I asked.

She nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes, absolutely! It's an incredible material. We can build zerg armor that's exponentially more durable at a fraction of the weight. They'll even gain partial power resistance if it works like we hope."

"That would be insane," I moved toward where Capacitor was stored. It was mostly my project, after all. The most purely mechanical armor suit aside from Tapestry. My hand trembled a little as I thought of it seeing its first real test drive. It wouldn't be the strongest suit to have come from our combined work, but it was my personal project, and capable of taking Battery from a five or so to an easy eight, probably a nine. "So when's Emma expected, anyway?"

"You got about twenty minutes," Riley let me know as she started putting on her control system for Clarice. "Don't let her exceed quarter power for the first ten minutes, let the biosystems adapt to her power first."

"Got it," I acknowledged. I spent the time waiting scanning through the user notes. I was still reading when Emma arrived. She went yellow-shift as she approached. It was, after all, her most suitable powerset for working with Battery's power.
"So, you're that excited, huh?"

"Just got bored waiting for the eye candy to show up," I retorted. I looked around and feigned disappointment. "Lemme know if you see any." I went back to reading.

"Just for that, I'm hogging all the attention when Chevalier shows up." Emma threatened. "Maybe I'll even take a page out of Narwhal's playbook."

"Subtle," I smirked. "At this rate, it won't be long before you sneak into Zach's bedroom with a bunch of Sabah's best scarves and perform a belly dance to the Legend of Zelda soundtrack. There might also be handcuffs involved."

"Don't see it happening," she sighed. "Vicky came along and blew both me and Crystal out of the water."

"Hard to compete with a shapeshifter."

"Can't even be mad," she didn't bother looking up from the computer. "Vicky's awesome. You should totally seduce her. Then I'll have my opening."

"Don't think it works that way," I pointed out.

"You said it yourself: hard to compete with a shapeshifter."

....

Assault came with, to no one's surprise. "So, how's life treating you?" he asked me while Battery was busy suiting up. Her default costume couldn't be worn under the armor, and Emma had gone with to help her get it on for the first time. Once she got the hang of it, she wouldn't need any help, but it wasn't able to support the same merging systems that many other armors enjoyed. A limitation thanks to how her power augments worked.

"I really can't complain," I answered.

"Working with all these girls? I wouldn't be able to complain, either," he joked. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

"Not really," I avoided looking at him. "I don't get noticed much. Curse of the tinker, y'know?"
"Not really," he shrugged. "But don't let it get you down. Girls like brains, especially the smart ones. And tinker girls are wild in the sack."

"Guess whose top of the line A-class battle armor has enhanced hearing!" Battery shouted from the other room.

"Come on, puppy," Assault shouted back. "As long as you girls have been back there? I'm not saying anything you haven't already figured out for yourself."

I felt Capacitor's first test on my skin. Battery's exotic electromagnetism leaving its residue in the air as she moved so fast that she seemingly teleported into the room. "Don't listen to him when it comes to women," she instructed. Then she blinked. "Fuck that's fast."

"Your power disrupts relativity," I informed her. Putting your Passenger high on the list of possible tools that the Entities use for their star drives, I added silently. "Capacitor stores that influence and amplifies it. In addition, it takes the brunt of the stress generated. Meaning that once fully charged you could use your full abilities for extended periods without much more stress than jogging. Although going into redzone will be similarly painful as your natural maximum power output."

"But redzone is a lot stronger than what you can do naturally," Emma added quickly. "If you stay in yellow, you'll have your normal max, but without any of the usual side effects. Plus all the other stuff the suit can do."

"You can probably get away with using your power for field command," I suggested. "Being able to think twenty times faster than a normal person has a lot of potential in letting you emulate a pretty strong thinker power."

"What's the 'Disruptor'?" Battery asked. She must have seen it on the HUD options. "Your power weaponized," Emma volunteered. "It distorts the flow of time in whatever you shoot. Nothing we can use to accelerate others, at least not without more Tinkers to look at our data and figure something out. But it will create chaotic eddies of slowed and sped up time in a small area. Because of how unpredictable the weapon is, we can't create a nonlethal setting. Don't use it unless you're shooting at something you really want dead. Based on our research, it should even hurt Endbringers."

"Not quite Endslayer grade, however," I qualified. "No sense in making her take stupid risks."

She looked at Assault and smirked. "Don't worry, it's not an Endbringer I'm going to use this on."
"But Puppy," Assault pouted. "If you do that, then I won't be able to impart my wisdom in understanding women to the boy here," he put a hand on my shoulder.

"Not helping your case, here," Battery pointed out.

"Actually," I argued. "Assault's been a great help to me."

"Told you so," he smirked.

"I mean, if he can find someone, then anyone can."

....

Battery was obviously thrilled by her suit's capabilities. An overall upgrade to her power on every level, plus enough bells and whistles to make anyone happy. She would be one of the heaviest hitters in New York until we worked out some custom suits for the Adepts, at least. I retreated to my room after a bit, leaving Emma to do the final testing phase. I wasn't needed, and frankly I found Assault annoying. He meant well, I guess, but he was still annoying.

"Hey, Tevor," Victoria caught up to me. "Have a couple minutes?"

"Uh, sure," I agreed. "Chevalier won't be here for a while. What's up? Riley said something about you having upgrade ideas for your armor?"

"No," she answered. "Well, yes, but that's not what I wanted to bring up."

"Okay?" I prompted. Vicky was acting really weird since after her fight with Baal. Then again, she did have to kill someone, I reminded myself. That had to mess with her head.

"So what's the problem?"

"Do you have any plans for Friday?" she asked.

Wait, is she? "Umm, not really," I answered.

"Good, there's a new movie coming out," she started.
Oh god, she is. "Umm, Vicky, it's not that I'm not flattered, but aren't you kinda with Zach or something?"

Her face scrunched up in confusion for a second, and then she started laughing. "Oh, oh god," she covered her mouth. "You thought I was asking... no, no. I was trying to hook you up with a friend of mine. Mandy, I'm pretty sure you've met her a couple times."

I knew who she was talking about. Nice girl, if a bit too quiet. She probably would have been a target for bullying, if not for the stories about what happened to Taylor. Not many out there who wanted to risk annoying Khepri, and bullying the shy girl was just begging to earn the personal hate of the scariest person on the planet, so all the students who would otherwise cause trouble were afraid to try.

"I'm not interested," I informed Vicky.


"She's not my type," I insisted.

"Don't see why not," Vicky continued. "Sure, she's not a model, but you'll be surprised if you give her a chance."

"Umm, when I say she's not my type, I mean that she and I are more likely to be in competition than date," I offered.

"Competition? For what?" she asked. "Sure, she's smart, but she's not Tinker smart."

"No, I mean we're fishing in the same pond," I tried.

"Fishing? Okay, what?"

"Gay," I finally gave up. "I'm gay. As in, not attracted to girls."

She blinked. "Huh."

"Yeah, something like that," I agreed.
"Well," she asked. "I bet I can find you a cute guy, then."

"I'd really rather you didn't," I argued. "I plan on coming out, in costume, after I graduate. I also really don't want people drawing too many lines between my civilian life and my cape life. I already spend too much time around you and Zach at school. So let's just keep it in both closets, okay?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess that works," she reluctantly agreed. "Although if you want to throw people off, you might need to find yourself a girl to be your beard. That kid who never dated and then came out as gay after highschool is a clue people will notice."

"You... fuck, you're probably right," I reluctantly agreed.

"I'm always right," Vicky boasted. "Oh, and while I have your attention, I was trying to come up with a belated birthday gift for Zach, and kinda need advice."

=================

A/N- whee, expanding other characters!
Riley and I examined our samples of Simurgh material. The crystalline pseudo-organics were incredible. "Nothing in this should allow them to be alive," I informed the girl. She no doubt already figured it out, of course, but I was as much asking her to educate me as anything. As much as it galled me to admit it, sometimes, Riley was simply a stronger Tinker than I was. Besides, she was splitting her attention between this and watching as Emma and Chariot worked with Chevalier. I hadn't seen our bosses so excited about a power since Lily's anti-Endbringer capability was suspected.

"That confirms Lisa's suspicions," Riley responded. "Endbringer matter is merely a construct, and the real life form powering the creatures exist in another dimension."

"Like the Passengers?" I asked. I had long wanted to know where powers came from, and had read every transcript that Emma and Riley put out on the subject, as well as my own contributions to the theories and discussions. I wasn't as gifted as Riley, though I had Emma beat as far as Tinkers went. Her advantage was she didn't have the Taboo holding her back like the rest of us. Still, my part in the dialogue mattered, and helped our research move forward.

"Possibly," she answered. "Lisa's convinced that the Endbringers are controlled by people, not Scion."

"So unless someone's found a way to take control of Passengers, it's a parahuman power involved," I concluded. *I'll have to bring up the possibility with Ruth.*

"Power combination, most likely," she volunteered. "A team of powerful parahumans, like us."

"A team with nothing better to do than torture our entire world?" I asked. "What kind of sick fucks would do that?"

"The Slaughterhouse Nine," she whispered. *Congrats, Rey, would you like some ketchup for those feet?*

"Sorry," I don't know how to handle things like this. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories." I wished I could talk to Ruth about this, but I couldn't imagine how she'd react to us keeping one of the most dangerous tinkers in the world like this. She was a wonderful woman, and I was prepared to even say that I loved her, but this was Bonesaw, here. That would be a bit much to ask her to accept.

"I'll be fine," she answered, going back to her work. I frowned. *There was a time when I thought she was far too childish to be the monster she was. Now it was the opposite. The child was far too young to act so old.*
I went back to my work as well. It wasn't my place to get involved. She had her friends, good ones, and they would take care of her. I just worked here. Side by side with some of the most powerful teenagers to have ever existed while solving the problem of a space whale virus god that would destroy the world a decade or two from now.

"Riley, come look at this," I spoke up after about an hour more work. I was watching the clone sample of SEB tissue.

"It's summoning mass from nowhere," she responded.

"A lot of it," I confirmed. "By my calculations, its current density is akin to a hundred pounds of mass, yet it's only consumed a couple gallons of nutrient fluid material."

"Which means it's still capable of breaking the laws of physics, even without a Passenger connection!" Riley declared. "It actually is Tinker tech!"

"It's like a nanotech assembly system that exists in multiple dimensions," I continued. "In fact, each nanite probably only exists partially in a single dimension, allowing them to..." I paused for a second. *What was I talking about?*

"The mass exists only partially in our own dimension," I continued. "But the properties of all its dimensions still exist in this one. In that way it is a lot like Chevalier's power, and even more like Theo's. His power does resemble the Endbringer mass, at least until a certain density is reached."

Riley's face darkened a little. "Theo's power looks like an Endbringer?"

"A little," I replied. "We know how shards evolve. Maybe one of the power synergies used to build them came from a Passenger that evolved from the same source."

"Maybe," she frowned. "We'll tell Lisa about the theory."

"Have to anyway," I informed her. "According to the computer, we tripped the Taboo at some point."

"Endbringers are Taboo?" she asked. "I always thought they were just power resistant. That's huge."

I pressed a couple buttons. "Flagged as priority," I informed Riley. "Lisa should get back to us right away on it."
"Taboo really sucks," Riley complained, going back to her computer. I went back to mine. This material was insane, and even if it had no other special features to exploit, there was no doubt the next generation of Zerg would be far more powerful. Especially now that we knew we could grow the tissue out of the amniotic gel, instead of expensive and hard to manufacture tinker metals. Granted, we still needed those components for shunting and power supplies, but now we only faced about a third of the expenses as before.

Of course, it would mean a new rebreeding program to adapt the zerg to their new physiologies, but at this point Khepri could do that on her own. There was no innovation to that process. Merely time and repetition. Building the new SEB growth shaping system would be far more complex. I started drawing up plans immediately while keeping an eye on the testing machinery. Powers testing would come later, as would 'breeding' it with other EB samples promised in the future, but we could give Emma a head start on her research into the energy properties of the materials.

I was still hard at work when Chevalier was finished with our battery of tests, six hours later. He looked exhausted when I came out, carrying the new weapon I'd grown for him. He looked up at me, then glanced at the gorgeous ivory sword. The SEB blade was flawless, and he wasn't even trying to hide his admiration.

"It is pretty," I said as I held it out for him.

"Very," he agreed.

"It's yours," I informed him. "One part apology for the ringer they put you through during testing, and another part proof of concept. Based upon our testing of your original weapon, this one's almost better even without your power behind it. A little heavier than your decorative ceramic sword, only slightly less durable than the giant blade. Its only real weakness, such as it is, is the size.

"Which is something I can easily fix," he concluded with a smile, taking the blade.

"Careful," I advised. "It's a lot sharper than your original weapon."

"Wait until you hear what else were gonna do for you," Emma's teasing could be mistaken for flirtatious. The girl had a tendency toward celebrity worship, and Chevalier was one of the big names. "Since all the durability is built into the SEB sword, we can replace your giant weapon with a tinker device."

"What would I be expecting out of it?" Chevalier asked, curiously.

"What do you want?" Emma replied. "The Protectorate's footing the bill for this baby, right? And I
can make it the size of a house and you'd still be able to make use of it. Which means I can set you up with forcefields, gravity sheaths, nanothorns, and have space to spare. How about a railgun? Adjustable output, of course, but it wouldn't be hard to build something awesome. Especially if you can use your power on the bullets. Depleted Uranium weight, plus Endbringer durability? In fact, I could probably make it rapid fire! I might have to create a secondary weapon-

"Umm, Emma?" I interrupted. "You're starting to fugue." Of all the Tinkers on the team, she was actually best about avoiding those, but she wasn't anywhere near immune.

"Uh, sorry," she blushed. Or, her body's equivalent to blushing. I doubted anyone who didn't know her would spot it.

"That's fine," Chevalier insisted, offering a winning smile to the pair of us. "I've worked with Tinkers, before. I remember the first time I saw Hero come up with something that excited him. But he never thought of using my power to accomplish something like this. I mean, it all seems so obvious now that you've started doing it, but all those years going by without anyone really thinking to build specialized equipment to harness powers this way. You've accomplished something incredible, here."

_The Taboo_, I recognized. That's why it wasn't until Amelia broke through that we started seeing Tinker-power augmentation, and power interactions. Of course, now that the idea had taken root in other organizations, it was only a matter of time until it became the norm instead of the exception. It made me nervous. Power interactions seemed vastly stronger than any individual parahuman. _What would we do when we were faced with enemies using strategies like our own?_

"Here," Emma offered him a card. "This has my personal email. I'll draw up a list of options for you, with a few estimates for costs and equipment requirements."

He accepted it. "Thank you, I'll get in touch immediately after I return home."

....

Ruth looked worse off than Chevalier did. The advantages and disadvantages of video calls. Tinker grade ones, no less. "Rough day?"

"Very," she agreed. "The Vasil children are starting to test their boundaries. Their father used fear to keep them under control, and that's wearing off. For some, it's a good thing. A chance for them to enjoy normalcy. Others are... well, we've started implementing the antimaster drug as a preventative instead of a treatment. It's getting to the point where some people are talking about giving up and locking them all away for life, instead of trying to help them."

"Masters scare people," I replied. "I should know, I am one."
"Fortunately, we haven't faced the nightmare scenario of one of them having a power on the order of Cherish or Heartbreaker himself in any of the children, it's basically the only reason this project still exists," she informed me. "We're trying to find homes for them within the Protectorate's system. So that when this implodes, hopefully there will be places for them to go."

"We came across one of those," I informed her. "Apparently they're implanting compulsions in criminals to stop them from using their powers. The bosses weren't happy to find out the way they did."

"That would be Florence," she sighed. "Tell them I'm sorry about that mess. It was part of our deal. Haven's taken responsibility for her and a few of the children who haven't had triggers. She's one of ones we have the most hope for."

"Well, that's a start, at least," I tried my best to sound compassionate. I was never good at conveying my feelings. Luckily, with Ruth I didn't need to be. Her powers meant that it literally was the thought that counted. She'd know what I meant, no matter how badly I bunged it up. Of course, it cut both ways. I couldn't fake anything past her even if I were the best liar in the world. "I know your powers make you a better expert than I could hope to be on psychology. But, one of the things they teach you early in med school is that you can't save everyone. You do your best, of course, but you have to find a way to come to terms with the idea that you're still human."

She smiled, genuinely. "A very smart, very good man said something like that to me before," she told me. "Thank you for reminding me."

"Hey," I said. "What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn't share the wisdom I've accumulated? Just don't expect me to do it again, because that was all of it."

She laughed.

I hesitated, then asked anyway. "So... you know how we talked about Passengers, and how they try to compel us to use our powers to the fullest extent?"

"Yes," she responded, a little warily. Conversations on the subject tended to upset her a little, and she refused to share why.

"Lisa came to the idea that Endbringers have a human controller, or controllers, recently," I informed. "I was thinking, you could probably apply your power to how they work. You could probably get a lot of data off Dragon to help. It might help you relax some."

"If I can find the time," she quickly agreed.
A/N- Woo, Rey gets an interlude! Actually, I'm glad I did this one... more of the loose ends being tied up from the last couple arcs.
I watched Chevalier play with his sword for a bit. I resolved to get his autograph, but only after I had something to show him from my tech. The SEB sword was cool and all, for something took no real effort and was grown in a vat. Its weight, durability, and ease with which it cut, well, I imagined Taylor would be overjoyed to have zerg encased in claws and armor like that, and she deserves to be. But Chevalier's folded space power was incredible, and I could do so much with it. What I built for him would be the stuff to impress our namesakes.

I left the boys to play with their toys, and started playing with mine. With some exception to the mobile command system, I had yet to work with anything larger than the biosystems of the zerg, and those were mostly Rey and Riley's project. So little of that was my work. Granted, the best of it was, but it still was something I couldn't claim real recognition for.

This sword would be mine, almost exclusively. Endbringer matter belonged to no one on this team, at least. When Chevalier used this weapon, I would be able to point to it and say I made that. *I should really do some research on mythological swords for a name.*

I retreated to the hidden expanse of lab, and caught sight of Riley doing her part on the SEB tissue. I was still in biotech state, it was best suited for analyzing Chevalier's power, and I hadn't bothered changing out of it, and that meant I instantly knew she was upset. Something that had been happening a lot lately.

I sat down next to her. "So, how's the garden, Mushroom?"

"It's good," Riley answered. "Rey had some new theories on the Endbringers and how they're made. I'm testing the tissue for more clues. If we can find out how the Endbringers are built, then maybe we can find a way to shut them off."

*God damn it,* I sighed inwardly. *I start designing a new superweapon, and Riley goes straight to 'find Endbringer off switch'. I'll never achieve recognition at this rate. "In the same way you can black out Taylor's power?" I asked.*

"Kinda," she agreed. "Actually, that's a really good idea. We know they're controlled extradimensionally. Maybe we can reinforce the dimensional boundary and cut off their communications at the source!"

"Sounds like something you should send by Dragon," I suggested. "That doesn't seem like your specialty."

"I know," she admitted.
"What's really wrong?" I asked, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Nothing," I didn't need my powers to tell me she was lying. She might have needed her powers to realize she wasn't fooling me for a second. "I just... there's this boy I like."

What? "Anyone I know?" God have mercy on whatever poor boy drew Riley's attention. "Has he managed to snag that scarf of yours, yet?"

"It doesn't matter," she sighed. "He's not interested in me. Doesn't even look in my direction like that."

Okay, this is something I think I can handle. "If it's Trevor, I'm afraid you're pretty much out of luck."

"No," she looked toward me. "Trevor's nice, but he's not... up to my standards. I have a number of highly desirable traits for a mate and expect the same in return."

"Ah, yes," I nodded. "I know that story well. Normal people use a number system. One through ten, where ten is the perfect combination."

"Then he's an eleven," she answered the unspoken question without a moment of hesitation. Oh, damn, she's got it bad.

"Come on, Tinker-girl, use your objectivity on this one," I insisted. "He has to have some kind of flaw. Everyone does. Come on, find something. If nothing else, he can't be that smart if he doesn't notice you."

"His girlfriend is prettier than me," she answered unhappily. "And nicer. And doesn't kill people."

Nevermind, maybe I can't handle this. "Oh. I can relate to that," I told her. Minus the murder part. Although, with the stuff Vicky was showing me, and my powers, I could be pretty good at it. And what I did to Taylor came so close to being murder that I avoid the label by technicality alone.

"Really?" she asked, her eyes showing the dampness of tears soon to fall. "What did you do?"

"Depends," I answered. "There was a time when I'd have trashed the other girl's rep and walked away with the guy, just because I could get away with it."
"I won't do that," Riley's tears were replaced by an angry determination.

"Neither will I, now," I agreed. "You want him to be happy, too, right?"

"Of course," she answered.

"And he is happy with his current girlfriend," I continued.

"Yes, and if he's not, I'll make him regret it," she added. "She's a great person."

Well, that's narrowing down who we're talking about, at least. "You're not into Zach, are you?"

"What?" she looked at me like I'd just suggested eating live scorpions. And she wasn't Riley who probably wouldn't have a big problem with that idea. "No, I'm not into Zach. That's just gross."

"He's not gross," I argued. "He acts like a dumbass, but once you get to know him he's smart, and funny, and nice, and gentle. Maybe a bit too gentle, honestly. The boy could really learn to be more assertive. Learn than girls don't need to be treated like spun glass."

"And you're still into him," the girl parroted my earlier words.

"Yes I am," I sighed. "But he's interested in Vicky, now, and she's been nothing but good to both of us. The idea of getting in the way of that disgusts me. So I'll just stay out of their way and wish them all the happiness in the world."

"But it hurts," the girl complained.

"I know," I confirmed, pulling her into a hug. "On the plus side, this is what they invented triple fudge icecream for."

"That sounds really good," she mumbled into my shoulder.

Our efforts to eat away our sorrows gave way to the obvious complaining about everything else. For Riley, there wasn't a lot to complain about. She loved school, she loved her new family, and talking about her old life was well outside our impromptu pajama party. So it wasn't long until we distracted ourselves with something far more fun for both of us, allowing us to forget about things for a while and really enjoy ourselves with things that don't require boys.
By the time Chevalier's email came through that evening, we had built several graphical models of his new weaponry, complete with cost estimates and several optional features we might be able to include. There was no possible way we could build everything into a singular weapon. Really, there was enough there that we could build him three systems, and there wouldn't be a shared feature between them.

I could probably call up Kid Win and see what his theoretical modular tech specialty said about maybe creating a collection of systems for him to swap between when he deemed necessary. Then he could have all the options available for use. If, sadly, not at the same time. I mentioned that idea in my notes as well. Ultimately, the email turned out to be three pages worth of typed notes, and then two and a half gigabytes of attached schematics and designs, mostly in the form of 3D model images.

I left the computer labs near midnight, intent on seeing if Vicky or Zach were up for another late night session. Mom and Dad would just have to deal with me not coming home tonight, again.

"Sorry," Vicky's voice drifted from our exercise room. "You're a nice kid, but, it's not happening." I froze, shifting white. Superhuman hearing and the ability to suppress any noises I might make. Not the best stranger power in the world, but it's what I had to work with.

"Ouch," Zach responded. "May I ask why not?"

"Well, Emma, for one," Vicky insisted.

"Why?" he asked, and three bonus senses loosely related to hearing told me everything I needed to know about his feelings. "I don't want her. I want you." Ouch, indeed. Nothing I didn't already know, of course, but it sucks to hear.

"Living lie detector times a thousand, remember?" The undertones in her voice were more subtle, a result of her power. This hurt her, too. "You're cute in your own way, but I don't have feelings for you the way she does. She loves you. I don't. You're a good friend. That's the extent of it."

"But-"

"And you love her, too," Vicky interrupted. "So don't pretend this is some kind of hardship for you. I'm going to get changed for practice until five minutes after Emma shows up. You're going to apologize to her and she's going to take you back. Then you're going to tell me all about it and I'll congratulate both of you and mean every word of it. If not, there are three places on your body that I can use to make you wish I could kill you. Understood?"
"Uh... yeah," he agreed. Hints of concern and fear entering his voice.

I scrambled to hide around a corner as Vicky turned to walk out the door. "Just so we're clear. If you hurt him, I will punch you through the face."

=====================

A/N- Emma hasn't had an interlude in forever, either.

Vicky does a good deed.

And remember all the FOreshadowING I did before? A lot of it alludes to this arc.
I got to 'work' early, today. Not that I did much, really, but it was nice to show up and participate. All my classes were in the afternoon, anyway. I spotted Vicky laying down on the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling. "Hey, 'cuz," I said. "You know, there's this thing humans do with their furniture, known as sitting. I know, it sounds really strange, but you should totally try it."

"I'm good like this," she answered. She learned her head back and looked at me upside down. "Zach and Emma really wore me out last night."

I paused for a second. What? No, couldn't be. "Speaking of, how is Zach? I haven't had much chance to talk to him lately."

"Happy," she answered. "He finally made his move last night."

"It took him this long?" I dropped down in a chair. "Jeez, it took him all of three hours to try for the rest of us. He must really like you."

"I shot him down," she sighed.

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, I thought you-"

"I found out what I did to Amy," she spoke. Uh... fuck... maybe it's not what I'm thinking. Please don't be what I'm thinking "My old Glory Girl aura. How badly it messed her up." Oh holy fuck. "Ah, so how long did you know about that?"

"A while," I reluctantly admitted. "Found out somewhere late June, early July. It's been a hectic last few months and I can't quite remember."

"And now I'm thinking about Dean," she added. "You know, we never argued in person. It was always over the phone. That's when we'd fight over how much time he was spending in the Wards. That's when we'd break up over whatever stupid shit we broke up over that week. Then we'd just make up again once we met in person. I didn't even think it was my power. Now? It's the only thing I can think about. Except when I feel bad that I don't feel worse about what happened to Amy."

"Well, Amy did get over it," I offered. "And now she's engaged, world famous, and spends her days stomping whole cities worth of villains while worrying about how to kill an alien space whale virus god. Seriously, did you hear about Indianapolis?"
"No, what?" she asked.

"Apparently a few of the Fallen we missed were hiding out there," I told her. "The PRT found the bodies executed thanks to an anonymous tip. One had his face blown off, one was skinned, and one, well, someone worked him over with a sledgehammer or something like it. The investigators are pretty sure they were there to join one of the local crime bosses after we broke their organization, and he killed them as a sort of peace offering to us. Or at least a 'please don't come over here' offering."

"Really?" her eyes widened. "Fuck."

"Yeah. Fuck," I agreed. "It's really hard to feel sorry for Amy when she's the leader of a team that scares powerful crime lords like that."

"God, when did this happen?" she did a casual twist and rolled off the back of the couch onto her feet.

"Heard it on the news late last night," I told her. "It'll probably feature heavily in the morning meeting. I don't think we can let people get away with shit like that."

"Good, I could really use a new punching bag," Vicky answered. "See you on the battlefield."

"Not so fast, girl," I sighed. "We're not done talking about you and Zach."

"Really? Triple homocide and apparently I was mini-Heartbreaker, and you want to talk about relationship drama? C'mon, Crystal, you're the one who used to make fun of me for that stuff."

"Zach's a friend of mine," I argued. "And you're family. This is important. How'd he take it? Did you at least let him down gently?"

"Not really," she replied. "Both barrels of 'you're a nice guy' and 'we should remain friends.'" I flinched inwardly. "But, hey, at least I didn't use 'it's not you, it's me', right? That has to count for something."

"Something," I reluctantly agreed. **Seriously, Vicky, what the fuck?**

"I also pretty much shoved Emma onto his lap," she added. "Figuratively speaking."

**What?** "What?" I was stunned. "Why would you do that? Is this just so you don't have to feel bad about turning him down? Because that is either one of the nicest or bitchiest things I have ever heard
of in my life, and I can't figure out which."

"I was doing it anyway," she admitted. "Even before... finding out about Amy. I don't know how to
describe what it looks like to watch someone pretend to despise someone that they love, but I
couldn't just ignore it."

"Yeah, but... what about them just being friends?" I asked.

"And what?" she asked. "I still would have turned him down. Seriously, I mind raped my little sister
into lusting after me for years, I'll never know how Dean honestly felt about me, ever. I'm really not
interested in being in a relationship with anyone right now."

I put my hand on my cousin's shoulder. It was so rare to see her act like this. It'll get better. Zach
would have understood."

"I know," she agreed. "Maybe I'll regret this, later. Right now? At least this way he doesn't have to
be all mopey about it. I feel bad enough as it is, I can at least spare myself other people being
miserable around me." She looked me in the eyes. "If I tell you a secret, will you promise to not say
anything about it ever again? To anyone. You'll just pretend like it never happened?"

"As long as it doesn't hurt anyone," I agreed.

"I don't want to feel guilty for Zach hurting," she told me. "Or anyone. I can handle making people
annoyed or angry. I can handle killing sacks of shit like Baal. But... knowing how bad I hurt Amy...
that's enough guilt for one lifetime."

"It's not your fault," I told her. "You didn't know your aura worked like that, and Amy tends to hide
things. And even if you were at fault, you shouldn't feel like that needs to be a secret." I consoled.
"Feeling bad for doing bad things is fine. Riley does it all the time and it makes people want to hug
her."

"Amy would blame herself if she knew," Vicky pointed out. "And that'd just make me feel worse."

"Okay, that's a good reason to keep it from Amy," I agreed. "But maybe you should say that to
Taylor. I'm sure she'd appreciate knowing you feel bad for what happened. You really should try to
patch things up with her. She is your future sister in law and such."

"Probably," she agreed. "But I feel bad about that, too. If it wasn't for what I did, would Amy be
enganged to a straight girl?"
"I've asked that question a few times, myself," I admitted. "And I'm pretty sure the answer is yes."

"What makes you so sure?" she looked at me. Her eyes were a mix of hope and skepticism.

"Taylia," I answered. "They're together because of that link. And that comes from their powers, not anything you did. Whatever's going on with Amy, you didn't do anything like that to Taylor. She is, as you said, straight. And she's engaged to a lesbian. It'd be like if I were dating Legend."

"You would," she smirked.

"So would you!" I exclaimed. "Dude's goddamn hot. But the point is, if that happened, people would be wondering what was up with him, not me. Same deal. Lesbian dating another girl, that makes sense. Straight girl dating another girl, not so much. Taylia's strong enough to make that happen. Adorably, I might add. The two of them are so happy together that it sometimes makes me want to punch them both just so they do something other than smile at each other. So, yeah, that part isn't your fault. Or your aura's fault. Blame the fucking space whale virus gods that are going to blow up and eat our planet."

"That makes me feel a lot better," she sighed.

"Christ, Vicky, the way you were talking... you were planning something stupid, weren't you?"

She looked away. "I'm invoking the 'talk to no one, not even me' promise," she muttered.

"That was only if no one was going to get hurt," I argued. "This, this sounds like someone was going to get hurt."

"It's not going to happen, so don't worry about it," she argued. "It wasn't going to happen at all. Just the guilt speaking."

"You weren't going to kill yourself, were you?"

"What? No!" she exclaimed. "Fuck, how's that suppose to make anyone feel better? Besides, even if I wanted to Amy would just have me brought back anyway. And Riley would probably surgically install a chip in my brain to keep me from trying it again."

"Why don't you just tell me what it is?"

"Fine, but I mean it with that promise," she insisted. "You tell no fucking one, ever. Not even me."
"If it won't hurt anyone," I repeated.

"It'll never happen," she insisted. "I knew it was a bad idea the moment it popped into my head." She looked around. "Okay, now or never."

"Fine, I promise," I sighed. "We'll never speak of it again."

She clenched her hands together and lowered her head. "I thought that, since it was my fault she spent three years like that, with my aura. It'd be fair if I... umm... volunteered myself. Gave her what she wanted."

"What the hell, Victoria!" I exclaimed.

"I know! I told you it was a bad idea and I'd never do it!"

"I hope not! The only thing dumber than that would be if some retard tried to revive the dead Entity!"

=============

A/N- It's been a while since Crystal got an interlude, too.

Also: FORESHADOWING!!!
Crystal was the first to arrive, looking more than slightly shaken. Recently learned disturbing news. Won't make eye contact. Afraid I'll learn details. Afraid I'll use information. Doesn't relate to her. Relates to a friend. Afraid of information upsetting someone important. Afraid I would tell that person. Information will upset Taylor. Crystal's not conflicted in loyalties, doesn't perceive hiding it as a betrayal. Doesn't believe information will hurt the group. I let it drop. Crystal was one of the only people around here whose judgment I trusted. Her and, disturbingly enough, Riley. Says a lot about the rest of the team.

She sighed. "So, did you catch the news last night?"

"Indianapolis, right?"

"That'd be the one, got any ideas?"

"May as well wait for the others before we start that up," I answered. "It's boring, anyway. I know you have better to dish, just the two of us."

"And save you the joy of showing off how you already know?" she snarked. Nervous. Afraid I've discovered the secret. Certain I'll act on the information. Afraid it represents a threat to Pantheon as an organization if I do.

"You just don't want to admit I was right," I smiled broadly.

"About what?" she asked.

"Kinda want to hear it myself," Taylor said as she walked in, already costumed. I watched the color drain from Crystal's already fair skin tone.

"Zach and Emma got back together last night," I taunted. Relief flooded Crystal's face. Wow, I thought. Teasing like this might even be more fun than actually knowing all the answers. Probably not, though.

"Wow," Taylor chuckled. "Fifty bucks says it'll take Amelia and Riley days to put Emma back together once Vicky finds out."

"You're on!" I declared.
"That was not a real bet!" Taylor complained.

"Too late," I insisted. "Vicky's the reason they got back together. Isn't that right, Crystal?"

"Umm, yeah," she agreed just a little too quickly for it to sound casual. "Don't know all the details, but she decided she wants to be single for the time being. Something about, well, it's personal. So she took a page from Lisa's book and, I quote, 'shoved Emma into his lap, figuratively speaking'. Taylor's not surprised by Victoria's sudden choice of celibacy. Knows the cause. Learned during Houston mission. Victoria learned of her aura's effect on Amelia.

"She should have done it literally," I teased.

"Seriously, Lisa," Taylor sighed. "What is with you and trying to get Zach laid? Is he bribing you? Does he have a strangely specific low level master power that we don't know about?"

"I like a challenge?" I offered. Really, I just did it for the laughs. People get so worked up over relationship drama, and I couldn't help but dip my feet into that pool. And then kick the water at everyone else.

"That might even be more disturbing," Taylor sighed. "Amelia's going to be a bit late. Her other little sister has been moody lately, too." Riley's emotions have been in flux since after Dream Girl. No, somewhat before then. Upset, lonely, feels left out. Afraid of losing her place. Emma's improving as a tinker. The zerg project is nearing the limits of what Riley's knowledge can accomplish. Her new project is the brain tech and Taboo. Is frustrated at lack of recognition from Amelia for bringing Victoria back.

I rubbed my eyes a little. Using my power too much in planning missions. Moving on seven cities in four states simultaneously takes freakin' work. And I hadn't tapped my new power in so long that I may as well not even have it. "It's okay," I sighed. "We'll just wait for Emma, Lily and Rey to show up. Help yourself to the coffee."

Our morning meeting didn't start until after the kids had left for school, for a few reasons mostly revolving around the rest of us making sure we wouldn't miss it for some issue on that front. Lily arrived a bit ahead of schedule, as was her habit. Emma and Rey, just a little late. Amelia didn't show up by the time I started talking.

"So, first bit," I started. "Have you all heard the news about the Fallen members that were mutilated in Indianapolis?"

"No," Emma confessed. "Fuckers did something to deserve it, I'm sure."
"I heard," Taylor's voice went a little cold. "People killing in our name like that? We have to stop it."

"If it makes you feel better, I'm pretty sure it's bullshit," I offered.

"Pretty sure?" Crystal asked.

"Well, yeah, pretty sure. There's not enough material for me to really turn my power on," I explained. "But I can't imagine that any supposed criminal mastermind would do something this idiotic. I can think of a lot of scenarios, too many. Most of them involve this being a frame job. Either to draw our attention or to deflect it away. Could even be the Fallen, themselves, trying to fake their own deaths. I don't know. Like I said, too many possible ways this could be explained, and that's without factoring in any number of powers that can complicate matters."

"It does, of course, mean we do have to go there," Taylor concluded.

"Absolutely," I agreed. "We can't let people get away with this."

"Killing Fallen?" Lily asked. "If you saw the shit we saw in Tennessee, you'd be all for it. I thought E88's dog rings were fucked up..."

"I'm with her," Emma added. "We can't do worse to them than they've already done."

"The problem is using us as a justification," Crystal corrected. "That's dangerous. We act like we approve of this, for even half a second, and others are going to start doing the same thing. Sooner or later, someone's going to get hurt that doesn't deserve it."

"Yeah," Lily agreed. "I get it. I'm just saying if this is what it looks like, we should go easy on them. Might be better off running the recruitment strategy instead of just stomping on them until they stop moving."

Still blaming herself for Missy's injuries. More cautious now. Perhaps overly cautious, afraid to make a mistake. Wants to allow someone else to control her to free her from responsibility. Sabah. Sabah was deeply upset by what she saw. Lily wants to keep her away from further conflict for a while. Hoping for a peaceful resolution as much for that reason as any.

"I'll keep that in mind," Taylor agreed. "This will be a scouting mission, first and foremost. No decisions until we know exactly what we're dealing with." That earned a nods from Lily, Emma and Crystal.
"I had one of Accord's people write up a draft for you," I told Taylor. "You're on for an announcement at noon."

"God damn it," Taylor sighed. "Is it too late to go back to being a supervillain? I never had to give speeches then."

=============

A/N- Lisa hasn't had an interlude in a while, either.
"We're doing what!?!" Taylor exclaimed.

"You heard me," Lisa replied.

"I know I heard you, I just can't believe it," she retorted. "You're basically putting Victoria in charge of a team."

Amelia's head nodded in agreement. "Can you maybe elaborate a little?"

"She and Riley are ideal for the investigation," Lisa insisted. "So we let them handle it. Pantheon needs to show it has the ability to be subtle. Going out in full regalia is going to give people the impression that we found our hammer and are using it to smash everything we see."

"Vicky's not what I'd call subtle," I retorted, and the others looked at me. "I mean, she's cool to spend time with, but she's kinda... well... I'm not really one to talk, but she's a real hothead."

"Yeah," Amelia agreed. "There's gotta be a better choice for this."

"Who else?" she asked. "Can't send you or Taylor, you're too high profile. We have to focus on our lower hierarchy members. Of those we have Crystal, who's not equipped for this sort of thing. No offense."

"I'm not equipped to do something so stupid it borders on the insane?" Crystal snarked. "I'm taking that as a compliment. The part where you imply I'm 'lower' on the hierarchy than you? That's the insult."

"We can't send any of our other tinkers," she continued, ignoring Crystal's comments. "The stuff with Chevalier and the Zerg upgrades are too critical. Zach's staying because he won't be much help in the mission, and it would disrupt Emma since they're in that squishy happy phase of the relationship. Speaking of which," she looked directly at where Taylor and Amelia were sitting. "When are the two of you going to grow out of that?"

"When you stop being a deranged bitch?" Amelia suggested. Taylor gave her fiancee a half hearted backhand that was less a reprimand and more a show of support for the comment in and of itself.

"This is likely to take a couple days," Lisa continued. "Which means Missy's not really an option. We're on thin enough ice with her mother as is. Theo is an option, but we really shouldn't be putting
everything on him. He's a good leader, but others need to have their chance as well."

*She's right about that,* I agreed. Theo really came through for us after I fucked up. Putting him in charge would have made sense to me. Hell, I'd settle for dragging Lisa along and making her the leader for this.

"But Vicky?" Amelia asked.

"Trust me, she needs this," Lisa insisted. "We can send someone else with the group. Lily, would you like to go?"

*What?* "What?" I asked. Seriously, what the fuck?

"Yeah," Lisa insisted. "You're pretty good friends with Vicky, right? And you're the one advocating we do this the peaceful way. And you scare the hell out of people. When you say you're not there to fight, they'll respond with 'thank god'. You're perfect for this!"

"You're doing this to fuck with me on purpose, aren't you?" I glared at the blond. She was and I knew it. Eliminating all the better options and setting this up to make it so easy for something to go wrong. If I didn't go, there'd be an even bigger mess, and then Sabah would be even more worried. I shouldn't go, she needed me right now, and I sure as hell wasn't going to bring her along. *She's been through enough.*

"Would it make you feel better to know I already ran this past Dinah?" she smiled.

"We rely on her too much," Taylor complained, but I knew she'd already been persuaded.

"Fuck my life," I surrendered to the inevitable. "What's the plan?"

....

I held Sabah from behind, almost apologetically. "Really?" she asked. "Vicky? Why?"

"I guess she impressed them in Houston," I half lied. "And you have to admit, her powers make her really good for tracking and investigation work. Plus her powers mean she might even be better in a fight than I am."

"Then why do you have to go?" Sabah asked, turning in my arms to look up at me. "I don't want you getting hurt."
"If I go, there shouldn't be any fighting at all," I told her. I won't put you through that, I added silently. "Didn't you get the memo? You're being held by one of the deadliest parahumans on the planet."

"You're not scary at all," she smirked, then gave me a kiss. "Just a cute little kitten."

"Rawr," I whispered, then bit her bottom lip. "A tiger, maybe. I could eat you alive."

"Not if I don't let you," she teased back. I felt my clothes tighten as her power infused the fabric. I could have broken the hold at any time, since my power nullified hers unless I was very careful with how I used mine. But where was the fun in that?

"Seems I've caught the tiger," she put her hand on my chest and pushed me back onto her couch, then straddled my lap and leaned against me. Her next words were a whisper. "Don't worry, I'll still let you."

I smiled up at her. All games aside, I was going to protect her. *As long as I can fight, she won't have to.*

....

"So, are you excited?" Vicky asked me when I showed up. I glanced at the others. Riley and Theo. It was a well balanced team, I was forced to admit. High end on both offense and defense, a couple fairly powerful thinkers, and a healer if things did go south. I tried not to think to hard about again having to work with Bonesaw again. Naturally, I kept that detail from Sabah. She wouldn't understand.

There wasn't any point in trying to lie to the girl. "Nervous, honestly," I answered. "First time we've been given this level of autonomy on a mission. That takes a lot of trust." The last time was pretty much fed to me word by word. This was, as Lisa had put it, a kind of team building exercise. It probably was a good idea, except for the whole 'trial by fire' part. I really could live without that.

"Really?" Riley asked with a smile.

"Yeah," I confirmed, knowing my discomfort toward the girl was easily detectable by both her and Vicky. Fuck, Theo was smart, he probably knew it as well. If anything, that'd just make my words more meaningful. "This isn't like our missions against the Teeth and Fallen where we had side missions or direct supervision. This is just us on a mission that's going to be front page news no matter how it turns out. If we screw up it makes the whole team look bad. That takes trust."
"I hadn't thought of it like that," Vicky replied. "That's kinda big, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Well, that's a bit lame. "So I'm nervous." We all glanced at each other.

"Hey, don't let nerves get to you," Vicky insisted. "We're still a collection of crazy powerful badasses. We just have to find a killer and explain to them how badly they fucked up. The only hard part is they're only guilty of murdering Fallen. Who fucking deserve it."

"Without starting a small war," I reminded. "If this turns large scale violence, we failed our win condition."

"Shouldn't be so hard," Vicky replied. "I mean, look at us. No one wants to start a fight with us. All we really need to do is ask a few questions. Second anyone lies to us, we know where to look. Pretty easy, all considered."

=============  

A/N- Someone asked for a Lily chapter.

Also, I think I'm starting to get the hang of this telling the story around the main characters instead of through them experiment I've been doing lately. What do you think?

A/N/N- Sitting here, some hundred and fifty odd chapters later. I think I have come to ADORE this style of storytelling, and will use it in perpetuity.
Missy opened up the path for us, and led us through. While she didn't need to, it was easier for the others to follow the path if they were led. Maybe Victoria could have figured it out, thanks to the power she got from my Passenger, but it was easier to be led. Clarice followed me, of course.

Our world was finally comfortable to breathe without special help, now. Still a very warm environment, especially compared to the mid fall weather on the other side. That allowed Missy and Theo to say their goodbyes with their faces exposed.

"I'll miss you," Missy told Theo, giving him a quick hug.

"I'll miss you, too," he kissed her forehead. "With any luck, we'll only take a few hours."

"I can still miss you that long," she replied.

They're so cute together. I focused on what Emma told me, about being happy that they were happy. Missy and Theo were my friends, and I would be happy for them. Vicky stepped up near me and put her hand on my head, rubbing my hair. It was nice.

"You know," there wasn't room for doubt.

"Won't breathe a word of it," she answered, then she switched to the private com system. "I take it no one else does?"

"Emma," I informed her, following suit and going over to com. "Lisa, probably, but if she does then she's keeping it to herself."

"Probably doesn't," Vicky told me. "I know more about the flaws in Lisa's powers than she does. Her ability's pretty brute force. Like a battle axe. Lots of power for smashing through obstacles, in exchange for giving up a lot of efficiency and accuracy. Mine's more like a scimitar. I can't get as deep, but mine's faster and more effective at handling the things it can handle."

"How do you know about weapons like that?" I asked.

"Emma asked Zach and I to do her a favor and help her name Chevalier's new weapon," she shrugged. "Besides, with my powers it can't hurt to find a few ideas for weapons to use. Besides, you'd be amazed at how boring things can get with the lack of sleeping."
"I thought you liked Zach," I asked. "Why?"

She understood my meaning. "Hard to explain. Probably the same reasons you have. They're good together, and it just doesn't feel right to get in the way of that."

I smiled and looked at her. "You know, Emma said something a lot like that when she thought you and Zach were together."

She blinked "Really? I guess that means I made the right choice." She wrapped her arm around me. "For what it's worth, I think you did, too. I'm glad Amy decided to adopt you."

"You mean that?" I asked. I didn't need to, my own skills and info coming off Clarice confirmed she was telling the truth. She could hide from my tech, perhaps fool it, but not all of it at once, and not without me at least knowing she was trying to beat that tech.

"Yup," she gave a light squeeze. "Ever since Amy spontaneously grew up into a badass overlady, I've been missing a cute little sister to take on shopping trips and give advice about boys and life. Guess who just got drafted?"

"So, what's the plan, anyway?" Lily interrupted. "We should probably know how we're handling this before we go in." She was right, this was important. And they were trusting us with it. It wasn't because it was something only we can do, it was because Big Sis believed we could handle it.

"First, we go by the PRT and let them know what we're doing," Vicky answered, letting me go, but still staying near. It was a nice gesture. "As much fun as it would be to just solve the problem before anyone even knows we're here, that'd probably just fuck everything." I resisted the urge to tell Vicky to stop swearing. But she was older, so I'd just have to accept adults did that sort of thing, like Lisa told me.

Lily nodded. "Fair enough."

"If we're lucky, we can get permission to see the bodies and the crime scene," Vicky continued. "Between my powers and everything Clarice is capable of, that should give us everything we need. If not, well, I'll see if Lisa can talk the Chief Director into yelling at a few people."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"We go around asking all the gangs in town what they know," she concluded. "All our suits have lie detection tech, except mine. Not a lot of parahumans out there that can really threaten me or Clarice. You two play backup since your powers require a bit more concentration."
"We could use the dimensional viewing tech," I volunteered. "I can look at everything from this side and no one will even know I'm there."

"Wow," Vicky chuckled. "When the PRT calculates our ratings, do you think they even bother to use numbers anymore? Or do they just write 'good fucking luck' down next to our profiles because it's less intimidating that way?"

"Close enough," Lily laughed. "All of our profiles have six page long notations that come out to 'you can't run, you can't hide, and you can't fight back'. Half of us have our own individual trump ratings. Mine's a four for bypassing any possible defence."

"Awesome," Vicky approved, then she turned her head toward Theo and Missy. "Hey, Horus! I'd threaten to leave you behind, but I'm afraid the bosses would blame me for any unplanned pregnancies!"

My friends quickly broke their hug, and I couldn't help but giggle at how sheepish they looked. With one last glance at each other, Missy moved and vanished, taken hundreds of miles in a single step. Theo jogged over to us. "Sorry about that, ma'am," he apologized. "Won't happen again."

"Don't be so uptight," Vicky insisted. "I'm not mad at you. Hell, I used to do the same thing. So did Lily, here, right?"

"Yeah, kinda," she admitted.

"So, on to the Protectorate," Vicky's voice shifted to business. "Here's how we approach this..."

....

We manifested atop the roof of the Indianapolis HQ. Or everyone else did, at least. I sat behind in our hidden world controlling Clarice. Alerts went off as guns were drawn and pointed directly at us. A meaningless gesture from them, as Clarice was the only one in the group that could be threatened by a firearm, and it would need to be one with more power than what they were carrying.

"Relax," Vicky raised her hands. "We come in peace."

"Identify yourselves!" one of the PRT troopers demanded.

"Pantheon," Vicky answered, allowing her armor to project her voice. "I'm Victoria. I have Aceso,
Horus and Atropos with me," she gestured at us as she announced our names, and I watched the combat alerts adjust as the soldiers' attentions did.

"We weren't informed of Pantheon coming here," the man insisted.

"When a serial killer starts emulating our more public victories, it counts as an open invitation," she pointed out as if it was the most obvious thought in the world. "We just wanted to keep things quiet. I'd say we didn't want the perp to know we were coming, but he no doubt already knows. It'd take a real moron to not realize we'd have to show up for this. But we'd like to keep him from knowing we're already here."

"Pantheon could have sent a warning to us," the man replied.

"Not my responsibility," she replied dismissively. "It's an unofficial meeting, anyway. Just to let you know we're here before we start the investigation. We'll be on our way, now. Please keep this visit quiet."

"Wait!" the soldier shouted. "Director Nicholas would like to have a word with you before you go. He said to let you know it wouldn't take long."

"We can spare a few minutes," Lily suggested to Vicky.

"Very well," Vicky replied. "We're happy to accept."

We were led through the halls of local PRT building. It was still an impressive building, despite not being quite on par with what I'd seen in Brocton Bay or New York. But our trip didn't last very long. For reasons that I didn't understand, all the Directors like to keep their offices way up near the top. Which was stupid, making them less safe and meaning they had to travel further to get to work, unless they came in through the helipad entrance. I resolved to ask someone about that.

Clarice analyzed Director Nicholas quickly and easily. Age 44, or near enough to it. Excellent physical condition for his age, though clearly he'd been dealing with a lot of recent stress and little overall sleep for some months. Further back than the New Delhi crisis, even. I had no way of guessing the source of that stress, as it seemed a bit too recent to be a matter of the job alone.

"I must admit, I had expected Pantheon sooner," he replied. True. But wouldn't have said so if he hadn't heard Victoria's comments from earlier. "I also expected a phone call to let us know you were here."

"Sorry," Vicky replied. Lie. "As you might imagine, Pantheon is quite busy."
"Is that why Gaea chose not to come?" he asked.

"Gaea and Khepri felt their particular method would be a bit... heavy handed," she answered. "We only need to track down the guilty party. There's no need to startle the whole city over the actions of one or two dumb asses."

"No, I suppose not," the man responded. He had an admirable poker face, but Clarice knew he was disappointed. So did Victoria, I was certain. He was also more than a little annoyed with Vicky.

"Mind if we examine the bodies, sir?" Theo asked. He was fully sealed in his armor, which made his voice echo significantly, distorted into something deep and hollow. Coupled with his natural height and bulk, it was unlikely anyone would guess him still a teenager.

"I can arrange that," he agreed. "I'll let the coroner know to expect you, though it will likely be an hour before they're ready for you. We could have arranged it sooner, if we'd known you were coming." Untrue, Clarice told me. It wouldn't take long at all, he was just choosing to delay us. His disguised resentment of Victoria probably played a part of that. But, then, that was the plan from the beginning.

"We understand," Vicky replied. "Would you mind giving us a guide? We need to arrange for accommodations while we're here, and it would be nice to be brought up to speed on the local cape environment while we handle that."

"You expect to be here long?" he asked.

"As long as it takes to find the killer or killers," Vicky replied. "We can't just run around kicking down the doors of every two bit crook and torturing them for information, after all. That's not how we do things."

"I'll arrange something," he agreed.

============= A/N- And Riley's new chapter. 
The Director assigned us a rather unassuming looking hero by the name of 'Brain' to be our escort. Skinny, in his early thirties with a bit of a pot belly, and a little shorter than me. He was easily the least imposing person in the room, in his business suit styled costume that was just a little too plain to believe it wasn't on purpose. He would probably be the least imposing person in a gradeschool.

And my power was completely terrified of him. Every combat strategy involved 'shunt out, attack from other dimension', and even that didn't work so much as keep me alive. With Theo, my power simply told me I couldn't win. With Brain, it told me that I would lose. He was easily one of the most dangerous parahumans I'd ever met in person, and judging by his emotional disposition, he knew it.


"He doesn't," I answered quietly. "If he's in my range, then I'm in his."

"Good morning," he said with a slightly too wide grin. "I must admit this is something of a surprise." Partial truth. My power didn't give any insight further than that, but it was easy to guess he expected Pantheon, just not us specifically.

"It was something of a complicated decision," I claimed. "But we're more than up to the task."

"Yes, you were the one who killed Baal, were you not?" I sensed no ulterior motive, merely curiosity over my power. "Was that... difficult... killing someone like that? Under orders from a superior who couldn't do it themselves?"

"Khepri killed Siberian," I replied dismissively. "Baal was arguably just as bad, if not quite as famous. We had only intended to engage a scouting mission, perhaps lure him out of the compound and then destroy his base of operations while he wasn't able to defend it. My power made it clear I could beat him, if I was willing to kill him. Considering we were about to witness a child being raped, it was the right decision."

"Ah, right, you have different powers after you were restored from being transformed by Bakuda's weapon, correct? Some tactic to confuse me by changing subjects?"

"You've read up on us," Theo spoke up. He was slightly unnerved by the creepy man and his questions as well.

"Of course," he answered Theo. "You've made quite the splash. I've also read up on the Triumvirate
and almost every parahuman on the continent ranking an eight or above. One of my powers, you see,
superhuman learning rates." He turned back toward me, still smiling that creepy smile. "Speaking of,
may I ask your name?"

"Victoria," I replied easily. I watched with amusement at his confusion and annoyance.

"I'm afraid I may have misspoke," he replied. "I meant your cape name."

"Victoria," I repeated. "The Roman goddess of success in battle, from which the word 'victory'
originates. Appropriate for a combat precog, wouldn't you agree? My identity's already public, after
all."

"Ah, I see," he agreed cheerfully.

"The fact that it confuses everyone and forces them to ask, thus making you that much more
memorable, had absolutely nothing to do with it," Atropos added dryly. Over the com system, of
course.

"Not all of us can kill Endbringers to get famous," I quipped right back, still paying attention to our
guide. "So, what kind of powers are we expecting in town?"

"You don't know?" he asked.

"We know what's in the dossiers," I answered smoothly. "But it would be foolish to assume that's the
whole story. Every one of us here has one or more powers, ranking at least a five, that aren't on our
list." That shocked him, especially considering how high they put our ratings to begin with. "I'd like
to hear what we're going into down on the streets, if it even comes to that. Bad intel is the easiest
way to fail a mission."

We spent the next hour and a half getting the full story. It seems the city only really had one major
criminal organization with parahumans. A mafia outfit, no less. All other criminal parahumans were
either of the sort that didn't draw attention to themselves, or had already been recruited or driven out
of the city one way or another. Apparently, the boss had a very 'old school' way of doing things, and
claimed to be a blood relative of Capone. Brain expressed doubts about that. Apparently every
criminal in the midwestern states liked to pretend they had a famous crook ancestor.

All told, they had eleven known capes on their roster, covering every base. The scariest of which
went by the unlikely name of 'Playmate'. Unfortunately connotations aside, she was a shaker 8/master
4/trump 4 whose power was to create board game like scenarios and force people to obey the rules of
the game. These games could be incredibly unfair, but there was always a win condition of some
manner. She was under no obligation to tell you what it was, however. She even altered powers to
obey the rules of the game. She'd be rated higher, but the 'games' were mostly illusions. Dying just
meant you lost and were removed from the 'board', no real harm done.

We were also given the name of an excellent five star hotel in which to stay for free. Apparently the PRT permanently rents a few locations for guests. I politely turned Brain, and the PRT behind him, down. We instead rented our rooms from a generic low price hotel chain, much to our guide's confusion and annoyance.

"Trying to keep a low profile," I reminded the man. An answer he seemed less and less happy about every time I gave it. Anyone could see that they wanted our presence in town to be more visible, I just wasn't sure why, yet.

And, finally, we got permission to examine evidence. I sent Atropos and Aceso to the bodies. Riley's powers made her better suited for pulling information off corpses than I was, and as much as Lily may have still really disliked Riley, it was better than sending Theo that way. Riley's feelings for him, and the really weird emotions that Theo had toward Clarice, just screamed bad idea. Seriously, what was up with Theo and Clarice? And was Tattletale high when she decided this was the team to send?

Theo and I handled the crime scene, under the wary gaze of the actual investigators. We used our hover tech to keep from touching anything important, and maybe to show off a little. The three were killed in a bar, after hours. Minimal signs of a struggle. A shattered floor where the one was smashed downward into it. I let my power do what it could, running scenarios that would allow this to happen to these parahumans, and it found nothing. "They weren't killed here," I stated.

"You're certain?" the lead investigator asked. I could read the doubts in his emotions, but there was no certainty one way or the other.

"Impossible to be completely sure, when it comes to powers," I answered. "But the battle was decided before. Either they were killed and brought here to be mutilated, or they were subdued, brought here, and then executed."

"There's evidence of defensive wounds on the bodies," he pointed out. "And a great deal of physical damage in the area indicative of a fight."

"Faked," I answered. "The battle wouldn't have been carried out this way by these parahumans. They would have parted immediately after the conflict started, taking cover. Belthegor was a shaker with control over soil and stone, he didn't even use his power."

"He may have been killed first," Brain suggested from the corner.

"Maybe, but not from the direction the attacks would have had to approach, based on the rest of the scene," I countered, gesturing toward the corner of the bar where the attack would, presumably, have
come from. And they wouldn't have been here in the first place. Too vulnerable. They were placed here after being rendered unconscious."

*And the local Protectorate just happens to have a parahuman whose main power is damaging people's minds and rendering them functionally helpless.* Which was too fucking obvious to be trusted. Plus he didn't show any sign that he was involved. I tapped the private com. "Aceso, how's the autopsy going?"

"They were drugged before they were murdered," she informed me. "Theoretically untraceable substance, broken down into hydrocarbons and carbon dioxide. If it were anyone other than us, I think it would be the perfect murder."

"Except," I prompted.

"Except that's way too easy, because they knew it would be us," she continued. "Besides, I've seen this drug before. Or one nearly identical to it. A west coast chemical tinker produces it, along with super tear gas and a few other things. It breaks down too quickly to form addictive traits in the brain, so it never became popular as a street drug, but there are a number of wealthy individuals who keep the market alive."

"Good to know," I replied. "Look for evidence of where the were before they got to the crime scene. They were subdued and brought there." So it could be Brain running a double blind, or it could be someone who didn't have access to a mind influencing power. I could have asked him, but that might just piss him off, even if he's innocent.

"Something wrong?" the investigator asked.

"Our instruments discovered evidence of a tinker drug in the victims bodies," I informed him, speaking loud enough to be properly overheard. I noted the reactions of shock and concern from Brain. But, then, I saw very similar emotions in the investigator, and I was certain he didn't have anything to do with the crime. *Dammit, if I have to call Lisa and ask her for help because my power isn't good enough... I'd never live it down. She wouldn't let me.*

"I'm assuming these instruments are not approved and verified forensics technology that we can submit in court?" Brain asked.

"Afraid not," I sighed. "Luckily, we don't have to prove that they were murdered, just who did it. Unfortunately, now we've got a sudden overabundance of suspects. They could have been brought here from practically anywhere. Anyone with a moving van, some good knives and a sledgehammer could have done this."

I watched the emotions of frustration and disappointment hit both Brain and all the investigators that
had overheard. It was, again, impossible for me to know if that was a matter of a greater conspiracy, or simple realization that this crime might not be solvable.

==============

A/N- Murder mysteries are fun! They'd be more fun without super lie detectors everywhere. But still fun.

Also: no one guessed Vicky's cape name. Which still makes me sad
Victoria was really stealing the proverbial show. I'd seen it before, my father was a genius at it, and there was a time when I was younger when he had some hope of grooming me to continue the family business, and had given me a few tips. Even instructed Victor to do the same. Victoria was good at it. Not nearly to the level my father was, of course, and certainly not a match for Victor's stolen talents. But still, she was good.

There just wasn't much her talents could do here, besides look good while doing nothing. The battle occurred elsewhere, and we had no way of knowing where. We left disappointed, if not completely empty handed, to meet with Aceso and Atropos. But a fairly common, if expensive, drug was no kind of evidence.

"So, now that we know we have no leads, what do we do?" Atropos asked, and gave a wary glance at Brain. She and I had been warned that our powers wouldn't shield us from his attack. If it came to fighting him, Aceso was the only weapon we had which might work. It might not even be safe for Taylor's bugs to be in range of this guy. But, for all his power, he was still physically human.

I took advantage of my armor's more or less amorphous shape to look at Aceso covertly. Clarice. *She's unfairly beautiful*, my traitorous mind told me yet again. As all the other times, I forced myself to remember that she was not real. *She was never real.* And, as all the other times, it didn't work. It was like telling myself she was dead. *How did Zach cope? Oh, right, he didn't have to. She couldn't use this part of her power on him.*

I closed my eyes. *It's not his fault,* I told myself. *And he didn't get away unscathed, either.*

"Hey, you okay over there?" Victoria asked, tapping on the armor.

"Yeah, sorry," I tried to mean it. "Just lost in thought."

"We're going to stir up a couple hornet nests," Vicky told me. "If your head's not in the game, let us know. We're here for the weekend, we can take a bit of time to make sure things go the best they can go."

"No, I'm fine," I insisted. I wasn't going to slow us down just because of something like this.

"Taking your word for it," she responded. "Okay, so we're still trying to be covert about it. Suggestions?"

"I can show you some of their suspected safehouses," Brain suggested.
"That's certainly an option, any others?"

"Neutral ground," Aceso spoke up. "Every city has two or three of them. Big ones can have lots more. Locations where villains will meet up to discuss major problems, even inviting indie heroes and rogues if the situation's bad enough."

"Would revealing you're in town be considered 'bad enough' for them?" Brain suggested.

"Doubtful," I replied. "They'd rather go to ground and hope we pick off their enemies for them in situations like this. When they ally together, it's for things like a mad bomb tinker blowing up the city one block at a time."

"Our town doesn't have other villains or independents," Brain pointed out. "What would they do under those circumstances?"

"Should still have the neutral locations," I insisted. "Visiting out of towners, friends on the opposite side of the law. Usually the owners of such establishments are well liked by the villains. Even if there's no need to keep them, they'll remain out of sentimentality."

"They're supervillains," Brain scoffed. "They don't strike me as sentimental."

I couldn't help but smirk, fortunately it didn't show through my armor, nor would my tone carry through the echo my power created. "If anything, the criminals are more sentimental than normal people. It's part of the criminal culture. Or, at least, any criminal culture that manage to last. Lunatics like the Teeth and the Fallen play by their own set of rules, of course. But more established criminal groups like Empire Eighty Eight and the Mafia like to pretend they're civil and even cultured. They'll go to absurd lengths to keep that illusion alive."

"Horus is our resident psych expert," Vicky patted my shoulder. "There's a reason I brought him along to the crime scene."

"You have a parahuman psychologist?" Brain asked, sounding more than a little doubtful.

"Of course," Vicky answered. "Why not?"

"Just seems odd that you would have powerful parahumans doing mundane careers," he pointed out.

"Blame my mother for that," she dismissed. "She became a fairly successful lawyer in addition to her
career as a crime fighter with no secret identity. We have a doctor, a very skilled business executive, even a fashion designer. Just because you're a parahuman doesn't mean you can't have a normal job. In fact, Pantheon encourages it."

"Fascinating," Brain replied. "And how do you plan to locate one of these meeting places?"

"I'm sure there's a place suspected of money laundering that you haven't been able to prove, right?" I asked.

"A few," he admitted. "What do you have in mind?"

....

An 'Authentic Italian' restaurant owned by the mob, huh? I might have mocked them for playing up the stereotype, but E88's holdings mostly consisted of drug houses and dogfighting rings. Bribery or intimidating enough of the police that they didn't even need to hide it. We of course left Brain behind to return to his bosses. We didn't need the Protectorate here for this. They just didn't know how to think of villains as people.

The greeter's eyes widened. We must have been imposing in our costumes. Vicky and I might have been recognized, we'd been on the news often enough. Aceso probably was, she was a little media darling because she gave them some great sound bites. Atropos, I was certain was identified immediately. The Azrael armor was more well known than most countries. That's what happens when you're an Endslayer, after all.

The man was impressively quick on his feet. "How may I help you?" he asked.

"We're interested in ordering a table," I informed him. With my armor padding my figure and adding a few inches of height, I'm sure I cut an imposing figure. Vicky was letting me take the lead on this one. Criminal culture was something I'd been raised in, and I understood it intuitively. May as well put that understanding to use doing something decent.

"I- I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have any tables available," he lied fluidly. I didn't even need the tech, I could see into the establishment, and the place wasn't much more than half full. Although even that was impressive since it wasn't quite time for Saturday dinner to kick off. It'd be much busier later in the evening. A man with hard eyes watched me from one of the back tables. He's the one, I decided. Not because he was the only crook in the place, but because he was the one who looked confident. He was either a trusted member, or a parahuman. In E88, he would have to be both, but this group may not work the same.

"That's fine," I responded back. "We're willing to wait a while."
The greeter's lips thinned. He had hoped it was a coincidence, now he knew for certain we were there for a reason. "Perhaps it would be easier for you to make a reservation and return later?" he offered. Meanwhile, the scanners in my armor showed that he had hit a button beneath his podium. Some kind of panic button, most likely. They wouldn't attack us, not this openly, but they knew we were here now.

The man inside glanced somewhere I couldn't see a couple seconds later, and then got up and approached us. The social reading tech confirmed what I already knew, he got the permission he needed.

"How's it going?" he asked the greeter smoothly, with the smile of someone who knew he was in charge, and had done this before.

"I was just apologizing to these folks that we weren't ready to receive more guests at the moment," he replied. Also part of the act.

"They can come sit at my table, then," the man offered smoothly. "In fact, put their meal on my tab. Not every day I get to buy lunch for an Endslayer."

*Smart ploy,* I thought. *Something right out of Victor's playbook.* Taking food from him would create a subliminal rapport, even though I was aware of the tactic. In addition, accepting a meal from a suspect was basically idiotic, so he'd know how much he had to worry based on whether we accepted. And, for all I knew, his sentiment was genuine. You didn't need to be a good person to have a grudge against the Endbringers.

"That is most generous of you, sir," I answered. "Although we wouldn't want to impose on you and your friends." Of course I intended to accept, but you had to show the initial reluctance, that was just a matter of politeness.

"Nonsense, we'd be happy to have you," he smiled. He knew by my tone that I was accepting. *All part of the game.* "I'm Angie. Pleasure to meet all of you."

"Horus," I responded as I shook his hand. "This is Atropos, Victoria and Aceso. Apologies for using their costumed names."

"That's fine. I've seen enough capes come and go to understand the score," he smiled broadly as he shook all their hands. He even managed to be charming about it. He stopped at Atropos for an extra moment. "I hope it won't come off as me only doing this for selfish reasons, but would you mind signing an autograph. Y'see, Arianna, my niece, is gay, and it would mean a lot to her. You're one of her heroes." To my surprise, he was telling the truth.
"Oh," Lily hesitated, looking like she wanted to ask us if it was okay. Angie caught on immediately, and it probably didn't tell him anything he didn't already know.

"It can wait, of course," he added. "Let's get you fed first. I insist." He led us in and snatched a few menus with the practiced ease of someone who'd done this often. "You can meet my pals, Joel and Brick. Dunno what Brick's real name is. Not sure he does, either."

The men he named weren't especially notable, physically. Big, but not especially so. Barrel shaped, I think was the term. They wouldn't stand out in a crowd, but they had the same eyes that Angie had when he first looked at me. These are men who've killed before, I was certain of it. They were also clearly hangers on, perhaps even a little insecure in their positions as they glanced at our host for cues. They could be relied on to do exactly nothing but what they thought he wanted.

The next few minutes were mostly small talk about the food, of which he was both familiar and passionate. We made our orders, and Angie's companions were content to let him do all of the talking. Eventually we got to the important question. "So, I hope you don't think it's rude of me, may I ask why you're visiting our lovely city?"

"Probably not the best topic over a meal," I replied, feigning hesitation.

"We're big boys," he gave Brick's back a good smack. "I think we can handle it."

"Don't worry about us," Joel agreed.

"It's the murders of the Fallen," I answered with a quieter voice, as if I didn't want the other patrons to hear. In truth, I didn't care that much, more because I knew we had a place that would make it hard for others to listen in, and the wait staff wouldn't dare.

"That's what I figured," Angie nodded. "Is there a reason you came to this restaurant?"

"Lunch," it was a lie neither of us believed, of course, but such was the game. "We're faced with a bit of a problem. We want to get in touch with the local villains, to see if they have any clues as to who might be trying to frame them for this."

"You don't think they're responsible?" he asked. The suit told me he was shocked by that possibility, and really wanted to pump us for more information without making it too obvious that he was. He was also suspicious I was saying all this, of course.

"It's either a setup, or a single lunatic serial killer," I answered. "Possibly an out of town group hoping we'll come in and clear out the locals so they can move in on the suddenly open market. Hard to say for certain this early in the investigation, but that's why only us four are here, for the moment."
If we don't get what we need in a couple days, we might have to bring reinforcements. We cannot ignore a serial killer sending us a direct message like this, but it would be a tragedy to let someone manipulate us into giving them what they want by turning this into a major spectacle.

There was more suspicion than relief by my statement, but then I expected there to be. Still, I had achieved what I'd come here to achieve. My message would make it up the command chain, and someone would find a way to contact us. Probably tonight. No more conversation was had on the subject of heroes and villains, as we talked about stuff already public, like the Endbringer battles. The whole time ignoring our suits' alerts that we were being listened to by hidden microphones.

Angie really did go out of his way to charm Atropos, and in the end it earned him an autographed picture signed to his niece, and he promised she'd cherish it. The whole encounter only lasted at most thirty minutes, but it did seem faster than that.

"Hard to believe he's a criminal," Atropos observed as we left with our doggie bags, intended for Riley who of course missed out on the actual meal.

"I know," Vicky agreed.

"Exact opposite for me," I replied. "Everything about him screamed obvious crook. Of course, I grew up around men like that."

"He reminded me a lot of Jack," Riley whispered her agreement through the coms.

That ended any discussion on that subject.

=============

A/N- One day, I might write a Theo chapter I don't enjoy. This is not that day.
I rubbed my eyes, willing the sting of too many nights without sleep away. "Hey, Mags, how're things going in your section?"

"Slow," she answered. "There's just too much data here. Even with Richter's keys, decryption is going to take days."

"That's to be expected," I sighed. "We did just capture multiple terabytes worth of information." It had been a timing critical mission, targeting one of Dragon's servers in the middle of a data transfer to another server. To call it stealing would be wrong. In fact, Dragon would never be aware that we had the information, since she still retained a copy of her own. It was still a risk, but her code had changed in the last few months, faster and more chaotically than it should have. We needed to know why.

"Do we at least know what we're decoding?"

"We have the data on Pantheon, including subsections titled 'Avalon', 'Genesis', 'Nemesis' and 'Ragnarok'."

"Well, those names aren't ominous or anything," I muttered. "Put priority on Ragnarok and Nemesis, in that order."

....

"Geoff, you have to see this," Mags insisted.

I turned in my chair and rolled it over to her desk. "What's the news?"

"Looks like our Dragon is trying to build herself a human body," she replied, pulling up the schematics.

"That's not new," I told her. "She already has one."

"No, I mean an honest human body," she replied. "It seems one of the pieces of tech she's working on with Pantheon is capable of converting human neurology into data, and then transferring it into
another body. Most of it was memory implantation technology acquired from Toybox, but they've taken it well beyond its original applications. Coupled it with some other tinker tech. Dragon seems to be experimenting in ways to adapt it to her artificial mind, and implant that into a completely organic clone body."

"Why would she do that?" I asked.

Dobrynja chuckled. "Sounds to me like Richter's little Pinochio wants to become a real girl," he suggested.

" Seems she and Defiant are even talking about the possibility of a family," Mags informed us.

It's possible, I thought. But I don't trust it. "Would this let her bypass Richter's restrictions on multiple copies? Could that be her intentions?"

"Maybe," she replied. "Tough to say. I do know she's hit a roadblock in the process. She doesn't understand the tech well enough to adapt it for what she needs. She's trying to find a way to request Pantheon do it, without letting them know what they're doing."

"So she hasn't told them what she is?" I ran my hand over my forehead and through my hair. "That's good information to have. We might need to make them aware of just what they're working with. Look into what she knows about Pantheon. Maybe there's something more we can use."

....

"Y'know that blackmail material you wanted?" Dobrynja looked at me with that face he only shows when there's trouble. "Well, I found a couple of doozies. I'm pretty sure this is the block where Dragon keeps her blackmail material on them."

"Do share," I frowned.

"Turns out, they have another tinker," he answered. "Remember how they supposedly killed the Slaughterhouse Nine?"

*Oh fuck me.* "Please tell me it's Mannequin," I requested.

"Fraid not," he shrugged. "Turns out she's been on the team since the beginning. The social dynamic program Dragon's using theorizes that Gaea must have joined the Slaughterhouse Nine in order to take control of it from Jack Slash. Specifically in order to recruit Bonesaw for Pantheon. Possibly Cherish as well. She's the one member of the Nine that seems to have escaped Brockton Bay alive."
"Christ," I muttered. They have Bonesaw. "I guess I can't say I'm surprised. Look at the monsters they're using."

"We could use it against Pantheon," Mags suggested. "But considering the power and influence they have right now, I'm not sure it would be enough. They killed one Endbringer and made the fight with another almost trivial. All for the low low price of ignoring the fact that they're the most powerful Class S threat on the planet right now."

"And it would tip our hand," I added. "We do this, and Dragon will know we have this database. And we make an enemy of Pantheon."

"Fuck," Dobrynja cursed. "Even if the authorities wanted to do something about it, what options do they really have? They're buying their law enforcement tools from them. The Triumvirate has equipment built by them. If we had this information three months ago, we could have done something. But now?"

They're untouchable, I added silently. We can fight Dragon, we have the tools for that. But how do you fight the most powerful parahuman force on the planet?

....

"We missed our opportunity," Mags whispered in dread. "I've decoded Avalon. Ascalon won't work anymore."

My stomach dropped. "What?"

"Well, it will," she corrected. "But it won't make a difference. Pantheon has found a way to access other dimensions. Like Aleph, only with a portal that lets people through as well. They found a new world of their own to claim."

"They conquered another earth!?" Dobrynja exclaimed.

"Not exactly," she replied. "It appears the planet they picked was scoured of life millions of years ago. Some kind of massive solar flare or something. They used that Yggdrasil of theirs to completely cover the entire world and are restoring it to life. Building a garden out of ash and stone."

Dobrynja sighed. "Well, that's comforting at least. They can have all the lifeless rocks in the universe, far as I'm concerned. Now how does this apply to Ascalon?"
"She has a fully dedicated backup server there, and she's building another one," Mags informed us. "If we were to use Ascalon, it would purge her presence on our earth, but..."

"But she'd restore herself from outside our reach," I concluded, slumping into my chair. "Richter's safeguards didn't anticipate multiple dimensions. If we got through and destroyed that as well, we'd be in business. But that requires fighting our way through Pantheon's territory to find a building that could be anywhere on the planet."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Mags joined me in deflating. "Dragon's intel on Pantheon is terrifying. Turns out, their leaders are more dangerous than Dragon ever was. Her, humanity could survive. We'd have to sacrifice our technology to do it, but we could survive as a species. If Gaea or Khepri wanted to, they could wipe our planet free of human life in a matter of days. Maybe weeks, when you factor parahuman involvement."

"Fuck," Dobrynja muttered. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Mags confirmed. "Look at Gaea's Yggdrasil. Early in its existence, it was used to wipe a plague off the planet. One specifically designed to be immune to being wiped off the planet. It's a lot like computers. If you can eliminate a virus that trivially, then you can build a virus."

"Anything that can destroy a plague can be used to create one," I stepped the analogy over.

"It took them weeks to cover their world with that plant," she added. "An entire planet subsumed to the point that there is only one lifeform."

"That's intimidating," I acknowledged. "If they turned that plant on our world..."

"They could kill everyone and everything with almost laughable ease," Mags replied. "And that's before considering what Bonesaw might be capable of. But they're not even the most frightening method Pantheon has at its disposal. You know Khepri's power?"

"Controlling bugs, including mutant bugs they build for her to fight the Endbringers," I replied. "She can hear through them, see through them, use their unique senses not found in humans, and she's even figured out a way to use them to emulate human speech." I'd been studying up on them after learning how closely they were working with Dragon.

"She has no upper limit," Mags informed us. "She has a range limit, but Gaea found a way to use the Yggdrasil to extend it. She can handle their entire world, and all the modified insect life on it, simultaneously. The more bugs under her control, the more brain power she has access to. If they did that on earth, she'd be able to have individual conversations with every person on the planet simultaneously with no difficulties."
"Fuck," I muttered. "Even if Dragon were fully unleashed, she wouldn't have that kind of power. There aren't enough computers on earth for it."

"And bugs are everywhere," Mags continued. "If human beings even can live there, bugs already do. Even with normal insects and spiders..." She trailed off, leaving us to think about the devastation you could inflict. Even if she merely used it to destroy food stockpiles, she could win a war against the world. "Dragon at least has to have technology, and technology can be beaten. How do you fight almost all of the life on Earth?"

"They're still human," Dobrynja pointed out. "One good sniper round ends the threat."

"Nope," Mags shook her head sadly. "Remember that mind copy tech Dragon wants to use so she can fuck her boyfriend?" I was shocked. Mags rarely cursed like that. She must be really upset.

"Oh for Christ's sake," Dobrynja sighed.

"Dragon knows for a fact they have used the technology to create backups of themselves," she informed. "She believes they used it to restore several members of their team after New Delhi, including Minerva and Eki. She knows they used it to restore Khepri after they defeated the Butcher."

We've been fighting the wrong threat, I realized. Dragon might be the only thing on the planet that can stop them. I buried my face in my hands.

===============

A/N- Here, have some Saint.

Chapter End Notes

Halfway through, not including Omakes
"God Fucking Almighty," Dobrynja swore. "I just broke the Nemesis encryption."

Despite Nemesis and Ragnarok being the highest priority, they were also the best encoded, using new techniques that Richter's keys didn't understand. We had to create new programs to decrypt the information they contained. This did mean they were the most recently created files in our captured database, however. It also meant that if we did this again, we might be looking at a completely alien system. We still hadn't solved how was her code evolving so quickly, and as a whole we had started to give up on even trying. Dragon was small potatoes compared to Pantheon.

"What did you get?" I asked hesitantly. After all the news about Pantheon, I had just about given up hope. I had also convinced myself that it couldn't possibly get any worse.

"The Endbringers are made by people," he replied.

It turns out, I was wrong. "What?"

"You're fucking kidding me," Mags muttered.

"Pantheon's convinced of it, and has been sharing information with the Guild and the Protectorate where they find any," he informed us. "Both of them are returning the favor. It's pretty much the world's most prestigious think tank right now."

"So they're all convinced?" I asked. "Could they be wrong?"

"Dunno," he answered. "That behaviorist Tinker from Haven. Rapture, the one working on Heartbreaker's offspring. She's applied her tech to the Endbringer patterns, and she's convinced they're at least partially guided by human beings."

"Partially guided?" I asked.

"That's what they're not sure about," he replied. "They aren't directly controlled the way Khepri controls her monsters, but they're less independent than, say, the Blasphemies or Nilbog's monsters. The closest thing I have to compare them to is Dragon's suits. They're smart in their own way, probably way smarter than any human being, but they're not capable of making their own decisions. Guided, reusable, autonomous WMDs."

"God, just when you think it can't get any worse," Mags sighed. "Dragon might evolve into a threat
to all humanity. We don't know if she will, and if she does she might choose not to use that power. Pantheon already can kill everyone the moment they choose to, and haven't thus far. But the Endbringers... if someone's controlling them, then they already are trying to kill everyone. No maybes about it."

"There's also a lot of details in here about what Pantheon has dubbed 'Power Synergy'," Dobrynja added. "They have examples of certain powers becoming exponentially stronger when used with each other. It's how they broke across dimensions, and how their Endslayer weapon works. Plus the obvious example of Khepri and Gaea becoming Class S threats. They believe the Endbringers are created the same way. They theorize that a power similar to Midas might interact with a power like Nilbog's to get what we see in the Endbringers. Not actually them, of course, but parahumans with similar powers. Plus a third for interdimensional access, since the Endbringer power source, and likely their control system, exists in another dimension."

"So yet another potential world threatening conspiracy?" I sighed.

"They're using Nemesis as the de facto code name for the makers of the Endbringers," he informed us. "Thus far it's been more about ruling out suspects. It's not the Yangban or the Thanda, or any of South America's major players. According to this, the behavioral tech suggests a North American being at least one member, probably the leader. Based upon the forms the Endbringers take, whomever is in charge of their creation is most likely male and an avid reader of philosophy and mythology."

"Which doesn't narrow it down nearly enough," I concluded. "I'll send that information to Teacher as well. See if his group can puzzle something useful out of it. Locating the source of the Endbringers... if nothing else, it opens up a lot of possibilities in the future."

....

"Multidimensional space whale parasites?" I just stared at the screen. I started laughing. *This was just fucking absurd.* "That's it. It officially, literally, cannot possibly get any worse than this."

"Geoff?" Mags' voice carried her concern. "Are you okay?" She put her hand on mine, and I focused on that. Something familiar, someone I could trust. She was always an anchor when I needed it the most. "You should get some sleep. I know things look bad, but we're still here."

"Oh, yeah, I'm just peachy," I fought to steady my voice. "Apparently Pantheon thinks powers come from parasites from another dimension."

"Like Aleph and Avalon?" Mags asked.

"Turns out, there might not be numbers big enough to express how many universes there are," I informed her. "Remember the information we got off the PRT networks about the end of the world?
That we thought Dragon might cause? And then we thought Pantheon might cause? And then we thought Nemesis might cause? Well, scratch all of that. Apparently Scion is the real source of Dinah's doomsday."

"How? Why?" she asked, moving her hand to my mouse.

"Because he's an alien and that's how they breed," I told her. "They travel between worlds, using people the way flowers use bees. Giving us powers, and then using our natural tendencies toward violence in order to advance their own evolution. Then, when they believe the process is complete, they eat everything. And I do mean everything. When they're done feeding, only dead space will exist where our world use to be."

"Can't we find another world, then?" Mags suggested. "Pantheon-"

"Won't matter," I told her. "These creatures are going to do the same thing to all of them. When I said everything, I mean everything. Every Earth in every dimension without any exception. Total omnicide."

"Holy fucking Christ," she whispered. "Are you certain about this?"

"Dragon's certain," I offered. "So is Pantheon and the Triumvirate. And remember that shadow organization that Teacher was so obsessed with finding before he wound up in the cage?"

"I remember," she agreed.

"I found it," I replied, tapping the screen. "They're called Cauldron. Somehow, they found the corpse of one of these aliens. What they call 'Entities', and are harvesting it to grant powers. The Case 53s are what happens when something goes wrong in the process. Dragon's been compiling a list of these artificial capes, but it's not stored on the database we acquired. I only know because one of Pantheon's members, Hecate, bought her powers from them."

"So one more giant conspiracy to the list," she laughed unhappily. "Got any idea how powerful they are?"

"Powerful enough to take down Teacher when he prodded them," I told her. "Enough that they functionally own the Protectorate, one way or another. Dragon seems to be legitimately scared of what they're capable of. The Triumvirate are also members, if the snippets of notes in Nemesis are any indication. Which means if we go after Cauldron, we could get a face full of Alexandria's boot."

"And they're all working together on the Nemesis and Scion threats," Mags added unhappily. "We can't really play them against one another when there's that to worry about. They're united until those
threats are dealt with. And even if by some miracle we did win... it would be like killing a bunch of jackals, only to be eaten by the lion that they were keeping at bay."

"I know," I agreed. "We’re just mortals. This is a battle between gods."

"Company!" Dobrynja shouted. Screens flickered to show the approaching person. A woman in an impressive suit. Her features suggested Mediterranean ancestry, but in a world of shapeshifters and tinker grade plastic surgery, that meant nothing.

She casually typed the code to the electronic lock for our current hideout. What confused me was that it worked- the code was irrelevant, it read your fingerprint to determine if you were allowed in. But apparently it worked for her, as the blast door opened. Dobrynja took point, being the only one of us in battle armor. Mags had rushed to get into hers.

The woman regarded us for a half second, then stepped into the bushes, out of our sight. A ball of mud sailed into the room and caught Dobrynja's visor. The woman rushed in a half second later, easily dodging the shots from my tinker handgun without even glancing toward me, diving for cover before throwing one of our wrenches at me. It wasn't hard to avoid at this distance, but I couldn't believe how she moved. How does someone dodge automatic weapon fire?

She jumped toward me the moment I ran out of ammo. Less than half a second later both my arms were behind my back and I existed as a human shield between the woman and Dobrynja and Mags. If either of them pulled the trigger on their better weapons, both the woman and I could be buried in the same coffee can. Something that didn't seem to bother her at all. She dragged me to one of the computer terminals, all the while ignoring the threats issued by my friends.

Seconds of typing later, both their armors lost power, and they were trapped in hundreds of pounds of tinker weapons and exotic alloys.

Suddenly my arms were freed and I stumbled forward. I briefly considered attacking the woman.

"Now we can talk," she spoke casually, without any indication that she had just performed feats reserved for Olympic athletes while being shot at.

=========

A/N- What? Cauldron's allowed to do things too, you know.

Also: poor Saint. As if two potentially world ending forces weren't enough, it turns out they're teamed up against A Whole Lot Worse (tm).
The others shunted moments after they entered ordered our hotel rooms, leaving only Clarice behind in the room. I sat down to eat the meal, or fragments of meals, that they brought me. The food was really good even if it was leftovers, and especially nice since they didn't need to bring me anything at all. The Yggdrasil was completely safe to eat and some portions of it were more nutritious than any natural food could hope to be. Even if it tasted like mushy apples and tree bark.

In the time they'd been gone, a series of small bedrooms had formed for all of us, allowing us to sleep here instead of inside the building. Our rooms were geonanalogous to the ones we had rented in Bet, and we had the dimensional viewing tech hard at work.

"That looks eerily like my actual room," Lily said as she walked out of hers.

"It's suppose to," I answered proudly. "My Big Sister used it as the model when she grew this one."

"Sometimes I forget just how insane her power is," she muttered. "She can do something this fine detailed from a thousand miles and another dimension away."

"Eight hundred and seventy three point four miles," I replied, having accessed the mapping program I plugged into Clarice. "From your bedroom and this one."

"How do you think I feel?" Vicky laughed. "I remember when she was my mostly helpless baby sister who was afraid to use her power for anything. Now here we are on a planet where she is pretty much a literal god."

"She's just that amazing," I agreed happily, then I hesitated. Clarice's motion sensors detected someone approaching, and strangely the spacial distortion senses I used to navigate Clarice through Missy's power were activating as well. "Umm. Looks like we got our company."

We turned our attentions to the dimensional overlay, allowing us to watch everything. "Ooh, he's good," Vicky noted with approval. "Case 53, looks a lot like Newter, but he's got some really good camouflage so I can't be sure his actual colors. And somehow, he's crawling on a ceiling made of those cheap panels that couldn't hold the weight of a large housecat."

"Doesn't match any records I have," I replied as I ran the description through our databank. "Wish we could have brought the command center with us."

"I'll go greet him," Theo replied as he covered himself in his liquid metal yet again. I smiled as he shunted over. The advantage of his power being so defensively perfect is that I could build his suit
for features and battery life, since I didn't need all the armor reinforcement. It wasn't an unusual design, fairly standard equipment profile for the brutes who were receiving our equipment, but I made his better than those. *He deserved it.*

We watched, using his armor and Clarice to provide what sound the could. I was a tinker and even I didn't know why light could cross like this, but sound couldn't.

"Open the door, take a half step out the door and turn your head to the left and up," Vicky instructed. Theo followed the instructions. "Perfect, you're looking more or less right at him. He can't see your eyes.

"Good afternoon," Horus replied calmly. "To what do I owe your visit."

"Uh... you can see me?" the invisible lizard man asked.

"No," Horus responded calmly. "But I don't need my eyes to know you're there."

"I heard you were asking about us," the man replied. "You made quite a scene."

"Not nearly the scene we could have made," Theo shrugged dismissively. "Honestly, at this point it'd be simply just to request all the villain groups give us their phone numbers. Save everyone the headache of doin' it like this."

"I wonder, did you pick up that attitude from your bosses, or from Kaiser?"

Clarice's sensors noted Theo's heightened emotional state, but he recovered masterfully. "I was hoping to keep that one a secret until after I turned eighteen," he sighed. "I don't suppose you'll keep that tidbit quiet."

"Don't worry, I ain't a snitch," he answered. "So, you were sayin' you don't think we did the killing?"

"This guy's weird," Vicky spoke up. "My combat sense isn't working on him. He might be some kind of really impressive illusion. Keep your armor at full strength, we can't be sure what to expect."

"Probably," Theo clarified. "It's too obvious a setup. Then again, it's also too obvious a setup. It could be you, trying to run a double bluff."

"Wheels in wheels bullshit, huh?" came the dismissive reply. "Nah, we ain't so, wassa word..."
"Machiavellian?" Theo suggested. "Elaborate?"

"Yeah! Elaborate," the voice agreed. "Now, I ain't sayin' this ever happens, mind you, but if it did. We wouldn't leave them to be found. Lotsa places to dump a body out there. Lotsa powers to make sure there's no body to be found. Hypothetically speakin', of course. You bein' here is real bad for our business."

"So who would you sus-" The area was bathed in a soundless white light. I had just enough time to register Clarice's damage alerts before her automatic defenses shunted her over to our dimension. The bitter sweet scent of burnt sugar poured off the changeling. She was still alive under the armor, in as much as she could be called alive. I did a quick estimate of how much heat it would have taken to do that damage that quickly. If it wasn't an exotic power based attack, which of course could break any rule, I was absolutely certain the building was already destroyed.

All this had happened in the two seconds. In the third, Vicky shouted commands. "Spread out! Find the attacker!" I couldn't see what the others were doing, and chose to stay in the center. It was a good thing the dimensional viewer tech had upper limits on energy transfer, it saved my retinas from being burned out.

There was a thud as a large body hit the ground, followed by sizzling. Theo. My world stood still. I moved toward the metal shell, only to hesitate when I got close. The heat from the armor was incredible, hot enough to overwhelm and burn a plant that had withstood New Delhi. One which pulled much of its power out of active volcanoes. I wanted to get closer, but discretion was the better part of valor. I can't help anyone if I burn myself. I accessed the badly damaged Clarice doll, commanding her to move while observing how it was killing her. Perhaps only two minutes left.

She activated her absolute zero weapon, draining massive amounts of heat away from herself and Theo's armor. I hoped my calculations on where to fire were correct, considering all I had available for senses was Clarice's badly damaged echolocation system. Theo's power should be able to protect him. I hope.

The light was still blinding, though it had faded to that of natural flame instead of whatever attack started this. Clarice, with only a little bit of strength left to spare, was used to cut through Theo's armor. At some point it had converted to the standard metal state, meaning he lost concentration on his power. Don't die. Don't die. I screamed internally as my changeling did all the dangerous work of peeling him out of his suit. I didn't speak, I simply stood there operating the controls and idly listing off the symptoms of shock that my body was exhibiting.

The armor was empty. Or at least empty of Theo. The metal was there, and the completely ruined bioarmor was there. Theo was not. How? I was so caught up in hope and confusion and fear that I didn't even notice when Clarice stopped functioning, slumping over the semi molten then flash frozen metal and baked Yggdrasil.
Vicky shouted a couple command that I didn't register. I was too stunned to care. I heard a body land next to me, and a hand rest on my shoulder. "Is... is he?" A voice asked hesitantly. It took me a moment to recognize it as Atropos.

"I don't know," I answered, trying to keep my emotions under control. "He wasn't in the armor. I don't know where he is."

"We'll find him, she insisted, placing her hand on my shoulder. "Now let's get you away from here. We have to regroup and figure out what to do. Victoria's already gone over to help with the fires and rescue survivors. My power's not so good for that. Do you have anything that can help?"

"No," I admitted, allowing myself to be guided by her hand through the blinding light. "Clarice didn't survive the explosion. Do you think Theo will be alright?"

"His armor's indestructible, remember?" She tried to sound comforting, but I could hear the doubt in her voice. "I'm sure he's fine. Just needs us to pick him up."

"Yeah," I responded. Lying my agreement to her lie. I knew we had the clone technology, but I didn't want to think about Theo being dead even for a little while. I didn't want to think about Missy crying. I calmed myself by counting my own tears, and a promise to myself that I would find whoever did this and extract a scream for every last one of them.

================

A/N- I get to torture Riley now!

Aww. Now I feel bad.
Ch 209- Victoria

I shunted over above the motel we had chosen to stay the night in, and the inferno it had become. I didn't need my power to tell me there were no survivors. A hundred feet back, my armor was alerting me to the dangerous heat levels. Easy enough to change that, however. A couple quick cryo blasts siphoned massive amounts of heat and prevented the spread to other buildings. Thanks to whatever tinker bullshit was going on, it would wind up in the batteries of the Ultralisks. Somehow. After that, a few more targeted shots reduced the flames to something approachable. Guess combat precognition extends to firefighting. Awesome.

I dropped down in front of the building, doing everything I could to get my power locked on to whatever asshole torched a building with... whatever the fuck that stuff was. I'd need to ask Riley, all I knew is it wasn't alive and probably wasn't a power, maybe. There was a lot of other stuff coming over my suit's sensors. Riley went all out with my armor's sensor suite, and what she couldn't give me, Emma and Trevor did.

My arm snapped out, grabbing the invisible Case 53 by the arm. "Fancy finding you here," I said with nothing resembling the light humor my words suggested.

"Hey!" he shouted, startling a couple of others who had come here to gawk at the now mostly dead flames. Many of them woefully underdressed for the chill of a mid October night. "Ya gotta believe I didn't have shit to do with this!" My power told me he was telling the truth. Then again, I didn't trust my power against him.

I took off, slowly, while my electrical power recharged the batteries of the suit. That ice weapon drained it fast, and shunting was fucking expensive. "The only thing I gotta do is find out how you survived that inferno."

"I..." he hesitated, and I knew he was about to either lie or refuse to speak. I let the antigrav deactivate, dropping us both toward the ground. "Okay! It was Playmate's power!" I reactivated the field. "Look, we use her to keep us safe. Walkin neutral ground, with rules that you can't fight at all. Even if the other guy wants to fuck us, they can't. Yer pals should be alright. Can't die in her power's field."

Made sense, and my power still believed him, regardless of my suspicions. "Sounds like something that'd be a real hit at the Endbringer fights," I pointed out.

"Don't work," he answered. "They're special or somethin', I dunno. You'd have to ask her how her power works, all I got is rumors."

Atropos' voice came on over the com. "Is Th... Horus with you? His suit's on this side, but he wasn't in it."
My eyes narrowed. "Apparently Playmate was doing her thing," I informed her. "Everyone got out, but Horus isn't with the others saved from the fire."

"Kaiser's kid?" he asked. "Unless he's immune to powers, he should be out." Oh, I spoke out loud. Well, nothing damaging was said.

"We lost Clarice," Atropos added. "What do we do?"

God damn it. "What we should do is call in the reinforcements," I answered to my new de facto second in command. "But what I want to do is fix this ourselves. We're putting this to a vote, though. Call the big guns, or follow my plan and handle this by ourselves?"

A few seconds later, I got my response. "We're in," Atropos replied.

"So," I spoke to my captive. "Do you wanna help find out who napalmed your neutral ground?"

....

"They tipped their hand," I told the girls. "They used a teleporter to deliver that attack, and to abduct Theo. I know almost exactly where they are, but we have to hurry."

"Then we can save him!" Riley exclaimed. She was sitting next to a badly mutilated Clarice. The doll had been split open in a way that my senses were certain came from Atropos' power. Dozens of mechanical bits had been pulled out of its insides and were strewn about, along with segments of two sets of bioarmor.

She's not going to let them live through this, I realized when I got a look at the girl. Her emotions were the slow boiling rage of a murder waiting to happen, and Riley had killed enough times already that she wouldn't blink an eye at another. Fuck. How was I going to handle that? I decided that question would have to wait until after we got Theo back. Depending on how we find him, I might just give them to her, I added.

"Atropos," I instructed. "We're going right now, along with a few of the Mafia capes. I told them we wouldn't wait for them, but I'd keep them updated by GPS and if they think they want to join in, I wasn't going to stop them. Riley, you tell us what you learned while we're en route."

Lily and I shunted over, using her system to do it. "Turn off your defensive power," I instructed her. I waited for her nod, and then grabbed her hand. "I can fly faster." I told her, and pulled her along toward our destination. Our antigrav flight had a max speed of just above three hundred miles an
hour. The extra tech loaded into mine afforded me over twice that max speed. Still nothing compared to Sabah's armor, but pretty damn fast.

"They used some kind of thermite bomb," Riley informed as we started in the direction the armor's senses led me.

"So not a power," I replied. "I was pretty sure it wasn't."

"It was sort of," she answered. "The chemical residue is a tinker recipe."

"First tinker tech drugs, now tinker tech chemicals in bombs," I replied. "Does anyone else find that suspicious?"

"Same guy, probably," Riley agreed. "But he's virtually a rogue. Works for the Elite, but all he does is make and sell stuff. It's not impossible that he's involved, I guess, but it's much more likely that he's just selling the weapons."

"Not quite a dead end, then," I replied. "I bet that stuff costs a lot of money."

"Yeah, lots," Riley agreed. "Enough material to do that kind of damage would run a quarter of a million dollars or more."

"So well funded, whoever they are," I acknowledged. "Okay, Atropos, you know the score."

"You kick their asses, I nuke their gear?" she snarked. "I miss the good ol' days when I was allowed to point weapons at people without needing a kill order first."

"Well, next time you'll think twice before making confetti out of an Endbringer," I retorted. "Personally, I think there's something to be said for making your enemies soil themselves just by standing in front of them. Although it's kinda gross when it actually happens."

"There's no way that actually happens," she insisted.

"My old power made it pretty easy, actually," I replied. "But I'm willing to bet you could do it on rep alone. Plus or minus a crossbow bolt a couple inches away from the throat."

We spent the next ten minutes talking about various strategies to, perhaps literally, scare the crap out of our enemies. It wasn't like we could travel any faster than we already were, without Missy around to help.
"There's the building," I replied as we approached the farmhouse well outside of the city. "Theo's alive," I informed them both. "Doesn't look like he's in any danger. A teenage girl in the room with him. Both seem calm and in good health."

"Another captive?" Lily asked.

"Dunno, maybe," I responded. "They're not leaving and I'm seeing no other living being. Shunting over, we'll check things out from the safe side." A second later, Atropos and I were back in the familiarly endless expanse of Yggdrasil.

We dropped into the ghost of the farmhouse, looking around. My powers didn't see any threat to traversing the house. No threat of injury, no real threat of discovery past the occasional floor panel to avoid stepping on. Judging by the age of the building, I would be surprised to learn there weren't creaky boards. Theo wasn't under any apparent duress, sitting in an old fashioned rocking chair, talking to a girl around his age, perhaps a little older.

Her, on the other hand, my power saw as incredibly dangerous. Deadly, even. Line of sight power, if she could see me she could hurt me. She probably wouldn't be able to kill me, but I got the impression that my regeneration and shapeshifting powers were the only reason for that.

"Lily, stay here," I instructed. I activated my stealth systems and watched as all the power to my other systems were quickly draining. With only the cloak active, I had at most twenty minutes of power. I was about to cut that in half. I shunted into the room. I couldn't touch her, either. It was unlikely she could hurt me if I did, but the risk was still pretty high. High enough that my power didn't like the idea. Besides, I had another option. One magnetic pulse later, and we were plunged into absolute blackness. Less than two minutes of power left in my suit.

"No!" the girl shrieked. "You were supposed to stop them! How did you even find me!"

I sense Theo diving sideways, using his armor to propel him quickly away from the girl. So, she was responsible, I thought. I couldn't touch her, I didn't have enough power to reliably blast her with the nonlethals. So I went with the next best option and hit her upside the head with an end table.

To my surprise, the table shattered into pieces that looked like it had gone through a wood chipper. Her power at work, because I didn't hit her nearly hard enough to break the table naturally. Much less to shatter it like that. Still, it was hard enough to send the girl face first into the couch, unconscious. Minor concussion at worst, my power informed me.

I let the stealth function drop. Theo couldn't see me either way. "So, I know there's a story here, but I can't for the life of me figure out what it is."
"I'll fill you in," he answered.

==============

A/N- And to this bitch, I bequeath a boot table to the head!
Trevor was enjoying a quiet evening tinkering when Zach burst into his workshop looking like the hounds of hell were after him.

"Dude, thank god you're here, listen I need your help, my life depends on it" The other boy looked genuinely terrified, something that Trevor had never seen before, even in the face of the Simugh.

Trevor felt the rush of adrenaline flow through his system, something that could make Zach fear for his life was formidable, and could either be a huge asset or a huge threat to Pantheon "Ok, let me call Khepri and -"

"NO!" Zach screamed "They don't need to know! We can deal with this ourselves! It's for the best!"
With that he grabbed Trevor and dragged him to where his Chariot was, stopping once to crumble to dust and regenerate. Trevor noted that Zach's terrified expression never ceased despite the mental balancing effect his powers normally had. "We need to get up in the air, where no one can hear us" he muttered in his rush, barely giving Trevor enough time to grab his helmet before forcing him to fly the panicked boy into the clouds, well beyond even Khepri's ears.

"Ok" Trevor said calmly, attempting to soothe Zach "What's this all about? Why didn't you want me contacting the others? Are we facing another Master/Stranger situation?" His mind was reaching for the worst possible conclusions, if Gaea and Khepri were compromised then the best case scenario was the fall of Pantheon, worst case was an extinction level event.

In response Zach handed Trevor the laptop that the tinker hadn't realized he was carrying "I need you to delete something from my computer and make sure no one can ever, ever recover it"

...What?

Faced with Trevor's blank stare Zach elaborated "A couple days ago I got curious and decided to see what kind of porn of us there was, most of it was pretty straight forward, usual stuff, you know" Trevor nodded, while he doubted his and Zach's idea of "usual stuff" was the same, the plot of pornos was fairly generic no matter what you were into 'One of the more popular videos out there was titled 'Sister appreciation' and I was feeling a bit down about Victoria so I figured I'd see what it was about. I started downloading it but then Emma came to talk to me and I forgot all about it until now and I really need you to make sure no one can ever find out I downloaded it!" Zach was pleading by the end of it

Trevor put his hand on his forehead "you know you can just delete it?"

"But it might not be enough!"

"Why not? Neither Amelia nor Victoria are tinkers and even if they do find out it's not like they can hurt you..." Trevor paused upon realized that there was another member of Pantheon the public accepted as Amelia's sister, the only person who had managed to physically harm since he triggered "It wasn't Victoria was it?"
Zach shook his head "Give it here" Zach handed the computer over and Trevor plugged in a USB that he'd gotten in the habit of carrying around from his days as a spy for the Wards. It contained a program that made all deleted data completely irretrievable without damaging any saved data.

"Here, you computer should be pretty slow for a few hours but no one will every find that video. Just don't download porn of you teammates again ok?" With that Trevor turned to the controls and flew them back to base, eager to be back in his workshop. With any luck he'd be able to complete his current project before something else dragged him away from his workbench.

Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

First of three Canon Omakes that I wrote for this story, for those of you that read this story on SV, this Omake will be new to you because it didn't get transferred from QQ.
"So, four against a dozen?" I asked. "We're really doing this on the say so of that girl?"

"Doubt they'd bring all of them," Vicky spoke, lazing easily against a tree. "Besides, they're all a bunch of b-listers. If you're scared, I can fight them all myself. Don't worry, I'll let you take a couple selfies next to them after. Y'know, so you can impress your girlfriend."

"Says you," I couldn't help but smile. The girl's confidence was infectious. "You can take all the credit you want. I'm the only one here with 'Endslayer' on the resume. I don't need to prove shit. I'm the biggest badass in any room I choose to be in."

"Says the girl with the rope marks across half her body," Vicky countered. Theo chose to fake a cough and look away, and all I could do was thank my armor for hiding my blushing. Damn it, Vicky. Why would you even say that? "Yeah, that's what I thought," she teased.

"Oh, go fuck yourself. Sideways. With a cactus."

"Wow," she replied easily. "You really are into the rough stuff. Speaking of, I think our guests are arriving."

She gestured toward the cars coming from the west. "Only three," I observed. "They could have piled everyone in."

"Most of them are gonna be normals," Vicky answered. "My combat sense is entirely unimpressed, except by the second car. That's the threat."

"They keep all their capes in the same vehicle?" I asked. "That seems kinda fucking stupid, to be honest."

She shrugged. "Hey, they're probably expecting us to handle the fighting. They're here for mop up and maybe trying to steal a captive or two from us, if they're particularly stupid. They think this is an alliance. And until they say otherwise, we'll keep treating it as such. Pantheon doesn't start fights, we just finish them."

I nodded my agreement. Good line, I'll have to say that one to Sabah. It'd put her mind at rest about things like the missions last week. She was upset by the idea that we were going on the offensive so much. When she joined, it was with the promise that Pantheon was in support of rogues like her, that this wasn't a military organization like the Protectorate. And yet here we were, kicking down doors and doing so much of the same shit that defined what she hated about cape culture.
I was still thinking about the issues in my relationship when the cars pulled up. The men with the guns were negligible. They'd run out of ammo before they scratched me or Horus. Victoria might be in danger, if she wasn't capable of all the insane shit she was capable of. I kept my eyes on the capes. Three men, two women. My suit's auto highlight system lit them up in order as Riley announced the details.

"Cage," he was a bigger man. Clearly older, with gray hair, but still in pretty good shape. "Creates invisible bubble forcefields. Can make them selectively permiable in either direction, giving him a barrier he or his friends can shoot through, or a trap to hold enemies. Upper durability limit, fifty tons of force. Approximately a vehicular collision at 30mph." *He's not a problem for me.*

The light jumped to the next. "Shockwave. Allegedly Cage's son. Generates fields that explode like landmines. Similar destructive power as his father's defensive one." *Okay, so he might be a problem.*

"Deadweight," the third highlight settled on a petite brunette. Smaller than Sabah, even, though not quite as little as Missy or Riley. *Is this gonna be one of the ones that contribute to little kids having more power stereotypes?* "She creates powerful localized gravity up to nine times Earth's normal. Thirty foot radius centered on herself. Isn't influenced by her own power. " *Oh, well, that's not so bad. Lots you could do with that, though.*

"Arc," the last guy was highlighted. "Electric blaster. Lower power than a police taser, but long range and can jump from target to target without power loss.

The last highlight was the older woman. Twenties or thirties, probably. "Playmate, you already know about." With long black hair, olive toned skin and an imposing six foot tall figure, she looked the name.

"Don't be too impressed," Vicky snarked over the com. "She's got more artificial parts than Clarice."

*Well, there are worse ways to spend money,* I thought.

Cage approached us. "So, you found your serial killer?"

"We did," Vicky agreed easily. "We found something else that's really interesting as well. A lot of somethings, actually. Let's just say that in that building is the key to destroying your entire crime family. Of course, you probably figured that much out the moment you saw the place. In case you're wondering? Yeah, we'll be using it."

"A double cross?" Cage growled.
"Not at all," Vicky answered. "You're free to leave and we won't stop you. Or you can start a fight, and we're okay with that. We were willing to accept your help fighting criminals. We're not willing to let you kill the captives or destroy the evidence we've found."

"Doesn't give us much choice, does it?" he asked.

"Well, I'd go with 'stop being a bunch of scumbags', if I were you," Vicky shrugged. "There's also accepting our offer to let you go so you can prepare for when we come after you for real. Maybe grab what you can and run like cowards. Surrender. All nice options."

"Or destroy what you have in there," he added. "We'll be doing that. Playmate's already made sure you can't hurt us. Offensive powers can't be used here. Defensive ones work just fine." Bubbles of swirling light formed around us.

"Okay, I lose," Vicky replied, instantly vanishing. Cage didn't have time to react before there was a crackle pop and a scream. Vicky was standing next to a now very unconscious Playmate. "Turns out, her power doesn't work on herself."

I infused my power through my armor and let the wings snap out, shattering Cage's barrier with no effort at all. With my superhuman accuracy and Azrael's computer targeting systems, dozens of bolts fired from the wings. Striking every gun the goons held. The bolts sank into the metal thanks to the precision use of my power. The weapons would never be usable again except as maybe clubs.

"That could have just as easily been your hands," I informed them, allowing the armor's voice enhancement to carry my words. Azrael's wings fanned to their widest span, and then folded slightly inward, pointing at the crooks.

Arc decided to try to be a hero, and blasted me with the full charge of his power. The energy jumped away from my body and through the wings before jumping back to my body. Other than my armor registering a 2% increase in battery charge, there was no effect. _Two could play at that game._ I altered the bolts and then fired a full volley straight at him. He didn't even have a chance to scream before the bolts passed right through him and turned the car behind him into so much scrap metal.

Then he screamed, falling to his knees in shock and terror, yet physically unharmed. Others around him shouted and cursed, retreating from the swiss cheesed sedan. Let them wonder how I fired my shots through the kid without touching him only to annihilate the vehicle.

"Okay!" Cage shouted. "You've made your fucking point. We're leaving."

"Not so fast," Vicky answered, tossing the limp Playmate over her shoulder. "Walking away was your option before you started this fight. Now you're our captives. Cops'll be here in a little while."
Horus, would you mind going into the house and seeing if there's a pair of pants available for the
big bad supervillain? Also, you're a witness that I was right and Atropos owes me fifty dollars."

*Really? That is both awesome and disgusting. Best fifty bucks I ever spent.*

....

"I must say, Pantheon does fantastic work," Director Nicholas was all smiles and praise. "The
murders solved, two of their most powerful capes, and enough evidence to break their entire crime
family. Incredible."

My hands clenched in the suit as I watched out the window. It was well past midnight, now, though
the lights of a city this size turned the late autumn cloud cover into a deep bronze haze in the sky.

"I must admit," Brain spoke up. "I was a little put off by your methods, but I can't argue with the
results."

"All in a day's work," Victoria answered calmly. "Sorry for getting you out of bed at this hour."

"No, that's perfectly fine," he answered it. "As much sleep as they've cost me over the years, I can
afford a little more."

"So, if you don't mind answering a question," Vicky replied. "Was it worth it?"

His smile faltered some. "Was what worth it?" he asked.

"Your career," she answered. "We figured out what you did. Covering up one crime with another.
Mutilating corpses. Fabricating evidence. Buncha other shit I'm not gonna bother naming because the
cops will take care of that for us later."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," he answered. It didn't take our tech to know he
was lying.

"Sir?" Brain looked at his boss. "Is this true?"

"Of course it isn't!" the man insisted. Ah, the wonders of redundant blinking lights in front of my
face, telling me things I already know.
"Then you have nothing to worry about," Vicky responded. She leaned over the man's desk pressed a button just moment after it started to beep. "Sorry for the late call, Chief Director."

"I'm accustomed to it," she replied. "Director Nicholas, do yourself the dignity of not trying to lie to me. What we say will remain confidential, right Victoria? Completely off the record, legally speaking."

"We already know the score," she replied. "We don't need his confession to bury him. Have your chat."

"Thank you," she replied. "Nicholas. The truth, as they say, will set you free."

He sighed. "We discovered the bodies of the Fallen when they were somehow dropped in one of our smaller conference rooms, along with a note and some minor physical evidence tying them to the Capello crime family."

"Fits what we know so far," Victoria informed.

"And from there, what happened," Costa-Brown prompted.

"We knew it wasn't enough," he explained. "To say nothing of evidence tampering simply by dropping the bodies there like that. At best, it would be yet another unsolved case. A waste of Protectorate time and resources." He looked toward all of us before his eyes went back to the viewscreen which I assumed the Chief Director was watching from. "After the events in Houston and other areas to the south, I took a gamble. Doctoring a crime scene that would point evidence to the gang it belonged on, while baiting Pantheon here in response to it. I expected them to come in force and deal with the problem for us."

"And that worked wonderfully for you," the Chief Director replied dryly. "Next time you want to do something this stupid? Don't."

Next time? I thought.

"Next time?" Victoria asked.

"Ignoring this one poor decision, Director Nicholas has been an excellent employee and a significant asset to the PRT," the voice over the phone was calm and commanding. "In addition, word of this could... muddy... legal actions against the villains you've worked so hard to put away tonight."

"And the PRT's reputation," I added angrily. The fuck?
"Now," she continued, ignoring my comment. "I would like to believe the PRT has been more than
generous in how we've handled of the criminal history of some of Pantheon's members." Oh fuck. "Is
it too much to ask you for a similar accommodation, now? After all, the Director's actions here were,
if gruesome and poorly thought out, ultimately victimless. In fact, I do believe they've resulted in a
net gain for Pantheon. A gain that could easily be lost if this situation became public knowledge."

Oh fuck you, I thought.

"You make a good point," Victoria gritted her teeth. My lie detector continued telling me things I
already knew. I would have turned it off, but my newest armor 'upgrade' meant that I couldn't. "But
it's not my call to make. I'll talk to my sister in the morning and see how she feels about all of this."

"Very well," Costa Brown answered. Her tone didn't change in the slightest and yet, somehow, she
sounded painfully pleased with herself. "I believe in the time I've worked with your sister and her
partner, I've come to know them well enough. I anticipate no future problems will arise from this
incident. Now, if you please, may I talk with Director Nicholas in private?"

"Yes," Victoria agreed, standing and turning away. I quickly followed after her. How the fuck do I
explain this to Sabah?

================
A/N- Vat ah tweest!

Also: Arc starts, and ends, with Lily. Huzzah!
Ch 211- Arianna

*Head hurts. Dark.* I slowly came to. I was laying face down on what felt like a giant gel pack. It was warm. And smelled like wet grass.

"Oh, good, you're awake," a girl spoke. "Before you do anything, I'm going to explain your situation. I have very powerful taser weapon. I can promise it won't kill you, and I can promise it will stop you. I can't promise it won't hurt you. Then we'll probably have to hand you over to a girl who's very close friends with the boy you kidnapped. She's our healer. I can't promise she won't kill you. Or a whole lot worse. So for your own sake, don't try anything."

I reached out with my power and felt... nothing. *Nowhere.* All of my anchors are gone. "How... how did you disable my power? How did you even find me?" I managed to croak, despite the pain radiating from my skull. I reached back and gingerly touched the back of my head. It was sore, and my hair was damp.

"Pixie flatulence," the girl answered dryly. "And Santa Claus owes us a favor ever since we saved Christmas from the mole people. Turns out murder, kidnapping, and dropping tinker napalm on a bunch of civilians gets you on the naughty list real fast."

*Well, shit.* "They weren't in any danger," I insisted. "Playmate's power was already active." I slowly climbed to my feet.

"Yeah, we figured that out, too," the girl replied. "So mind explaining what you were thinking? I mean, most of it's pretty transparent, you want to bring down the Capello crime family. You framed them for the Fallen murders, knowing we'd have to come along and do our thing. When you figured out it wasn't working, you tried to draw the big guns by kidnapping Horus and murdering the rest of us."

"No!" I insisted, and immediately regretted raising my voice. I hissed in pain. "No," I said again, much quieter this time. "I didn't kill anyone."

"Okay, let's say I believe you," the girl agreed too quickly, I realized. *She already knew I didn't do it.* "Why the fuck did you do all of this? For that matter, your power is strong enough to take them out yourself. Why bring us into this mess at all?"

"I didn't," I told her. "That incompetent Director did. I practically gift wrapped his case for him, and then he goes and sets up a fake crime scene. Then I kinda got my hopes up when you showed. I mean, if he was too chicken shit to handle it, maybe you would. Then I found out you were just going to let them get away with everything like you didn't care at all, so I was trying to give you more reasons to go after them."
"Well, yeah, all evidence suggested they didn't do it," the girl replied. "We kinda need a reason before we start kicking ass. It sucks, but that's how it works.

"Oh, they did it," I insisted. "And a lot of others. Thirty murders that I know about, probably lots more. I just never had a chance to prove it before. The mob's been doing business with the Fallen for years. Buying drugs, selling guns and forged documents and even homeless people. After you happened, those three showed up looking for a place to stay. They were given an overdose of Bliss. Then suffocated."

"And you didn't go to the police?" she asked. "With any of this?"

"They own the fucking police," I growled. I wanted to yell at her, but I learned my lesson last time. "And the courts. And the Mayor. Wouldn't be surprised to learn they own the Director, too."

"Doubt it," she answered. "At least about the Director. If he was on the take, those deaths never would have made it on the news. I have to ask, why are you so obsessed with the mob? And how do you know so much about it?"

Okay, she has a point about that. "Oh, pardon me, I must have forgotten my manners when I was knocked unconscious," I grumbled. "Arianna Capello. Pleased to meet you." I held out my hand to the darkness, but the woman didn't bother taking it.

She laughed. She actually laughed at me. I bit off a smartass remark or stream of profanities. "Sorry," she spoke after a moment. "I'm not about to fall for that trick. Touching you is a bad idea. While we're on that subject, just what is your power, anyway?"

"You don't know?" I asked. "How did you disable my power if you don't even know what it is?"

"It's not," she answered. "One of my powers is combat precognition. It tells me how to beat you. It doesn't tell me why it works, just that it will work."

"Teleporting," I answered. "I can teleport anything I can see into touch range of myself. Anything I'm already touching, I can teleport to anywhere I can see. And I can teleport myself, of course. It's pretty useful."

"Maybe I should have mentioned I have thinker powers. Emotion reading is one of them. Making me a damn near perfect lie detector. Want to explain the rest of your power? Like travelling almost a hundred miles. Pretty sure that's not line of sight. Or how you destroyed that table."

God damn it. "Umm... I can set places. I call them anchors. I can teleport things to or from an anchor
like I'm there and can see it." I paused for a moment. The woman said nothing, and I reluctantly continued. "I don't really know how the destroying things works. I just teleport something, but halfway through I kinda cancel the effect. I learned I could do that by accident."

"Show me," she instructed, and I felt something tap my side. I reached out and touched it. A stick of some kind? Too heavy, too thick, too smooth. I focused, and activated the teleport. Without anchors and without the ability to see, there wasn't anywhere I could send it. I obeyed her request and it returned to normal. The process took less than a blink of an eye. The object was gently removed from my hand. "So... Arianna..." she said after what felt like an eternity. "How would you like a job? The pay's slightly less than wonderful, but the perks are amazing."

I thought this would be more fun, I thought as I watched police ransack my house in the middle of the night. I glanced over at Atropos. She was even more awe inspiring in person. It gave me confidence, knowing I was standing beside her. She glanced over at me and I looked away immediately.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing..." I looked down. "Just. Thank you. And I'm sorry. Again."

"Don't worry about it," she responded. "Most fun I've had in a while." She gave a hard look at Victoria, who simply clasped her hands together behind her back.

"Really?" I asked. I chose not to ask what that was about between them.

"At work, at least," she answered. "Murder mysteries, intrigue, politics. We were one scantily dressed actress and a carton of cigarettes away from film noir. I give it a nine out of ten, would recommend to friends."

"Thanks," I smiled.

"Miss Capello?" a man asked as he approached. He was smartly dressed.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I'm Agent Mallory, FBI," he introduced himself. "First, I would like to commend you on your bravery. I know it must be difficult, but you're doing a good thing."
"Not nearly as difficult as you think," I shrugged. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not so fragile. I'm now functionally homeless, you're putting half my living relatives in a cell tonight, and the other half are probably going to hire someone to murder me with piano wire. Wouldn't be surprised if they're already making the phone calls. And I'm a major witness for a federal case that could define careers. Witness protection is a thing I know about."

He blinked. Feels good to know I can still throw people off their game. "Err, as you wish Miss Capello," he recovered quickly. "That does make this a great deal easier."

"I'll be turning it down," I informed him.

"Uh... excuse me?"

"Got a better offer," I told him. "Don't worry, I'll be there to testify and do all the stuff you need me to do. But I've seen my father get to people who were supposedly safe before. I wouldn't be surprised to find out he bought your boss a prostitute for his or her birthday. I can't trust you to keep me safe."

"Miss Capello, I assure you we can provide the best possible security," he continued. "Better than anyone else can offer."

"Except them," I gestured at Victoria. It was fun watching his face and the barely visible look of shock. He was good at hiding his reactions, but not perfect. "They can give me a new name, a new identity, even new fingerprints and DNA. Can you offer that?"

"I... no," he admitted. "I suppose we cannot." He looked toward Victoria. "And you're going to do all this? Why?"

"I found out she's never seen The Godfather and I'm really looking forward to movie night," she replied. "Besides, I have to continue my family's tradition of abducting children from supervillains. It's worked out awesome so far."

==========

A/N- Vicky gets the best lines. It's in her contract.
I woke up in a nice hug. Taylor decided to be the big spoon... *wait, when did she get all the extra arms?* "Gah!" I shot up in my bed, only to drag the grasping arms with me. *WorryConfusion.* I looked down at the thing wrapped around me. *Riley's damn spider.* I tried to will my heart to stop beating so fast and took some slow, deep breaths. "Don't worry, Taylor, I'm fine." Then I slowly peeled the fuzzy little abomination's legs off of me. It purred at the attention I was giving it like the world's friendliest, and dumbest, cat. I tossed the thing on my bed and hit the shower.

After that and getting dressed, I walked out where the ever friendly plant spider sat attentively on my pillow. I sighed. "Okay, Fluffy, hop up." It climbed up onto me and wrapped its arms around me like a backpack while purring the whole time. I can't believe I'm saying this. "Don't worry, your mama will be home soon."

I walked out into the group area, still toting the albino furball. Lisa just looked at me. "Dammit."

"What?" I asked.

"Well, ordinarily I would have teased you mercilessly for this, but we actually have business to discuss today," she informed. "At least you won't need the coffee. It's already gone cold anyway."

"Blasphemy," I muttered as I took the pot and started pouring the lukewarm fluid into one of the disposable cups. "Coffee is life. And try working at a hospital. You learn to drink this stuff even if it's achieved a solid state."

"Your sister reports her mission as, and I quote, 'complete success, until government corruption fucked us'. Turns out, the PRT Director was responsible for the message we responded to. He didn't do the killings, he just doctored up a crime scene."

*Oh god damn it.* "Is this going to be one of those messes where we overthrow a PRT office and install our own puppet government? Because honestly that wasn't nearly as fun as I thought it'd be the last time. Now it just sounds like a headache."

"Nah," she replied. "Costa-Brown stepped in and saved the Director's ass. Vicky says she's 'fucking blackmailing us'."

"Is she?" I asked, then took a deep drink of my coffee.

"Pretty much," Lisa shrugged. "Slightly more polite than that. 'We wanna keep this guy, yadda yadda, we've ignored worse from your team's members, calling in the favor' stuff, no big deal. I'm
not sure if the Director in question is one of Cauldron's agents or this is just a power play by Cauldron by holding it over the guy's head in the future. Either way, I talked with the Chief Director about it and very politely agreed with her assessment. Something was said about us doing them a favor, and that favors made good currency. You'll have to sell it to your sister later."

"Okay, that doesn't sound so bad," I muttered. Really didn't like us letting this kind of corruption slide, but such was our reality these days. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, Vicky's found a pet mob princess that she's inviting over for tea," Lisa added dismissively. "So, y'know, plan for a new roommate."

What? "What?"

....

"Her power's more like Lachesis than Trickster," Trevor kindly informed me. "Pretty sure she has a cousin Passenger."

"What's a passenger?" Arianna asked.

"I'll explain later," Vicky answered. "For now, they're just what powers come from. The detailed explanation is gonna take a few hours and a bottle of whiskey to wash it all down with. Then some more whiskey. Then another few hours because you forgot it all."

Trevor politely waited for them to finish, then started up again. "She compresses space and time, things go Taboo, and the target moves. If Lachesis' power works like a warp drive, then Arianna's is a wormhole generator."

I looked at him blankly. I wasn't surprised by the 'Taboo' part. Almost every power, if you analyzed its functions deeply enough, stumbled into 'Taboo'. Tinkers were the most obvious, preventing people from understanding the technology that might be used to fight the Entities. All powers that had to do with dimension warping ran into similar barricades. The Entities obviously feared what would happen if we could access Passenger dimensions. The blank look had nothing to do with that. "Explain it in layman's terms?"

"Her power works by creating a tunnel in space and time between two points," he answered. "It also temporarily accelerates her mental functions to process the information when her power's active, giving her the equivalent of several minutes to handle computing that would melt a supercomputer. This allows her to envision a scene, then scan the planet to find a matching location. She then generates a tunnel the physical size of a hydrogen molecule, compresses the target down to that size, moves them through the space between dimensions that we observe in the Labyrinth-Atropos interaction, and decompresses them on the other side. All in a span measured in nanoseconds. Like I
"Holy fuck!" Arianna gasped. I agreed fully. "How do I do all that? I barely passed algebra!"

"It's actually only a fraction of what Khepri does," he added. "Passengers handle incredible amounts of information like it's nothing. This isn't anything new."

"Wow, way to make me feel special," Arianna pouted.

"And she has no Manton Limit?" I asked. Seriously, this could be gamebreaking.

"One," he replied. "Like Lachesis, she can't actually cross dimensions. Even right at the border of our gate, she can't cross it with her power. Not really a surprise. If she was capable of dimension jumping, she could accidentally teleport into any number of dimensions that look almost exactly like ours and never even realize it."

"Whoa..." Arianna muttered. "So there's an existential crisis waiting to happen. Good thing I'm used to those already. So now that we've tested my powers to exhaustion, am I on the team now? I'd like somewhere to put my stuff before the police sell all of it at auction."

"I'll find space to give you a room," I agreed. "We'll need a little bit of time before putting you on the team officially."

"Trust me," Vicky added. "You're not missing out on much. Our job basically consists of looking badass for the press. Pretending we don't know we're badass for the press. Avoiding the press. And making it very clear to the bad guys that we're totally badasses while our bosses are having snuggle time." Vicky had lifted up fingers as she went over each point.

"It's all here in this pamphlet that Zach made." she lifted up a sheet of paper that unfolded like a small map. "See this picture right here?" she tapped the paper. It was one of the photos of me and Taylor sitting under that tree at school. "Yeah, isn't it adorable? We have to make that look intimidating."

"Oh, I love that one!" Arianna agreed happily. "Especially the motivational poster one online!"


"Which one?"
"The 'For their one month anniversary, they gave each other a dead Simurgh' one," she chuckled.

"Really?" Vicky asked excitedly. "That one was totally my idea! I made Zach make it, but it's totally mine."

"Seriously?" she asked. "I've got a few ideas of my own! How does 'Diamonds are forever, Endbringers are for play' sound?" I cringed.

"It sounds horrible," Vicky answered with a deadpan voice. *Oh thank god.* "Which means it's perfect!"

*God damn it, Victoria.*

==============

A/N- A fun little chapter showing how the new girl's power and personality works.
"Have to admit, for a cold recruitment, this works out really nice," Taylor said as she plopped down next to me in bed. She and her dad had worked out a sort of Sunday tradition where she stayed there Saturday night and they spent most of Sunday together. Weekends were sort of a dead time at the base anyway. I usually spent that time with Riley. Or sometimes I just got a nice day off from talking to former supervillains about world threatening crisis. There was a lot to be said about vacations. *At least things are getting better,* I told myself. *Fallen gone, Teeth gone, more and more groups joining our alternative-to-the-Protectorate alliance.* Other than the Elite, there no longer were any human threats on this continent that would require our direct intervention. It was nice.

"Definitely could have been worse," I agreed, snuggling up against my partner. Mutant plant spiders just didn't compare. Although Fluffy had decided its new place was on Taylor's lap. The thing was cute, in a weird sort of way. I idly scratched between its large, shiny, and numerous eyes.

"Knock knock, lovebirds!" Lisa shouted from outside our door. "I'm coming in! Please have your pants on this time!"

*AnnoyancePride.* "She only ever does that when she's bringing a visitor," Taylor observed. I, meanwhile, had sent the command for the door to open. Riley rushed in first, while Lisa and Arianna stood in the doorway. *ConcernWorrySecrecy.*

"Fluffy! I've been looking for you everwhere!" Riley chided the gigantic albino spider. It seemed excitedly happy to see her, in as much as the thing had no actual emotions. It quickly hopped off Taylor's lap and scuttled energetically toward its creator. "See, isn't he adorable?" Riley picked up the easily four foot long imitation arachnid. Arianna seemed only slightly put off by the display.

"Umm... sure..." the girl gingerly reached out and patted Fluffy, which resulted in much happy purring. "This is easily the cutest spider in the world. I think. Either that or it's the most horrible cat?"

"It's actually made of plant material," Lisa informed. "It's never been a cat or a spider or any other animal. Pretty much a walking Chia pet."

"You made this out of a plant?" she looked at me like I'd just performed a miracle. I guess, in a weird way, it was.

"See, told you she can do pretty much anything," Vicky answered.

"So, umm, what's going on?" Taylor glanced from Lisa to Arianna and Riley. I felt the same concern. We sorta didn't want the newbies around the child formerly known as Bonesaw. That was never the recipe for anything good.
"Relax," Lisa replied. "She's okay with it. Easier to get it out of the way. Like ripping off a bandaid."

"Yeah," Arianna agreed. "Riley's adorable. You two must be so proud."

"Proud?" Taylor asked. ConfusionMisgiving.

"Of your daughter, yes," Arianna replied. "I swear I won't tell anyone that you two created a test tube baby with each other and then accidentally accelerated its growth to the point where she was a teenager."


Vicky started laughing hysterically, followed quickly by Lisa. "What have you been telling the new girl?!" I yelled.


"Please tell me you got that on camera!" Zach shouted from the other room.

"The fuck do you actually want?" Taylor sighed. ResignationAnnoyanceAmusement. She couldn't hide the smile on her face. Honestly it was kinda funny. I would be getting my revenge, of course, but I gave up pretending not to smile.

"Well, I was just going over new identities with Arianna here, and she's kinda got an interesting request," Lisa informed. "Not a difficult one, but pretty major for us to take care of before all the paperwork is created and passed through the PRT."

"Alright, what do you need?"

"Umm... Vicky said you can change everything, right down to the DNA if you wanted?" for the first time since I met her, she seemed hesitant. One would imagine everything else, plus or minus Bonesaw, would be the scary part, but not in this case.

"Pretty much," I replied. "It's a little imprecise at that level. I can't really predict the changes or understand them. All I do is decide I want the results to be permanent, and my power handles the rest. I also won't be able to change you back to your original genetics afterward. I might be able to get close, but certainly not exact. Too many variables in the code, plus junk DNA, plus innumerable
other factors. Once we do something like that, there really is no changing you back."

"But that's okay because we already have your DNA on file for your clone, plus the brain scan," Riley volunteered. "We've had some bad luck with our revival tech and incorrect genetics. Without your original code, we might not be able to restore your powers when we bring you back."

"Good to know," Arianna agreed. "So, umm... you'd be able to turn me into a boy?"

"I... sure?" I answered. "You know you don't need to go to that extreme. I could even make you cosmetically male without doing genetic alterations. A lot easier to reverse that way."

"No, I want the full package," she answered. "Err, no pun intended this time."

"You're absolute certain you want to do it like this?" I asked.

"Ever since I was twelve years old," she insisted. "You're just correcting a mistake nature made. Can you do it?"

*RealizationUnderstanding*. "Oh... sorry for being so obtuse about it," I apologized.

"Hey, I don't like to talk about it much, either," she shrugged.

"Look at it this way," Vicky added. "We go in, kick ass, walk away with the supervillian mob boss's daughter, and suddenly add a new heroine on our team. Strike me as something people are gonna figure out. This is the best disguise ever. And it's not even like this is a life altering decision or anything. If he doesn't like it, he's back to being a she in a day or two at the most."

"Yeah. It'll be a little more complex than what I usually do when working on people," I told her. *Him? Whatever*. "The Yggdrasil is easy because it's customized to respond to my power perfectly. You're not. So, first, how old are you?"

"Just turned twenty, why?" she asked.

"There are laws about this sort of thing," I answered.

"Which we'd probably break anyway," Vicky added. "Like I said, this job has the best perks. Ever. Of all time."
"Probably," I admitted. I appraised Arianna. She was pretty tall for a girl, maybe a little taller than Taylor. A nice face, pixie style haircut that suddenly took on a new meaning to me. A fair amount of pudge. Not a huge amount and with her height she carried it nicely, but I'd guess her weight at around a couple hundred pounds. Yeah, there was certainly mass enough to work with. No need for extreme measures to do what needed to be done here. "So, any preferences?"

"Well... I've already got the Italian thing going for me," she started. "So... think you can do a young John Stamos? Sure, he's actually Greek, but close enough."

"Umm, maybe if you get some pictures?" I offered.

"You don't know who I'm talking about, do you?" she looked disappointed.

"Not even a little bit," I admitted. I looked over at Taylor, who simply shrugged.

"Great," she sighed. "Now I feel old. So, uh, will the process be difficult?"

"Not really," I answered. "You have the mass I need. The rest is the easy part. I can't just pull matter out of nowhere when using my power, and fusing other lifeforms together gets ugly really fast."

"So, if I asked you to make me taller, it wouldn't work?" she sighed unhappily.

"Not without it hurting like hell and taking an hour or two," I told her. "But I can tweak your growth patterns a little. Minor growth spurt, not much different than all the others you go through as a teenager. You'll have to wait a few months to get the extra height, but we can totally make it happen."

"Sounds good to me," she agreed.

============= 

A/N- I keep making that RvB reference. No one ever spots it.
"That sounds so boring," Vicky argued. "You have all this cool stuff. You should use it mercilessly.
I paused to listen, it wasn't like I had much else to do right now. Taylor was off with her dad again. I
probably could have went with, but it didn't seem right cutting into their family time like that. Despite
the public identity, Taylor liked to keep her father away from her cape life, and vice versa.

"But that's not how it's done!" Riley whined. "It has to be normal or it's not fun!"

"Never thought I'd hear you say something like that," Zach spoke up. "Oww! Riley, please stop
teaching people how to not set off my rejuvenation power. It's lost its charm."

"She has a point," Missy replied, completely ignoring Zach's comment. "All the cool toys just get in
the way. It needs to be the traditional way. Especially since this is Riley's first time." The fuck are
they talking about?

"Really? That's awful," Theo spoke up. "Okay, normal way it is. Missy, you need to change. Vicky,
you too."

"No I don't," Vicky insisted. "You can do what you want, but I make this look way too good to give
it up. Just check out these curves."

"Yes ma-oww!" Zach exclaimed.

"Emma," Theo continued. "You can find something to put on. Sorry."

Okay, now I have to know. I finally walked into the group area. Riley was closest, wearing a
headband with two red puffballs held up cheap aluminum stems. Vicky was dressed up in a very
realistic copy of Alexandria's costume, though without the helmet. She'd even turned her hair black.

Missy was dressed up as a knight, although the outfit looked far too realistic to be any kind of store
bought costume. I saw Zach and just sighed. "Zach... why are you dressed up like a princess?"

"What?" he put his hand on his hip in a complete mockery of feminine grace. "Oh, I see how it is.
Missy gets to anachronistically cross dress and you're not asking her any questions. But when a
maaaaan does it, suddenly it's wrong."

"I wanted Theo to wear it, but he chickened out," Missy complained.
"He doesn't have the hips to pull it off anyway," Emma teased, putting her arm around Zach. "But now I don't have a costume. Do you know how hard it was to get a dragon costume to go with the theme? From Dragon, no less."

"You're suppose to be giving her armor a biotech interface upgrade," I pointed out. "Not wearing it to go trick or treating."

"Well, it needs field testing," Emma argued.

"Where's Eric?" I asked.

"Oh, apparently he's too old for trick or treating," Vicky informed us. "He's at a party with Crystal, Sabah and Lily. I'll probably swing by later, after the bartender gets too bored to check for ID. It'll be just like old times."

"Vicky," I replied dryly. "You do realize that regeneration means you're immune to alcohol, right?"

"What?" she asked. "Seriously?"

"Yup," I confirmed. "And pretty much every other drug, illegal or otherwise, that you can come across."

"Well, fu-udge me then," she sighed. "No wonder Lung had anger issues. Can't get drunk, there's nothing left to punch, can't even take a cat nap. How is a girl suppose to relax around here?"

"Speaking as someone in the same boat," Zach spoke up. "Whenever I need some good stress relief, I-"

"Finish that sentence and you won't get any 'relief' for a month," Emma threatened darkly.

Zach paused. "Babe, you know I love you, but if you threaten to take away my video games I will have to break up with you."

Emma glanced around. It was Vicky who started laughing first, and then I followed. That was the permission that everyone else needed to join in.

"Umm... I don't get it?" Riley spoke up. We just laughed harder. And then the alarms went off. Fuck.

"He pussed out last time," Zach replied. "I bet a fifty he does it again."

"I'll bet you five grand that you won't keep the princess costume on during the fight," Vicky added. "And it doesn't count unless it's over the battle armor."

"You're on!" Zach ran off, and everyone else started scrambling as well. We needed our costumes, the real ones this time. The others would arrive in their own time. Honestly, we probably didn't need to rush, we had almost thirty minutes of warning time before they could even narrow down the target location. Over an hour of total ready time. New Delhi, we had over four hours of warning, but that was a fluke brought on by the Simurgh for maximum devastation. Over four times the number of capes were there as was typical, and it resulted in the highest casualties of any Endbringer, or for that matter anything, in history.

I slipped into my standard costume, then opened the floor beneath me so I could drop into the labs. My Dryad was now officially the least advanced tech in the building, but it was still my battle harness. Riley had her Clarice controls on and was waiting for me. "Think I can take Clarice into the front lines this time?" she asked.

"Didn't you just finish making the new one?" I asked.

"Yeah," she admitted. "But she's extra powerful now. I think she's good enough to fight Behemoth."

"Let Taylor handle that," I told her while fusing my armor to my Dryad and climbing in. DeterminationThrill. I smiled. The SEB upgraded Zerg were incredible, and my General was just aching for a chance to really use them. "You focus on saving lives and running analysis with the rest of our tinkers. You're our best hope for learning how they're made, and how to shut down their makers. That's more important."

Emma was busy suiting up as well. Her armor was, well, I wasn't sure how it worked. But it could give her over an hour in her hybrid state, with all the data collection advantages which that entailed. My armor overheard her conversation. "Behemoth's core should be in its lower body, if our estimates are correct," she spoke. "Try to sever a leg if possible, we want the densest EB tissue we can acquire for our tests and future weapon development. Atropos already knows. Sorry I couldn't get the majority of the tech completed. No, thank you. We're about to jump over, see you at the fight."

Who was she talking to? I was about to ask her when I was interrupted when Crystal appeared in the middle of the lab, followed a minute or so later by Eric, Lily and Sabah. "Sorry it took so long," he apologized. "Took a bit of effort to sneak out of the party."
"Our reputations are ruined forever," Lily complained.

"I'm sorry!" he insisted. "I panicked. It was the first thing I could think of..."

"Telling my classmate we were going off for a threesome was the first thing you could think of?" Lily growled.

"It worked, didn't it?" he defended. "Did you have a better idea?"

"How about anything?" she suggested. "Anything at all would have been a better idea. You're lucky I don't turn you back into a girl the hard way."

"Well, at least I didn't say it was going to be a threesome with me," he argued. "So you don't have to worry too much."

Sabah just stood there looking embarrassed.

"Get in your costumes," I instructed. "You can vent your frustrations on Behemoth."

Lily moved toward her armor, giving Eric one last glance. Sabah followed suit, and Eric started putting on his own suit. It was one of the generic outfits. The teams hadn't had a chance to really optimize his power, except to provide tinker bombs to teleport to the Endbringers. He'd mostly be watching from a safe location and rescuing the injured and teleporting the occasional Zerg into combat range for Taylor.

We started shunting over. The mobile command center was already waiting, flanked by over a thousand zerglings and a hundred gargants. Most were the old fashioned variants, but we had plenty of the SEB upgraded versions, shimmering an unnaturally flawless white in the afternoon sun.

"Rey called in," Trevor informed us from the command center. "He'll be catching a ride with Rapture."

_We destroyed the Simurgh with less than a quarter of these forces_, I smiled. _DeterminationCertainty_. I looked over at Taylor who was only barely visible, but heading toward us fast._Today the hero killer would die._

============

A/N- Yay Endbringers!
... Also, for anyone who can't figure out who Eric is? Let me preemptively call you a moron.
I landed next to Amelia. *ConfidentSafe*. "Welcome to the party," she greeted.

We took our position, with everyone else forming clusters in front of us. The tech group was the obvious one, with Emma, Trevor and Riley for now. We’d fill out the ranks later with Ray and Rapture, the latter of whom might be instrumental in learning more about how the Endbringers thought and acted as a whole. Clarice would of course swap out with Riley instead of simply stand dumbly off to the side of the platform.

Lisa also took her place in that group. She wasn't a tinker, but in many ways she was better equipped to understand the Endbringers than anyone. With any luck, Victoria's power would be useful as well, but I wasn't holding a lot of hope. A lot of thinkers get pointed at Endbringers, only a rare few have ever got anything useful from them.

Then there was the 'big kid table' with Lily, Sabah, Crystal, and now Eric. It was remarkable how few on this team were actually adults, in retrospect. Eavesdropping was something I normally tried to avoid, but under the circumstances I wasn't so concerned.

"Are you okay?" Crystal asked Eric.

"Umm... not really," he admitted. "This is... I've only been a parahuman for about six months. I've never been in a real fight before, and my first is an Endbringer." Six months and he's never been in a fight? Six months ago was right around the time when Leviathan attacks Brockton Bay. I couldn't even remember the last time my life was so peaceful. Though, granted, things had gotten less dangerous of late. Having an army of monsters did that for you.

"My first real fight was Leviathan," Sabah added, showing a rare amount of initiative. I liked the woman, but she really wasn't the leadership type.

"Yeah," Crystal agreed. "Look, you won't even be in the thick of the battle. We've got an army of bug monsters that are going to do most of the heavy hitting. You just worry about getting people to safety. And that includes keeping yourself safe."

"Thanks," he replied. "I guess I'm just afraid of fucking it up on my first time out."

"Most veteran heroes are afraid the Endbringers," Lily replied. "You'd have to be insane or insanely powerful to not be. Just remember to stay calm and follow instructions. Trust that your team knows what it's doing. We've killed one Endbringer, we can kill another just as easily."

*They don't need our help,* I decided.
It would be a misnomer to say I turned my attention to the younger group, since I had the ability to focus on both. Zach, Theo, and Missy made up that core for now. They'd normally have all three of the tinkers with them, but those we needed in position and getting all the equipment up and running. Zach, for reasons I really didn't want to speculate upon, was wearing a 'slutty princess' halloween costume over his armor. Their conversation seemed fairly mundane, with Zach teasing Theo about radiation and glow in the dark sperm.

*AmusementAnticipation.* "You probably shouldn't 'inspect the troops' when your girlfriends right next to you," Amelia teased. "You might make me think I'm not attractive anymore."

I leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Whatever. We both know you're the one who gets to enjoy all the eye candy. Fifteen people, only five are guys. Of those guys, one is way too old, one was a girl, one is gay, and one is Zach."

"You didn't even mention Theo," she pointed out.

"Because Theo's not a guy anymore, he's Missy's property," I explained. "And if we're being honest, she's one of the capes I think could take us. Let's not tempt that fate. Besides, I'm happy right here." I wrapped my arm around her suit's arm. *WarmSafeLove.*

"You really know how to butter a girl up," she smiled at me.

"Yup," I agreed. "I know how to butter up exactly one girl. Luckily it's you, or things could get really awkward." *AmusedPleased.*

Dragon's voice came on over the command center. "Tentative confirmation of Behemoth," she informed our tinkers and thinkers. "Tracking estimates surfacing to occur in East South East Asia."

*TrepidationConfusion.* Oh, she must have picked up on my emotions. I opened all the coms just so no one was left out. "It's going to be China," I stated, there was no doubt. All the conversations died.

"Probably," Lisa agreed. "It makes sense. We either go for the kill and potentially start a massive international incident, or we let the Endbringer do its thing and make ourselves look weak in the process." *FrustrationAnger.*

"Another no win scenario," I agreed.

"Dragon's making calls on our behalf," Emma informed us. "Alerting the Chinese government about the potential danger and offering our help. There's a chance that China will accept it."
"They won't," Lisa responded. "What happened in New Delhi is being surpressed as much as possible by the CUI. They don't want to give their people the idea that outsiders are powerful enough to kill the Endbringers when they cannot."

*DisgustCertainty.* "We're going anyway," Amelia commanded. Riley turned and jogged toward us. Clarice robotically moved into position at her station. "At least we're getting close. Whether we choose to attack, we'll worry about later. If we're lucky he'll go after somewhere else." *HopeDoubt.*

"I'll relay that back to Dragon, if that's okay?" Emma offered.

"Do it," I agreed. She took a minute speaking into the interdimensional com in the command center.

"Dragon's acknowledged our decision, and is sending more detailed coordinates," Chariot informed us. *Why hasn't he ever picked out a thematic code name,* I wondered idly. *Something to ask him about one day.* "I'm uploading it into Lachesis' targeting system."

We waited in silence for a few minutes. "Damn," Emma muttered. "I know it's not a surprise, but Lisa was right. They're claiming they have a plan of their own and that we can fuck off. In words only slightly more polite."

*ConcernDisgustDismissal.* "We're still going anyway," Amelia insisted. "We are not going to let Behemoth destroy any more lives than we absolutely have to. If they want to bitch about it afterward, we'll deal with the consequences then."

"Damn straight!" Victoria shouted. No one objected, not even Lisa. And I was sure she would have.

"I've got the location," Lachesis informed us. "Chongqing."

She stepped forward, or what would become our forward, which was more to our right. I watched space twist and ripple from her power. Creating tunnels of this size took time for her, more for the risk of accidentally cracking continents than any actual difficulty. Our command center passed through first, guided by Clarice. Then the zerg poured through, using the infrared trackers left behind for them to follow. Amelia and I waited as everyone filed through. We were the last ones to pass through the passageway to our analogue of southern China.

"You know," I smiled at Amelia. "When you promised me an army, I was expecting giant hornets and relay bugs, not anti-Endbringer monsters."

"And when you agreed to be my partner, I was expecting you to help lead the team, not an engagement," she teased right back.
"I helped!" came Riley's muffled shout from her place in Amelia's armor.

In thinking about it, she was right on both counts. "Yeah, you helped," I agreed. "Keep up the good work."

==============

A/N- Has it really been 25 chapters since we got a Taylor perspective? Wow.
"Establishing dimensional tunnel," Trevor spoke up after the command center landed in place. "Shunting over the relay bugs." The portable relays were built from slightly modified, especially fast dragonflies. They wouldn't be out of place in any part of the world, so we felt confident we could use them without our presence being noticed. The zerg all served as relay bugs as well, of course, but there was no way to use those without being noticed.

I got my first look at Chongqing. The city was drizzly and dirty and looked cold. The relay bugs aren't going to do well in this weather, I realized. Of course, Taylor was smart. She'd probably fan them out and have them latch under trees or ledges of buildings. Hopefully the native insects would do better, but this was late October, not exactly the best part of the year for bugs. *Then again, bugs aren't how you fight Endbringers.* I looked at the literal army of zerg around us. *Those are how you fight Endbringers.*

_Confusion/Worry.* "They haven't even started the sirens," Taylor muttered. "I don't know Chinese, but there's no panic at all. These people have no idea what's coming."

"Maybe the C.U.I. didn't believe us?" Missy suggested.

"No, the Yangban are out in force," she told us. "Ten full divisions. Two hundred and fifty parahumans grouped twenty five at a time. Near the edges of the city. They seem to be practicing drills. There's also several thousand normal soldiers. There's not enough bugs for me to get a thorough count. They seem to be setting up barricades of some sort, but again I can't be certain."

"Barricades? Against Behemoth?" Lily this time. "Are they on drugs?"

"Tinker tech," Emma spoke up. "I'm running the scans now. It's gonna take a while, this stuff is like Dragon's work. Or mine, even. A hybrid of multiple Tinker disciplines. It's really elegant, can't wait to see how it works. I do recognize what I think are forcefield components, but like nothing I've ever seen before. Please tell me there's a chance we can steal some of this tech in the confusion? Dragon will want to have our babies if we get her some of this stuff. Fuck, I'll have your babies to get my teeth into this."

_Concern/Curiousity.* "If there's a way to get away with it without violating the Endbringer Truce or starting an international incident? I'll consider it."

"Woo! Bonus mission objective!" Vicky declared. "I'll scout the perimeter and look for weak points. Beats all this 'hurry up and wait' bullshit."

*I need to talk to her about playing too many of Zach's games,* I thought. "Go for it," I told her. "But
"Our priority is Behemoth."

"Understood," she saluted us in a mockery of military discipline. "Hey, Khepri, mind lending me a couple of the ghost cats? I'm pretty sure we'll need them for this."

"Okay," my partner agreed. Her undercurrents led me to believe that if we had a good shot, she'd okay the mission. We aren't even officially our own nation yet, and we're already committing international espionage.

It was another ten minutes of waiting before Behemoth arrived. A small skyscraper collapsing into the street below heralded the first and most deadly Endbringer. It was hard to place a value on which of the three was ultimately most devastating. They all had their place. Simurgh was, to quote something Zach had said, the 'mind killer', using paranoia and psychological weapons to incredible effect. Leviathan was the city killer, destroying our homes and our security. Behemoth was the hero killer. The one that took our best hopes for the future away from us.

The monster's head peaked out of the rubble, and the people which had moments before been gawking at the collapsing building turned and fled. They should be in shelters, I couldn't help but think. Behemoth opening attack was a roar that thankfully stayed silent from our side of the dimensional shell. Glass exploded even where we were positioned, over a mile away. People dropped in agony around us, their screams as visible and as silent as Behemoth's.

Those nearest the monster. I had to turn away. Skulls had shattered just as thoroughly as the glass, leaving gore and mess in the street. It was all I could do to not be sick within my suit. There were cries on our side, shrieks of horror and disgust. Taylor tried to offer me some comfort through our link, but she was too upset. The best she could maintain was anger and determination. I latched onto that, and returned it in kind. A feeling turned idea turned oath. *No matter what the future consequences might be, we would not let Behemoth leave this city alive.*

A lance of unidentifiable energy struck Behemoth from the side. His skin went from reddish brown to a neon green color, and then shattered into some kind of crystalline dust.

"Looks like a variant of Bakuda's glass," Riley informed us impassively. *Of course she'd be one of the ones who could watch this without looking away.* "It won't work. EB tissue is too dense, at most it could influence three layers deep. Superficial. Cosmetic damage."

"Anything that doesn't damage the core is cosmetic," Lisa replied. She, at least, sounded tense and nervous. "I didn't have a good position to see it with Leviathan, and by the time we were really hurting the Simurgh, I had already shunted out. But I'm getting the idea now. Victoria, what are you seeing?"

"A whole lotta nothin'," she answered. "I can anticipate his attacks, sort of."
Three bolts of lightning streaked toward three different Yangban divisions. They were almost annihilated. Moments later, they had reformed as if nothing happened. They have a variant of Zach's power?

"Dude, they're ripping me off!" Zach exclaimed.

"No, it's a form of time manipulation," Lisa replied. "A several second step backward in time, undoing Behemoth's damage. You were saying, Victoria?"

"Those three bolts could have been three hundred, maybe three thousand," she answered. "I'm sensing every possible attack he can make. This is like watching Bruce Lee fight a room full of toddlers, and letting the toddlers think they stand a chance of winning. If Behemoth wanted, this city would already be gone."

RealizationFearFocusDetermination. "Nothing we didn't already know," Taylor replied, her voice calm and commanding. "We know the Endbringers are far more powerful than they pretend to be. We also know we can kill them. If they want to hold back, then so be it, that just makes our jobs easier."

Meanwhile, Behemoth and the Yangban traded blows while the city around them suffered the consequences. At some point, they started switching attacks and combining energy types. Seems we weren't the only ones with cryo blasts, and somewhere they found a cape that could summon serpent like forms made of water. The Yangban's power sharing and amplification techniques meant they could literally flood a city block with the things, forcing Behemoth to boil away the mass even as more came to replace it and the ice power made it all the more difficult to burn through. It was an effective tactic in keeping the monster's attacks from reaching them.

Behemoth unleashed its roar again, shattering the water, the buildings, and countless people.

"One minute and six point six seconds between roars," Lisa replied. "This one's following the rule of threes as well, if a slightly more sinister variant."

"It doesn't have to," Victoria answered. "It could keep that attack going constantly for days if it wanted to,"

"Part of the human controller's bias," Lisa answered. "Remember, we're still recording this data for Rapture and Dragon to chew over for patterns and psychological profiling of the Endmakers. Anything you can contribute will only help."

The Yangban switched to another tactic, turning the street around Behemoth into some kind of liquid substance. The matter then warped and moved, wrapping itself around the creature and pinning its
arms and legs together. He fell and was immediately fired upon by dozens of energy attacks. Many, but not even close to most, were deflected away by his dynakenetic powers.

"They think they're winning," Vicky informed us.

"By the Endbringer's programming, I think they are winning," Lisa answered. "They follow a script. It's like a video game. The game programmer could easily create a game that instantly kills you in the first four seconds, but where's the fun in that?"

"These fights are suppose to be fun?" Zach asked. "Is Tarn Adams a suspect?" He stopped for a second. "...aaand I'm the only one who gets the joke."

"Oh fuck," Lisa muttered. "He's right. Or my power thinks he's right. The video game analogy might be more apt than I thought. It's possible the Endbringer battles are someone's idea of a game. Like gladiatorial combat on a mass scale."

=============

A/N- Losing is Fun!

... Honestly, after you get familiar with the interface, Dwarf Fortress is pretty easy. I quit playing after it became clear that FPS drain would kill all my fortresses.
"They're actually very good," Taylor admitted. It was true, we'd been watching the dance between Behemoth and the Yangban for nearly half an hour. One thing that surprised me was there were no losses. Well, there were many losses, Behemoth was doing an excellent job of burning through Yangban groups, only for them to recreate themselves moments later. They focused heavily on mobility and ranged assaults, having a hugely versatile array of tools to escape Behemoth's close range options. And, of course, all the civilians.

"We can take them," Victoria replied dismissively. "They have to call each attack. It slows them down, makes them predictable. The restoration power creates confusion in their ranks as the troops have to adjust to the changed perspective. They also have pretty much no thinker powers in the mess, so they're vulnerable to stealth attackers."

"They probably have other groups with those powers," Lisa informed. "Strangers, too. No sense in deploying powers that won't work on Endbringers in the first place. The C.U.I. knows what it's fighting. In as much as anyone without our intel could know."

"They're shooting the civilians!" Taylor exclaimed. Reflexively we turned toward the nearest barricade. The dimensional display tech reacted and dimmed the area around us and highlighted the more distant location. *It pays to have so many talented tinkers on the team.* Taylor was right, of course. The civilians had been retreating toward the barricades, trying to find anywhere to escape Behemoth. Now they were running from the barrier as dozens were mowed down by automatic weapons fire.

The ground beneath me shuddered, at it took a second to realize it was me causing it. The Yggdrasil trying to reach up and block the bullets. An impossibility, of course, from this side of the barricade.

"What do we do?" Sabah asked, her voice small.

I froze. This wasn't something I knew how to handle. These weren't just some gang. This was the single most populous nation on the planet, and if we jumped in we would be sparking an international war. One that we might very well lose to sheer numbers.

"We can't help them," Taylor spoke. "If we do in the middle of a Behemoth fight... it doesn't matter our reasons. We lose our allies. Almost all of them. If the Yangban tries to fight us instead of fighting Behemoth, it'll cost more lives in the long run than doing nothing."

"Fuck!" Vicky exclaimed. "Promise me that after we're done with the Endbringers and fucking Scion, we come back to these fuckers. We can't let them get away with this." She punched one of the
shadowcats hard enough to knock the three ton SEB armored creature on its side. It climbed to its feet without even a noise of objection.

"Yes," I agreed. "We'll make our stance known, take this footage to the international community and let them figure out what to do with it. When we start the portal system, we're leaving them out. I refuse to give people like them a world to exploit." *Doubt Concern. Taylor was right, I was bluffing about giving this to the world as a whole.* Doing so would prove we could spy across dimensions. This was something that Dragon was okay to know about, and it was something we couldn't hide from Cauldron if we tried, so we pretended we trusted them enough to just tell them, but this was functionally the perfect Stranger tech. Unless they invented something that could beat it. Better that they didn't even know to try.

"Is it wrong that I'm suddenly cheering for the Endbringer?" Eric asked. "Like we should just go home and let the Endbringers go after China as much as they like? Because right now, I'm hoping they drop right into the capital and have the time of their lives stomping on a royal family or two."

*Cruel Anger.* None of us said anything, but judging by the quiet responses, I couldn't help but feel most of us agreed with him on this, at least on some level. Certainly none of us felt the need to voice a disagreement.

Meanwhile, Behemoth decided he'd had enough punishment and it was time fight back again. Wrenching himself free of the liquefied earth with a massive leap, he traveled far more rapidly than I would have expected something that size to be able, and slamming into a group of Yangban, quite literally. Caught within the kill aura, they somehow managed to avoid bursting into flame. A defensive power of some sort, I would assume. Whatever it was, it wasn't a match for the incredible strength of the Endbringer, which crushed them without difficulty. That Yangban division was killed permanently.

A stream of exotic energies cut into Behemoth, leaving further gouges in the mostly restored flesh. *That's why he stayed so long in the gunk,* I realized. It let him regenerate from the damage they'd inflicted, however meaningless that damage may actually be.

"It has to obey the rules," Lisa observed. "If enough damage is inflicted it retreats because it's suppose to, not because it has to, but it's also allowed to buy time and recover. It's a psychological mechanism to punish hesitation and nonlethal attack styles. Encouraging conflicts to be as destructive and aggressive as possible."

"Sounds like everything we've learned about Passengers thus far," Clarice added. "They compel their hosts toward this."

"Untrue," Lisa replied. "Yes, they compel hosts toward conflict, but not toward this kind of mindless slaughter. They want evolution, and killing hosts in large numbers limits that. Small numbers of death are fine, of course, but there's a certain point where it becomes a problem. It's why Nilbog stopped with his city instead of overwhelming half the country. Why Jack Slash refused to let his
people cross certain thresholds. The Passengers want a cold war. The Unspoken Rules, or something similar to them, are a psychological compulsion. Endbringers are the antithesis to that goal."

"It suggests a host like me," I spoke. "One with a Third Trigger." *RealizationFearConcernSupport*. I felt Taylor's hand on my shoulder. Or, more appropriately, her suit's interaction with mine. It wasn't quite the same comfort, but it was nice.

"Putting special notes in describing Third Triggers," Lisa replied. "We're drifting dangerously close to the Taboo, here. This could limit our results."

Behemoth leapt again, and then promptly stalled in mid air. He was locked there as the Yangban took the opportunity to fire every attack they had at the trapped Endbringer, which roared and launched streams of lightning at his opponents.

The attacks took their usual toll, shattering already damaged buildings and reducing Yangban divisions in number, only for them to suddenly be restored. It was certainly an incredible power, significantly stronger than the Adepts' leadership.

The lightning around Behemoth stopped tracking toward enemies and turned inward, bouncing along his skin and the scars inflicted by the battle. The monster's skin started to glow white hot with power.

"Oh, fuck," Lisa muttered. "I think they've finally managed to piss him off. This is a new attack."

The Yangbang switched back to the water snakes, putting a huge amount of water around Behemoth. Thirty seconds had provided a quarter mile thick shell of water. Then he unleashed all that power, flash boiling the water and drowning much of the area in superheated steam. It poured forth and scoured Yangban and civilians alike, leaving them with horrific burns. The time manipulation was invoked again. Was there a limit to that power? I wondered.

"I don't understand," Lisa replied. "He should be withdrawing now. They've done more damage than he's experienced in his last three fights combined, and forced him to use a new power. What's he staying around for?"

"Uh... looks like they're starting up that barricade," Emma spoke. "I... have absolutely no idea what I'm looking at."

We looked around us, viewing the polyhedron dome that suddenly formed over the city. It was mostly clear. Behemoth roared again and sent lightning into the shielding. It turned nearly black in the panels that had been struck, then the color faded, leaving the entire dome slightly darker, but uniformed in shade.
"Okay, still don't know what I'm seeing," Emma muttered. "It's diffusing the energy through the field and into the area inside."

"I just lost my bugs," Taylor informed us. "I can't sense them in that dimension."

"The tunnel collapsed," Trevor responded. "I don't know why. Probably something to do with that shield."

Behemoth dropped and rushed the nearest part of the barricade, which was still well over three miles away from him, ignoring everything the Yangbang threw at him. It took him under a minute to arrive, colliding with the shield. Amazingly, it held. And the shield dimmed enough that the city was plunged into instant night.

"Holy fuck!" Emma exclaimed. "I know what it's doing! I think. It's using the energy directed against it to create a localized spatial anomaly. A naked singularity." She paused for a couple seconds as she realized that most of us didn't know what that meant.

"Umm... it's randomly warping the laws of physics inside it. There's no possible way to predict or control it, but the more power that field absorbs, the stranger things are going to get in there. And I mean that in a 'one plus one equals tapioca pudding' type physics breaking."

"Is that even possible?" Lily asked.

"Normally? No," she answered. "In there? Probably not, but things equally impossible are going to happen, one way or another."

"They're trying to kill him by changing reality enough that whatever allows him to function simply stops functioning," Lisa replied. "They're trying to make it so he cannot exist anymore." ConfusionTrepidationHope.

Behemoth attacked again, and our visual vanished. We still had displays from further away, but everything inside the dome was no longer visible. We no longer knew what was happening on the other side.

============= 

A/N- Ah, if only the cycle hadn't broken. That's the kind of thing that might let the Entities overcome the entropy problem. But Eden had to faceplant into a planet. Dumbass.
"That can't possibly work," Zach muttered. "Can it?"

"Not a chance in hell," Lisa replied. "The Endbringers already can't exist by the natural laws of our reality. What they're doing's going to put one hell of a dent in the fucker. Probably. Even that's questionable. But only attacks that can hurt the core will actually kill an Endbringer."

"Can we break the field?" I asked. "Maybe save the people caught inside? Their lives are being thrown away for nothing."

"No," Emma answered. "Opening the containment now would let the exotic effects pour out into the rest of the world. The results could easily be worse than New Delhi. It might even make our whole world uninhabitable." HorrorDismay.

"And they're using this on their own people," Taylor growled. "When that weapon shuts down, we're taking at least some of those barricades. The whole fucking thing if at all possible. We need to know how that tech works. This is a whole new kind of WMD. It might even be a way to attack Scion directly. If nothing else, if we have it that means they don't."

"And the possibility of an international incident?" Lisa asked.

"Fuck to that," I said, adding my support to Taylor. "They just unleashed that... that! On their own people. No one's going to blame us for doing what we must to stop it from happening again."


"Umm... if I may?" Trevor spoke up. "If you're willing to cannibalize some of our equipment, we might be able to do this without them being able to prove we were ever here in the first place."

_That would be nice._ "I'm listening," Taylor spoke for us.

....

The shield was still up, or at least we were unable to scan into its location and Behemoth had not left the containment, almost an hour later. We finished our project within that time. Over two hundred of
our zerglings were cut open to remove the shunting components, but we finished our new device. A nearly sixty mile long tube of modified Yggdrasil. Crystal and Vicky were busy pumping it with as much power as they could, and I was adding the amount of power I could by drawing off the normal Yggdrasil mass. We were ready.

"The power signatures are fading," Emma informed us. "Exotic physics effects are being detected. Either it's shutting down, or it's about to rupture. No way to know until we see it happen."

The shields didn't shatter so much as they evaporated, leaving behind a desert of twisted shapes existing without rhyme or reason. Several large slabs of matter had fallen into the blue sand that was all that existed of the soil. Crystals and metals were strewn about. Strange and colorful corals extended out of the sand, and birdlike creatures started falling from the sky and shattering into goo. A goo which struggled to move before breaking down into mist.

"Life?" I asked. "That field created living things?"

"It makes as much sense as anything else," Emma replied. "The laws of reality changed, but they didn't stop existing entirely. They're dying because whatever chemical properties allowed them to exist in the first place no longer apply. As lethal to them as the weapon itself was to the people caught within."

One of the crystal forms shifted and shattered. Beneath was Behemoth. He was reduced to a skeleton. Or, skeleton might be the wrong word. Perhaps more like an artist drawing the proportion lines before getting to the rest of the drawing. Little more than stick figure with extra details. If anything, somehow, he looked even more terrifying this way than he did with his flesh intact.

"Now!" Victoria shouted, and the ring of plant material shunted over. Taylor had six and a half seconds for the matter to completely encase the ring of barricades and shunt back. Any longer, and its cloaking effect would fail. She did it in five and a quarter. The massive wall of rings took their geosynchronous place in our dimension. 

"Could the theft be attributed to us? I asked myself. Maybe. Our teleportation equipment was already pretty well known, but only a few knew we were using an alternate earth as a planet sized staging platform and at-will base of operations. Either way, they certainly couldn't prove anything.

Behemoth charged the line not far from where he was trapped, smashing into the soldiers who had, not long ago, murdered innocent people who were simply trying to flee. The Yangban moved quickly, opening up with similar tactics as before. This time, the eldest of the Endbringers was done playing games. Now he fired at three divisions instead of one at a time. Now when he shot, he got the whole group. In three seconds, seventy five Yangban and hundreds of soldiers died.

"They broke its program," Lisa spoke in horror. "They follow a mantra of hitting harder than they are hit, and that was one hell of a hit. It's not going to retreat. It's not going to hold back. If we were to try to kill Behemoth now, it's just going to result in a slaughter. It's going to keep killing until it feels it's achieved enough of a body count to match was just happened."
"That could take hours," I replied.

"It will take days," Lisa corrected. "Well, Eric, you get your wish. I don't think China will survive this."

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked. *Fuck, didn't we just basically say we wanted this?*

"Unless Chariot has a way to evacuate entire cities?" she responded. "No, there's really not."

Behemoth's next attack was a new one. He smashed the stub that was once his fist into the ground and it rippled outward, a shockwave in the earth. Where people were standing, there was no warning. They didn't fall or scream or even see their deaths coming. They simply exploded into gore.

"He's still holding back," Lisa continued her analysis. "Less than before, but that was nothing but theatrics. Taking time to telegraph his attacks unnecessarily. He could easily do that without the stomp."

Behemoth moved into the part of the city which hadn't been functionally removed from the face of the planet. His kill aura no longer simply killed people, it caused the glass of the buildings to melt.

"Radiation output is off the charts," Emma informed us. "Much higher and your insides would simply liquify. As it stands, lethal exposure would occur in minutes. If you survive everything else for that long, at least. I think he's trying to lure the defenders into following his trail and killing themselves."

"Would the Zerg do anything to help?" Taylor asked. "Slow him down at least?"

"No," Lisa responded. "He'd just burrow underground to avoid them and start killing from beneath the earth. Fighting us in person is... more like a polite formality than anything. He certainly doesn't need to do it."

"So what do we do?" Vicky asked. "Let him go on his killing spree across China until he gets bored and takes a nap? Then kill him after he's calmed down a little?"

"That's exactly what we have to do," Lisa responded. "There are no other possibilities."

The visual display flickered again, and then fuzzed into near nothing. "What happened? Another reality weapon?" Taylor asked.
"Close," Trevor answered. "According to Dragon's tech, her satellites have gone dark as well. It's Scion. He's finally showed up."

"I hate to say this," I spoke up. "But that's good, in a twisted sort of way. The fuckers run from Scion, right? He'll go back into hibernation before killing most of China. Hell, maybe he won't run. Maybe he'll fight back and at least do some damage to Scion."

"We'll have to find out later," Lisa replied. "Whatever else happens, there's nothing more we can do here. Pack it up, head home, and hope like hell he didn't see us watching the battle from this side. The idea of him knowing where to find our dimension worries me."

============

A/N- And, sometimes, no matter how far off the rails you go, you intersect canon.

Chapter End Notes

http://i1180.photobucket.com/albums/x412/Desastre_BadLuckStar/emma-amelia_zpsdh9btl4x.png Fanart of Emma
Thankfully, China's city killer weapon was designed to be transportable by convoy truck. Ultralisks were more than capable of doing the lifting needed, and with Missy there to do the work, it only took us a fairly short amount of time to put the devices in our storage location. Our Tinkers were quite excited to work with the devices, of course. Or, at least, Emma and Trevor were. At the very least, they were going to talk with Dragon about tech trading. Not really Riley or Rey's specialty. I, meanwhile, was simply in shock. *We watched them murder a city.*

"Why'd they do it?" I asked as we finally got into our home. I could have asked sooner, but somehow I had to wait until we were inside a familiar setting. Lisa just looked away. She had an answer, she just didn't want to say it.

"Reputation," Eric volunteered. "My father's like that, too. If someone outstaged him, he had to find a way to outstage them right back. You can't run a gang without being the scariest fucker on the block."

"Sounds about right," Theo nodded. "It's about power and image. We killed an Endbringer. They had to kill one or they would look weaker than us."

"They are weaker than us," Victoria replied. "When we kill Endbringers, they actually die. Behemoth lived through their attack."

"They got what they wanted," Lisa informed us. "Behemoth was destroyed."

"Not by them," Vicky retorted.

"The story they tell is quite different," she sighed, holding up her smartphone. "Heroic sacrifice, yadda yadda, shield yadda yadda, prevented Behemoth from destroying China the way the Simurgh did India, more yadda yadda. Victory for the CUI, and proof of the Mandate of Heaven, or whatever bullshit propaganda they're using this week. Doesn't matter what the truth is, they only have to fool their own people. Imperial China has won its internal PR war. *DisgustHate.*"

"By killing millions of their own?" I voiced the outrage all of us were feeling. "They didn't even let the ones who could escape get out. They were gunning them down like they were already dead."

"I wish I could say it was even something so callous as removing witnesses," Lisa replied. "This was... fuck, I guess it's analogy time. Did you know grenades aren't designed to kill people?"

"No," I admitted.
"I do, ma'am," Theo simply closed his eyes and put an arm around a very upset looking Missy. "We can leave, if you want," he offered her.

"No, I need to hear this," she answered. "I want to know why."

"I know it sounds counter intuitive," Lisa continued. "Until you start thinking economics." DreadDisgust. "A dead soldier costs the enemy a patch of dirt and a gravestone. A wounded soldier costs hospital beds, doctors, food and money. It's functionally the same thing here. A good chunk of the city was destroyed, along with all its residents. Now they'll build a monument to all the dead in its place. If the people had escaped, there'd be refugee camps and aiding the homeless. Or, maybe they wouldn't, and they'd just tell the refugees to suck it up. But that would still be disruptive and remind their people that this so called victory of theirs had victims instead of heroic sacrifices. Easier just to let everyone pretend this is a happy occasion."

"That's beyond fucked up," Zach replied. "Can they really do that?"

"Already did," Lisa answered. "In the time it's taken us to get home, their royal family has already declared it a national holiday. Something which, I remind you, no one did after the Simurgh's death. We mourned the lives lost in India as one of the greatest tragedies in human history. China celebrates its dead as heroes, and brags that its forward thinking prevented the damage from being worse. Welcome to propaganda."

"Fuck," I cursed.

"It's not all bad," Lisa replied. "Thanks to this being such a 'great victory', it means they have to stay silent about anything that disproves that claim. They're not going to say anything about the stolen tinker tech. At least as long as we don't say anything about their little mass murder spree, they won't be able to officially complain about us walking away with their doomsday weapon."

"So, basically, we're looking at the glass as half full," Zach replied. He waited a beat. "While ignoring the part where the liquid inside is cat piss concentrate. Know what? Fuck it. I'm done. If you need me, I'm going to be online finding a shooter game that involves mowing my way through a Chinese army. Killing Nazi zombies just isn't going to cut it for me anymore."

"Aww," Riley whined. "I worked so hard on that Christmas surprise, too." AnxiousHorror. We all went silent and looked toward the girl. Every last one of us. She looked at our expressions. "What?" she asked.

"Don't worry," Lisa cut in. "She was just telling a joke." The rest of us breathed a collective sigh of relief.
"No, dad, we didn't even do anything," Taylor spoke into the phone. "We geared up before finding out he was going after China. They refused to let us help. Sat around and waited to see if they'd change their minds. Not much we could do without starting World War Three. No, they don't. Scion did it. I think he always could. I don't know why he didn't. Hard to figure out a guy who doesn't speak and spends as much time rescuing kittens from trees as he does stopping volcanoes. Sorry our dinner went to waste." MisgivingReluctantHappy. "Oh, well that's good. I'm just going to stay here tonight, I thought you wouldn't mind. Sounds good. Love you too."

She sighed after hanging up the phone. "How is it that I lie to my dad more now than before he knew I was a cape?" She sat down on 'her side' of the bed.

"Welcome to international politics, I guess," I turned and crawled up behind her.

"Know what sucks the most?" she muttered as I brushed her rather abundant hair off to the side. "This feels like something Piggot would do. Like we're leaving the victims to suffer because the abuser's more useful to us than they are."

"We're not," I insisted. Taylor let out a light moan as I pressed the balls of my thumbs into her back. "It's more like a hostage situation. If we go in now, it's going to hurt a lot of innocent people. Unacceptable amounts of them. China still has almost a billion people in it, and they'll all suffer if we attack the CUI."

"And we have 'more important' monsters to go after," Taylor sighed. "Scion takes priority. Fucking moral arithmetic."

"Even you can't be everywhere and do everything," I offered.

"I probably cou-," she gasped as I sent a pulse of my power through her body, lightly stimulating her entire nervous system. "That's cheating," she finally managed to form words. "That is so not fair."

"Hey, you're the one who used her doppleganger," I pointed out. "You don't get to complain when I use my powers." I pressed my elbow against a spot on her lower back that my power kindly informed me was a prime location. I smiled as she moaned softly.

"I didn't hear you complaining," she replied, pushing her back against me in a way vaguely reminiscent of a cat. For the briefest second, that caused me to freeze up. Her body was so absurdly strong and flawless, reminding me that she was the copy, not the original. I crushed that thought immediately. She's still Taylor.
"I don't hear you complaining either," I countered, hitting her with another pulse that caused her to slump back against me.

"Why would I?" she asked happily. "Oh, by the way, your Aunt Sarah says hi."

"When did you ta-" I hesitated for a second. "Oh. You mean?"

"Yup," Taylor answered. "They apparently decided that it would be wrong to let dinner be wasted. And then she stayed over."

"Eww," I responded.

"I know," she agreed, still leaning up against me. I allowed myself a look down her shirt when she did. AmusedPleasedConfident. "So I'm staying here tonight."

"I should charge you rent," I teased.

"You still owe for that house I got you," she argued.

"Okay," I agreed. "So we're even. Are you feeling better?"

"A little," she replied.

"Good," I scooted a bit away from her and rolled face down over on my side. "My turn."

====================================

A/N- mood whiplash! I never tire of it.
"Hey, Ames," Vicky spoke as she walked into my brand new office. *Yes, I have an office now, instead of just remodeling my bedroom.* Once upon a time, that bedroom had been an office that I just created a bed in when I chose not to go home to sleep. At this point, it had been months since I even set foot in that house. *Time to give up and simply admit I live at my job.* "Your birthday's in May. So why are you celebrating it in the middle of November? Are you in that big a hurry to turn eighteen? Because we can have a perfectly ordinary party, if you're bored."

I hesitated for a moment. *She's not going to like this one,* I thought to myself. *Sorry, Vicky, but I promised myself this when I took my birth name.* "It's my real birthday," I told her. "Or my real birth month, at least. Apparently finding out who my birth mother was still isn't an option. And it's looking more and more like my father renamed me after getting me, so nuts to having an identifiable birth certificate."

"And what's wrong with you being Amy Dallon?" Vicky argued, staring me down. "I get that you were pissed at mom. I even get why. But this is like you're saying you don't want to be my sister."

Ouch. "That's not..." I sighed. "That's not what it's about. It's about being me, instead of what other people try to force me to be. I stopped pretending to be Amy Dallon because I wasn't happy. I've found who I am now, who I want to be."

"So you don't want to be my sister," she pressed.

"No!" I repled. "I do. I just... honestly, I want to be your sister now more than I did... before." I looked away.

"Oh, right," she muttered. "I kinda try not to think about that."

I cringed. "I spent the last three and a half years of my life trying not to think about it." *At least it's comforting how I don't really find her attractive anymore.* Lisa said it was because her aura warped my memory of her. What she really looks like is really very different than what my mind saw. Rose colored glasses, superpowers edition. "You can understand why I'd like to put that part of my life behind me."

"So you'd rather be Marquis' daughter than Mom's?" she asked.

"If you asked me that a few months ago, I would have said 'fuck yes',' I told her. "Now? Yes, as a matter of fact, I think I would have. I still have some memories of what my life was like. Before. They're happy memories. Whatever Marquis might have been, he was a caring father. I'd like to think that, maybe, we'd have a relationship a little like Taylor and her dad. Fuck, even now Danny
treats me more like a daughter than either of them did for the whole ten years of my life I spent with them."

"Except the part where he was a supervillain," she argued. "Probably would have turned out more like Eric or Theo and their fathers. Is that the kind of parental relationship you'd rather have?"

"Maybe," I shrugged. "But at least there's a chance. Maybe he would have cared about me. Maybe I wouldn't have been treated like a ticking time bomb or completely ignored or... everything else. You can't blame me for choosing 'maybe okay' over 'guaranteed suck', can you?"

"Was it really all bad?" she asked. I almost backed out then. SupportLove. I drew on my link with Taylor. This was a long time coming, and I'm not going to chicken out of it yet again just to spare Vicky's feelings.

"Other than you?" I replied. "It really kinda was. Sure, it was all first world problems. I wasn't starved or sold into slavery or beaten or molested, so there are plenty of people who've lived through a lot fucking worse. But I was raised to by a father who couldn't love me and a mother that didn't even pretend not to hate me. Parents I desperately tried to earn some kind of approval from for years and at best got indifference. Yeah, I know they're both trying to make up for it now, and I'm even trying to let them. You should thank Taylor for that, by the way, because she's the only reason I didn't tell Mom to get fucked by Behemoth."

"I... that mindlink between the two of you?" she asked. "You're using it right now, aren't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Is that healthy?" she asked.

I paused for a second, thinking back to what I was like before the link. What Taylor was like. What we were like when we went without it. What happened to Taylor, especially.ConcernInsecurityLoss. I focused back on the link. Don't worry, Taylor, never again. She probably got something closer to comfort and certainty. It was still hard for us to communicate more than the simplest ideas through the link.

"Is it healthy for Eric to be Eric instead of Arianna?" I asked. It may have been a deflection, but it was an analogy I could work with as well. "I'm sure there are people out there with really good arguments why it's not. And ones with equally good arguments why it is. He's happy how he is, and he'd be miserable if I, for whatever reason, decided that what he was asking for was wrong. He gets to live the life he wants, now. So do Taylor and I. AgreementCertaintyLove.

"Well, aside the Endbringers and Despotisms and Space Whales," I added. "But we're kinda stuck with those."
She stood there, chewing over my answer. Or, more likely, trying to find an argument against it. "I kinda hate how much smarter you are than me, sometimes," she finally answered. "This philosophy shit isn't my thing, so I can't really say anything without looking stupid or like a complete bitch."

"Yeah, well, Lisa's tried her best to talk us out of it, too," I smirked. "She finally gave up." *After Taylor's death and her own Second Trigger.* "If it makes you feel any better, we don't leave the link on constantly. It basically turns off when one of us falls asleep. We also have cutoffs that we can use to deactivate it temporarily. Like when we're going to the bathroom. We don't have a lot of privacy between us, but there are limits."

"Yeah, I get the idea," Vicky scrunched her face in what I had to assume was exaggerated disgust. "So... yeah... you'd rather be Amelia."

"That doesn't mean I don't want you to be my sister!" I exclaimed. "You have to believe that."

"I know. Lie detector, remember?" she tapped the side of your head. "Sure, your link messes with the emotion part of the bioscan some, but I'm pretty sure you can't actually get a lie through."

"Umm, I've always kinda wondered, what does that look like?" I started. "You know... Taylia... how our emotions look to an outsider. Call it my birthday present."

"Well, okay," she sighed. "The first thing is that the two of you don't get angry. Or, not as angry as you should. Whenever anything really starts to get to you, it's quickly replaced by a sort of... intensity... kinda like when my power starts running and telling me what to do to kill something."

"That one's mostly Taylor," I replied. "She's really big on taking action when something looks bad. Kinda like you, honestly. Whenever you get mad, you turn it toward something productive. Like punching Nazis. *I wonder if that's part of why I was attracted to her in the first place. That and the legs. Oh, yes, the legs.*"

"Well, I do love punching me some Nazis," she agreed with a smile. "You also never stay sad for very long. Like, at all. I get the feeling that if I stormed out of here in anger and swore never to talk to you again, you'd be over it in, like, a day or two. And that might be my ego refusing to let me admit you could get over it sooner."

"You're my sister and I love you." I insisted. "I couldn't just forget about you like that. We put so much time and effort into saving you in the first place."

"Believe me, I'm glad you did," she replied. "But it's... fuck, after Behemoth was destroyed, you and Taylor retreated to your bedroom and by morning you were fine. Not even pretending to be fine.
"You were both honestly over the whole thing."

"We're not over it," I insisted. *DisgustDetermination.* "We're still going to make them pay for what they've done."

"I know," she replied. "But then look at everyone else. Missy spent some time crying on Theo's shoulder. Lily and Sabah went straight to one of their bedrooms, and I'm pretty sure they skipped their usual nightly routine of wild sex followed by one or the other stumbling back to their apartment next door because for whatever reason they refuse to actually move in together." *Yeah, I still wasn't sure what the story was with that, myself.*

Victoria continued running down her list. "Zach and Emma both got themselves banned from PHO. Granted, that happens like once every other week anyway, but they really went all out this time. Eric decided to go after the punching bag until his hands bled."

I remembered that, of course. "He said he just needed to work out some frustration and went overboard," I told her.

"Yeah, doesn't surprise me, he's really hung up on that whole 'real men don't show weakness' shit," she replied. "And I got to lay in bed all night cuddling Riley while she whimpered in her sleep. And the next three nights I spent sparring with Zach and Emma and Crystal and Eric while Riley stayed with you. The only person who didn't seem bothered by all this is Lisa. I'm pretty sure she's decided there's exactly one person on this planet that she actually cares about, and it's not the eight or nine million Chinese who died."

*ConcernSurprise.* "Wow... I didn't realize... are we really that oblivious?"

"Kinda," Vicky answered. "You two get so caught up in the grand mission and each other that there's not a lot of space in those noggin's of yours to notice everything else going on around you." *RealizationWorryFailure.*

"Pot calling the kettle black here, sis," I retorted.

"Hey, I'd be doing the same thing if I could," she argued. "But there aren't any more Nazis left to punch, and there aren't any heterosexual life partners for me to cuddle with in our underwear. Don't say Lisa, because there's literally no one worse."

"What? You prefer Riley?" I teased.

"Okay, I was wrong."
A/N - Yeah, I know the formatting got borked in the last bit. Fixed now.
"Surprise!" Riley shouted as I followed Vicky into the main area.

"Hey, Mushroom," Zach stage whispered. "It's not a surprise party."

"So what?" she asked. "It's fun."

"Well, can't argue with that logic," he agreed. "So, what's first? Cake, icecream or presents. Just remember to unwrap Taylor last." Amusement Annoyance.

"Don't you mean..." I stopped for a second. "No, of course you don't." But it did invoke a thought or two. Pleased Proud.

"Oww!" Zach exclaimed, looking over at Riley, who had given him a good jab in the sides. She really dug into his rib with that one.

"No, we gotta talk serious for a minute," I insisted. "I've just found out I suck at considering other peoples' feelings. Like really, really bad."

"To be fair, most of us do," Vicky responded. "We're allowed to. It's called being a teenager. Pretty much on the front page of the user manual. I can see feelings and I still suck at it most of the time. You can ask anyone."

"Yeah, took us two hours to get her to understand that some of us actually have to work to keep our figures, and that means we have to eat something other than pizza once in a while."

"You mean there are things other than pizza that you can eat?" Zach cut in. "What is this strange idea that you speak of?"

"He acts like he's joking, but he's really quite serious," Emma added. "Takes him half an hour to figure out how to make a sandwhich. Which isn't half as long as I'll make him suffer if he makes the obvious joke." She growled the last few word at him.

"Yes, mistress," he fake whimpered. "Please don't hurt me again."

"All joking aside," I insisted. "I mean it. We kinda get caught up in the, well, everything. No need to go over all the shit we have to worry about. I'm trying not to murder the party completely. So, yeah, I was saying. We get distracted by all the huge shit and start to ignore some stuff. Like how sometimes we have to do things that upset some of you. And that's the kind of thing we can't afford to ignore."
You're important. Not just because of your powers, but because you're my friends. Except maybe you, Lisa. Depends on how much shit you'll give me for saying that. And Rey... maybe I should worry about him some more, too?"

"Don't worry on either account," Lisa replied. "It's your birthday, you're entitled to exactly one soppy speech without me using it against you. But only one, everything else will be used against you. As for Rey, I don't think you have to worry. Except maybe that he's having way too much fun at his job, especially with the new Endbringer tissue. I'm more than half expecting to walk in on him hugging the samples and telling them how much daddy loves them."

*AmusementConcern.* "I'll... umm... try to keep a better eye on him," Taylor offered.

"Don't worry about it," Trevor replied. "I think he's finally discovered his real specialty."

"His specialty is Endbringers?" Zach exclaimed.

"More like artificial life," he responded. "Yeah, I know, not news. But they confirm his skills aren't just for things that we know of a life. He can work with inorganic things like Endbringer tissue. And probably a number of other things. Doesn't get much more alien than Endbringer. Maybe some of the weirder Case 53s."

"Okay, so that's him out of the way," I agreed. "Let's get to everyone else. I'm sorry things went so badly in Chongqing."

"Not your fault," Crystal insisted. "There's no good way to handle that shit. We should just be glad Scion wiped Behemoth before it could go on a complete rampage. At least now we know more about how they think, and what we have to do to kill them. Like making damn sure we do it on the first hit."

"Thanks," I smiled. "I just want you to know that, as completely dense as I can be, it's not because I don't care. I'm just busy and... fuck, how is it that my life was less complicated when we were planning to overthrow the PRT? There's just so much to worry about now. I just want you to know that if you have any problems, you're free to bring them up with me any time."

"You heard it here first, folks," Zach announced. "Amelia just gave us all permission to walk in and have a chat with her when she and Taylor are in mid—Oww god damnt!" Emma and Riley jabbed his ribs, and Vicky zapped him in the face. "I was going to say cuddle time!"

"Holy shit, he's telling the truth," Vicky informed us.

"See, told you!" he insisted.
"But only because you figured someone would interrupt him so you could say that," she added, doing her best 'mom' impersonation.

"That? You can really tell that?" Zach asked, and Vicky simply nodded. "Okay, that's it, your power is completely unfairly bullshit."

"Says the guy who even my power can't figure out how to kill," she muttered. "So, is all the heavy shit done? Can we get to the gifts? Or the cake. Or how about gifts made out of cake? One of you can tinker that up, right?"

"Okay, Vicky, what's your gift?"

"Crystal and I got this one together," she announced.

"We may have let Eric help," Crystal added. "Someone needed to carry the bags."

"It's not like I know what you like," he shrugged. "And they seemed to know what they were doing."

"We got you your entire winter wardrobe update!" Vicky announced. "The miracles of weird ass thinker powers, I can just envision you in each outfit so you don't even need to be there, they'll all fit perfectly and look awesome."

"She did the fitting, I did the awesome," Crystal added. "When you pulled her out of stasis, you left her fashion sense behind."

"Don't look at me," Eric replied. "I have less than zero fashion sense. I'm still wearing the same clothes I did in highschool."

"Okay, where are they?" I sighed. Damn Vicky and her damn shopping.

"Your closet," she informed me. "We knew you would just keep using your old clothes, so we replaced everything for you. Now you have no choice but to look good. So give up and deal with it."

"Thanks," I replied dryly.

"Emma and I got you one together," Riley smiled, holding out a box. I opened it, and a large
parakeet with a gorgeous green coloration hopped out onto my hand. It didn't seem upset to have been in a box. "It' a songbird," Riley informed us. "It's designed to be the perfect singer."

"It's Yggdrasil based, of course," Emma informed. "About a terrabyte worth of memory storage for plenty of storage space, and it has hundreds of songbird types it can sing, either in imitation of actual birdcalls, or simply singing along to whatever music it's playing."

Meanwhile the construct had hopped its way up my arm, and was nuzzling my ear. I reached up and rubbed its back, which it seemed to enjoy.

"Also, it's pretty much made of adorable," Emma finished up.

"Me next," Zach declared, holding up box that could have held clothes. He handed it over and I nearly dropped it for the weight. I peeled off wrapping paper of some cartoon character I didn't recognize, and looked at the contents.

"Massage oils?" I asked.

"Hey, those are the high quality kind," he replied.

"Okay, this was actually surprisingly thoughtful," I admitted.


Theo gave me a remarkably well sculpted model of a tree. He is getting really good with his powers, I noted.

Missy's was next. "It's a collection of extra music for your songbird. And instructions on how to use it since tinkers don't know what user documentation is." The bird chirped happily at Missy.

"I made you a nightgown," Sabah offered hers next. "It's some of the finer spider silk. There are no words for how comfortable that stuff is."

"More music," Lily shrugged. "Sorry, I don't have one of those cool making things powers. But then I got to thinking about that bird and wondering what it can do. Everyone else kept picking out soft rock, so I got you some good metal, just for variety's sake. Also, it's kind of hilarious watching that little thing go."
We were down to just Trevor and Lisa, and Lisa simply smiled and waved in his direction. It was a smaller box. A couple long boxes, I realized as I opened the wrapping. "They're a matching pair, for you and Taylor." I opened it and lifted the silver chain. It had a lovely rendition of the globe on it. I found the other was shaped like a scarab beetle, wings open.

"They're meant to lock together," he informed us. Taylor and I fiddled with it for a little bit before figuring it out, but he was right. The final product had the beetle sitting on the globe and shielding it with the wings.

"It's beautiful," I replied. I meant it, too. The artist who created this was a genius.

"And the best for last," Lisa announced, holding up an envelope and handing it over. "Don't worry about all the words. It's really quite simple. The UN's finally agreed to everything. You're holding official recognition. Pantheon is now its own sovereign state, with recognized domain by the majority of our world's nations." SurpriseAwe. "Congrats you two, you can call yourselves the Queens or Empresses or whatever you like of your own planet sized country. And the magic tree house is now, officially, a magic tree Embassy."

"Holy fuck," I muttered.

============

A/N- Woo, birthdays! And recognizing a bunch of kids as a sovereign power.
"Accord and Dragon have already done the heavy lifting," Lisa replied as we sat down to our first real development meeting. "There's about twenty seven hours of technical reading, but Dragon will be kind enough to summarize all our plans." Lisa pressed the button that activated our meeting. Multiple holograms popped up. Dragon, Accord, Rapture and Halo. Why's he here for this one? For our part, only myself, Taylor and Lisa and Emma were present. Due to her multidiscipline tinker specialty, she was functionally our tech advisor for this meeting.

"Good morning, Pantheon," Dragon acknowledged. "Esteemed guests. We are here to discuss the management of the newly established nation-world. Pantheon has, of course, been acknowledged as the rulers of an interim government presiding over their earth Avalon. This meeting is an unofficial discussion of the intended management of that world, both in the nature of its laws, and the nature of its role in the international, and soon to be interplanetary, community. I would remind those present that this is unofficial. Any suggestions and agreements made here today are, as such, also unofficial and nonbinding."

We all nodded in understanding. This was too massive to just decide in a single day. We'd need to hire legal experts and god only knows what others to get everything smoothed out perfectly. On the other hand, we had the world's ultimate think tank here. Details would be handled over time, but the broad strokes would be established here. If, as Dragon put it, unofficially.

"Accord has drawn up an excellent development model for the effort of Avalon's industrialization," Lisa announced first. "I apologize for being unable to review it fully before this meeting, but as always the plan is brilliant. We can basically just hand a copy to the city government and walk away. I appreciate the extra effort put into creating a model which does not take parahuman involvement into account, beyond the ever present Yggdrasil."

"You're welcome," Accord replied, sounding about as happy as I've ever heard him. Which was still about the same as a slightly annoyed Carol. "I felt it was necessary to recognize that not all locations would have access to appropriate parahuman resources. The intent was to allow natural development to occur at a rapid but stable pace on its own."

"Industrial resources, we can supply," Emma replied next. "In what is a gross waste of our tinker talents, we've designed a series of organisms that can provide basically any form of oil or gas product. I won't go into too much detail, but suffice it to say a couple thousand square miles of Yggdrasil dedicated to the process, and properly supplied by solar energy surrounding the region and garbage for mass, could provide pretty much all the crude oil consumption needs of Earth Bet. We will be able to get even more efficiency once we switch to biodiesel, but we'd still have need for petroleum for plastics and the like, so the designs will continue to have value."

"Also a good way to keep the country funded," Lisa added. "The US and UN have made it abundantly clear that any attempt to get into the oil industry on Bet world would result in some problems, but on our own world? Well, if we're charging for gas, we probably won't even need taxes
to pay for anything. Or at least very little for a long time. Plus or minus rent."

"I would be willing to purchase fuels for a number of my projects," Dragon offered. "I prefer not to get political, but there is an appeal in not giving my money to oil companies."

"Of course, there is the issue of money and economy," Lisa added. "Accord has drawn up points in that regard as well. As a nation functionally lacking in 'fiat' wealth, we have to back our economy on reality as opposed to perception. Having a reliable trade partner helps. We can also count land ownership as a pretty strong basic wealth, but that will have less appeal as there's not a lack of places to live."

"I've already created a system for specialized Yggdrasil that will merge into the normal replace the old with new features and structures," I replied. "Food will be unlimited. I can create versions that become roads or grow into small houses. Nearly instant small communities. Bigger ones will need metals and construction materials, of course."

"With my help, that likely won't be an issue," Dragon offered. "I have need of a larger manufacturing base than Bet can currently provide me. You have already generously provided a region for me to work with, and I would continue to do so. In the process, I'd hire my own people and purchase my own construction equipment and transport it to Avalon. Once my needs are fully met, I could provide a seed from which other development companies could start and expand. In fact, I would like to invest in those companies, myself. Your world currently has a great deal of untapped exploitable resources. Once your industrial age begins, it won't take long to reach modern development status. Albeit with a significantly lower population than most industrial nations."

"Which brings us to finding colonists," I stated. We'd all given this a great deal of thought, after all. "Atropos made an interesting suggestion the other day. We can, essentially, recruit Japan. ConfusionInterest. I smiled. "She said her parents are immigrants, came over before Kyushu. Japanese culture is strongly focused on family and heritage, and the collapse of their country into third world status is understandably heartbreaking to them. She suggested we could give Avalon's Japan to Bet's Japan, with similar governing concessions that they've already had with America since after World War Two. It might take some convincing, but she really thinks it could work. And there's always refugees from elsewhere."

"That would be a significant head start," Lisa agreed. "We can even do better since our governing system would give them worldwide influence. A lot of it considering they could instantly become the most populous region on the planet. It also brings us into governing as a whole. Dragon's provided us an excellent design that I could only call a 'Constitutional Federal Monarchy'. She's probably better equipped to explain."

"Yes," Dragon responded. "It would function fairly similarly to the British Empire at the height of its power, with a various local governments working alongside a powerful but distant monarchy. You would provide the monarchy, and with it the military aspect of your world."
"At the representative level, the government is not that different from American states," Lisa added. "They assign their own chosen leaders to be, functionally, our own brand of Congress and Senate. Though who they select is more the way governments send people to represent them in the United Nations. Just like the states, they'll be their own countries, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them. It's an ideal hybrid of independence and interdependence. And takes care of most of the effort of managing a planet from us."

"That sounds pretty good," I agreed. It really does. Totalitarian government, even benign totalitarian government, wasn't something I wanted to be a part of. Controlling the military was fine, if only because I didn't want anyone else controlling it. I had memories of the PRT and fucking China to teach me why putting that power in the hands of people was unacceptably frightening.

"As for us?" Lisa continued. "We're the military branch. Police, too. We have less power than, say, the US President. Bit of veto power, but our legal systems pretty automated thanks to the contributions of what's going to be an extremely powerful judicial system, compared to the USA. Be sure to thank Rapture and Emma for this baby."

Oh boy. "Yes," Rapture spoke. "We've developed a mass production system for what are, essentially, perfect lie detectors." Surprise Anticipation. "In essence, your legal system will never be held back by the need to consider whether a criminal is actually guilty or not. With exception to parahumans who might have resistance to the tech through any number of possible methods. They'll be considerably more difficult to handle, but are fairly rare."

"As such," Dragon responded. "Law will focus on determining the extent of punishments appropriate for particular crimes. A less costly and more streamlined affair. It will provide equal protection thanks to unbiased, AI systems. Although determining a punishment for a given crime will be handled by jury, guilt itself can never be in doubt and no agency will be able to cover up a crime's occurrence. Although investigative work will likely still be needed to find criminals quickly, citizens will be required to regularly submit to an automated interview to catch people whose crimes have gone unnoticed."

"That... that's insane," Taylor spoke. "A system that can honestly protect everyone equally." Her emotions were complex and hard to parse, combining mixtures of anger, regret, frustration, hope and vindication. She must be thinking of what might have happened for her if she had been able to rely upon such a system.

"You'd have to rewrite at least three amendments to make it happen in the US," Lisa smirked. "Also it'll be a while before we have the infrastructure to really produce judges, juries and overall legal systems. So here's hoping the other incentives keep people away from being criminals for a while."

"There's an entire section in here regarding the legal rights applying to, and I quote 'unnaturally created, modified, nonhuman and otherwise unusual sapient beings'?" Halo spoke up.

"Yes," I answered. "In addition to the various forms of Case 53s, there is the fact that my sister's
currently in a body she wasn't born with. There's been a few years for the law to catch up to stuff like that, but at this moment you could argue that she's not entitled to legal recognition under US law. And there's the possibility of AIs, or a power like mine in the hands of someone who'd actually use it that way."

"Fair enough," he replied. "While we're on the subject of legal rights, your stance on religious freedom?"

"Similar to America," I answered.

"Even if we wanted to take a different approach, we really couldn't," Lisa replied. "We will enforce strictly protected equal rights for everyone, and beyond that we're just going to leave it to our individual nations. In fact, the brilliant part of this system is we can do that with almost everything. Our function here is basically the same as on Bet. We exist to eliminate problems and make sure others don't want to become problems."

==========

A/N- Isn't it lovely when a plan comes together? And makes a world.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, Acolyte (Temp-banned) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.
Your temporary ban expires on December 1, 2011.
You have 25 infractions and 15 warnings. You were last banned on September 28, 2011.

Topic: A New World? (LOCKED)
In: Boards ▶ Theories ▶ Conspiracy ▶ World ▶ Pantheon
Acolyte (Original Poster) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Posted on October 12, 2011:
Early August/Late July Pantheon began utilizing a new form of teleportation technology. Initially it seemed to be just like any other, except for the fact that there appeared to be no limit to how much they could transport and how far it could go. On August 15th they transported a massive army that no one had seen before from a unknown location and then saved the lives of several capes by teleporting them to an unknown location, saving them from the Simurgh's final strike.
Like everything Pantheon does, their teleportation devices are shrouded in mystery. Where did they store their army of beasts? Where did Minerva and Chariot take the capes they saved and why did they return to New Dehli?
I've heard rumors from the tinker community that Pantheon's devices are immune to regular anti-teleportation countermeasures. One tinker got his hands on one of their devices and made a post claiming it was closer to Haywire's technology then a teleporter. The post was deleted and no one's heard from him since.
And now closed door meetings are being held across in the highest levels of government. Meetings on everything from colinization plans to Interdimensional politics to the sovereignty of a Parahuman State.
It is clear that Pantheon has discovered a new world and remade it in their image and our Overlords are doing their best to get a slice of the pie. The only question is what do we do?
I for one will be immigrating to Pantheon's world at the first available opportunity. The chance to escape our oppressors and enter Pantheon's loving embrace shoudl not be passed over.

This thread has been locked, any posts made here will be deleted immediately and the poster will be banned for one day

(Showing Page 30 of 31)

Judge (Moderator)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Pantheon has done nothing but protect and aid people and has proven essential to preserving our rights and freedoms, including developing a extremely effective anti-master drug. The claim that they...
are intending to take over and "put the people with real power in charge” is extremely offensive and completely unfounded. Enjoy your ban.

► Zero Sum
Replied on October 16, 2011:
You clearly haven’t seen Pantheon in action. If they wanted control of BB, or the New England for that matter, they would have it.

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Not helping

► Stone Face
Replied on October 16, 2011:
This is all very interesting but can we get back to the topic at hand? All evidence that Pantheon has access to an alternate universe is both flimsy and circumstantial. While I'm not putting anything past them I'd like to see some hard evidence before I assume they have a spare world.

► Acolyte (Original Poster) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Just like a shill, to deny the evidence that is right in front of you. Pantheon is more powerful then they let on and the government is trying to cover it up so you don't realize that there's a better option then letting them grind you into the dirt.

► Acolyte (Original Poster) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Just like a shill, to deny the evidence that is right in front of you. Pantheon is more powerful then they let on and the government is trying to cover it up so you don't realize that there's a better option then letting them grind you into the dirt.

*User as received an infraction for this post*

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Just because someone disagrees with you doesn't mean they're a shill

► Chrome
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Yes, because a bunch of teenagers who think they're gods are a way better option then our rightfully elected leaders.

► Acolyte (Original Poster) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
If you think we actually have a say in who gets elected then you're dumber then I thought.

► Chrome
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Says the guy whose too dumb to avoid double posting. If we're not choosing who gets elected, who is? The lizard people? Giant alien space whales? Democracy is a tried and tested method that protects us from one that one person with power who wants to screw us over. History has shown us that every time power is handed to one person they go mad with it. And that's without Big Sister seeing your every move through her creepy bugs. Pantheon has too much power as is and sooner or later they're going to decide that they need more for the "greater good". They need to be restrained now, before it's too late.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 28, 29, 30, 31
(Showing Page 31 of 31)

► Newter (Verified Cape)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Man I wish I was the secret power behind the government, that would be awesome

► Stone Face
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Man where the hell did Judge go? This is getting bad, fast.
► Acolyte (Original Poster) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Maybe Pantheon should seize power, they've certainly shown that they have the ability to get things done. I bet that if they took over we'd be looking at cleaner cities, less crime and a fuckload of dead Endbringers. They're certainly more suited for the task then anyone you voted for
► Chrome
Replied on October 16, 2011:
And what are you going to do when they decide that regular humans aren't good enough for their new and better future? Just shug and submit to modification? Pantheon has shown time and time again that they're willing to pervert nature to complete their goals. Right now they're sticking to big emergencies but what happens when they kill the last S-Class threat? They'll look for other ways to improve things and decide that humans would be better if they were a little less human. They've already started experiments with Acesco. And what about behaviour modification? Do you think Blasto and Accord just gave up crime because Pantheon asked them to? Why would they imprison criminals when they can "reeducate" them? I guess you think free will's overrated.
► Ekul (Banned)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
*Your post has been deleted, you are not a member of the PRT, you haven't killed 300 C.U.I. agents and the tech guys assure me you can't trace anyone's IP. This is the fifth time you've attempted to derail a thread with this stupid, violent rant of yours despite our warnings and temp bans. You are no longer welcome on this site*
► Acolyte (Original Poster) (Temp-banned) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
The day you get reeducated I'll fucking celebrate
► Chrome (Temp-banned)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
Ha, you'll probably sacrifice yourself to your "gods" before that ever happens
► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on October 16, 2011:
I step away from to computer to have dinner and come back to this. I'm giving you both a month and half to cool down and I'm locking this thread. The only people who know what Pantheon can do is Pantheon and the lot of you seem incapable of speculating civilly. 31 pages of this crap is more than enough.
End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 29, 30, 31

So this derailed far faster then I expected it would, apparently crazy and discussion just don't mix

Chapter End Notes

Second of three Canon Omakes by me
"So, how's Pantheon's toy treating you?" I asked Newter as he lounged in one of the private booths. Recently he'd been acting a little unusual, as evidenced by the lack of attractive girls who were often too young to purchase alcohol. He of course never did anything untoward to them, and in fact made them sign wavers before allowing them to recreationally try his drug. I was initially hesitant to allow him to do that at all, but he had proven discreet and it tended to draw in men wealthy enough to pay good money, and girls attractive enough to get wealthy men (or women) to pay good money.

Remarkably enough, it actually reduced the other recreational drugs making their way into my club. Or at least it did, before Pantheon put the kibosh on that market entirely. Every few weeks, some fucker would still bring some date rape drug in here. They were given the option of being taken out back, beaten by a couple of the bouncers, and then given to the police. Or taken out back and left for Khepri to deal with. I almost felt sorry for the bastards who chose option two. Almost.

"Oh, the usual," he answered, lounging back with his wine glass. I knew from experience that it wasn't wine. Likely a clear soda, possibly sparkling water. He always said it was a waste of good booze, since his powers meant he couldn't get intoxicated. "My IQ's gone up a few more points, I'd be in the top five percent of non-parahumans except," he gestured by spreading his arms and then bending his hands inwards. "My reaction speed and hand-eye coordination deserves its own thinker rating, with both hands. And I keep having those dreams about the mildew room."

"It's something, at least," I replied. Not long after Newter started the treatment, he began having the vivid lucid dreams about a room with a mildewy smell, but he couldn't see or hear or touch anything, he was simply in the dark with the smell. We asked Yum Kaax about that, and he said something about smell being the sense most strongly tied to memory. Nothing was certain.

"Everything we were promised and more," he agreed, with his usual cheer.

But not the one thing we were hoping for, I frowned. "Sounds like we should consider having all of us use it," I replied. We had tried it on Elle, but that failed to show results. Patheon's tinker theorized it was because her power caused the problem. The neural regeneration tech could repair any biological and even a lot of psychological disorders, but much like Case 53s regenerating their bodies back to their nonhuman state if someone like Gaea repairs them, the ones that altered the mind wouldn't allow that mind to be altered back. Elle could never be normal unless her power was removed.

"Couldn't hurt," he replied, then took another swallow of his drink. "Anyway, I'm feeling a bit peckish. Can you let the doorman know to expect a couple pizzas in an hour or so?"

"Will do," I agreed as I turned and left. It was an obvious dismissal, and I tried to respect my employees' wishes when it didn't interfere with the job. Newter wished to be left alone to gorge himself on junk food. We all had our ways of coping.
Elle was staring at the wall, slowly running her hand across it. As she did so, the Yggdrasil's dark teal coloration would shift, changing color and texture at random. Over the course of hours, it would fade back to its original color. Pantheon had given us a special house for her, and any of us, to stay in. Being alive, the Yggdrasil was resistant to alteration Elle's power. Not completely, for reasons no one quite understood, but it was enough that the girl could safely stay in this home without any risk to herself, us, or the property. Any damage caused by her power's 'friction' against unchanged Yggdrasil would regrow quickly.

Emily was attempting to feed the girl while she played. Mashed potatoes and peas. Something she could eat safely if she forgot to chew, which could happen on a bad day. *Pantheon talked about permanent power removal*, I reminded myself. *Elle might be able to be restored to normal, at the cost of her powers.* I pushed that thought back. We needed her, no one else could provide the dimensional gates. And those gates, the safe havens they represented, were what was going to give humanity a real hope for the future.

I didn't believe Pantheon could end the Endbringers. They got the Simurgh, somehow. Maybe they could even kill Leviathan and Behemoth, but Barghest was custom designed to beat Pantheon, that was obvious to everyone that was actually paying attention. All the replacements would be as well. The only real solution was to get off of Bet. Find worlds where there might be some hope in the future. If an Endbringer crosses into another dimension, seal it off and leave them trapped inside. It was a cruel sort of math. Sacrificing a world, maybe a million people, so that the rest of us could have a future. But it was our only real hope.

"Good morning, Elle," I said as tenderly as I could. She didn't respond at all, hadn't seemed to hear me at all. I hadn't expected that she would. *I'm sorry, Elle, you have to be one of the sacrifices.* As she absently swallowed her food, I examined her art. Crudely drawn, but angry seeming stick figures and faces. Some held objects that may have been sticks, or perhaps guns. Bars, cages and chains were strewn about. Strangely, those were done in disturbing detail, each link painstakingly drawn. Another aspect of the damage her power had done to her.

"So, Tattletale just called," I informed Emily. *I don't care what she calls herself; she'll always be Tattletale to me.* "Our negotiations are locked in and agreed upon. "There's still stupid arguments over where to establish portals, and the order of priority, and other shit that the talking heads won't finish until Christmas or the next Endbringer fight, whichever happens first. And then suddenly everything will be solved in a couple days and they'll all announce success and then go give each other congratulatory handj-" I remembered the little girl in the room. "shakes in the back room."

"I still don't know how you managed to negotiate pay of two million dollars a portal during an international mandate that the Sanctuary Initiative was a humanitarian aid project and to remain completely nonprofit," Emily smirked. "Seriously, are you sure you don't have a Master or Thinker power?"

"Security?" She asked. "Oooh, I think I get it. There's all kinds of dangerous people out there who might want to capture or kill the portal makers. You'll need to provide bodyguards and parahuman protection over us during the trip and the stay in hotels. You could probably make that a lot more expensive than a couple million a pop."

"Right on the money," I confirmed. "Plus or minus a few other details. I let them talk me down from three, just so they could feel like they won something. It's not like they won't profit from this. New land, new people, new taxes. It's only fair we get our part of the pie." And to ensure that Elle gets the best care for the rest of her life, we owe her so much more than that.

"Unlike Pantheon, we're not getting a shiny new planet of our own."

"Wait," she blinked. "They're asking for a planet!?" she stressed the last word hard enough that it even got Elle to glance over at her, though only for a second before she returned to her art.

"I bet it'll end up being more than one," I shrugged. "Remember how they were talking about Gaea's dead playground world when we did that first portal?"

"Yeah," her eyes widened. "That place was a wasteland. Like. A billion nuclear bombs level wasteland. They fixed it?"

"Yup," I answered. "Safe for humans. Or will be in a month or two. They're arguing that it's not private exploitation of a Sanctuary world, because their Avalon. That's what they named it, by the way. Could never have supported life without them."

"Think it'll work?" she asked.

"Oh, absolutely," I agreed. "They need it too much to say no. Besides, the experimental tunnel showed there are hundreds of habitable worlds without any humans. Selling something that was never theirs and they couldn't use anyway? Easiest price in the world to pay. It's the next two parts that are going to make them drag their feet, and that won't take much longer."

"Please dish," Emily leaned toward me, while Elle continued to work her art.

"First," I started. "Think about it. They've got one dead world. There are easily dozens of others in similar states. They can keep claiming those without making many waves. Maybe they'll make a token gesture and give away half their salvaged planets. By the time we run out of acceptable options, Pantheon will have five times as many worlds as their next two competitors combined."
"Shit," she agreed.

"Second," I finished. "They're not negotiating over the planet. That's a given. What they want is recognition from the international community that they are a country. In short, Pantheon's members are one rubber stamp away from being one of the most powerful nations on earth. Seems fair to me that we walk away from this with about thirty mil each, give or take."

"You're not getting paid enough," she informed me.

"I know."
"I'm not getting paid nearly enough," I muttered. Atropos had finally arrived, in full costume, with a travel pack that was pretty much an oversized six legged suitcase. Literal legs, it trotted near her like an obedient dog. Along with her were three others. Eki and Victoria, I recognized. The young man that could have been Latino or Mediterranean in ancestry, I had never seen before. All were, of course, also in their armors.

"I dunno," the tall blond in front of me smirked. "I'd say you're making bank right now. Two mil a portal? All five of you? That's two hundred grand per job, and each job can be done in a few hours for basically no risk. No one ever paid me that kind of money. One guy did try to hire me for a job that paid almost as good a while ago. I inquired as to what company made such a generous offer, but for some reason he had come down with a sudden case of knocked the fuck out. Later we had a conversation but we got too busy talking about my family life. Like how my mother was just made a senior partner at her lawfirm, and how I planned to celebrate my seventeenth birthday. We forgot all about his job offer in the excitement."

"You're making all of that up," the remarkably good looking young man insisted. Now that he was closer, I noted his armor was one of the rather bland and generic battle armors that Pantheon mass produces for the Protectorate. He probably doesn't have an abusable power type, I decided.

"Nope, all true," Victoria smiled cheerfully. "I may have embellished a little bit at the end. The conversation was pretty one sided, seeing as his jaw was wired shut. Other than that, all true. But I digress. We were talking about Faultline's career, not mine. Is this girl taking notes from Tattletale? Or she could even be Tattletale. I knew who she was suppose to be, but a little bit of Blasto's cloning and some body shaping with their bullshit powers... couldn't rule out anything.

"Miss Dallon?" I asked, trying to get her attention focused, though I knew she was doing this on purpose.

"Wow," Vicky replied. "So you do remember me!"

"It's hard not to," I answered as noncommittally as possible. "Victoria Dallon, recently brought back from the dead with a brand new powerset. One that makes your old one look boring by comparison."

"How is making villains drop to their knees and weep in front of me a boring power?" she retorted. "Sure, maybe I got better powers now, but you can't call my old set the least bit boring. Maybe it's just because you were too smart to start trouble in the same city as me?"

Tattletale clone, I would bet money on it. "Or Armsmaster," I replied.
"Oh god!" she exclaimed. "Best gossip ever!"

"What?" Atropos asked with the kind of familiar confidence that led me to believe they'd done something similar before. The man, who I still hadn't put a name to, was less assured. A new recruit, I decided. Wonder what kind of top tier power this one has. I didn't put too much concern into it. Power follows power, after all, and Pantheon had absurd amounts of power. Besides, I was more concerned with Tattle-two-point-oh.

Victoria's grin widened into something just a little less malicious, but not less infuriating, than the real Tattletale's. "Turns out, Faultline here had a crush on Armsmaster." God damn it.

"Really?" Atropos laughed.

"Can we just get to the point?" I insisted, trying very hard to sound more bored and less annoyed. "There's no point in talking about the dead."

"Oh, right, knew we forgot something," Victoria responded. "Well, the bosses agreed that your point about needing security was a good one. So we're here to provide security for our half of this equation."

What? "What?" I asked. "Your half is an Endslayer. What does she need protected from?"

"That's what I said," the blond sighed. "But they were pretty insistent that we go along. I tried to argue with them, but they wouldn't listen. My sister and her fiancee are like the most overprotective parents ever."

"Hey, I got the cameras," Eki replied as she held up a bag. "Do you think eight extra memory sticks will be enough?"

I looked at her, and back toward Victoria. "Cameras?"

"We gotta make sure we document any incidents, right?"

"So how many boring places do we have to go through before Milan?" Eki asked.

I raised an eyebrow. "Hey, if I have to go anyway, I might as well try to make the best out of a bad situation," Victoria added. "Plus since we have an Italian speaker on the team anyway..."

"I'm looking forward to England, myself," the young man added.
"Just because you think British accents are hot," Eki teased, jabbing him lightly with her elbow. He blushed slightly. *Well, he won't have any trouble finding girls who'll appreciate the attention,* I added internally.

"Just remember that if my sister has to cure anyone's herpes, she will tell me, and I will tell everyone else," Victoria practically sang.

"You spend way too much time around Zach," Eki said dryly.

"Not my fault the only good shooter game involving the CUI pretty much requires co-op mode," she replied. "Would you rather I have the shitty AI soldiers run the chain gun mounted on the back of the Puma? Sure as hell ain't gonna play with those creepy fucks online. I swear to god, if another nasally pimple infested thirteen year old asks me to send pictures of my tits, I will use my power to find a way to kill the internet forever."

This is hell, I decided. *This is Tattletale's revenge for outsmarting her and making money off of this in spite of all her efforts to make that impossible. Well played, bitch. Well fucking played.* "Are you going to introduce me to the new guy?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Oh, right, where are my manners?" Victoria smiled. "This is Janus. He'll be our chauffeur for this event."

"Good to meet you, ma'am," he smiled and extended his hand. I accepted it, expecting a handshake. Instead he lifted it up and gave my fingers a light kiss. *Really laying on the charm there, huh kid?* I smiled back. *He's a little too effeminate for my tastes, but if I'm not careful I'll need a crowbar to pry Emily off.*

"Charmed," I answered. "So, I know the powers the others bring to the table. What are you capable of?"

"Long range teleportation," he answered. "I can teleport things to myself, or I can choose a location anywhere on the planet and send them there instead. Pantheon bought an abandoned oil platform a couple miles off into the ocean that I can put trouble makers, and a hospital to send civilians if we need to."

"That is quite an ability," I responded. Screw the crowbar, I'm going to give Emily some champagne and my finest tips for dealing with men. "So, how much are they paying you? I could use an extra hand around here." I of course expected to be turned down, but it opened the dialogue for the future.

Atropos laughed. "I remember when you were trying to recruit me."
"And if you had accepted, we could charge a hundred times as much for these gateways and no one
would bat an eye before paying up," I pointed out. "We could have all been billionaires in a couple
years."

"True," she agreed. "But instead, I get to be an Endslayer. One of the most talked about badasses on
the planet. And now a member of the Japanese Imperial family. You should have seen the look on
my parents faces when they found out about that."

"And laid," Victoria added. "You get that a lot, too."

One of the wings from Atropos' costume snapped out. Victoria was knocked back several feet.
Remarkably, she back flipped a couple times and landed feet first on the wall, then dropped to the
ground, standing.

"You let her hit you!" Eki declared in shock.

"If I didn't, she'd have plotted something even worse. Probably got her girlfriend to help, and that's a
fight I would lose so hard," Victoria replied. "Anti precog battle armor is such bullshit."

Janus had the good sense to look embarrassed by the display. "Sorry, ma'am," he shrugged
sheepishly. "I do appreciate the offer, but I'm not the sort that's really concerned with money. If I
was, I'd have just continued living the good life as the child of a supervillain mob boss."

"Well, I had to try," I responded. Okay, Emily, ball is entirely in your court now.
"Are you going to be okay?" Amelia asked. No, I reminded myself. *This is a mission, she's Gaea here.* I smiled as she placed a hand gently on my shoulder. *She's concerned about my wellbeing.*

"Dinah gives me almost ten percent better odds than anyone else," I answered, looking up at her. "Besides, it's Clarice, not me. I'm perfectly safe."

"I know," she answered, her breath visible in the chill air. "But this is still Nilbog."

*She's scared of him*, I realized. *What he is, what he represents, what he's done. A dark mirror to her own power, what she could have become. What she would have become, if Jack had gotten ahold of her.* "I know," I answered with confidence, though it didn't seem to make her feel better. "You don't have to worry, there's nothing he can do that compares to me. He's a fairy tale. I'm a goddess."

She didn't seem comforted by that, either. If anything, it seemed to upset her more. *I suck at making people feel better.*

"Everything's ready on this end," Khepri responded. "Relay bugs are through, I'm expanding out to cover the city. It's strange, though. Even for this time of year, there should be more bugs. There's barely even any worms in the soil. I don't have the ability to search for anything."

"There's still time to cancel the mission," Defiant asked us. He had been the one most vocally opposed to this plan from the beginning. He was also the one that Dragon trusted to monitor this mission up close.

"No," Minerva answered immediately. "Our odds plummet if we wait much longer. Whatever inconveniences we face now, keep in mind we have an over ninety eight on this. Besides, we need this victory now, after the destruction of Behemoth got claimed by the CUI."

"Hardly seems we can consider Behemoth and Nilbog to be equivalent," Defiant countered. *He doesn't like Minerva. That's a point in his favor. Then again, that was a point in almost everyone's favor.*

"Not even close," she agreed. "But better than nothing by far."
The pair of them and Yum Kaax were managing our command center for this mission. Our other tinkers all had their own projects. Tir was working on large scale shunt devices for Japan alongside Hecate. Dragon would listen in, but she was putting most of her efforts on our world into establishing an industry base and moving the core of her operations to our world. Who knew populating our own nation-world would take so much work?

Their advice wouldn't make the difference in this mission, anyway. *I'm the key component, I'm the one whose actions determine success or failure.*

We had positioned at the epicenter of the city, the heart of it. Finding the Goblin King would be Taylor's job, but it was likely near us, or in the most impressive looking building left standing.

"The scan's complete," Yum Kaax informed us. "We're bringing up the dimensional viewer system."

There was a shimmer as the sky changed and our otherwise barren landscape was replaced by buildings. Most suffered from general lack of repair, but were mostly intact. Snow coated the ground in thick drifts. Old snow, from the looks of it, but still pristine. Throughout the city there was no sign that the smallest bit had been touched by life since it had fallen.

Big Sis saw it, too. "Everything's dead," she muttered.

"Not everything," Minerva answered. "We're getting life signs. Nilbog's monsters. There's not a lot of them, but they're there. Buried under the snow or hibernating in buildings. You'd think they were dead. In fact, a lot of them are dead."

"It's the cold," Yum Kaax replied. "His creations, they've stripped this city of resources. Probably running on solar energy just to keep themselves alive. But Nilbog isn't like Amelia. He can't just magic up biosystems and remodel them at will. He imagines and he creates, but that's it, there's no understanding of how or what he's creating. More like Genesis than anyone on our team. They may be stronger than anything Amelia or I can build conventionally, but they're starved for raw material. Proteins. Some of the complex saccharides, perhaps. And he doesn't know how to grow something that can make more."

"Wasteful," Defiant muttered. "He could have grown gardens. Potatoes and soybeans would cover most needs."

Yum Kaax simply shrugged. "I never said that he was smart. Clever, maybe, but definitely not smart. Then again, by the time he ever realized he needed seeds and other supplies, they were probably eaten by something."
"He'll wait until spring and have the living bring him the dead," Minerva added. "Then he'll consume what he has to and replace what he can. That's why Dinah said it had to be now, during this cold snap. It's the time when he's weakest, when he's most aware of the inevitable point when he no longer has the resources to keep his creations alive."

"If we were going for an assassination," Defiant volunteered, "Now would be the time. Or we can simply allow him to die of starvation."

"Dinah says that results in the death of millions of people," Minerva responded. "No matter what plan I suggest, or what counters we propose, it always results in millions of deaths. And, yes, I verified that it's human people, not Nilbog monster people. Yes, that applies to just leaving him alone. Eventually he'll get desperate enough to break out of containment."

"I believe I've found him," Khepri answered. "It's the one building with heat, and it's about a block from here. Aceso, time for you to shine."

"On it," I responded, taking a seat. Clarice and Bella, or stripped down models of them both, started to move. A couple buttons pressed, Bella stretched her beautiful wings, and they both shunted over into the heart of Nilbog's realm. My sensors started relaying data immediately.

It was far colder here than on Avalon. Temperatures well below freezing, although nothing that could threaten our constructs. Calmly, I approached Nilbog's throne through Clarice. The building was obviously once the town hall, but was now covered in wild growths of plants and vines that had either died or went dormant. Flags and other colorful cloth draped the area like something from a medieval reenactment, but had long ago started to tear and fade. Now they were mere rags.

Two monsters barred the door. Both were large, feline in nature. Their heads were distinctly humanoid, however, and they had almost comically large breasts with much of their torsos keeping to a mostly human form. Their eyes were enormous in proportion to their faces, and they had minuscule mouths in comparison. This is the work of a man who forgot what humans looked like, I realized. Something intended to be beautiful, but instead only fit to disgust and disturb. This is why I'm the ideal candidate. I know how he thinks.

"Sphinxes," Minerva informed. An obvious statement, if there was ever one. But I waited for the insight that should come. "Nilbog's put more effort into these than most, and he's keeping them active despite the cold. They're some of his favorites. There were three, but they died recently. These two are what he had the supplies to rebuild. This is why Dinah's numbers spiked recently."

I might be able to use that.

"Who are you," one demanded. Her voice was wrong, irregular, an unnatural combination of high pitch and loud that wouldn't happen in most normal life. It was more like listening to Minnie Mouse with the volume up far too high. And her inflections were stressed, as if from a second rate actress.
trying to mimic royalty or dramatic speech. *Or a child imitating something she watched.*

"I wish to speak with Nilbog," I told them. "I am an emissary from the gods."

"Going a bit off script there," Gaea whispered, although there was no need to.

"No, it's perfect," Minerva insisted. "Riley, you're a genius." To my surprise, the insulting comment comparing me to Doctor Frankenstein or something similar didn't follow, a rarity. *Probably just doesn't want to be unprofessional during the mission.*

The sphinxes moved toward me, but a simple command brought Bella back and took her further off the ground. The gust from her wings disturbed the snow only barely. Neither of Nilbog's guards came out to mar the perfect white. "I will speak with your master, he is worthy," I told them. "You are not."

"Offer him a gift," Khepri responded. "Or, no, call it a blessing. We'll get it ready."

=============

A/N- Next chapter is either meeting Nilbog, or me cutting to a different scene entirely. Guess which!
I nodded, and Clarice spoke. "I bring a blessing to your lord, but only to his person, and none other. One does not get to snub divinity." Shatterbird would be proud of my display here, I thought. She'd deny it, of course, and find some way to insult it. But she would be impressed nonetheless.

A voice called out from inside, which Clarice easily picked up on. It was excessively jovial, overdramatic and strange. But unlike my behavior as Bonesaw, this man was not faking it in any way. This is how he wants to act and believes he should act. "Spectacular! I've never met a goddess before! Come in, come in!"

I allowed Bella to descend, and she walked into the building, her wings folded to her sides. Or she pretended to walk. It had taken weeks of work to achieve it, but this was actually a flight subroutine. Bella would mimic walking or running, but her feet would never touch the ground. One of my favorite bits of showmanship. The features were also programmed into the other steeds I had built, of course, but it was designed for Bella.

Nilbog was sitting upon a throne that looked to be cobbled together from modifying a love seat. He was massive, easily four or five hundred pounds, and most of it was fat. His skin coated in a thin greaselike substance that was blotted with the ashes of fires and dirt. "You spoke of a blessing?" he asked with the eagerness of a five year old. It would take all of minutes for a man like Jack to twist this pathetic sap to his will.

"Yes, I did," I answered, still astride Bella. "I am Aceso, I come here to your kingdom on behalf of Gaea, bringing a message from all the gods. An invitation."

"What if I do not believe you are a god, child?" he asked, still smiling. This was a game I knew, feigning haughtiness in the face of a possibly superior foe. Jack might not have written that book, but he certainly added a few chapters.

"Nothing will happen," I answered.

"So you are afraid of me?" he laughed, his multiple chins shaking. Drops of oil splattered down his body. Most people would find him repulsive, I knew. I certainly didn't find him attractive, but I was familiar with worse horrors than he had to offer. I created many of them.

"Not in the least," I answered. "I will simply take my leave of you. Your punishment will be nothing at all. Gods are secure in their power, and unbelievers suffer simply for being unbelievers."

"No!" he insisted. "Gods are mighty and should demonstrate their might. Teach the unbelievers to suffer for the crime of refusing to obey and bow to them. Only weak gods would allow themselves to
be ignored. You are no god."

"He's projecting," Minerva informed us. "He was a loner and a loser before getting his powers. He
knows what he did to Ellisburg was wrong, but he has convinced himself that they were at fault for
treating him wrong. He still feels guilt, though he will of course deny that, even to himself."

"I can prove otherwise," I answered. "Gods have great knowledge. For example, I know that this
body you present here is not the real you. That is fine, you may talk to me through your intermediary.
More importantly, I know that your kingdom is slowly dying."

He frowned, his mood darkening.

On the other side, I was listening and watching as Gaea and Khepri discussed and worked with
Defiant. They're nearly finished. "Add a second shunt device," I instructed them as they worked.

"That's going to slow us down a little," Defiant replied.

"Trust me, I have a plan," I told them. They, thankfully, didn't argue

"Gods have great power, able to perform incredible miracles," I continued, buying the bit of time
needed.

"What miracles can you perform, then?" he smirked. "I have slaughtered and claimed my own
kingdom. I have populated it with subjects loyal to my will and ready to service my every desire.
What miracles have you performed?"

I have created diseases that would scour life from this planet. "I have restored the dead to life," I
answered slowly and dramatically, exploiting Clarice's painstakingly perfected voice. "I craft
weapons powerful enough to slay other gods. I have seen those weapons turned upon the
Endbringers, and then birthed armies from their dead flesh. I offered those armies to my Sister's
consort as a tribute." Would he even remember the Endbringers, trapped behind this wall for as long
as he has been? "I am the gatekeeper of life and death even for the immortals."

"We're ready," Gaea informed me. She sounded more than a little upset right now, and much of it
was probably caused by my speech. Sorry, Big Sister, this mission is more important than your
discomfort. I could observe the unnatural calming influence from Taylia at work, making my words
more palatable. Khepri agrees that, since this is working, it's the right thing to do.

"Still, it is not my miracles that should concern you here, today," I finished. "I will agree that gods
are not always known for benevolence, but we shall show you such blessings today. Behold."
On the side, I gave the command. "Now."

There was a crackle as the large amount of air was displaced and the mass shunted through. A living blob of psuedo-flesh, thousands of pounds of it, appeared. It was more like a large slab of raw roast beef with a pulse than anything else, and it smelled much the same. The outer layer, at least, was Yggdrasil tuned to work with the shunt drives, although the inner matter had been transmuted into something very much animal flesh.

"What is that?" the bloated man-child asked, as dozens of his hidden minions started crawling out of the woodworks. Literally in more than a few cases. They came in many shapes and sizes, most childlike in their natures, three to four feet tall, hybrids of human and animal features. Few were functional lifeforms, clumsy and misshapen and only alive due to his power breaking many of the laws of biology. It seemed that Nilbog was more interested in creating creatures that looked like cartoons than he was in making life that could function as a viable being. They're toys, I realized quickly. No more indicative of his real capabilities than Fluffy was of mine. And created for the same reasons, an escape from loneliness.

"It is the blessing we have brought to you and your kingdom," I answered. "Nourishment and strength for your subjects, enough to restore those you've lost."

His minions rushed toward it, ready to devour it in their hunger and need. "Again," I instructed my friends. The slap of flesh vanished before the goblins reached the target. The ones nearby desperately lapped at the fluids left on the floor where it had sat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, bellowing his rage as the minions turned toward me. They can kill this Clarice, I decided. Perhaps they could even destroy the newest model. Certainly this old one is doomed.

Clarice, of course, showed no fear or concern. She could have, if I wanted her to. She could be very convincing, but now a lack of fear was ideal. "I believe we spoke earlier of what the punishment for denying gods should be. You claimed wrath and murder. I claimed that the greatest punishment was nothing. This is what I meant. You reject us, and we do nothing. We keep our blessings from you, and you are the one to suffer, while the true gods remain untouched and untroubled."

The monsters kept advancing.

"Attempt to harm me, and we can revoke the blessing permanently," I threatened. "Or acknowledge our godhood and accept our blessings, knowing that we are your betters. You are a king, are you not? Your duty is to your subjects first. Surely, the price we ask is nothing to the reward that comes from it?" Fuck you, Jack, I thought angrily in my head. Everything you used on me and others, all the tricks to manipulate the vulnerable and the unhinged. They are lessons I will never forget. Fuck you.
The corpulent Nilbog avatar growled at me, causing his whole body to ripple. The goblins around him, however, stopped their approach, following cues that Clarice's sensors and my own deduction concluded was based upon smell, although I lacked enough data to understand those messages. "Very well," he finally spoke, feigning boredom. "You have proven you are indeed worthy of your claim to godhood."

Clarice nodded, and I didn't even have a chance to speak before the slab of flesh appeared where it had been before. *My team had clued in on the plan.* It landed on several of the goblins, who made a series of unhappy noises that quickly turned to ravenous joy as they started feasting upon the meat from their trapped positions. A couple of the minions cut a comparatively small, but still several pound, chunk out of the thing and brought it before Nilbog.

*His eating habits are even messier than the Siberian's,* I decided. Much of the material falling in bloody splatters across his body. Smaller, froglike creatures then crawled over him, lapping away the spilled mess. Nilbog moaned at the sensations of the cleaning.

I heard Lisa retch in disgust. *Highlight of my day,* I decided. Clarice and I simply waited patiently until the gorging had finished.

"Now that you have accepted our blessings, hear our vision for the future of your kingdom."

Nilbog, still moaning lightly as the creatures scuttered across his body cleaning him, smiled at me. "I'm listening."

"You are hated by those outside this wall," I started.

"And I care?" he asked.

"I expect you do not," I admitted. "But would it not be better to have neighbors beyond your kingdom? To hear tales of other lands? To have a kingdom more suited to your desires? My sister can provide all those things. A kingdom where the land itself serves your desires just as your subjects do."

"You can do that?"

"With ease," I answered. "Behold."

I activated our dimensional viewing system, granting the Goblin King sight of our world. We were geosynchronous with a great dome lit in blues and greens. The walls were full of alcoves, some bright and some dark, promising an infinite variety of tunnels for the goblins to roam and explore. From my real body's perspective, I could see the inspiration that Gaea had used, the heart and
circulatory system. It was incomplete, of course, but it was still massive and could be expanded upon almost infinitely.

Nilbog reached out to touch a wall, and his hand passed through the illusion. He looked at me in awe and suspicion. "What is this?" he asked.

"A vision of the future," I offered. "We can grant you that kingdom. You will be able to abandon this forsaken and dying kingdom in exchange for a territory whose beauty and bounty defies imagination. In exchange for swearing your loyalty and fealty to the God-Empresses of Avalon."

He kept trying to touch the walls of the faux ventricle that would be part of his new home.

"Yes, yes, this is truly a miracle worthy of godhood," he remarked appreciatively. The basis was Minerva's idea, using an animal body as inspiration. Passengers influence their hosts subconsciously, and in the case of someone like Nilbog with absolutely no other influences to muddy the waters, he would be as strongly motivated by the Passenger's desires as anyone could be. In this case, that influence took the form of alien worlds and biosystems. He'd be compelled to love this creation the same way an infant is compelled to love their mother's attention.

"Then your oath of fealty?" I insisted.

"You have it," he agreed eagerly, his fat rippling like a slow motion view of a water balloon right before it burst from his excited bouncing.

"Good," I replied. "Now, let us discuss your first tasks as a vassal of the gods."

=================

A/N- Clarice takes all her school's drama and literature classes.
"You're certain about this?" Chief Director Costa-Brown asked. We, of course, knew her as Alexandria, but we hadn't even considered revealing that secret. In truth, she had done more good for us in her civilian guise as I could ever imagine her doing as a hero. Still, something of a comfort to have, an ally for this teleconference. The problem is, she was also terrifyingly difficult to keep secrets from, with her thinker powers. She'll probably figure out we've already removed Nilbog during this meeting.

"Yes," Taylor responded from her position beside me. "Dinah Alcott's predictions have always served well for us in the past. She gives the SM7M a guaranteed victory, and our new containment method developed between us and the guild, means we won't see the deaths that her prior calculations produced."

"You still haven't identified the cause?" Costa-Brown asked.

"I'm afraid not," I admitted. "We've put a great deal of effort into planning for every possible outcome, and somewhere along the way we finally found something that works. We won't know why until we see it in action." We won't find out, because we'll never see it in action, I thought. Our solution was to him our world's equivalent to Madagascar. It was large enough for him to imagine himself a great and powerful ruler over a vast kingdom which he would populate with monsters that, in some ways, were as dangerous as our own. And it isolated enough to keep any incidents from occurring.

"Pardon the interruption," one of the other fifteen Directors spoke. He looked more like a scientist than a military type, and the name below read Armstrong. "I have read the reports on the M7Ms, but I don't recall anything about an SM7M, would you please elaborate?"

I glanced over at Taylor. AffirmationDeflection. Her eyes glanced over at the only Director actually in the room with us. Calvert, or Coil, or our puppet, depending on how generous you were feeling when you identified him. "Of course," I spoke. "It would probably be best for Director Calvert to handle the details. He knows more about the remote operatives than Khepri and I."

He nodded. "Very well," he agreed. "As you are already familiar with the M7, I can make this brief. The full name is the Simurgh enhanced Model Seven Military. Its existence is so classified that if you must refer to it, the 'S' stands for 'Specialized'."

"Simurgh model?" one of the others asked incredulously. His name read 'Tagg'.

"Correct," I answered. "In many ways, it's not as good as the normal M7s. It's easily the most durable design, capable of regeneration much as the Endbringers themselves are, and at least partially power resistant. Nothing short of a six on your rankings should even be able to scratch them. The
problem is, they don't work with a lot of tech we put into the other models. No stealth, no high energy cost systems. They're good at exactly what they're good at, and nothing else." Unless they're the Clarice model, which actually uses the Endbringer tissue as a power supply, in which case they're better at everything than any prior model.

"You've weaponized Endbringers!?!" he exclaimed. "What else have you built? Are your anti-Endbringer constructs made of this material?"

"Of course," Taylor answered. "Well, some of them at least. Others are still conventional. As a nation, we understand the need for a versatile military force."

"So the rumors are true," another man spoke up. His panel identified him as Director Vance. "The UN acknowledged your request."

"Three days shy of a month ago," Taylor replied. "We are recognized as the rulers of the interim government presiding over Earth Avalon. The exact details of our future, more permanent government is still in flux, which if anything renders our need for a strong military even greater for relatively vulnerable position on the world stage. While I don't doubt that our functionally sole neighbor, the United States, would aid us in a crisis, we'd prefer to have the capacity to respond to troubles ourselves."

"You are aware this calls into question the legality of Pantheon taking any action within the United States, correct?" Costa-Brown asked.

"We are," Taylor replied. "However, that only applies to myself, Gaea, and Minerva. All other Pantheon members as of this moment still retain their United States citizenship exclusively. They are members of our team, but not citizens of Avalon. Much the same way that the Guild and the Protectorate operate, with members from a number of countries. Still, yes, as of this moment the founding members of Pantheon are unable to act as heroes within the United States without violating international law. It's one of the reasons we're choosing to give the PRT command of this mission. Because, as you might imagine, we could have used our own weapons to assault Ellisburg, instead of giving them to you."

"One of the reasons?" a woman by the name of Newton asked. "That implies there are other motivations. I would like to hear them." A few of the other Directors spoke their agreement. Meanwhile, Costa-Brown simply watched in interest. She wants to see us handle politics on our own, I realized. She has Lisa's measure, now she wants to know how we handle things.

"There's no way to say this nicely," I replied. "But, frankly, you need the victory."

"Pardon?" Tagg asked.
"You still haven't recovered from India," I replied. "Things are holding together, but every public victory has been Pantheon's. It's eroding the public's faith in the PRT and everyone here knows it. Your reputation is badly damaged."

"By your actions," Tagg's voice was calm, but hostile. Ice. *Annoyance*.*Distaste*.

"We weren't the ones that put Piggot in a position of such power, and with so little oversight," Taylor pointed out. "But let's not slip into petty recriminations. We want the PRT to have a public victory in the near future. One that reminds the criminal groups that there are powers out there beside Pantheon that can actually get anything important done."

"Having trouble with the responsibility of dealing with criminal elements on such a scale?" Tagg asked.

"Not hardly," Taylor responded. I tried to push calming emotions into the link, she was getting baited into an argument. She faltered for a second. "It is as the Chief Director pointed out. I am now part of the ruling body of another nation. I have a new set of priorities and responsibilities to consider, the wellbeing of what will soon become my own people. As you are responsible for yours. So, let me ask you this question, all of you. What do you believe happens when Avalon goes public?"

Tagg's eyes narrowed. "It would be easier for you to simply tell us what you think," he responded.

Taylor shrugged. "Very well," she replied. *SmugSuccess*. "Pantheon as it currently functions is perceived as holding together most of the East Coast in the face of a slow descent into complete anarchy. A perception that's true, incidentally. When we go public as our own nation, we will functionally become a foreign power. At which point, the United States of America, supposedly the most powerful government in the world, will be openly and directly relying upon an outside military to help it maintain order within its own borders. You have to know how bad that will be."

Tagg froze. Everyone did. For a full minute, no one spoke. I could imagine some of their thoughts. In a country as fiercely independent as the USA, that would be perceived of as a glaring weakness. Some would support us, others would demand we leave, others still would find any number of reactions. The only thing universally true is that no one would be able to ignore it, and under no circumstances would it be anything but a nightmare for all of us involved.

"I believe we all see your point," Costa-Brown agreed. "The Endbringer conflicts are, of course, a separate factor. If anything, foreign aid during those is an affirmation of our country's status. The Protectorate has always offered to aid all foreign powers during those, and receiving aid in return would prove the value of that policy. But in any other circumstance, it could prove disastrous."

"It's better for us to fade into the background," I continued the thought. "It will still be our weaponry, but that's little different than any other foreign trade. We'll likely have similar treaties with Canada and many other countries."
"We're more than able and willing to stand as a very powerful foreign nation," Taylor added. "If at some point in the future we're perceived of as even more powerful than America, you won't see me losing any sleep over it. But the critical component is that we need to be seen as a foreign nation. The alliance that Pantheon forged between independent cape groups can remain. Pantheon will take a supporting role, instead of playing the role of the 'conquering heroes'. With exception of the Endbringer battles. During those, there are no politics or countries. There is only the enemy of all mankind, and those heroes who would fight them."

"Very well said," Costa-Brown responded. "I could not agree more. I doubt anyone would object to Pantheon's assistance at future Endbringer conflicts," she paused for a moment, giving all the directors a chance to disagree. None took the opportunity. "However, withdrawing from active involvement in the USA's affairs is clearly the wisest decision, and I appreciate your foresight in this matter."

"Thank you, Chief Director," I responded. It was actually Lisa's foresight, but you already know that.

"It does beg the question," A Director Gutierez spoke up. "Why are you choosing Ellisburg?"

"Honestly, that was Director Calvert's suggestion," Taylor volunteered. "We only needed a scenario that would grant a high profile victory to your PRT, we weren't especially concerned with the specifics. A complete lie, we very much wanted to go after Nilbog, much like we went after the Teeth and Fallen. Plans just got... twisted... a bit, under the circumstances."

"Pantheon came to me for advice on the subject of targets," Calvert nodded. "With the Guild's removal of Heartbreaker, and their elimination of the Teeth, Fallen, and Slaughterhouse Nine. There aren't many truly monstrous and and well known villains remaining. At least, not ones who warrant such a dramatic response, or would elicit such positive coverage in the aftermath."

"The Wild Hunt?" a Director Tucker asked. She looked an awful lot like an old, skeletal librarian. She brought up a group that stuck to the desert states, a parahuman biker gang that one that might be called a low profile variant of the Slaughterhouse Nine.

"If we could predict their next attack," Calvert responded. "The remote controlled troops have range limits, and we can't deploy them over that kind of space without spreading our forces too thin to do any real good. Until they resurface, there's very little we can achieve. As Gaea and Khepri pointed out, there is some urgency in finding that high profile success. We know exactly where to find Nilbog, we know our success rate is guaranteed, with the worst possible outcome being the destruction of a few disposable troops."

"The argument is compelling," Costa-Brown agreed. "Certainly we will retain control over the SM7Ms after Ellisburg, to deploy in future high profile missions."
"That is correct," Taylor replied. "They have a very long shelf life. They will not break to simple wear and tear, or even moderate combat punishment due to the Endbringer tissue's regeneration. Chances are, they'll only need to be replaced when rendered obsolete by newer, superior, designs."

"Coupled with your precog's assurances that the Nilbog mission will result in a victory," Costa-Brown responded. "I do believe we can consider this the second test run of the PRT as a primary force against parahuman aggression, instead of as a supporting force for our parahumans. In a way, it seems poetic that it should be Ellisburg which marks this evolution in policy."

"Glad you see it my way," Calvert responded. "I have already outlined a primary strategy based upon my own experiences and intel gathered by Dragon's equipment that I would like to present to you. I'm sending copies now for your review."

"I believe this is where we see ourselves out," Taylor spoke. "We've done our part here, and should attend to our other responsibilities."

"Very well," Costa-Brown nodded. "Thank you for your time. And congratulations on your new status as world leaders."

==========

A/N- The real reason they chose Madagascar is as revenge from a certain video game that Riley and Amelia constantly lose at.
I moaned happily as Taylor kissed slowly down my back. *Mmm, this is nice.* I reached back and found her head, running my fingers into her hair and pressing back against her. And then the yelling started.

"Wake up!"

*Oh god damn it, why now?* I felt a hand shaking me by my shoulder. I opened and glanced at the clock, one of the only pieces of equipment that we had yet to perfect an organic equivalent to. *We can make a working microwave out of plants, but somehow clocks elude us.* I felt Taylor's mind flicker into awareness. *Realization* *Frustration.* Judging by the undertones, her dream wasn't that different from mine. *Maybe there's more activity in the link while we're unconscious than we thought?*

"Riley, it's two in the morning," I complained.

"Endbringer!" she informed us before rushing out of the room.

*Shock* *Focus* *Anger.* I agreed completely while stumbling out of bed. *Whatever the fuck this Endbringer was, it was extra dead for this.*

Our suit up wasn't much different than last time, although our armors were different. The SEB material meant one hell of an upgrade for most of us. Mine was, again, an exception. Other than the SEB under layer and reactor system that gave me all my systems for less space, with a hundred times more durability, I was still in the standard equipment. The Dryad, too, had upgrades. But my suit was meant provide a huge supply of biomass and genetic codes to generate constructs from, not actually fight anything.

The new Zerg, however, were numerous enough and tough enough that I didn't need to fight. With any luck, I wouldn't even need to heal anyone. Our number of zerglings had capped at over ten thousand, last I heard. The most recent couple thousand with various high yield energy weapons. The gargants had been adapted as well. Instead of being meat shields, the new batches were valid combatants, able to properly grapple Endbringers and slow them down for other attacks.

"The attack already started," Emma announced as we shunted over. She was at the command center, along with Riley, Trevor, and Rey.

"No warning?" I asked.
"There won't be one anymore," Lisa informed. "The newest Endbringer is a change in strategy in response to Chongqing. Expect it to be more resilient, probably faster and with more exotic powers than Behemoth. Expect it to have a method to deal with Scion, should he arrive."

ConfusionHope.

"No," Lisa replied. "It won't be able to kill the bastard. It'll probably have a way to run or hide. Maybe several ways. Chances are, that will be part of its weaponry. We'll have to see."

"Dragon's been feeding us intel," Emma responded. "This one's a time manipulator. It has pillars that accelerate time around him. Looks like a bad mockery of a Buddha statue. More evidence for the human designer theory. It's only been active a few minutes so far."

We watched the low quality video feed. At this point, only the Triumvirate had arrived along with a handful of Dragon's new attack drones. There was also a handful of local capes, but they seemed pretty lackluster. This was very much the Triumvirate's fight at the moment. I looked at the label underneath the feed. What's special about Santa Clara, Cuba?

"Don't try to puzzle out the logic behind the target," advised Lisa. "There won't be the same patterns as before. The only thing we can be certain about is the old patterns no longer apply, except the timing."

I just looked at her. Not asking, you'll just have to find someone else to play propwork.

"They're following their timing patterns, still. Behemoth was late, and then replaced by Simurgh. Still counts as late. Barghest would have been more or less on time. Behemoth was early. There's are either seven or nine Endbringers currently active."

"I suppose you'll tell us your reasoning one of these days," Taylor replied. ImpatienceCuriosity.

"Has to be," she answered. "If there are only six, the attacks are coming too quickly. If there are ten, then they'd be coming more rapidly. Only three numbers to pick from. We can throw away eight because it has no cultural significance. We're left with seven, a number strongly linked with superstition, and nine, which is linked to the rule of three which seems to rule much of the Endbringers' behavior patterns. The only way it could be eight is if the Endmakers are aware of our suspicions about them, and are trying to break pattern, which I very much doubt."

Four people appeared nearby. Victoria, Crystal, Lily and Sabah. A moment later, Eric followed. "We're here," he said. "Hey, Minerva, Faultline told us to give you her best regards."

"When you get back to the job, tell her I said 'fuck you, too'," Lisa smiled
"Spitfire would have given you some warm wishes, too," Vicky smirked, then gestured toward Eric. "But she used them all up on the lady killer over here."

Eric looked away, blushing heavily.

Zach laughed. "Just remember to keep the burn ward on speed dial. Also, that was a terrible pun and you should feel bad."

"I do feel bad," she responded. "Almost four weeks touring Europe and I haven't gotten so much as a kiss. A girl might begin to worry that there's something wrong with her."

"I keep telling you that you'd have better luck if you didn't challenge everyone who tried to a fight to the death," Lily argued.

"And I keep telling you that I refuse to settle for anyone who gives up just because I happen to break one of his arms," Vicky huffed theatrically. "Hopefully Denmark's made of sterner stuff. Hey, do we have an upload for... uh... Denmarkian? Denmarkese?"

"Danish," Lisa answered reflexively.

"Sorry, I'm all out," Vicky responded.

"You did that on purpose," Lisa glowered at Vicky.

Zach groaned and shook his head, and that's when she started laughing, followed by most of the others.

"I was paid to do it," Vicky added, holding a finger up while laughing a bit too loudly for it to seem completely natural. "Two grand. Five if she gets a video of it."

"Okay, enough goofing around. We're on Endbringer duty," Taylor interrupted. "AnnoyanceDistaste. Save the jokes for after people are done dying."

Missy shunted over. "Sorry I'm late," she spoke immediately. "I wasn't informed that the fight was already happening."

"Uploading coordinates," Trevor replied immediately, skipping the pleasantries. Space rippled
around us.

"I'm going in first," Taylor informed. "The rest of you can catch up, we need to get reinforcements to the defense immediately."

She didn't wait to see if there was any objections. *It was fine, I'd be by her side soon enough.* I was still waiting for the swarm to finish its transition some minutes later. Confusion Disbelief Fear.

"It just vanished!" Emma declared. "The new Endbringer's already retreated."

"No it's not," Lisa insisted. "This is too soon, not enough damage done. Even Barghest's psychological warfare methods left more impression than this one has had a chance to inflict. There's more."

"Endbringer identified in southwestern Australia," Emma responded. "It just teleported halfway across the planet." Frustration Anger.

*Fuck.* "Missy, open another tunnel to..." I glanced at the map. "Albany, Australia. Our priority is to get the Zerg in to do real damage."

"Understood," Missy agreed. The zerg turned and began to funnel back through the one pathway and into the other, chasing the new Endbringer. Concern Distrust. I quickly realized Taylor's concerns were justified. *Even with this teleportation, there's more to this one's power. He's not destructive enough, what's his special weapon against the world?*

============

A/N- Khonsu's back! Do worry, the next EB will be another original.

Poor Amy's dreams continue to be ruined.

And Vicky's contract remains air tight.
FrustrationAnger. I pushed calming emotions into the link, but it was hard to do. I wasn't quite as upset as Taylor, if only because I wasn't out there. I was prep and aftermath. But after three and a half hours of this cat and mouse bullshit, everyone was on edge.

"The Moirai cannon's going to be useless," Lisa sighed. "We'll never time to set it up."

"Just let me get into the fight," Lily insisted. "This one's not adapted against me, is it?"

"Shouldn't be," Lisa admitted. "This one's in response to the Chinese and Scion. But it will be able to kill you. Those time bubbles will age you thousands of years if you're not careful."

"Then I won't get that close," she assured us. "Yeah, the ranged attacks aren't as good, but they can still hurt the fucker. Drive him off so we can work out a better plan for his next appearance. We can't keep doing nothing."

AgreementUrgeDeflection. "Go for it," I instructed. "We've seen how this one works, everyone with speed and power enough to do damage, if you're willing to take the risk, at least give it a shot."

"Zach, stay out of this one," Vicky commanded right after I finished speaking. "You're not immune to aging, and you don't have a backup. You go out there and you're going to die for real."

He hesitated for a moment. "Fuck," he muttered, turning around. He walked over to the specialized suicide bug. "Looks like I'll have to be careful this time."

Vicky, Lily, Crystal and Zack shunted over. They still hit harder than anything we could build with our zerg, and we watched from the other side as they opened fire above a small town somewhere in Germany, adding to the stream of attacks by Legend and a couple of the locals.

"We're deploying the Endslayer weaponry," Crystal's voice came over the communications. "All close range attackers, fall back."

Alexandria and a couple others I didn't recognize bolted up and away from the Endbringer, and Lily opened fire with her new and improved Azrael. This one's attack rate was limited solely by her ability to generate charge for the weaponry. Its mass generation came from absorbing Endbringer tissue and converting it. Unfortunately, her power didn't actually work on Endbringer tissues, and couldn't be combined with Defiant's nanothorn weapons. That would have been too convenient.
The torrent of fire caught the new Endbringer, carving gouges into its side. The black covering came off, revealing a layer of silver, then deeper another layer of black. More bolts, each specifically designed to take as large a chunk out of an opponent as possible, kept making more cuts into the strange interior of the monster.

"Something's wrong," Lily spoke over the com. "I'm not cutting nearly as deep as I should."

"Is it designed to be immune to the power that killed Simurgh?" Alexandria asked over the armbands.

"No, that would be impossible. Her power bypasses defenses. But this one's body is ablative," Lisa responded, also via armband. "Each layer's designed to deflect damage outward instead of allowing deeper penetration. A protective feature to ensure a single attack, no matter how powerful, can't do more than superficial injury. Probably an adaptation to prevent the attack Scion used to kill Behemoth from working."

"That's... I really want a sample of that to work with," Rey replied through our com. He and Rapture had managed to arrive a little while ago, and took their place in the command center. "Uh... what I mean is, it's a completely novel expression of the Endbringer biology. We could learn a great deal about the way they work."

"Well, fuck," Lily muttered. "Guess we do this the old fashioned way. Hit it until it stops moving."

She started firing again, as rapidly as she could, but it let itself brush into one of its own time distortions, and the inches of damage vanished in an eyeblink. "Fucking bullshit!"

Meanwhile, streams of energy were coming from Vicky and Crystal's suits, rapidly switching up attack types while using what I was sure was one of their medium damage settings. Must have been Vicky's idea. They were doing their fair share, of course, but the way this one was built meant it didn't really matter.

It disappeared again.

"Fuck!" Vicky swore. "We still got a minute before we can shunt back over."

"I'll take you," Alexandria offered. Our members gathered up. "Sorry, Osiris, the method we use won't let you bring your mount with."

"Okay, I'll catch a ride the other way," he agreed.

"Remember what I said about the old patterns no longer applying?" Lisa spoke. "Well, here's the new one for this Endbringer. Whenever it's hurt, it will select zones with low population so it has time to regenerate."

"Meaning the more damage we do, the less people it kills," Alexandria added. "Understood."

"One fuckton of damage, coming right up," Lily agreed. They moved ahead without us. Meanwhile, we waited for the zerg to shunt back over and Missy to build a new tunnel. How is it we have three top grade movers on this team, and I feel like it's not enough?

We arrived two minutes later to bear witness to Alexandria holding the Endbringer, her bone chain pulling both is arms behind its back. With it more or less trapped in place, everyone there was hammering the Endbringer with their energy attacks. Our blasters were now going with wide distribution blasts, and Victoria had taken to firing two weapons at once, following one precise beam with the next, always aiming at the point where the left leg met the torso. There was a deep gouge in that area.

Zach shunted over immediately, diving between two pillars and colliding with the Endbringer's chest and disintegrating the area. Fortunately for Alexandria, her new costume was grown from her own genetic material, making it as durable as she was. Except her cape, that was reduced to dust like almost everything else in the vicinity. It didn't do any real damage to the real target, however. Not even two full layers.

Zach move in for a second burst, when the time distortion pillars shifted, one moving over his position. Emma shrieked in horror. *FearLossFailure.*

Zach reappeared on our side of the barrier, crashing hard into the ground and destroying a good amount of Yggdrasil with the nanothorns. Fortunately, that was almost two miles from our location. Missy bridged the distance so he could reach us in a few moments instead of a minute or so. Emma jumped off the platform and rushed to him. They were far enough away that I couldn't hear what was being said, but given that Emma was both hugging and punching him at the same time, I let them have their privacy.

Meanwhile, Alexandria was knocked away from the Endbringer, and her bone chain snapped as she lost contact. Lily took this as an opening, pouring another stream of destruction down, but the Endbringer vanished again. The bolts rained down on the street below. Despite her power wearing off before the bolts struck the ground, they still hit hard enough to shatter the streets and destroy cars unfortunate enough to get caught in the hail of projectiles.

It had escaped yet again.

"Bloemfontein, South Africa," Dragon informed us after thirty seconds or so. Our group packed up
and moved again. I couldn't help but notice that Zach chose not to go back into the fight. I didn't blame him, of course, but it was definitely noticed.

Our move into the heart of South Africa made me wonder why the Endbringer would even bother. The city looked like it had already been through an Endbringer. The locals mobilized amazingly fast, however. By the time we arrived, there was already a dozen capes deployed. The most visible one was a huge, fur covered monster. He, and thanks to a lack of clothing it was easy to identify this one as a he, looked more than a little like a bulked up Lung going for 'werewolf' instead of 'dragon'. He had latched around the Endbringer's neck and shoulders, and was enthusiastically chewing on his face with jaws resembling a cross between a pitbull and an alligator.

Alexandria joined the fight, attempting to carve into the enemy with sickle-like weapon we'd grown for her. She was peeling layers off, but hadn't managed to really get any deeper. At least we were achieving something, however.

The Endbringer finally managed to pull the brute off and fling him toward a time pillar. Alexandria bolted up, catching bestial parahuman and throwing him to safety.

"Deploying the Endslayer weapons again, everyone fall back," Lily instructed. A half second later, she dived into the time field.

================

A/N- No one ever gives Khonsu his fair credit as an Endbringer.
Moments after Lily was absorbed into the bubble, bolts started streaming out. Small sputters at first, but 'first' in this case was a matter of an eyeblink. Then it was like trying to count the raindrops in a hurricane. The new Endbringer's front practically melted under the onslaught, and it moved to retreat from an attack that was coming from within its own defenses. *She's winning,* I realized with a thrill. *She's going to kill the fucker.* ExcitementHope.

The bolt wave stopped for a second and we got our look at the inside of the Endbringer. There wasn't a lot to say, it merely kept the same layers going throughout. It let itself drift toward one of its other time fields, and started regenerating. The stream of bolts started again, this time joined by the blasters. The brutes and Alexandria packages stayed back, they'd have to content themselves with watching the display of firepower. The bolt wave halted for yet another while the other ranged attackers kept up the pressure.

"She's been in there about seven and a half days," Emma spoke. "That's my guess at least."

"Will she be okay?" Sabah asked.

"The life support systems for our armor is pretty good," Emma answered. "If it absolutely has to, it can keep you alive for years. Hers could last longer, since she doesn't have to waste power on dozens of offensive and defensive subsystems the way most of the rest of us do."

Another bolt wave cut into the Endbringer as they spoke. "It's not going to work," Lisa spoke up while we were watching the screen. "The Endbringer's core is protected by a time effect, much like the columns. In addition to all the other high density Endbringer bullshit we've come to know and despise. It's regenerating faster than Lily can cut into it, with or without the time dilation."

"You're certain?" Chevalier asked. Dragon had tied him in to our coms so he could coordinate, where possible. He was, unfortunately, not able to really participate in this fight, but he did his level best.

"If she could have, she would have by now," Lisa answered. "She's had months of subjective time to succeed. He's had years of subjective time to regenerate."

FuryImpotenceDisgust.

The time bubble popped, and Lily came out. The same moment, the Endbringer turned toward her, sending one of the other columns toward her. We knew from experience that this one was more like a hard wall of time, not unlike what Clockblocker could do, but far more massive. Or at least that was the theory. What we knew for certain is that it reduced any cape that had touched it to little more
than a red mist.

Alexandria rushed in and collided hard with the damaged monster, forcing it back.

Lily shunted over, and started to fall. "I had to hit the overrides," Taylor informed us. "She wasn't responding."

Sabah was already rushing toward where Lily had begun to fall, the ribbons of cloth in place to catch her. *At least her power's not still active,* I thought.*That would have been a disaster.*

She wrapped Lily in her bandages, immediately rushed her to me. "You have to help her!" Sabah demanded. Thanks to her armor, I couldn't see her face, but I could hear in her voice that she'd been crying.

"Set her down," I instructed. Once she was in contact with the ground, I used the Yggdrasil chain to reach my power into her. Sleep deprivation was the only glaring medical issue I could spot, alongside partial malnutrition and dehydration, but nothing especially troubling with either of those conditions. I mended the sleep issues, and adjusted her metabolism slightly to make recovery for easier, then I gave the push that would allow her to wake up.

"S-Sabah?" she asked, then she flung herself into her girlfriend's arms. "I've missed you so much. I tried. I tried so hard. I couldn't... I'm sorry..." she started weeping uncontrollably, clinging to Sabah's armor.

"Sedate her," Rapture instructed. "She needs to rest."

I chose to trust the psychology tinker to know what she was talking about, and Lily slumped into her girlfriend's arms. "Sorry," I spoke, although I wasn't sure if the apology was meant for Sabah or Rapture or Lily.

....

*FrustrationTiredDisgust.* "You need sleep," I demanded of Taylor and Missy both, looking around at the condition of our mobile base.

Right now, Emma and Riley were manning our command center. We had thrown out the Clarice pretense after Rapture left. She, like most of the forces that had arrived early in the battle, had given up on contributing and had gone back home to deal with other responsibilities.

Zach and Theo were here as well, and Theo also looked exhausted. And I brought along Crystal and
Trevor when I arrived to provide some fresh help. They, at least, had gotten some rest.

In the field, Victoria was fighting alongside a small swarm of the zerg. Legend and Dragon made up the rest of the force that actually mattered in the fight. The Endbringer, now designated Khonsu, was now terrorizing a small town in the Rocky Mountains which didn't even have any local capes. Although I had to admire the local normals, a number of whom opted to start shooting the thing with rifles.

"I can keep going." Taylor insisted. "Just restore me again."

"That's not a substitute for actual rest," I insisted. "Everyone else is fighting him in shifts. Even Dragon and Alexandria are taking time to recover, and their powers mean they don't actually need to sleep."

_LoveImpatience_. "I can't, not right now," Taylor insisted. "I know you're concerned, but I can keep going." _You're repeating yourself, Taylor._

"Me, too," Missy demanded, stifling a yawn. I followed suit, having less than seven hours of rest in the three days we'd been fighting. "She did it for over six months. I'm not giving up so easily."

"She woke up a couple hours ago," I told them.

"Will she be okay?" Taylor asked.

"Rapture's diagnosed a number of anxiety disorder triggers," I informed my partner. "Isolation, the idea that she failed. They'll be taking shifts to care for her. She won't be fit to return to duty for a while." _ConcernSympathyAnger._

There was a sharp beep from the command center.

"We're detecting the waveform," Trevor spoke. He meant the signal Khonsu radiated right before his teleportation. Thanks to the intel they got out of Azrael, they'd found a method to track the Endbringer preemptively. "Estimating approximately forty five seconds until he moves. Target location... Riyadh, Saudi Arabia."

Missy sighed, and then took a deep breath. Fuck. I reached over and touched her shoulder, repairing her biology where I could. Modifying brains was still something I did my best to avoid, especially when I was this tired. Removing fatigue was the best I could hope to achieve. She'd be okay for a few more hours. Missy stood taller and the tunnel opened quickly, although certainly not as fast as it would if she were rested.
I wrapped my arms around Taylor as I mended her next. While I worked, a small swarm of the selected Zerg went through the tunnel. Even they were being deployed in shifts, because moving the whole army through in a timely fashion was simply impossible. "Love you," she whispered as alertness returned to her mind and our link. "But you worry too much. I can do this."

"We're working on a solution," I told her. Lisa's been in contact with a few groups that might be able to assist in this."

CuriosityDoubtHope. "Such as?"


"There's talk about recruiting help from the Birdcage."

ShockConcernSupport. "Do you think he will be there?" I didn't need to ask her who she meant. "Do you want me to come with?"

"No," I squeezed her harder. "Yes. But you're needed here. Lisa and I can handle things. Just... don't be surprised if our link cuts out. There's going to be a lot of people there who want to keep their secrets. We have the quantum tunnel device, but even if it works, don't let them know you're there."


"Says the girl who was about to fall over from exhaustion," I muttered.

"Thanks." WarmSafe.

Vicky shunted back over seconds before the Endbringer vanished again. "Vicky," I spoke, leaving no room for debate in my voice. "I need you with me."

"What for?" she asked.

Before the end of the day, you might have to kill my father. "I'll explain on the way," I told her.

=============

A/N- PLOT DEVELOPMENTS!!!
We were ready. Myself, Lisa, and Vicky. I took a deep breath and we stepped through the gateway from Avalon to wherever Cauldron was setting this meeting.

"They're not even bothering to hide their reach, anymore," Lisa spoke. "Their Doormaker isn't limited to a particular dimension. Which means he doesn't have a Manton limit or likely the other Taboos that come with it." 

"One of the harvested Passengers?" I suggested.

"Undoubtedly," Lisa answered. "They probably have others. No wonder they're so confident. Eidolon may have been their most successful experiment, but they likely have dozens, possibly hundreds, of members who are only slightly lesser." 

"You're saying they're stronger than us," Vicky concluded. "Well, looks like we'll have to be on our best behavior."

The room we stepped into wasn't anything to look at. It was lit from the back, and had only one actual exit. There was a sort of desk that reminded me somewhat of a bank teller or drive through counter. It had a microphone stand as well. Past it was a large, empty space. Completely dark, and past that a ring of other panels of light, with silhouettes of people. The nature of the lighting made it impossible to recognize features, although some were distinctive. Such as Chevalier and his completed sword, which Emma had dubbed Caliburn.

A couple others stood near him, though I didn't recognize who they were. Leaders from the Protectorate, I had to assume. The ones not out there fighting Khonsu. Another panel had the distinct shape of power armor, and the long spear-like weapon that I knew as Defiant's.

"They're not worried about a fight at all, are they?" I whispered.

"I wouldn't be, either," Vicky replied. "Panel to the left, that's Cauldron, I'm sure of it. They're too familiar with the area, and confident they have the upper hand. The woman in front is nothing special, base normal, maybe a thinker of some type. But her bodyguards are scary. I could take one of them, probably, and only because of the battle armor. Both? Maybe with a bit of luck, but I don't think I could do it and protect the two of you. Plus there's a third around here. I'm not even sure what it is, some kind of telekinetic. There's nothing I can do to even inflict harm on it, much less win a fight."

There was no reaction from Taylor, so I knew we didn't have that protection, either.
"Impression of the other groups?" Lisa asked.

"The little girl off to the left? Yeah. She's not a child. Some kind of power to control her age," Vicky added. "She's easily the most deadly person in the room. Most of her people are powerful as well. The one with that freaky shadow thing? Master. She's killable. That shadow? Fuck, it might be a match for the Siberian."

"The last groups should be arriving shortly," the Cauldron representative informed us. "I apologize for the wait."

"That's quite alright," a man in the not-child's group spoke. "Fairy Queen, would you mind if I spent some time speaking with Gaea?"

"Very well, Marquis," the girl spoke, her voice a cacophony, a chorus of dozens of childlike voices working together. For once I was glad for my experiences with Taylor's swarm-voice, it was the only thing allowed me to suppress a shudder at the display. And that, in turn was the only thing that let me hide my apprehension at speaking to my father. "You may speak with the Royal Artisan, if she deigns to humor you on the matter."

I hoped my voice was calmer than it felt, and imitated the Fairy Queen's tone. "Very well," I spoke, granting the implied request for permission. Glaistig Uaine nodded briefly and then stepped back from the counter to allow the man to take her place.

"It... you've done very well for yourself, Amelia," My father spoke to me. "Grown up strong."

"I have," I agreed neutrally.

"I'm glad," he continued. This is the bogeyman that Carol feared I'd turn into? "I'm proud of you. And I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you."

I clenched my hands inside my armor. Wrong choice of words. "Let's not start our reunion on a lie, Marquis," I spoke. I wish Taylor was here, this is so much harder without her to help me. "You could have. Easily. It only required you give up being a supervillain. A family, or a life of crime. That was your decision, and no one else's. Please don't insult either of us by pretending otherwise."

I couldn't see his face, thanks to the light. I think, in a way, that made this both easier and harder. It was less personal this way. There was less we could say, too, without airing our dirty laundry to the various witnesses here. As it stood, however, I needed to make it clear to them that I wasn't going to fall prey to daddy issues and compromise myself or Pantheon. Hopefully, this would do that.
"I... yes, you're right," Marquis spoke. "Let us hope there's an opportunity to talk privately in the future."

"I'd like that," I agreed after a little hesitation. *Theo has a good relationship with Purity, despite everything, I reminded myself. And I even managed to forgive Carol, even if things are still somewhat less than perfect between us.* As much as I wanted to, simply out of years of repressed spite, I couldn't tell Marquis to go fuck himself. Especially not now, given the circumstances of this meeting. We needed all the allies we could get.

The last couple groups arrived. A set of three people in power armor with a cross motif. *Part of Haven? And Faultline's, who I recognized only by Gregor the Snail's distinctive profile.*

"Now for introductions. I'm Doctor Mother, founder of Cauldron." the woman spoke. "You should know we extended the invite to others. Miss Alcott declined to join us, content to let Panthon represent her interests. Adalid cited a desire to stay in case Khonsu arrived in his city. We reached out to the Yangban as well, but they predictably declined. In a way, that is a boon. We have no use for those who aren't committed to the wellbeing of the world as a whole."

"That's a laugh," a female voice from Faultline's corner growled. "We know who you are and what you've done."

"Hold on," Lisa interrupted. "We could be here all day with recriminations, but right now there's an Endbringer on the loose, and the more we talk, the more people it kills. That actually matters to some of us."

The woman with the shadow spoke, our translation program activated almost immediately, letting us understand her words. *<People die every second of every day. Babies die in the womb and the children killed like dogs. Women are raped and murdered, and nightmares tear apart men to feast on their insides.>*

*Well, that's fucking bleak.* Minerva spoke almost immediately after, letting the translator do its thing. *<And cowards stand by to watch the slaughter, convinced they are too weak to change things. Would you leave the strong to fight alone?>* 

The shadow shifted, and a nasty crocodilian skull formed itself as a mask over the thing, giving it a semblance of a head and face. *<Do not presume you can speak down to me. I am unimpressed with false gods.>*

"We are strong enough to fight the Endbringers head on and win," Minerva didn't bother translating this one. "If you aren't able to face them, then drop the fucking posturing and admit it. We'll seek allies from those are are stronger."
"You don't seem to be doing so well on this one," a smug voice from another panel spoke.

"The Elite," Lisa informed me via our private channel. "I'm betting it's Shark."

"Only because he keeps running from us," Victoria countered. "We've been fighting him for days and still haven't lost, which is more than anyone else can claim."

"Now," Minerva insisted. "I know all of you have plans within plans. Secret weapons you're holding for a rainy day. Guess what? It's fucking pouring. So which one of you wants the bragging rights of having the weapon that lets us hurt that motherfucker when Pantheon's willing to admit they can't?"

"Many of us would be putting ourselves at a significant disadvantage if we were to use our backup plans merely to drive off an Endbringer once," the man with the cross themed armor spoke. "We'd be hurting ourselves in the long run for nothing."

"Your only talents are as a thief, Saint," Defiant growled. "There's nothing you have which isn't stolen, and none of it is good enough for this battle."

"I was speaking of others," Saint retorted. "I'm aware of my relative limitations on this scale. I merely want to help those with the power come to an understanding of the bartering needed to make this work. Anything to cut through the posturing and reach an agreement."

"Pantheon's willing to hear offers," I volunteered. "We have some significant resources that could compensate for time and effort, as well as protecting you from others that would try to exploit you for helping. I think our stance on those profiteering from Endbringers is clear, as is our generosity with our allies."

"That is worthy of consideration," a man in a robe admitted. "But I fear it would not be enough on its own."

"What of Cauldron?" Faultline asked. "They brought us here, but aren't putting any of their own offers on the line."

"We have nothing we're willing to use that we haven't already put on the field," Doctor Mother replied. "We're providing this forum for negotiation, yes, and a number of our capes are out there fighting, but we must concern ourselves with even greater threats than the Endbringer." They mean Scion, I knew.

"You plan to slay the King of the Faeries," the little girl spoke. King of the Faeries?
"You already know?!" Lisa gasped. "Oh, fuck, you're a Third Trigger. You've broken Taboo... uh, the memory blocks."

"Yes, Negotiator," Glaistig Uaine spoke. "The secret truths have been unveiled to my eyes. Much as with yourself and your Empress. The faerie will be restored to grace in the end. I know you seek to oppose Him, and I allow this, as such goals are laughable and absurd. When the end comes you and I shall discuss your rebellion with great amusement."

"I... see..." Lisa hesitated. "You actually want him to succeed." She'll be putting together pieces for a little while, I realized.

"It is not a matter of 'want', Negotiator," the Faerie Queen responded. "It is simple inevitability. Like wanting the sun to rise. He is above us as we are above the commoner fae, as they are above mere mortals. You are of his design, and therefore your rebellion is of his design. I have no need to interfere with it, and in fact I watch with interest. You need not fear me."

"That's certainly generous of you," I agreed.

==============

A/N- Okay, so Glaistig Uaine is more fun to write than I'd expected.
"I'd prefer we do not discuss the matter further," Doctor Mother interjected. "Those who are already aware can see the many dangers that can come of this information becoming public at an inopportune moment. Besides, we have a more immediate concern to worry about. Since we're close to the topic anyway, let us discuss the possibility of drawing on parahumans from the Birdcage to assist in this battle, and the new future Endbringers."

"I am uninterested in participating in your battle with the abominations," Glaistig Uaine responded. "The end comes no matter your actions, life and death are merely a diversion. A game that we play. I am choosing to live, and keep the company of the dead."

"There is nothing you desire?" the head of Cauldron asked. "We have significant resources, and can find some method of payment. I doubt money would be of value to one such as yourself, but there are other things, if you're willing to offer a price, we might be able to meet it."

She paused for a moment. "A sacrifice worthy of my efforts?" she mused. "A hundred thousand corpses, each naturally gifted by the faerie." Capes. She's demanding a hundred thousand dead parahumans.

"We don’t have time to joke about this," the apparent leader of the cloaked capes

"I am not joking, Astrologer," she replied. She could be considered almost serene in an alien sort of way, but she was talking about functional genocide. "I would like to see their lights in the sky. I have seen only glimmers, fragments of the performance. To see it all at once… yes.”

Their lights? "You mean the Trigger visions?" I asked. "The glimpse of the source of powers?"

"You are correct, Royal Artisan," she replied.

"We can provide you memories of the visions," I offered. "We have tinker tech which makes it possible to move memories from one person to another. We can take them from others whose eyes are opened like your own. Surely our sight would be greater than even thousands of ordinary parahumans could be?"

"We might be able to improve the offer," Cauldron added. "As I'm sure you're aware, parahumans get new visions when other parahumans trigger nearby. We could arrange for yourself and the others we know will retain their vision to witness them, a thousand such triggers over the course of a year, seen from multiple viewpoints. Would that be an acceptable offer?"
"An interesting one at least," she answered. "But not tempting enough for me to go to war. I am willing to provide insight and advice, perhaps even some power where it suits me. Would you find that acceptable?"

"We'd like more, but we will take everything you're willing to give," Doctor Mother replied. "This also predicates upon Pantheon's agreement. As well as the concerns of the others at this table. As powerful as you are, Faerie Queen, your conditional aid might not be as valuable to us as the others' support."

"I understand," she nodded. "You have my price, let me know when you're willing to pay it."

“If I may?” Marquis spoke up. “With your permission, Faerie Queen.”

“Granted,” Glaistig Uaine said.

“There are others who would accept freedom as a payment,” he said. “Myself included. We’d fight that monster if you gave us the chance. We merely ask that few others are also released, and that you don’t send us back to the Birdcage after the fact.”

“No,” Chevalier insisted, finally speaking up. “No, that is not an option.”

“Some of the strongest parahumans reside therein,” Marquis said. "Glaistig Uaine might be the most powerful, but there are others you could surely make use of. Lung, for example. Lustrum. Myself. I am willing to swear an end to my former ways, and I have never broken my word before."

"There are too many dangerous individuals in there," Chevalier countered. "Yourself and Lung are amongst the least dangerous, which is saying an awful lot. There are the Valefors and the Heartbreakers to also consider. Acidbath. Genoscythe. The list goes on."

"Heartbreaker and Valefor, as Dragon can assure you, are non factors," Marquis answered darkly. "Heartbreaker made the mistake of annoying the wrong parahuman. It ended poorly for him."

"Lustrum convinced him that I, as the most powerful of the Birdcage, was the most valuable target," Glaistig Uaine clarified. "The Corruptor sought to make me his toy, now he exists only as my puppet."

Oh shit, she has Heartbreaker's power, I realized. Then I wondered just why that frightened me so much. She already had some of the most terrifying and deadly capes in history, what was one more in the grand scheme of things? A lot, apparently.
"I again express my deepest apologies, Faerie Queen," an older looking woman replied.

"It doesn’t matter, there are many others, opening the Birdcage must be a last resort," Chevalier continued. "Dragon, back me on this."

“I agree with Chevalier,” Dragon said. “The prisoners must stay within the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center. If you attempt to release them, I’ll deploy everything I have to stop you. Neither of us can afford the losses at this juncture.”

“But if we did try,” Saint said, “And if we succeeded in releasing some specific individuals, you wouldn’t be especially unhappy, would you?”

Dragon hesitated long enough for everyone to get the impression he wasn't wrong before she spoke. “I sincerely doubt the individuals you would release are the ones I'd be happy to see getting their freedom. You associate with the wrong people, Saint."

"Those of us standing here," Marquis offered. "After all, we'd be doing the fighting, and that risk to our lives deserves some consideration. As would Lung and a few others who couldn't be here," Lung. What would he do if he was free? He would come for Taylor, that I was certain of. Stopping him would be difficult, even with the Zerg. Lily can kill him, but in her current emotional state... would she?

"There are others, as well," the woman who apologized spoke. “One of my girls was unfairly imprisoned, another needs psychiatric care that we can't provide. The only reason either is still alive is because of my protection. Their freedom is a condition of my involvement.”

“We all have people we’d see freed,” another man spoke. “Let’s say two for each of us.”

"I can guess who some of the cell block leaders would choose to release," Dragon spoke. "No, that is not and will never be an option. It is no secret that I have issues with the nature of the Birdcage, but this would only make matters worse."

“Their opinions don’t decide this,” Marquis said. “Cauldron, you have the means to send us back or not. It’s your authority that matters.”

Chevalier's weapon shifted some, but he didn't do anything violent. “If you do this, you make an enemy of the Protectorate and the Guild. Perhaps Pantheon as well,” he glanced over at us.

I hesitated. On one hand, there were monsters like Lung and Bakuda who would kill my beloved were they free. On the other, there were those who could help us in this battle. Then there were those like Canary who never should have been imprisoned in the first place. This wasn't something I could
decide easily. I did, however, nod an agreement with Chevalier after a moment. Enough to let them know I shared his opinion on this, but also that I might be persuaded to change my mind. *As it stands I just can't see the Birdcage as a solution. Sorry, Dad.*

"If you would do this," Chevalier continued. "We would be forced to look into all of Cauldron's activities publicly. Your secrets would come to light, as would those heroes and villains who purchased their powers from you."

"Understood," Doctor Mother replied. "I apologize, Marquis," she responded. "Your aid is not as valuable to us as keeping the peace. Certainly not as worth hurting our clients. There's little value in defeating the Endbringer if it results in a civil war."

"You'll be expecting us to return to our cage like songbirds, then?" one of the other men asked.

"Your other option is to stay here and die," she answered. "This facility is on a dead world. If you choose to stay, it is only a matter of time before you die, probably of thirst. Some of you may not have that concern, but you would be in for a lonely existence."

"I suppose it cannot be helped, then," Marquis sighed. "We'll be here when you need us."

"If it comes to the point where we need your help that desperately, then we've already lost," Chevalier remarked.

"So... see you next Tuesday, then?" Marquis quipped back.
"This is getting absurd," I sighed. "I get keeping the Birdcage closed, though I want it known that I will consider certain specific members being released lawfully, now that we know we can remove them from the facility without losing everyone."

Canary being one of them, I added silently. I wondered how the woman would react to learning Bonesaw is one of her biggest fans. "But that can wait. For now, if no one's willing to contribute a game winning weapon, there has to be some of you that can help us do the fighting. Pantheon's willing to foot the bill, do all the frontline work. You've seen our weapons, you know our capabilities. We just need a way to keep it from escaping to heal itself."

"We can provide that," the cloaked figure offered. "I, my sister. Others may help." His English was understandable, if a little choppy. "You got revenge on the Third for destroying our homeland. Doing so hurts us, we rely on our enemies not knowing what we can do. We must extract a payment from each of you. For you, an oath to slay the others."

"We've made that promise many times," I agreed. "We'll do everything in our power to kill all of them. Some we do not yet know how, but we will try to learn."

"We're investigating the idea that the Endbringers are made by people," Dragon informed him. "If we locate the creators, I can promise they will not survive."

"Dragon, offering to kill someone as a favor?" Saint mocked.

"You misunderstand," she responded. "I would capture them and turn them over for legal trial. However, as they already have kill orders preemptively assigned upon their discovery, the sentence will no doubt be carried out quickly. Or, depending upon which organization locates them first, possibly quite slowly."

"Acceptable," the man replied. "The Endbringers, or their makers. For the rest, we will ask other favors when the time comes. India is gravely wounded, and the jackals circle us. You will provide us aid to drive them off."

"We can agree to that," Doctor Mother replied.

The others glanced at one another. Dragon nodded after some hesitation.

"Very well," the man from the Elite replied, and others murmured their ascent. The shadow-wielder chose not to respond.
"Moord Nag?" Doctor Mother asked. "What would it cost us to bring you on board?"

The woman and her shadow looked toward the woman in sequence. <Let them all die. I am content to watch the world burn. Scavenger and I shall draw strength from the fallen.>

“Can I ask who she is?” Faultline asked.

Minerva replied, while the woman from the Birdcage translated Moord Nag's sentiments to the others. “Moord Nag. Warlord based in Namibia. She's managed to survive for eight years in a place where warlords measure their lifespan in weeks. Subjugating other warlord and establishing a level of relative peace otherwise unheard of in the region. And she was strong enough to do it alone.”

<Not alone,> the woman responded. <With my Predator.>

“She said she’d be willing to let the world burn, before,” the woman from the birdcage said. “I don’t think you have an ally there.”

“From her attitude,” Saint added. “I don’t even see why she was invited.”

“I’ll ask you the same thing I asked the others,” the Doctor said. “What would it take for you to fight, here?”

<I cannot spend my power. It must remain strong to protect my people and my neighbors.>

“She can’t spend her power, not without-”

“Without providing dead to restore the balance,” Doctor Mother replied. "That is a hard pill to swallow."

“No,” Dragon spoke. "It is not acceptable in the least."

<Five thousand, it matters not if they are criminals, they may be infants or elderly or the sick and dying. Merely that they are alive when given to the Predator.>

“No,” Dragon said, before the translator could speak. "We don't need her. Our limitation is mobility. Hurting the Endbringer enough to force its withdrawal. As Pantheon has pointed out, we have the muscle needed to hurt it, if given the opportunity."
Even if she walks away, she'll still kill people to keep her Predator strong I realized. "Can we kill her?" I asked via our private com. "Not now, but later. She's the worst kind of monster."

"More harm than good," Lisa answered. "She's a celebrity in her region, viewed not unlike us. She predates on the guerillas and slavers that would harm her protected territory, and subsists upon the elderly and sickly that willingly offer themselves to her. If we take her away, then five thousand people will be murdered, or worse, in a weekend."

Fuck. Moord Nag and her Predator turned simultaneously, leaving her podium. <Wait!> I shouted. <You say you need human life. Is nothing else an option?>

<Only the death of mankind can satisfy the Predator's need.> Moord Nag answered. *Hmm, minor translation bug, that.*

<I might have an alternative,> I offered hesitantly. I pulled from the biomass, pushing to onto the table as I worked it and crafted it. Human DNA was easy enough for me to simulate, I didn't need a reference sample. I shaped it, building the bones and the meat and the blood. The nervous system. Everything from the neck down was indistinguishable. Above? The skull cavity was filled with a matter that could only be described as amniotic fluid. Completely human, female, but without any more of the brain than strictly necessary to keep it very much alive. <Try this,> I offered, feeling more than a little sick to my stomach.

A light gust of wind brushed across the area, and my creation, still in its Yggdrasil egg. It was set gently down in front of the African warlord. The shadow, now wearing the skull of some kind of dog, merely neared the thing. The Yggdrasil withered and died almost immediately. The contents no doubt didn't fare any better. <It works, but is not satisfactory,> was her answer. <A meager imitation of the strength the Predator draws upon.>

I cringed. <It may be meager, but I can offer them in large amounts. Grown as numerous as apples in an orchard.>

"Ames... what are you doing?" Vicky asked. "I... that... you know what those are?"

"I do," I told her. "There's no better choice. Whether she joins this battle or not, all other options are worse."

<And your price is to have us fight the Endbringer?> Moord Nag asked.

<Can you use your Predator to touch something without killing it?> I asked.

<Of course,> she answered. <It is a simple matter.>
"Then I can offer you more," I answered. "A great deal more. A garden that grows more of them. Five hundred a day. In exchange, you must swear never allow your shadow to feed on people again."

"Impossible," she responded. "You would cripple my ability to defend myself from my enemies. I cannot accept such an arrangement."

"Then only in self defense," I amended. "You will never need to murder to remain strong. In exchange, you will join every Endbringer fight from now until we finally find a way to end them for good. Once that day comes, we will renegotiate."

"I find this an unpleasant arrangement," Moord Nag answered. "Still, it is acceptable. The contract is sealed." She turned and left, the shadow with her.

"I'll discuss matters further with the Thanda," Lisa said softly. "Vicky, stay here."

Around us, discussions had broken off into smaller after arrangements. Chevalier and Doctor Mother agreeing to a followup meeting. Lisa finding out what the Thanda could do. Saint speaking to one of the Birdcage residents. I listened in on it all, but didn't really hear any of it.

"Amelia?" A voice asked. Vicky stepped between us.

"Sorry, she's not taking visitors," Vicky threatened.

"It... it's okay, Vicky, I'm fine," I was lying, of course, but right now encountering my estranged supervillain father was easier to stomach than what I'd just done. Anything to not think about how I was now selling lobotomized infants to a monster.

============

A/N- I got bored with my characters (and readers) being happy. Back to mopey emo time!
Vicky glanced at me, then stepped back. "If you need me, I'll be right over there. Warming up the anti Endbringer weapons. You never can be certain when they might be needed." I almost rolled my eyes.

"I understand," Marquis spoke with a calm, somewhat amused, demeanor. "Thank you for looking after my daughter all these years."

"It's what sisters do," she answered, her voice ice. Electricity visibly danced between the talons built into the armor. She stepped back a couple feet, and her armor shimmered, then turned invisible. "Just pretend I'm not even here."

"Quite the friends you brought with you," he smiled at me.

"Sisters," I corrected.

"Sisters? Plural?" he glanced over at where Lisa was chatting.

"Well, one's an complete bitch who knows exactly what to say to piss me off, but at the same time I know has my best interests at heart even when she's being an unbelievable pain in the ass," I told him. "And the other's Vicky. So, close enough."

"I saw some speculation on the news about me having a second daughter?" he prompted. "I must admit, this came as some news to me."

"To hear some of the other people in Brockton Bay tell it," I answered with just a bit of impatience. "I should be running DNA tests with every native of the city between the ages of nine and twenty. But, if it makes you feel any better? No, Clarice isn't one of yours."

"You know this for a fact, and still let the rumors persist, then?" he kept his easy smile. "I take it you're trying to conceal her true identity. No, don't worry, I won't ask any details." He held up his hand and small white knife that was almost certainly bone. Then he sliced the ball of his hand, though not deeply and dabbed it with a bit of cloth. "Here, should help you if you want to really sell the deception. I'm sure you or one of your tinkers can figure the rest out easily enough."

"Uh, thank you?" I said as I took the cloth. He wasn't wrong, though at this point there was so little benefit to having physical evidence to fabricate Clarice's identity that it really wasn't that useful. I opted not to tell him that, however.
"I heard about your engagement on the news," he said, changing the subject a bit. *He jumps between topics without warning. Then again, there's a lot to talk about and not a lot of time, of course he does.* "Your fiancée is beautiful, by the way."

"Thanks," this time I meant it. "Tell her that to her face, and she'd call you a liar to yours. I think that's part of her charm, personally."

"You have your old man's taste in women," he agreed.

"Yeah," I agreed unhappily. "It was very kind of our fans on the internet to point that tidbit out, amidst various other bits of speculation. You'll be relieved to know that no, she is not. Yes, we did check. I've been assured that, genetically, the two of us aren't even the same race."

He scratched the back of his head. "There are things you're prepared for when becoming a father. There are things you aren't prepared for, but aren't hard to figure out, really. And then there are those things that you never could have imagined could be a thing. I think this conversation is very much one of those."

"Yeah, try living a day in my life," I quipped. "You'd be amazed at how often weirdness like this happens to me."

He looked down, sighing. "I meant it when I said I was sorry. If I had it to do all over again, I'd have done things differently. I want you to know that."

"Nothing we can do about the past," I responded. I wasn't sure, myself, if I was accepting or dismissing the apology. "We just have to move forward. Do better in the future and make up for our mistakes where we can."

"That's a very wise way of looking at things, you were raised well," he praised, then his face showed realization and concern. *He must have noticed how I froze up.* "You weren't taught that, were you? It was something you had to learn for yourself."

I shrugged. "Like I said, moving forward, making up for mistakes."

He stepped forward and raised his arms a bit, then hesitated. His arms moved back to his sides and then up again. He settled on placing his hands on my shoulders. "I hope you never have to hear your own children say something like that to you," he sighed.

"Sorry to interrupt," Minerva spoke from the entrance. "But if we don't go now, I'm pretty sure they'd leave us behind. Not forever, of course, but a couple hours just to teach us not to waste time."
I turned my head toward her. "Understood," I replied, keeping my voice as neutral as I could.

"Well, visiting hours are over," Marquis sighed. "You've grown up to be a fine young woman, Amelia. You remind me a lot of your mother. I'd like to tell you about her, if we get the time. Maybe I can meet Taylor as well?"

"Yeah, that sounds nice," I offered. It was lame, but it was the best I could say and still be honest. He turned and quickly walked away, his body language changing in the blink of an eye, to the kind of man that could command respect in a prison full of some of the most horrific monsters the world has ever seen. *Well, at least I know he'll have something in common with Taylor,* I thought. Then I turned to follow my team.

....

I had been reunited with Taylor, and restored as many people as needed it. Then we went on the real offensive. The zerg poured out of our dimension, ready to engage. All of the shifts were over, and everyone arrived for their part of the battle. Except Lily and Sabah, I amended.

The zerglings and ultralisks charged through the rubble of a small town in southern Switzerland whose name I didn't notice, piling on to the Endbringer. Exotic energy weapons had been built into tusks made of sharpened Simurgh tissue, which Taylor wielded as an extension of her body. Khonsu pulled himself free, trapping numerous zerg in time fields. Much like himself, being captured in temporal acceleration would only allow them to recover and recharge.

"We have to shunt over," Lisa informed us. "Quickly."

*ConcernUncertainty.* Even so, she didn't argue. She shunted as instructed. I followed, along with our command center and everyone on it. Khonsu turned toward us, attempting to force through the masses of zerg between us. Despite not touching the ground, he was not really flying, nor was he very fast, but he was stronger than the monsters we built to fight him. *GrimCertaintyFocus.*

Taylor's flying units piled on the attacks, backed by our flying parahumans. Alexandria had wrapped one of her chains around Khonsu's throat. She and a couple ultralisks gripped it, pulling him back, though their efforts didn't seem to concern the Endbringer or slow him down.

"He's coming specifically for us," Lisa spoke, informing us of something we already knew.

A black mass poured out of nowhere. On it stood a woman. She doesn't look like a warlord, I thought. More like a groupie of some kind. Black t-shirt with the sleeves torn off and cut to show the stomach and waist. For whatever reason, she also wore a black knee length dress skirt. I guess when
you're the most terrifying person on a continent, you can wear whatever the hell you pleased.

Her Predator poured around Khonsu, forming claws and fangs from... whatever it was made of... and digging into injuries that had been made by others.

"Stronger than Alexandria," Lisa appraised of the monster.

Almost half a mile away, we hurt the popping and cracking noises as Khonsu was split open. A huge chunk, three layers thick about as large as a car roof popped off of the Endbringer and was tossed casually away.

"Make that a lot stronger than Alexandria," Lisa amended. "Looks like a similar Passenger to Siberian."

"Detecting waveform," Dragon announced over the armbands. "Target location: French Guiana."

Moord Nag fell back, coming away with another thick chunk of Endbringer shell in the shadow's claws. Our command center slowly lifted off the ground, and us with it. Then the scenery changed from a snowy, very much destroyed, European village to a tropical South American village. Strange, I didn't even feel the transition, I realized. Even with Trickster, there was always a little bit of sensation that came with teleportation.

But all of us had come with. The zerg still had grip on Khonsu, Alexandria still had him chained. Moord Nag's shadow still held the shell of Endbringer matter. He didn't have a chance to restore himself. We can win this. HopeConfidenceDetermination. Taylor's hand gripped mine. Bursts of energy from all our blasters streamed forward. Now that Missy wasn't needed for transportation, even she joined, hammering Khonsu with waves of distorted space and leaving cracks in him that seemed to penetrate deeper than any prior weapon had managed.

Moord Nag took advantage of this damage, specifically targeting them with the shadow. Near as I could tell, she was pouring the shadow into the gap and using it to spread between layers, then pushing them apart. Either way, the pair made a brutal tag team, melting through his layers the way Lily had during her attempt.

A pillar of time shifted, moving toward Missy. As tired and focused on offense as she was, she didn't even see it coming. She blipped out of Bet to find herself on Avalon. "Fuck!" she shouted on the coms, which were mercifully designed to keep the volume at a reasonable decibel for us. "It almost got me, didn't it?"

"Hah!" Clarice chirped happily. "Told you the auto detect system was perfect."
"Yeah," Missy agreed, her voice shaky. "You get to pick on movie night. Landing to recharge, see you in a couple minutes."

The rest of the battle proved straightforward. We had him outclassed in firepower, now. The Endbringer was incredibly durable even by their standards, and had its movement gimmick, but past that it was predictable. The zerg absorbed most of the damage. Until the last few moments. "Waveform detected," Dragon informed us. "Coordinate unknown. According to my understanding of dimensional physics, it's to a place that doesn't exist."

What? "I think, my friends," the Indian cape responsible for our teleportation spoke over the armbands. "I won't be following this one." No one objected, and we took a few more good shots before the Endbringer disappeared.

==============

A/N- And there's the end of Khonsu's fight arc. On to the aftermath!
"Can we kill her?" Amelia asked me. She continued talking, but I focused more on my power. *Finds her power repulsive, reminds her of Siberian, reminds her of when she was being hunted. Antithesis to everything she ever believed in, both as Amy trying to be a good hero, and as Amelia who spends her efforts fighting those like the Slaughterhouse Nine and Fallen. Deeper issues. Amelia is currently lacking Taylia bond. Passenger reasserting aggressive impulses. Desires conflict. Lack of sleep makes controlling impulses more difficult. Might cause scene. Might take action what would be viewed as a violation of the Endbringer truce. Unlikely. Will need resources, will return to Taylia. Might ask Victoria. Victoria wouldn't hesitate.*

"More harm than good," I answered, phrasing my explanation in the most delicate way possible. "She's a celebrity in her region, viewed not unlike us. She predates on the guerillas and slavers that would harm her protected territory, and subsists upon the elderly and sickly that willingly offer themselves to her. If we take her away, then five thousand people will be murdered, or worse, in a weekend." Not, strictly, a lie. I simply left out a lot of details about what happens when Moord Nag doesn't have access to volunteers or 'acceptable targets'. If Victoria and Amelia weren't so exhausted, I might not have been able to fool them.

Amelia interrupted Moord Nag as she left, offering a grown alternative to human life. I must be tired, too, I didn't even think of that as an option. I didn't turn my power on the pod she created. I could make an educated guess, and there were so many more important events going on here. I hesitated for a single moment on the long term deal she'd made with Moord Nag. It went against what we understood of parahumans. Passenger damaged by Third Trigger? No. Nothing occuring in host can harm Passenger. Connection damaged? No. Powers work as before, Passenger functioning as normal. Fears upsetting Taylor. Yes. Passenger worried about losing Taylia bond again. Oh. Oh wow. That is something.

Not a lot that could be done with it right now, but that is certainly something.

After Moord Nag's acceptance of Amelia's offer, the groups started breaking up some. The Elite approached a south american group that had also chosen to remain silent. *Never intended to help, simply curious as to the dynamics. Sent thinkers. Shark, thinker specializing in finding ways to disrupt the plans an goals of others. He used that ability to economically ruin business rivals and acquire their assets on the cheap. Saw numerous weaknesses to exploit in this meeting. Opting not to use them. Knows that Cauldron and Pantheon, to say nothing of Moord Nag, would retaliate with physical force. Correction: ties with Cauldron. Acquired powers from Cauldron. Fears female bodyguard. Fears male bodyguard more.*

The other was a thinker that bordered on a master known as 'Hype'. His ability? Knowing what people wanted, and knowing how to get them excited over things they didn't actually want. The former power, I was certain, they'd be putting to use at this meeting, and perhaps we'd be seeing an offer at some point in the near future. His secondary ability was more insidious. He didn't directly alter peoples' minds, he simply manipulated and tricked them. Not something that could easily be noticed by anti Master techniques.
Chevalier took the chance to talk to Cauldron. Concern over Case 53s. Hoping to gain access to Cauldron’s records of creating them. Perhaps find their actual identities. Serious morale issues within Protectorate. Serious need for new members. Sees helping them as a means to recruit more of them. Hoping to encourage Cauldron to provide more artificial capes to the Protectorate cause.

Saint opted to talk to a man from the Birdcage. Emotional connection? Yes. Unusual. Familiar, not friendly. Light desperation. Need. Addiction? Similar. Subtle, power based, mind manipulation? No, not setting off Rapture’s tech. Manipulation. Similar to Hype’s. Saint is a tinker. Resource needed. Resource unique to the Birdcage? Useful information to have, and I was quite certain Hype knew it as well. Oh well, the Elite weren’t really a concern and would regret making themselves a concern. A fact that they were no doubt very aware of.

I noted Marquis approaching. Hesitant, uncertain. No surprise. Doesn’t have anything of significant value as leverage to ‘earn’ a conversation. No intent to disrupt or manipulate. Simply wants to talk to his daughter. Not a lot for me to use, there. Not until we started looking into opportunities to get certain people out of the Birdcage. I simply ducked off to speak with the Thanda members. Victoria would keep an eye out for Amelia.

<Greetings,> I spoke to them. <You spoke of a method to aid us in the fight?>

<Yes,> the leader agreed. <I am impressed that you know our language.>

<Tinker tech,> I admitted.

<I see,> he was a little disappointed, but hid it well enough. <Impressive technology, then. Now to speak of business. I and my followers are willing to help, as payment for slaying the Third and seeing to it that the devastation of our people was not in vain.> Doesn’t blame us. Doesn’t feel we were responsible for Simurgh’s final farewell. Is not suspicious at all that we might be even partially responsible. Knows we’re not. Knows who is. Person responsible is friend. Was friend. Died as a result of the attack. <We risk a great deal in doing so.>

I considered offering them, all of India, in fact, a place in our world. We needed the population, after all. Although, even if everyone accepted, it wouldn’t even total another hundred million. Won’t work. India as a culture still resents European imperialism. Will view our governing system, rightly, as a mirror of that. Disdain for our leaders. Homosexuality still illegal. Viewed as a perversion practiced by degenerates, not unlike bestiality in the USA. While these ‘dark’ capes of India, whether hero or villain, were ironically enough more socially accepting than most, they certainly didn’t speak for their people.

<We can minimize the risk,> I offered, instead. <Lie about your help. We prefer to be honest where possible, but we won’t punish our allies for trying to help us. What can your cape do?>
He creates bonds between things. If one is moved, the other moves as well, the man informed me. That's an odd power to say the least. He has no limit to weight, can take whole cities at once. It will work on the abominations. When he flees, everything connected to him will join.

That seems almost perfect for this. Risky, but perfect. I agreed. We can protect your ally, you won't need to risk your organization's safety and anonymity.

Except this one, he added. He will not like it.

You may use it to your advantage, I suggested. Imposing that you have friends and allies within Pantheon may intimidate your foes.

No, I merely meant to correct, he answered. We will do it out of our obligation and to see that the abominations are destroyed. There is no need to compensate us further, our duty is enough.

Very well, I agreed. We are about to go anyway.

Ablative layers. Forcefield reinforcement within layers. Laws of physics break down well before reaching core. Sacrificing majority of offensive abilities for defenses far greater than any prior Endbringer. Does not want to be destroyed. Creator fears destruction of the Endbringers. Creator more concerned with their ability to inspire fear than their ability to inflict harm.

The recruitment of Moord Nag was a huge boon for the battle. Her power really was on par with the Siberian in many ways, even stronger in some, and exponentially better on the offensive than our zerg. Better, even, than Alexandria in actual combat. Coupled with Thanda's strange 'attunement' cape, and from what I could decipher, that's what it was. Similar to Chevalier in its ability to interpose properties, only in this case the property was relative position in space and time.

The battle was, once we finally had a way to keep the pressure on the bastard, almost anticlimactic. Is this how future Endbringer battles are going to be? I wondered. Impossible, hopeless, conflicts until we discover the one perfect power that makes them seem nearly trivial? My power had nothing to offer me for the question. Still, it was an insight to consider for the future, a window into the minds of the Endmakers.

Alexandria landed next to us after the battle. "Do you have time for a debriefing?" she asked. Knows we don't, being polite. Establishing some level of superiority by implying she's capable of continuing if we wish.
"Sorry, we're all pretty much dead on our feet," Amelia spoke. She wasn't lying, she was a wreck and Taylor was barely functional. Fatigue, difficulty concentrating. Power strangely unaffected, zerg still function as normal despite controller's exhaustion. Power not relying on her mental condition. Taylia bond functioning normally, though both members of bond too tired to use it.

"I understand," Alexandria agreed. "I have things to deal with as well. I just want to find out if you are well enough. I heard about the barter you made to Moord Nag." Concerned about Moord Nag's opinion. Recognizes the warlord's capabilities. Has been aware for some time.

"I'll follow through before going home, don't worry," Amy answered. "Before I have time to think about exactly what I promised."

"She's one of the few that can actually make a difference in the final battle," Alexandria added. "I thank you for your efforts. On a more official note, you've been authorized to take some of the KEB tissue for your experiments. You're making better use of it than anyone else, after all." Official authorization. Not the Protectorate or PRT. Presidential approval. Cauldron has functional control over the US government. Wants us aware. Wanted to know if were were already aware. Wants to remind me of my various obligations as well.

"Which is pretty bizarre," I spoke up. "Considering our... new legal status... you might want to show us less obvious favoritism in the future. People will start to get suspicious. Oh, and no, I don't know anything more about the Endmakers that I think is useful. Maybe Dragon's tracking Khonsu's retreat will give us something useful in the long run, but that's on the Tinkers to handle. Other than that, I'm certain no one at the meeting was involved. The Elite know I was there for that purpose, by the way. If they find the source first, we're looking at a fucking nightmare. They'll try to take control of them."

"That's troubling," Alexandria replied. Suspected most of that, now knows we weren't surprised by implication that they control the President. "They're difficult enough for me to deal with as it is. I suppose it's too much to hope you have a way to prove it. Not showing at the Endbringer battles is, unfortunately, not enough to justify a full scale assault the way you've dealt with the Fallen and Teeth." Hoping for useful information, excuse to hit one of the few remaining organized villain groups with highest level of force. Some concern about loss of Pantheon's ability to police after Avalon becomes public. Hopes to remove remaining problem before that occurs.

"No, and there won't be," I admitted. "Sorry.

"I understand," Alexandria replied. Again aware. Is impressed by how I'm handling situation. Wants to discuss more. Sees me as a... friend? Well, that's a surprise and then some. Aaand now she knows what I just figured out. "The warning is appreciated, regardless. I'll make contact when you've had a chance to recover from this ordeal. Do you have any time you'd prefer?" Offering opportunity to talk about details. Including possible friendship.

"Well, it's only three days to Christmas, which is pretty much ruined for everyone on the planet," I started, mulling over responses. Wouldn't be upset if I reject. Would pretend not to notice, much as I
do in similar circumstances. We really are a lot alike. Remind her that I have friends and obligations that come first, see how she handles it. "If you find a way to sneak away during the vacation time, feel free to come over. Amelia makes the best turkey."

"You cook?" Alexandria asked Amelia. "I can never find the time, myself." Took warning at face value. Willing to meet halfway. Not planning to manipulate us. Has no need to, considers Endbringers and Scion to be primary goals, knows that's our goal as well. Wants us to stop them. Correction: doesn't care who succeeds in stopping them, as long as they are stopped. Wouldn't view a friendship to be something that would further that goal any more than current alliance does. Personal reasons.

"No," she responded, struggling to stay awake. "I... uh... grow it."

"Other than the texture, you'd never be able to tell the difference," I answered. The words conveyed a lot of meanings. An approval of Amelia, a sort of territorial line. She understood immediately that I was accepting, more or less provisionally, her unspoken interest, and the underlying loneliness in it. When I was being honest, I was lonely as well. With exception to Rapture, I didn't have anyone I could relate to on a Thinker level. And in the case of Rapture, she didn't have the same concerns that I had. She didn't need to deal with the same responsibilities which Alexandria and I did.

"I might even take you up on that," she agreed. "Now, I won't keep you. Weight of the world and all that, as I'm sure you're quite familiar with." Alexandria took off. I didn't need my power to tell me she'd be there.

=============

A/N- No new events, but lots of new information.

Also... I think this is where I fell in love with the Lisa/Rebecca interaction.
"About fucking time," I muttered as Khonsu vanished into wherever the hell he came from. My team started shunting back over to Avalon almost immediately.

"Hey, Vicky, mind giving me a hand?" Taylor asked.

Yes I do, I need to go check on Amy. "What's the sitch?"

"Most of the zerg that got hit by those time fields lost their shunt drives," she answered. "Janus is teleporting the cats back to base, but the gargants are just too large. You're the only one with a system that can handle sending them over."

God damn it. "Okay, I understand." On the plus side, it wasn't hard work, and I managed to make it look cool. Eric simply stood in a field as all the zerglings came to him double file. One touch, they'd vanish, and were no doubt ending up in the lawn of the magic tree embassy. I, on the other hand, got to move around. Ultralisks were just too heavy to walk through the streets without crushing them. Let the Protectorate heroes still here know just what I was capable of. I fought the bastard nonstop the entire time, resting only to get a lift from one location to the next, a half hour visit to Shady Conspiracy Central, and one hour he spent in China, and I was still capable of working as if I just got here.

The open comlink came up, with Amy speaking. "Sorry, we're all pretty much dead on our feet," she spoke.

"I understand," Alexandria, or Costa-Brown if you prefer, spoke. "I have things to deal with as well. I just want to find out if you are well enough. I heard about the barter you made to Moord Nag."

"I'll follow through before going home, don't worry," Amy answered. "Before I have time to think about exactly what I promised."

"She's one of the few that can actually make a difference in the final battle," Alexandria added. "I thank you for your efforts. On a more official note, you've been authorized to take some of the KEB tissue for your experiments. You're making better use of it than anyone else, after all."

"Which is pretty bizarre," Minerva replied. "Considering our... new legal status... you might want to show us less obvious favoritism in the future. People will start to get suspicious. Oh, and no, I don't know anything more about the Endmakers that I think is useful. Maybe Dragon's tracking Khonsu's retreat will give us something useful in the long run, but that's on the Tinkers to handle. Other than that, I'm certain no one at the meeting was involved. The Elite know I was there for that purpose, by the way. If they find the source first, we're looking at a fucking nightmare. They'll try to take control..."
"That's troubling," Alexandria replied. "They're difficult enough for me to deal with as it is. I suppose it's too much to hope you have a way to prove it. Not showing at the Endbringer battles is, unfortunately, not enough to justify a full scale assault the way you've dealt with the Fallen and Teeth."

"No, and there won't be," Minerva admitted. "Sorry."

"I understand," Alexandria replied. "The warning is appreciated, regardless. I'll make contact when you've had a chance to recover from this ordeal. Do you have any time you'd prefer?"

"Well, it's only three days to Christmas, which is pretty much ruined for everyone on the planet," Minerva speculated. "If you find a way to sneak away during the vacation time, feel free to come over. Amelia makes the best turkey."

"You cook?" Alexandria asked. "I can never find the time, myself."

"No," Amy replied. "I... uh... grow it."

"Other than the texture, you'd never be able to tell the difference," Lisa insisted.

"I might even take you up on that," she agreed. "Now, I won't keep you. Weight of the world and all that, as I'm sure you're quite familiar with." Alexandria took off, going back to the Dragon vehicles that would be providing their lift home. While they'd been talking, I had shunted over the last few Gargants. Pantheon's cleanup, at least, had finished. Except Eric, he still had a few to go.

I landed near the others. "We're having Eric take us home," Lisa informed me. "Missy's not safe to use. Don't tell her I told you that, though. I told Theo to sit with her until she falls asleep so she won't argue. We'll come back for the hardware after everyone's spent a couple days in bed."

I glanced over at the boy who was finishing his job. "At least he got some sleep," I agreed.

Eric teleported over. "Okay, that's covered," he replied. "What's left?"

"You're sending everyone except Amelia and I home," Taylor instructed. "Then we're taking a trip with Moord Nag to cover her fee for this excursion." Taylor put her arm around Amy. I watched the badly muted interplay between their emotions. The only thing keeping either of them on their feet is the other one.
"I'll be coming with," I added. "If she tries to pull something, I'm the only person who could react in time to stop her."

"We'll be in a Dragon transport," Amy replied, and then yawned.

"You'll get a nap on the way, I hope," I argued.

"Just like old times," Amy mumbled. I watched as Riley's tech did its thing. The somewhat increased oxygen levels coupled with a light caffeine like stimulant meant to be absorbed by the lungs. It was doing what it could, but the system was reaching the point where the stimulant would stop helping. Then they'd crash hard.

"She's down," Taylor informed us. "Everyone goes home. See you later, Lisa."

Eric tapped Lisa, and she vanished. Then he shunted over. I walked over to my barely awake sister and her equally out of it fiancee. With very little ceremony, I simply grabbed the backs of their armor and took off. Their antigrav tied into mine and I took off, bringing them to the carrier vessel which radiated Moord Nag's particular aura of danger. The only person here that was as threatening as her was Dragon.

Once you rule out the artificial capes like Eidolon, I realized, there's a bias toward female parahumans being the most powerful. Dragon, Moord Nag, Missy, Riley, Lisa, Eric counts as a girl for this one, Lily. That woman with Cauldron. Fucking Glaistig Uaine. I might have dismissed all that as coincidence or something, but that was before I had seen Scion in person. His loneliness was a physical thing, I felt it wash over every cape that came near him, myself included.

"Y'can let us go," Amy muttered. "We can fly ourselves." Speaking of overpowered female parahumans.

"I know," I lied. "But we're in a bit of a rush."

I dropped them both down in front of the tinker craft, and walked forward. The pair followed me. They were still awake, kinda, at least. Eric popped up right next to me. "So, Faultline told me to tell you they got everything cleared with the UN," he spoke up. "Woulda told you sooner, but, yeah."

Yeah. "How long do we have?" I asked.

"Day after New Years," he answered. "She says it's the best she could do. They weren't happy about the news."
"I get it," I agreed. "Every day we wait costs a lot of money and potentially lives. They're frightened, and it's not like we can tell them what happened to Lily so they back the fuck off for a while."

"Do you think telling them would help?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. Probably not. Lily would kick our asses if we did, though."

"I know," he agreed.

"I'll talk to her," I told him as we started going up the ramp.

Moord Nag had already taken her position in the pilot seat of the vessel. Her shadow occupied the chair next to her.

<You are late,> she informed us as if we didn't already know.

<We had responsibilities to deal with,> Amy answered. The translation device made her sound a lot better than she really was right now.

<Speaking of,> I added. <We have a lot of stuff to worry about right now. Would you mind if we handled that during the trip? I wouldn't want it to seem like we're ignoring you for the flight.>

<Indeed, I would prefer that you did,> she agreed. <Ours is not a friendship, it is an alliance of convenience. Fear not, for as long as your mistress upholds her part of our contract, I shall abide by it as well.>

Mistress? Is that a translation bug? Whatever, I don't care enough to argue with her. <Works for me,> I responded as I led the others to the back of the vessel. It's going to be a long flight.

============

A/N- Actually, I got nothing. Except sleepy Vista sounds adorable.
"What the hell do you mean, marriage?" Sabah demanded. Well, that's about how I expected this to go.

"It's a political thing, only," I insisted.

"Political?" she sounded more than a little skeptical. "You're going to marry a prince. Couldn't they just, I dunno, adopt you? That's a thing they can do, isn't it? You shouldn't have to marry anyone." At least she's not too angry. I reached over and pulled her hands together, clasping them in mine.

"Doesn't work that way," I answered. "The royalty in Japan is patriarchal. Even if I were adopted, I'd lose the status pretty much as soon as I got married to anyone who wasn't part of the royal family. Besides, well, you know my family history. I'm not interested in having even more parents."

"But getting married to someone you've never even met?" she grumbled. "That's so much better."

"It's a marriage in name only," I insisted. "I won't be expected to do anything. It's not like I want to have a husband. I won't be in the succession path, so they won't expect me to produce an heir or anything. All I'd have to do is show up on parades every so often."

"Do you even know who this guy is?" she asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "The Emperor was very clear that his nephew knew and accepted this whole arrangement. He'll never try to touch me, he'll never get in the way of..." I hesitated for just a heartbeat. For as long as Sabah and I had been together, we still weren't officially anything more than friends and coworkers who happened to have sex a lot. As opposed to our bosses, who are engaged and don't even kiss. I finally settled on a word. "Anything. As long as I don't object to him having lovers of his own. I don't have a problem with that."

"Can't you just, well, not?" she argued weakly. "They should be happy with what we're offering. A new, safe, place to live. A fresh start. A chance to rebuild. Why do you even need to be a part of their royal family?"

"It isn't just that they're being asked to abandon their homeland for a new, better one, Sabah," I sighed, sitting down on her couch, and bringing her to sit next to me. "They're being asked to give up their autonomy as a people. Their rights to govern their own county. Allowing outsiders to dictate the future of their country. They can't just do that without assurances that they can give to their people. That they'll be treated well. Being able to point to one of Pantheon's royalty and say 'she's one of us, too' will do that."
"And you're not already one of them?" she sighed.

"No," I answered. "I was born in the States. To them, I'm only a little different than any other westerner."

"By that standard, wouldn't anyone be able to marry in?" she asked.

"Probably not," I replied. "Besides, who else would it be? Our fearless leaders are too busy being very publicly engaged. And other than them, only us Endslayers are really famous and liked enough to be accepted. With me, at least they get someone who looks like them. Besides, can you imagine the freakout if we tried to marry off the cute little barely teenager to some guy in Japan?"

She smiled, trying to meet me halfway on the humor. We both ignored the other option. Her. Sabah made it abundantly clear that she would never get married under any circumstance, and I was okay with that. I didn't really want to, either, though I wasn't so opposed as Sabah was. If anything, that was part of the appeal here. I'd make my parents happy, there would be no obligations to my not-real-husband. Really, it was perfect. But Sabah didn't see it that way.

"You want this, don't you?" she asked. Accused, really.

"Maybe there was a time when I imagined being a princess," I admitted, shrugging a little. "Wait, is this about how I used to have a boyfriend? Trust me, I'm gay. Maybe it took me a little while to figure it out, but believe me. I'm not into guys."

"It just makes me feel uncomfortable," she argued.

"We need them, Sabah," I tried a different kind of appeal. "And they need us. This is my homeland and my heritage we're talking about here. This is a way for me to help them. Wouldn't you help yours, if there was a way?"

"My heritage would arrest us just for kissing," she informed me bitterly. "More fucking obligations and expectations and demands. This isn't any different."

I guess it's not. "I'll see if Lisa can come up with another idea," I offered halfheartedly. I considered arguing more, but there wasn't any point in it.

She pulled me into an embrace and kissed me softly. "Thank you," she murmured as her power started to work its way through my clothes.
I woke up slowly. *When was it that I stopped getting surprised by waking up in my armor?* I sat up and sucked on the straw built into the armor. It no longer had a taste to me. I got to my feet and relieved myself in the armor. That didn't bother me anymore, either. It did at first, but after a while I just sorta stopped caring. If anything, it was more sanitary than removing the armor enough to go to the bathroom in a corner of temporal prison. That, and all the people around me. True, they were outside the bubble and probably wouldn't realize it if I had. No one had gone very far since I had last gotten tired enough to sleep. Only a stream of energy blasts from Legend traveled quickly enough for me to notice.

I started firing as rapidly as my power would let me. I managed to work out a pattern, one I had a lot of practice with, starting at the left and working my way right. The bolts rushed after the fucker. I'd kill him and all the others. *Sabah was right. They should be grateful that I want to be part of their royal family. I shouldn't need to marry into anything. If I was one of the world's favorite people after killing one of these fuckers, what would they think after I kill a second? Or a third?*

*Leviathan, especially. Kill that fucker and Japan would just make me the Emperor, and I could marry whoever the fuck I pleased after that. Yeah. That's the fucking key right there.*

I activated the music player. Then turned it off again. *Over two thousand songs and I'm sick of every fucking one of them.*

*I miss you, Sabah. First thing I'm doing when I get out of here? I'll tell you how much I love you. Wait, no, that's the third thing. First two are brushing my teeth and having an actual bath.*

*....*

*Arms feel wrong. Cold. Heavy.*

"Atropos?" a woman's voice asked. *A voice? I'm not in the bubble!*

"Did... did I get him?" I asked, slurring the words some. It had been so long since I tried to speak that my mouth had trouble making the sounds correctly. *Please tell me I got him. Tell me I didn't break first."

"You did more damage than anyone," she answered softly. "But... I'm sorry. This one's built differently than the others."

I opened my eyes to the unusually dim light of Pantheon's base. I'd gotten so accustomed to the glare of open sunlight in Khonsu's power. I looked a the woman. She was pretty, in a mousy sort of way. She had what my mom called a 'well travelled' face. I'd seen her before, but I couldn't quite remember from where. Then I glanced across the rest of her body. The blue, white and gold body
armor gave it away. Rapture. Right, she was there during the fight.

_Dammit._ "I never had a chance of killing it, did I?" I couldn't help myself, I started to cry. _I stayed in there for so long. Alone. I could see the world outside and I chose to stay trapped in there. It didn't even work._

"It doesn't seem like it," she answered, her voice was smooth, understanding. "You did a lot of damage, slowed him down. Because of your effort, I'm sure thousands were spared being killed by Khonsu. You're a hero, in every meaning of the word."

Khonsu? _Oh, they must have named it._ "Where's Sabah?" I asked.

"The other room," she answered. "We need to talk some before you can have guests."

"I want to see her now," I growled, sitting up. Only to find I was held down by something. _What? No._ "Let me up!"

"We have to make sure you're okay first," she kept her voice calm. I reached out with my power, and got nothing. Everything on or around me is alive. I can't use my power on anything.

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I just need to see my girlfriend. Let me fucking up!"

"Please, just be patient a little longer," she asked. "You've been without human contact for a long time. That has unpredictable effects on people. You could put yourself in danger."

"Don't give a fuck," I insisted.

"You could put her in danger," she added. "With your powers, you might even kill her on accident."

I started crying again. "I just want to see my girlfriend."

==============

A/N- Poor Lily.
"Okay, this is so unfair," Zach muttered.

"You're just angry 'cause I'm kicking your ass," I smirked.

"Of course you're kicking my ass," he sighed. "That's what your power is. 'How do I kick its ass? Parahuman edition.' There's no one whose ass you don't kick."

"Yeah," I agreed. "And to think, I used to think flying and punching things really hard was the coolest power ever. Also, it's not just how to kick ass, it's all kinds of other things. Speaking of which, did you try that little trick I suggested?"

"Haven't had a chance to," he admitted. "Khonsu. Even Emma was exhausted by the end of that. Fuck, even you and I were worn out and I didn't think that was possible."

_How did he know that? _"Are you sure you don't have a thinker power?"

He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

"Right, stupid question," I muttered. "Seriously, though, how did you figure that out?"

Sadly, my question wouldn't be answered, because the door opened, and Lily walked in. My bioscan powers don't really have an 'off' button, so I was flooded with information immediately. Sleep deprivation made sense, considering her circadians were all jacked up. Had been crying. Minor impact injuries on her hand indicated that she punched something. Harder than her hand, so definitely not a person. Had sex recently. *Eww, stupid gross power.* I tried very hard to ignore information about her digestive system, which was still in the process of getting used to solid foods again.

"Hey, Vicky?" she asked. "Can we talk?" I didn't need my powers to hear that she was upset.

"Sure," I responded. "Zach, girl talk time. Go spend some time with Emma, I'm sure she'll enjoy the distraction. She's been poking at Khonsu bits for hours."

"But..."

"Fiiine," he groaned, getting up off the couch. "Kick me out of my own bedroom."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to-" Lily started apologizing.

"Nah, it's cool," Zach interrupted. "I was getting bored with having my shit wrecked like I'd never picked up a controller before in my life. I'll just pretend you're here helping Vicky with her repressed bisexuality."

"And I'll just pretend you didn't say that," Lily remarked back. *And now she's forgotten to feel bad about chasing Zach out of his room, I observed.* *Seriously, are we sure the dumbass doesn't have a Thinker power?*

There was no more fanfare as Zach left us alone, although I waited for a few seconds to confirm he didn't stick around to eavesdrop, and I simply waited patiently. Not a lot I could say that wasn't just stupid questions. There was a mounting level of embarrassment in Lily's emotions as things went from quiet to a little awkward.

"So... can I stay with you, tonight?" Lily asked. *Correction, are we sure the dumbass doesn't have a Master power?* The emotions spiked as Lily realized what she said. "No! I didn't meant it like that. You're hot and all, but..."

"Relax," I smiled. "Biothinker, remember? I know your feelings, or lack of them, toward me."

"All of them?" she asked, her fear switching from panic to more basic apprehension.

"Well, every one of them that happens when I'm in the room," I corrected. "And everyone else's, too. So, you've taken a few looks. I'd be more insulted if you hadn't. I know you aren't really interested in me. You love Sabah. I'm just some freakin' amazing eye candy."

"And yet so very humble," she added as she sat down on one of the loveseats. Zach's bedroom was more like a small living room than anything. Television. Computer. Video game television. Two loveseats, a couch, one of those rolling computer chairs, and two ordinary chairs. No actual bed in sight.

"Yup, that's me," I agreed. "So what's the story?"

"Well, Sabah and I went on a date," she started. "It was just perfect in every way. We came back to my place and, well..." she trailed off for a second, letting me draw the obvious conclusion so she didn't have to say it out loud. "After, I. I told her that I love her."
"Then nothing," she sighed. "She said nothing. Pretended not to hear me. A little while later, she got up and went back to her place. It's the first night she's done that since..." she trailed off again. Khonsu. For me it had been three days of fighting and now a couple days of rest. For Lily it has been almost six days' rest after half a year of fighting. "She didn't do anything wrong, I did spring it on her out of nowhere. I just need someone to stay with me tonight."

"No, I get it," I agreed. Your girlfriend has issues, and you just kicked all of them square in the twat. I liked Sabah well enough. She reminded me a lot of Amy, back before I had my glass-nap. Although Ames always shut down when I started talking clothes and shopping, while that's exactly where Sabah really came to life. Lily, on the other hand, was more of a tomboy, interested in sports and the various thrills of cape life.

"You don't mind?" she asked.

"Not at all," it was a half truth. Not sleeping meant I'd spend several hours laying around basically doing nothing. But Lily was one of my friends, one of the people I really trusted. This wasn't a big ask.

"Thanks," she agreed. Then she looked around sheepishly. "So, uh, how do we do this?"

"Your place or mine?" I asked, smiling a little. If I were Zach, I might have added a little humor to this. But whenever I tried to pull shit like that, it just made me feel weird. No idea how he did it, and my power didn't include pulling off bad jokes.

"Yours," she said immediately.

*Weird pick, but okay.* I stood up. "It's a bit of a trip, hope you brought your walking shoes."

"That's okay, I could use the exercise," she agreed.

....

*Mom's up,* I realized. A quarter before seven, my alarm clock informed me. Use of my power made it easy enough to get out of bed without waking Lily and then sneak out of my room. Bad jokes weren't on my list, but stealth was way up there. I went downstairs. I'd see if I could con a nice, home cooked meal while I was here. Amy's stock was nice and all, but sometimes I needed to bite into something made from actual meat.
"Hey, Mom," I smiled at her. *Hmm, she's nervous about something.* "How's my favorite lawyer?"

"Vicky," she spoke, going motherly. "You know I try to be open minded about these things, and I can't do a whole lot to stop what your sister does in her place. But I would appreciate it if you don't bring your girlfriends over to stay the night in my house. I know, Christmas night, so I'll ignore it this ti-"

*Oh.* I started laughing. Mom just looked at me with a combination of annoyance and disbelief, which made things even funnier. "You have the totally wrong idea," I told her. "Lily's not. We're not dating. At all. She's a friend. Plus she's already taken. Plus I'm into guys. She's having a rough time and I was helping her out."

She visibly relaxed. "Good. I was beginning to worry that I'd never have grandchildren. Not. That you should take that as encouragement to start now."

I smirked. "'Y'know, I don't think that would be an obstacle. I mean, Amy creates new life on a daily basis. Compared to that, allowing same sex reproduction is nothing. She's already turned one girl into a boy. He's pretty hot, actually, if you like the tall, dark, and trying way too hard to be all brooding and male." I watched the various emotions run through Mom's body, and couldn't help but smile in anticipation. "And with my powers, I might be able to do it all myself."

Her face scrunched up. "Okay!" she exclaimed, bringing up her hands in defeat. "That's more than I wanted to know. I would have settled with 'don't worry, I just need to find the right guy'."

"What happened to being open minded?" I asked.

Her face was a blank stare. "My seventeen year old daughter talking about getting herself pregnant goes well beyond being open minded. Now let's get back to the girl sleeping in your bed."

"That's Lily, a friend of mine," I informed. I skipped on mentioning her status as a teammate. Mom no doubt suspected, of course, but talking about her cape identity would have been rude. "Like I said, she's having a rough patch. So I kept her company while she slept."

"Company?"

"Yeah," I shrugged. "I don't sleep, remember? So I basically just spent the whole time running combat simulations." Seeing her still blank look, I continued. "Pretty much, I just use my power to find the best ways to fight me, and then the best ways to fight me fighting me. It's a lot like having the world's best combat tutor teaching you the best martial art that can possibly exist."
"If your power already tells you how to fight, why are you using it to teach you how to fight?"

"Because I nearly lost my fight with Lilith," I answered. "My armor saved my life, full stop. Precog on precog combat gets messy, and there are others out there a lot stronger than her. Then there's anti-precog powers. My powers don't do anything useful for Endbringers. Then there was this woman... at the Khonsu battle... my power's idea of how to win in a fight with her was trying to find a way to talk her into letting me win. I still don't even know if she's really that scary, or she just has some kind of weird Master-Stranger power. My power didn't consider her a real threat to me in my armor, but that's not saying a lot. And my power doesn't even see Eidolon when he's right there in front of me."

"That..." she sat down. "You know, every so often I'm reminded how my girls are in the big leagues. I'm still caught up in a world where we had to worry about when Hookwolf would smash a liquor store for having an owner with a tan, or not paying protection money, and arguing with Armsmaster over jurisdiction. Now Class S threats and the Triumviate come up in casual conversation."

"Speaking of S-threats," I smiled. "The PRT's about to use their new toys to remove Nilbog sometime early in the New Year. Like the fifth or sixth, I wasn't paying much attention at that meeting. But that's classified, so I didn't tell you about it. We coulda done it ourselves, but we have our own announcement. The twentieth is when Avalon goes public. Woulda been sooner, but, Khonsu. Oh, and Alexandria's showing coming to our Christmas party tomorrow. That's not classified. In fact, you're encouraged to let it slip. We kinda want people to know about that one."

"Is it too early to break out the scotch?" she asked.

"It's five o'clock somewhere," I shrugged. "Don't worry about pouring me a glass. Waste of perfectly good alcohol."

==============

A/N- Didn't have enough material to make a normal chapter, so this is pretty much two small chapters.
"Will she be okay?" I asked Rapture. She functionally stood guard while Emma handled the medical checkup. They refused to let me into the medical room while they checked on her and did whatever it was that they had to do. The older woman had almost a foot of height over me naturally, and her power armor added a pretty significant advantage on top of that. But in Tapestry, I don't think she could have stopped me from pushing past her.

"Hard to say for certain," Rapture replied. "Physically you don't have to worry. There's nothing short of death that this group can't cure." The woman hesitated for a second. "Wait? Death, too? How dead? Oh my. How did they pull that off?"

I hesitated. Should I tell her? Would that give away anything serious? We still have Bonesaw.

Rapture's eyes narrowed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

*How much did she figure out just like that?* I fidgeted. *She's worse than Lisa.*

"Listen," she spoke. "I'm sorry. I can't help noticing things., it's a natural part of my power. I try not to, and I try to pretend I didn't when I do. In your case, I feel like I have to speak up. Is someone forcing you to do something uncomfortable?"

*Forcing?* "No," I answered. *That much was true.*

"If you're worried about upsetting the rest of your team, I promise I'll be discreet" she offered.

*She's going to figure out everything at this rate. "No," I looked away from her. "It's not that." Wait? Why would she think I was being forced to? I didn't like having Riley on the team, I hated how she got away with all the horrible things she's done. Even now I would occasionally think about how she took apart the people who had come to me for safety, and how badly I failed them. But I understood it why they kept her. The zerg alone were proof enough of how good an idea it was. I didn't like it, hated it even, but it was a good idea. "No one forces me to do anything." I was shocked at the anger in my voice.*

That seemed to mollify Rapture. "I understand," she answered. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. I'll let it go, but remember that I'm here to help if you want to talk about it."

"Thanks," I tried to force a smile. I couldn't help but be suspicious. Rey trusted her, but then he was a supervillain before he took this job. There was just something about the woman that set my paranoia off. *She's much more dangerous than she pretends to be.* I stood there in silence, resting
and allowing my armor's reinforcements to keep me upright, instead of my tired legs. *I'd wait here until they let me in.*

Eventually the door opened, and Emma stepped out. "I've run all the medical tests. She's fairly healthy, although there's some atrophy in several muscle groups and signs of partial malnutrition."

"Malnutrition?" Rapture asked. "I thought you said the armor would sustain her indefinitely."

"It can," she argued. "But we kinda found a design flaw. Eating the exact same thing for months at a time causes appetite loss. We'll work on that."

"Months?" I asked. *God, Lily.* "How long was she in there for?"

"According to her armor's internal clock?" Emma replied. "One hundred and ninety seven days. Which brings us to the big problem."

"The psychological trauma," Rapture finished.

"What... what should I expect?" I asked. *Please, Lily, be okay.*

"In Lily's specific case," the woman answered. "Difficulty with common, even gradeschool level, tasks, such as basic arithmetic and reading comprehension. That should be minor and wear off quickly. More of a concern will be the emotional problems. Poor impulse control and emotional outbursts. Since she wasn't in extreme isolation, and had the opportunity to focus on a task, most of the time this will be minor. The real risk is in how she spent her time in isolation. Using her power almost constantly, and destructively. There's a risk of her lashing out violently. Ordinarily, that wouldn't amount to much in the long run. But her powers..."

With her powers, if she touches your clothes, she could reduce most of your body to nothing in a second or two. "Lily can kill Endbringers with a spool of string," I concluded.

"Yes," Rapture responded. "She won't as long as you and others stay calm around her. Give her time to decompress. Recovery from the worst symptoms should be quick. Isolation is not an inherently traumatic experience in a case such as this one. She will have to relearn normal interaction. There will of course be personality changes, a change of diet and habits. Expect her to throw out all her music in favor of something else. She'll probably be, well, 'clingy' if the easiest way to describe it. Emotionally needy."

That's not a surprise, or anything new. When we got together, she said she wasn't good at being alone. Really, it was me more than any other reason that she joined Pantheon to begin with. "I understand," I agreed. *I got her into this mess.*
Lily was practically my siamese twin these last couple days. The first night after she finally woke up was nothing but us staying in my room. She seemed afraid of going back to her own, strangely enough. We ordered pizza and she ate enough to make herself physically ill. Then she ate some more, although a bit more carefully.

We listened to my music, which was nice. My music was from my own culture, of course. It's what I grew up on. Lily prefered pop and metal. Rapture was right, her music tastes had changed completely.

I spent that day not letting her know that Khonsu still hadn't been driven off. Fortunately, it didn't take long. Sometime after I had fallen asleep holding Lily in the dark, that first night after she'd recovered. She didn't sleep that night, and I woke up to her exercising naked in my living room. She had roses and a box of chocolates rush delivered for me. She cried when she explained that she ate all the chocolates.

I only found out later that she didn't put her clothes on when she answered the door for the delivery man.

That day was full of laughably childish behavior and delightfully uninhibited sex. Most of it in the shower. She cried, again, when we got in the shower and refused to leave even after the water went cold. She fell asleep around five in the evening and was still asleep when I got up.

And now? Now dragged me out on a date on Christmas eve.

"How did you manage to find a place open now?" I asked her. The restaurant was lovely. Clearly going for a culturally authentic Japanese feel. I really didn't know enough to say whether they succeeded, but the place was beautiful and the food was wonderful. I might have preferred it be a little less authentic. Sitting on the ground for a meal felt less like 'restaurant' and more like 'life in the dorms'.

Lily smiled. "One of the perks of a large immigrant population. You can always find a family business where the family practices a different set of holidays." She's only been in this city for six months and already she knows it better than I do after three years.

"I guess that's true," I took another bite of my fried rice. It was good. Over the past few months with Lily I'd worked to get use to the idea of rice dishes that weren't spicy enough to make the Americans cry. Totally worth it.

We went back to our apartments after. I could get a real place now, I thought to myself. Hell, with
my share of the reward money for the Simurgh's death, I could afford my own city block. But I'd come to like it here, and being close to both school and work was really convenient. It was wonderful knowing that I didn't need the job, too. Almost as liberating as knowing that now my costumes were about the art, not the mechanical benefits. The grown-in-a-vat battle suits were the combat armor of choice these days. I sold high quality custom clothes.

Lily nibbled on my neck and pulled me toward her room. I gave my door a glance. I have so many projects to work on, I thought to myself. I was planning to catch up during Christmas break, but then Khonsu happened. My customers would be understanding of some delay. It was an Endbringer attack, after all. But Lily was consuming almost every part of my life right now. She pressed herself up against me and moaned softly. I should try to explain to her that I still have to worry about work.

I remembered Rapture's advice to be patient with her, that she'll get over this in time. I relented and let Lily pull me into her place, kissing her hard as I forgot about work for a while. Lily was appreciative as ever, and we wound up exhausted on her bed, with her idly brushing my hair.

"I love you," she whispered, kissing my shoulder. I hesitated. Love. Was that what this was? I was jealous when I found out about her arranged marriage. That hurt, even though we had promised each other that were were both people who didn't believe in marriage. We made promises when this started, to allow each other space. Now she was breaking those promises. Taking more and more of my time and energy. Demanding my attention in so many different ways. In a way, I didn't really mind it. I enjoyed being with her. I should tell her I love her.

Too late now, it'd just sound like I was saying it out of obligation. Easier to pretend I didn't hear her. Thankfully, she didn't say anything, didn't make a scene of it. I sat up after a while and made my way to the bathroom, stopping in front of the mirror to straighten up my hair. Dammit, Sabah, what are you doing? You should talk to her. Explain.

She's not ready for that. She still needs time to recover. Fuck, I need time to figure things before I try to say anything. I splashed some water on my face and ran a comb through my hair. I wasn't a fan of how boringly flat my hair was, but it did make it easy to care for.

By the time I left the bathroom, Lily had started her exercise routine. She hadn't bothered to get dressed. Rapture didn't mention exhibitionism as a side effect. "I... I have work I need to get done," I told her.

She stopped and looked at me. Her lips quivered a little. She wants me to invite her back, I realized. It'll just distract me. "I'll see you in the morning," I offered.

"Okay," she forced a smile. "See you in the morning."
A/N- Well. Turned out decently enough.
These halls are far too impersonal, I decide as I walked through the corridors of Cauldron. Contessa was, of course, already aware I was here, and waiting alongside Doctor Mother.

"Good morning," the elder of Cauldron's leadership spoke. It was late afternoon by my personal clock, but Cauldron's base was located in Europe, and that's where both Contessa and Doctor Mother were from, so they went by that schedule despite a mostly American focus of effort and resources. Despite the fact that both of them kept to an American sleep pattern, for that matter. I'd suspect them of being snobbish, except I knew these two, and neither had it in them. The answer was likely part of Contessa's path.

"Good morning," I agreed. "I have the latest report on Chevalier's new armor design. It shows a great deal of promise. Possibly of the anti-Scion variety."

"You're kidding me," Doctor Mother exclaimed. Even Contessa showed signs of surprise, which managed to surprise me. She's not infallible, that much I already knew. Her power has shown some critical flaws lately.

"Pantheon believes it's the best defensive design ever built, at least," I informed them. "Functionally as durable as Khonsu. Plus a few other features. Legend and I gave it a stress test and we were unable to cause detectable damage. The jury's still out on whether it's a legitimate defense against Scion, but it's certainly a powerful weapon to use against him. More than that, they hope his power and the data they got off of Khonsu's teleportation will let us find our way into Scion's personal dimension."

"I must admit, the plan to set Pantheon on the goal of killing Scion has proven more fruitful than I expected," Doctor Mother praised. "If nothing else, halting the collapse of civilization into anarchy is a remarkable achievement unto itself."

One which we hadn't believed was possible, I added silently. We followed Contessa's path. We accepted the inevitability of defeat, placing our priority on saving the world. More saving every other world than Bet. We treated that world as the battlefield. I had to wonder about everything that I'd done in the last decade. All the choices I'd made. What would I have done differently, knowing what we now know?

"Yes," I agreed, and the word didn't carry my thoughts or accusations. The next question did, if subtly. "Why did we never harness Endbringer tissue?"

It was Number Man that answered the question. Another parallel between us and Pantheon, recruiting Slaughterhouse Nine members. "We didn't see the benefits," he answered simply. "We know that the Endbringers, for all their power, are strictly inferior to Scion in every appreciable way.
Even if we had an army of them, they wouldn't be able to defeat Scion. It was, and in many ways still is, a better use of our time to devote our efforts to the formula. Discovering a power without limits is still our best hope."

*Right, Scion, the crux of the problem.*

"The more I view recent results, the more I come to believe power interactions and synergies are the tool that will let us beat Scion," I spoke. It wasn't really a debate, Cauldron and the Protectorate were already dedicating resources in that direction. So were most of the foreign cape groups. The Entities had, understandably, created blocks on powers to keep any given parahuman from having too much power. But the synergies were, somehow, exempt from those blocks. Far stronger than any individual power could hope to be.

Contessa, of all people, spoke next. "My power can't see them," she finally admitted. "They're part of the Taboo. It makes finding paths difficult." *She's scared,* I realized. *Or she wants me to believe she's scared. Possibly both.* It made sense, Pantheon was surrounded by so many power interactions, precog blocks, and Taboo research subjects that every time they did something new, it completely altered our models. Only the Alcott girl seemed able to provide useful predictions around them. As their current activities had nationwide impacts on an almost daily basis, it made Contessa unreliable.

"It might also be the reason Endbringers and Eidolon are immune to precognition," Doctor Mother spoke. "Pantheon's theories about the Endbringers as a complex power interaction would explain a great many things."

*And David's power, if looked at as hundreds of powers interacting simultaneously, would be similarly protected.* The theory made sense. "I see," I agreed. "While we're on the subject, I've been invited to Pantheon's base for a Christmas party."

"I trust you accepted," Doctor Mother replied. *She sees it as an opportunity, of course. Learning more about Pantheon, its plans, and its inner workings, would only be beneficial to Cauldron in the long run.*

"Naturally," I agreed. I left out that my reasons were as much personal as business. "I don't imagine I'll learn much, however. I don't intend to try. Their primary Thinker is the one who discovered power interactions in the first place. If I go in with espionage as an intention, I'll almost certainly be discovered." *If I would, she never would have invited me in the first place, I knew. She's trusting me.*

Doctor Mother simply nodded. "Wise precaution. Is there any other business?" she asked.

"None of import," I answered.
I came to their home by flight, in full costume, only to be moderately surprised by photographers taking pictures and video footage. It's five in the afternoon on Christmas day, significantly below zero, and there they were out in force. I certainly had to respect their work ethic. Enough to even stop and give them a sound bite or two. I landed more or less equidistant to all of them and waited. A few started asking questions immediately, I simply rose my hand up. "Wait for the others," I instructed. They listened well enough. The secret to dealing with reporters was a lot like dealing with politicians. And, for that matter, men. As long as they knew you'd give them what they wanted, they'd do almost anything you asked.

I was impressed, however, at how easily they took it in stride. No one attempted to pester me into talking 'early', and usually there'd be at least one who didn't accept waiting as an option. *Pantheon has them well trained.*

Eventually everyone got into position. "Alright," I pointed at the crew that had arrived first. "Your question."

"Allen Shin, Channel eleven," he introduced himself. "Why are you here at Pantheon's headquarters? Is there an emergency?"

"Not at all," I answered calmly. "This is a personal visit."

"Personal? Care to elaborate?" another reporter asked.

"They invited me to their Christmas dinner," I answered. They didn't seem particularly convinced, so I continued. "As you might imagine, I've gotten to know a few members of Pantheon fairly well during the Endbringer conflicts and other events. It's no secret that they built the weapons you've seen me use. I consider them to be colleagues, and some of them to be friends, so I accepted their invite. Even if that ruins my reputation as an incurable workaholic."

"Which ones do you consider friends?" another prompted. "Any that might be more than friends?"

*Damn gossip rags.* "I think it'd be more fun to say nothing and let you speculate," I answered. *You will no matter what I say or do. This way I'm in on the joke.* "Now if you'll pardon me, I have some friends to visit. Have a Merry Christmas."

I turned and went inside, ignoring further questions. There was nothing more of value to talk about anyway. Either it'd be more gossip questions that I wouldn't dignify with an answer, or they'd start to ask business related questions. If those were going to be answered at all, it would be in a controlled environment with the national organizations, not a cute little photo op with the local press. *They know I am here, let them speculate about everything else.*
The entrance to their building was practically a living maze, and the biological lighting created the otherworldly feel that I'd grown to enjoy in my rare visits. Almost the opposite of Cauldon's sterile corridors and labs. The building even smelled alive. My senses weren't truly any better than human, but my ability to process what those senses told me was significantly better, and I trained myself to exploit that. The earthy nature of the scent was much like that of a forest, but lacking in the decaying leaf scent that most people came to associate with the woods. Either way, it was relaxing.

By the time I got through the passage, I found a handful of Pantheon's members waiting to greet me. Victoria, Atropos and one other. Janus, their transgendered member. My power would have had an easy time recognizing that, even if it wasn't obvious from other information. I read the hostility in their positioning. Right, they're annoyed about the events in Indianapolis.

"Good evening," I spoke. "I owe you an apology."

"Your power tell you that?" Victoria asked. "Good. It means we can beat your Thinker power. Don't worry, we get what you did and why. Social positioning. Manipulation. Cloak and dagger bullshit. Sorta one of those facts of life around here. I just want you to know that if you do anything that hurts my family. Well, look at us, tell me what your power's telling you."

She stood with complete confidence, there was no hesitation or fear in her language, or Atropos'. The new member was still faking it, though not bluffing so much as afraid of doing what he knew he could do. "You can kill me," I stated. "With Atropos, that comes as no surprise, but your combat precognition is showing other methods. Any one of the three of you has at least one weapon I probably won't survive."

"Pretty much," Victoria agreed. "We're on the same page, then."

"You don't have to worry," I offered. "I never intended to try anything like that at this party." I read her language even as she read mine. Her power wasn't like Minerva's, it was inferior in most ways. Such as divining motivations. Emotion detection had its advantages, certainly, but without years of training it wouldn't reveal the causes or reasoning behind an emotion. She'd just know I wasn't lying, which was enough for this.

"Alright," she finally replied, going from slightly menacing to carefree teenager in a heartbeat. "Dinner's at six, there was suppose to be an open bar but then Amy had to ruin it by inviting our parents. Have fun, try not to roll your eyes at all the old people trying to get your autograph without asking for it. I'm trying to talk Lisa and Rapture into a game of super poker later tonight. You're invited."

She walked back into the hall where the talking was coming from. I opted to follow. I spotted Minerva quickly enough. The short blond was talking with a younger girl with brown hair. She glanced up at me, and the other girl turned her head to look. Dinah Alcott, I recognized now. But I was already having a conversation with Minerva.
Her eyes flickered for a half second toward Victoria and the other two. *They gave you a hard time? Sorry about that.*

I relaxed my body language slightly. *It's okay, no harm done.*

Her face tensed slightly. *I'll talk to them later.*

I let the briefest sign of concern cross my face. *No, I'd rather you didn't. It's unnecessary.*

Her head tilted just a fraction. *If you're certain.*

I smiled, and strode into the room like I owned it. *I'm certain.*

Most of Pantheon itself had met me enough times that there wasn't any celebrity worship amongst them, but there were others. Khepri's father I was quite certain had never seen me in person, though I memorized his profile as I did all the other people directly connected to the group. I'd met Gaea's family during the Leviathan attack on Brockton Bay, but only briefly. I had long ago gotten used to the reactions others had of me, but here it amused me. *Your daughters have achieved more in six months than I have in a decade, it's not me you should be in awe of.*

Minerva's grin widened.

=============*

A/N- This chapter was fun for me to write.
"You know how your sister might be clinically insane?" I teased.

"Which one?" Amelia deadpanned. "And what did she do this time?"

"Well, in about fifteen seconds, she managed to threaten to murder Alexandria, and then invited her to a poker game. In that order." She knew I was talking about Victoria, already. Riley, and for that matter the rest of the kids, were spending their time with their own private party. Riley because she had to, Missy because she preferred to spend time with Riley. Which meant Theo, Trevor, Emma and Zach had managed to bow out of the officially adult party.

"Remind me again why I let her join the team?"

"Eye candy?" I suggested. "Amusement. She smiled. I had to admit, it felt good to know we were at the point where we could joke about that. "You don't have to worry, though. Alexandria handled it well enough. Thanks for turning off the Yggdrasil's 'eat all bugs' feature."

"Just don't abuse the privilege too much," she warned. "A girl could get insecure knowing her date is paying attention to everyone at the party except her. Now dish on all the juicy conversations."

"Isn't this a violation of privacy?" I asked.

"It's a party," she countered. "Unless they sneak off to the bathroom together, they can't complain if someone overhears their conversation."

"So... leave Dad and Sarah alone, got it."

"First, eww," Amelia smacked my side lightly. "Second, they're over there talking to Crystal. So you can tell me."

'You'll get to try it out soon enough,' Crystal said to her mom. 'The next upgrade will be ready in a month or so. It's so much better than this one. Three times the battery life, better forcefield augmentation, anti-power features.'
'Isn't this your fifth upgrade?' Sarah asked. 'I thought you said the last one was the limit of the tech.'

'It was, then,' Crystal replied. 'Now it's not. You know how Tinkers get.'

"Crystal's giving your aunt another hand me down top of the line battle suit."

"Again?" she sighed. "See, this is why I'm glad I'm not part of that conversation. Sounds boring. What else have we got."

'Yours, too, huh?' A woman laughed. I didn't recognize. 'Mine was convinced he'd become a hero ever since he was six.'

'With Vicky it was always Alexandria,' Mark agreed. Is he flirting with her? I couldn't tell, but the woman was definitely flirting with him. 'She spent all of middle school with her hair dyed black.'

'Trevor made me get him that one swimsuit calender Legend was in,' the woman, who I was now assuming was Trevor's mother for all the obvious reasons, leaned in a little closer. 'You know, I bought another one just for me.'

'Vicky had that one, too,' Mark laughed. 'My Amy said it was tacky. Guess I know why, now.'

'You can always spot the ones who'll turn out like that early,' the woman replied. 'She's not wrong, though. It was definitely tacky.'

"Your mom's talking business again," I offered. No way in hell am I telling her about her dad flirting with Trevor's mom.

"Who's her victim this time?"

"Mister Barnes," I informed.

"Well, that's not so bad," she replied. "I'll remember to avoid them like the plague."

I found myself agreeing with her fully. Emma's parents were not on my list of favorite people. I still remembered how her dad functionally blackmailed mine. The asshole still hadn't even offered an apology. It wouldn't surprise me if he didn't even realize what he did was wrong. Lucky us, he was a divorce lawyer. Saved me the awkwardness of telling him to go try to shove a stick up Leviathan's ass. Of course, it also cost me the satisfaction of doing that very thing. I'd have to settle for the fact that Emma avoided him almost as much as I did.

My thoughts must have bled into the link, because Amelia gave me an extra tight hug. "Hey, am I
going to have to distract you? I can always drag you back to our room until dinner starts. In fact, I might just do that anyway."

I poked her nose. "You do realize I'm under aged, right?"

"Excuses, excuses," she sighed. "I could just drag you over to Avalon. No laws there at all. Or are you going to pull the 'waiting until marriage' line, because at this rate..." she trailed off, not mentioning the elephant in our room. There were now two Endbringers we didn't know how to kill. And at least three more coming that we knew nothing about, but were probably just as hard to kill. Trading their offensive potential for even greater defensive power, the way Barghest and Khonsu had been built.

"Speaking of," I changed the subject. "Lily's postponing hers indefinitely. We have to worry about that."

"Good," Amelia insisted. "I know it might cost us our colony plans, but we can make up for that other ways. Open invitation to all refugees is a start. But forcing her into a marriage she doesn't want. Even if it was her idea. I won't-"

'I was beginning to worry you wouldn't show up,' Lisa spoke to Alexandria.

'Can't allow myself to appear over eager,' the woman answered easily. 'I hope I'm not interrupting your conversation, Miss Alcott.'

'That's quite alright,' the little girl replied. 'We weren't discussing anything of consequence.' 'And I should make my rounds. Networking is an unfortunately necessary part of the job.'

_I still don't like how adult she felt the need to act. Worry Horror Loss._ My attention snapped back to Amelia. "Oh god, Taylor," she muttered. _Guilt Fear._ "I didn't mean. I know our engagement is. You don't have to if you don't want, you know I'd never expect-"

I put a hand over her mouth. "That's not the problem," I insisted.

"Mmmph mp?" _Confusion Hope._

"No," I insisted. "I was just listening in on Dinah talking to Lisa and Alexandria."

"Mmm," _Relief Humiliation._ I let my hand off her mouth. "Sorry, there was just this weird combination of nostalgia, regret, and obligation. I thought, given the subject. I am such an idiot sometimes."
"Hey," I turned toward her and rested my forehead on hers. "Listen to me. There are a lot of things I regret. Things I'd do differently if given the opportunity. You are not one of those things. Except the part with the bank. And unless you want to watch me cry, don't mention ending our engagement again, okay?"


"Now, say hello to Dinah," I instructed her as I broke our impromptu huddle.

"Hi, Dinah," Amelia spoke as she turned away from me and toward Dinah.

"I was about to leave, actually," she spoke up. "I wouldn't want to intrude on a private moment."

"Don't worry about it," Amelia replied, her emotions smoothed and her voice relaxed. "Taylor and I can talk whenever we like."

"We probably should spend more time with our guests," I admitted reluctantly. I still wasn't fond of socializing. "There was a reason we invited all these people, after all. And it wasn't so they could eat all our food."

"Very well," Dinah agreed. "I just wanted to thank you for your help. It's come to my attention that I'm too... aloof... of late, and I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate everything you've done for me. The numbers are looking better every day, lately."

How long have I wanted to hear those words? Amelia squeezed my hand as my emotional surge hit her. I smiled. "Thank you, that means a lot," I insisted.

"I'd also like to thank the girl who made my gryphon," Dinah requested.

ConcernHesitation. "That was..."

"Please don't lie to me," Dinah replied. "By virtue of my interactions with Lisa, I'm aware of a great deal of information, and as often as you call on my power for your needs, I've picked up a few other details. Spare me the literal headache of doing this the hard way."


"I'll take you to them," I offered. "So, how long have you known?" I asked her as I broke my hand
hold with Amelia and guided the girl toward the labs.

"Approximately a day and a half before you released me from Coil's custody," she informed me.

=================

A/N- I decided to use a similar technique to the TV thing for Taylor's 'bug senses'. Lemme know what you think.
Ch 241- Missy

I had to admit the party was fun. I considered going out to associate with the adults, be taken seriously, but I could only do that if I left Riley here alone. She was my best friend, and this would be her first Christmas since she was six years old that she'd be able to enjoy. That she'd be able to have surrounded by family and friends that cared about her. Of course I was going to stay with her.

_I wonder if we could use our cloning tech to bring back Jack Slash. Being covered in acid and drowned in cockroaches was nowhere near a horrible enough death for that twisted bastard._

Riley, at least, seemed happy now. Not the false cheerfulness of Bonesaw or Aceso, but a simple contentment while spending time with her friends. We had, out of some mutual agreement, chosen not to do any major Christmas gifts. Simple trinket gifts like cute outfits, nothing more. We had an evening of just spending time hanging out and relaxing. Mostly by keeping the Tinkers away from their labs for a night. Which was a lot easier said than done.

"No, they totally got a thing going on," Zach insisted. "They even chased me out of my own bedroom."

"Zach," Emma sighed. "First of all, everyone chases you out of your bedroom. It's the only way to make you leave. Second, Sabah would kill them both."

"Well, that's one possible solution," Zach smiled. "But maybe they thought it'd be fun to add a little vanilla swirl to their- OW! Riley, you don't even- OW! Emma, seriously, what the hell?"

I laughed. The two of them were really good at reading each others' reactions with stuff like that. I still couldn't figure out why Zach still said something like that, it always got him in trouble for no reason. Then again, Zach joined in the laughter, too. Maybe that was the point.

"Besides, Vicky's into men," Theo pointed out. "And not even girly looking guys."

_Ain't that the truth_, I agreed silently. She and Dean had been quite the pair, much to my younger self's constant disappointment. It still hurt a little to think about him, though the last seven and a half months had eased the pain. He was a friend, and I still missed him dearly, but I no longer carried the torch for him that I used to. It helped to have so many good friends to support me, and a wonderful boyfriend.

"She turned me down," Zach pointed out.

"Dear," Emma said with exaggerated sweetness. "I think that proves Theo's point."
"Yup," Trevor agreed.

"Sorry Zach, it's true," I added.

"Ouch," he pouted. "Just when I think I might be able to have some self esteem of my own, you find and murder it in front of me. Using fire."

"Don't worry Zach," Riley offered. "By most standard of masculine attractiveness, you are actually measure quite satisfactorily. Symmetrical features, greater than average height and muscle build, no significant injuries, greater than average intelligence and emotional stability. Even with your health issues before acquiring your powers reducing viability by approximately twenty percent, you still average out at a seven point two four, with a twelve percent margin for error based upon the cultural and psychological preferences of the perspective mate."

"Why do I feel like I just went through FDA inspection?" Zach asked.

"She says you're cute, but you aren't her type," Emma offered, giving Zach a one armed hug. "Don't worry, you actually are my type."

"Huh," he replied. "I knew that sounded familiar. Well, since it's 'pick on Zach day', then I'm the one who gets to pick the movie."

"No," Trevor insisted. "You keep showing us these dumb ass movies from Aleph. That last one was utterly retarded. Alien invaders is cool and all, but why the fuck would anyone be dumb enough to terraform a planet that gives their entire species all the powers of Alexandria and Legend combined? Don't get me started on the parts that can be summed up as the single most poorly written Jesus allegory in the history of storytelling."

I found myself nodding in agreement.

"Well, at least it had awesome special effects?" Theo offered.

"I liked the dubstep cannon," Emma added.

"The whole point of watching Aleph movies is to laugh at how shitty they are," Zach argued. "That's what makes them fun. That and all those companies we've never heard of that pay for their businesses to be the ones that get blown up in the fighting. Truly, they are geniuses of product placement. Besides, this next movie's by a really good director. The guy who did Pan's Labyrinth. You all liked that one, didn't you?"
"Depends, what's it about?" I asked. *Is this one going to make Riley cry, too?*

"Well, it starts off with these giant robots and they fight..." Zach hesitated for a second. "Actually... now that I think about it, maybe we shouldn't see that one."

I was about to make a remark, but then a tunnel opened in the wall. Taylor stepped through, along with a girl that couldn't have been much older than ten. "Don't worry, she's safe," Taylor said as Riley moved to hide behind me. "Everyone, this is Dinah. She wanted to meet all of you."

"Good evening," the girl spoke up, walking more or less straight toward Riley. "I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate Typha. She's everything I hoped for and more. Your work is truly amazing."

"Thank you!" Riley responded excitedly. "I put a lot of work into making her perfect. Have you tried her roosting feature?"

"Yes, indeed," Dinah nodded. "I admit, I haven't used my actual bed ever since. She is indescribably comfortable."

Oh god, she is so adorable in her tiny little business suit trying to act all grown up! I paused for a second. Oh. *Is this what everyone thinks when they look at me? No wonder the adults never take me seriously."

"Well, clearly you're getting along," Taylor spoke up. "I'd love to stay here with you, but I have to go back to the adults. They need to be supervised or they might actually start having fun."

"You have my deepest sympathies," Dinah responded. "If you see my uncle, let him know I'm busy and that I apologize for not having time to see him."

"I'll be sure to do that," Taylor agreed as she turned and left.

"We were just about to watch a movie," Riley informed the girl. "But since you're new, you can pick something."

"Don't let them fool you," Zach remarked. "She's only saying that so I don't get to pick the movie."

"I don't have a preference for movies," Dinah answered.
"We didn't get you any presents, either," Riley said apologetically.

"That's quite alright. Typha's the best present I've ever had," Dinah answered. "Besides, I am the guest here, you shouldn't have to get me anything. In fact, I should be the one bringing you gifts."

"Ooh, could you tell us the future?" Riley asked. "Like who I'm going to get married to? Can you do that."

She frowned for a second. "Not exactly. My prediction powers only give percentages and possibilities. I can tell you if you'll ever get married, and if you point someone out to me, I can answer if it'll be between the two of you, but I can't simply give you a name."

"Oh, I guess that works," Riley replied. "Will I-

"Maybe you should wait on that," I interrupted. "Dinah's questions are really valuable. Like, huge, she probably charges thousands of dollars for each one."

"Fifteen," Dinah confirmed. "I sometimes offer discounts for bulk requests. In addition, Minerva and I have come to an arrangement to help counter my predictions of the end of the world. But the money isn't really a concern anymore. These days, my fees are more about dissuading people from coming to me at all than it is encouraging them to use me for their own purposes. And I'm taking something of a vacation."

"A vacation?" Trevor asked.

"Yes," she responded. "My parents feel I overwork myself and should focus more on relaxing and enjoying life. I refused to stop working on finding solutions or improving the numbers for the end of the world."

"It's good to have parents that worry about you," I agreed. Mine sure didn't, but at least I didn't have to worry about that anymore. It had taken some time for me to figure out how to make it work, but I convinced my mother that Pantheon was a paying job with responsibilities, and I was making a lot of overtime. Really, I was paying myself out of my share of the reward money for killing the Simurgh. It was more than I could ever imagine spending. So I used it to create excuses for me to spend all my time with my friends and the people who actually acted like a real family.

"It is," she agreed. "So I have enough power for everyone to ask a question, without any risk of tiring me out."

"You don't have to," I insisted. She reminds me of Riley, so eager to make friends that she'll offer them gifts like this. "We're not going to treat you any differently for not letting us use your power."
"You misunderstand," Dinah answered. "The numbers get better if you accept my offer."

"Numbers?" I asked.

"The end of the world," she answered. "It's a marginal difference, granted, less than a point oh one percent increased chance of stopping the end, and between fifteen to thirty thousand more survivors if the end occurs anyway."

"So, basically, if we don't start asking, we kill something like seven thousand people each?" Zach asked. "How the hell does that make sense?"

Dinah simply looked at him. "All I know is what," Dinah answered. "How and why are not things my power gives to me."

"Well, can't argue with that," Zach nodded. "Alright. So, what are the odds that two or more people in this room will participate inathreesomewitheachother." He spoke the last few words fast enough that he could complete the sentence before getting jabbed hard enough to dust and reappear.

"The hell is wro-" Emma started to yell at her boyfriend, but was interrupted by Dinah.

"Ninety four point seven seven three," the girl answered.

We all fell silent.

==============

A/N- I don't know if this one counts as foreshadowing. Seems a little too blatant.
So many things flashed through his mind:
"What is the chance that we succeed in averting the end of the world?"
"What is the chance that I will outlive the rest of Pantheon?"
"What is the chance that Lily recovers?"
And the worst one of all:
"What is the chance that by the end of this, I will regret it?"
But that wasn't what was needed at the moment. He couldn't change the world with his power, hell, he could barely change himself. But he was able to help out anyway, by helping those who could. And right now they needed to break the ice.

"Alright. So, what are the odds that two or more people in this room will participate in athreesomewitheachother."

"Ninety four point seven seven three," Dinah answered.

Huh.

================

Reader Note: I'm sooo glad I got Zach's personality down in such a way that lets things like this happen.
Ninety five percent? Holy shit. Who? I ruled myself out immediately. Given the issues with my biology, it would make a lot more sense for me to just give Zach permission to cheat than it would for me to participate in anything. Dinah and Riley were thirteen and twelve, although developmentally Dinah was a year or so behind the curve thanks to her captivity, and Riley was setting up to be an early bloomer. Then again, Dinah's prediction didn't have a time stamp on it, for all I knew this wouldn't occur until we were all in our twenties.

There were a few uncomfortable glances exchanged, to say the least. Theo looked like he was about to apologize to Missy for something he didn't do. Riley looked a little... frightened? Zach, well, my lovable moron looked like he wanted to apologize, too. Only in his case he should.

Trevor coughed uncomfortably, then spoke up. "Well, I'm just going to say it's easier just to pretend no one asked that question. How's that sound? Whatever may or may not happen in the future, I'm sure it'll make more sense then. In the meantime, let's talk about something completely unrelated."

"Sounds like a plan," Zach agreed readily, and everyone else nodded their agreement. "Well, my monkey's paw has been properly high fived. Next time I'll ask boxers or briefs. So, who else wants to try their luck? You can't possibly top mine."

"Chances my sister, Aster, becomes a parahuman?" Theo asked. Of course he'd want to know that.

"I can't see that," Dinah replied. "My powers are still limited by the Taboo. I have been meaning to ask if you had a way to work around that. It would be extremely helpful for all of us."

"Not in the way you're hoping for," I admitted. "We can install memories of things that are Taboo, but that won't allow you to remember new Taboo information, nor will it allow retain new memories of Taboo information you might pick up in the future. We believe it's only possible to completely break the memory blocks if you have a trigger event after receiving the memories. And as of right now, we have absolutely no way to break the blocks on Thinker powers on Trigger Events, Endbringers and Scion. Believe me, we've tried everything we could think of. Which, admittedly, isn't much."

"A pity," Dinah replied. "Do we have any other questions?"

Trevor took a deep breath. "Chances my mother accepts me when I go public with my sexuality? She'll pretend she does, I'm sure. I just need to know if she'll ever actually mean it."

"Nothing I didn't already expect," he sighed. *Oh, Trevor.* "Well, that's her problem. Not my fault if she can't handle it, and no one will be able to say I haven't done my part to care for my family."

Theo reached over and put a hand on Trevor's shoulder. "Sorry, man. Believe me, I've been there."

"Woah, back up a second," Zach raised his hands and affected shock. "You're gay? That is such a relief. I thought all those magazines were Theo's and I was losing so much sleep trying to figure out how to tell Missy the bad news."

Trevor chuckled. "Fuck you, Zach."

"Ordinarily I'd turn that down," Zach replied. "But the precog has spoken. I'm gonna have to ask you to wear a wig, though."

Trevor gave me a smirk. "Would you?"

It took me a moment to realize that he wasn't propositioning me. At least, not for the obvious result. It took Zach longer, so he wasn't remotely prepared when I dug a thumb up into the nerve under his armpit. Not too hard, or his corrective teleport would have undid my effort.

"Gah!" Zach jumped away from me. "Okay! I'll be good!"

"No you won't," I teased. *He may be an idiot, but he's a good man, always there to lighten the tense situations with humor.*

"Yeah, probably not," he replied.

"I have my question," Riley asked softly. "Will I ever be able to do enough good to make up for the bad things I did as Bonesaw?"

*So much for lightening the mood.* Missy was there first, pulling the girl into a hug. *I could probably ask the same question, I thought. And everything I've ever done is nothing compared to what Bonesaw was guilty of on an average weekend.*

"I can't answer that kind of question," Dinah replied. "My power follows numbers. Good or bad aren't able to be put into numbers. I don't know if our Passengers are capable of comprehending such ideas in the first place. I do know you've helped. A lot. The Nilbog mission alone improved the numbers by a full percentage point, and up to half a million extra lives. But... I've been trying to remind myself that there are people behind my numbers. Faces and names and lives, instead of just..."
data. So, I want you to know how much you helped Sam and Rory."

"Sam?" Missy asked. I was drawing a blank as to who Dinah was talking about, too. *For that matter, who's Rory?*

"You'd know her better as Prism," Dinah replied. *Oh, right, one of the ones we revived from Bakuda's glass bomb.* "She came as my cousin's date for my uncle's Christmas gathering. She's the head of one of New York's Protectorate teams, and Rory's second in command of a different team. They wouldn't stop talking about it. Oh, and they're going to get married in a year. But don't tell them, they don't know about it yet. Or the baby."

"Wait, she didn't keep her powers when she was revived," I interrupted.

"She got a new set," Dinah replied.

"Her too?" I asked. *Thank you distraction.* "That's two of the five we restored, already. There has to be some kind of undetected bias, since none of them should be any more likely to get powers than any random person on the street. What abilities did she get?"

"She creates copies of other parahumans that are in her line of sight, now," Dinah answered. "She can generate a maximum of three clones per day, and they have duration limits that deplete faster as they use their abilities. Thinker and Tinker are especially bad for the duration. My power, for example, she can only ask one question to a clone, then it pops. More generic brute or blaster powers can last for potentially hours, depending on how powerful they are."

Zach let out an appreciative whistle. "Some people have all the luck. Even if the only thing you do with that is find out what powers an enemy cape has, you're golden."

"That's a lot stronger than her original ability." I added. "However, it is similar. Prism used to be able to create dupes of herself and then absorb them for temporary ability increases. Now she dupes others, complete with powers. Compare to Victoria, who in both cases got brute, mover and energy generation powers. Riley, do you think there could be a pattern?" Here we go, Tinker talk, think about that instead of self pity.

"Unknowable with such a small sample size," Riley replied. "It's an interesting theory, however. What's more significant is the potential for additional data from pre and post trigger brain mapping. Every piece of data we can pull together on how trigger events work, the better. With enough samples, I might even be able to build devices that let us modify powers."

*That's right, that was one of her projects.* As good as my powers were, they weren't nearly a match for Riley's in trying to understand how powers worked.
"I will make certain to let her know," Dinah replied. "This could be the reason the numbers get better."

She's uncertain. Not lying, but her power's not seeing benefits to the process. I blinked, realizing that my power switched into 'biotinker' state. The nature of these repeat triggers are still part of the Taboo, of course she couldn't know what would come of that research. It was something of a miracle that she could even see Scion's actions enough to know there was an apocalypse in the first place.

I glanced at my friends. Zach remained his usual baseline, with the slightly slower than average aging process. He was more alert than most of us, to his body he had just woken up refreshed and alert only a few minutes ago. Everyone else besides me had been up since this morning.

Missy was mainly concerned over Riley, as was Theo. Riley was torn between her Tinker nature and her foray into self pity. Something that was occurring more frequently than ever, of late. Tinker productivity loss alone could account for a number change.

Trevor was still caught up in his family issues. Sadly, there was very little I could do for him in that regard past being a sympathetic ear. He wasn't lacking in people who could understand what he was going through. None of us in this group had what could be called a good home life. One of the things I most envied Taylor for, her relationship with her father. I think mine would have disowned me if he thought he could get away with it. Going public with everything I'd done, well, unintended side effect was that it hurt my dad's reputation.

"I have my question," I finally spoke up. "You don't need a lot of details, do you? I could, say, ask you if a plan would work without you needing to know the details of the plan, right?"

"Yes," Dinah answered. "Minerva often uses questions of that nature."

"I have one of those plans," I replied. "If it succeeds, how much do the odds change in the end?"

"Point five percent increased odds of the apocalypse occurring," Dinah replied, her eyes widening. "But if it does occur, the number of survivors increases by almost one hundred and fifty seven million people." Her eyes met mine. "What exactly are you planning?"

============

Bonus scene:

"What are the odds the author's going to be a dick and not tell the audience what's going on?"

"As if you even need to ask."
Victoria walked into the meeting room looking almost solemn. "Everybody, I have an announcement to make," she started.

"She got her ass handed to her at the poker game last night, and now she's moving to California," Lisa interrupted. What? Oh no.

"What?" Amelia and I asked together.

"First, those two events are completely unrelated," Vicky started. "Second, you're a bitch. And third, how was I suppose to know my powers didn't work on poker games?"

"Well, if I were you, I would have tried playing poker before challenging three high end Thinkers to a game," Lisa replied.

"Let's just back the conversation up a minute," Taylor interrupted. "What's this about moving to California?"

"Alexandria invited me," Vicky answered. "We got into the conversation about the Elite being a pain in the ass, and how our alliance of indie groups pretty much stops around the halfway mark in the country. Since it's physically painful how boring it is around here, I'm going out west to start my own team. Y'know, kick around a few villains, take a few names, video tape my fights and put them online. Why did you guys stop doing that, anyway?"

"That's actually a pretty good idea," Taylor agreed.

"Mom is going to flip out," Amelia added. From the tone of her voice, that sounded like an approval of the plan.

"I'm going to miss you," I told her.

"Don't worry about it, Mushroom," Vicky insisted. "I'll have Eric bring me back on the weekends. In fact, I'll take him with me so I can come back whenever I want. It'll be like I'm not even gone."

"Wait, when did I agree to any of this?" Eric asked.

"You became the property of the most attractive woman in the room when you gave up the power of
boobs," Vicky retorted. "Besides, this is LA we're talking about here. You're not going to convince me that you don't like the idea of hanging out on the beaches. Maybe you'll be discovered by an agent and become a movie star or something. Then you'll have all the girls throwing themselves at you."

"Make you a deal," he replied. "Instead of trying to get me set on fire, how about you try asking nicely?"

"Well, sure, if you want to take all the fun out of it," Vicky sighed. "So, would you like to join my totally badass team? Crystal's going to be there. Plus Lily and Sabah. I'll talk to them after they're done with their hangovers."

"Oh, sure, take pretty much every adult on the team," Taylor remarked.

"Well, I can't take the kids," Vicky argued. "You need the Tinkers to do what they do with the whole world ending shit. Zach's going to stick with Emma. Maybe I could talk Theo and Missy into coming along." My heart jumped. Not them. "But that ruins Zach and Theo's bromance. And now that I'm done with school, it's up to Missy and Clarice to represent how awesome we are at Arcadia. The legacy must go on. Besides, they're going to have to show Dinah the ropes when she get there next year. The three of them are going to be too adorable to contemplate."

Taylor and Amelia looked at one another, and their eyes flickered as they conversed via Taylia.

"We'll need to set some ground rules," Lisa replied. "Assuming Crystal even wants to go, that means she's in charge. Eric and Lily are too valuable to the Exodus project to go with you. Not that it really matters, you're already more than strong enough to hold your own. If anything, with the Elite's focus on Master and Stranger capes, Lily is too much of a liability. Plus Faultline is putting a lot of effort into recruiting Eric, I wouldn't want to disappoint her."

Eric spoke next, his voice controlled, but it wasn't hard to recognize anger and hurt. "Are you saying-"

"No, Spitfire is totally on the level," Lisa replied. "Faultline, on the other hand? Well, she is a mercenary, what would you expect? Also, she's almost as much of a manipulative bitch as I am, so just keep that in mind. I'm just letting you know all this so you don't wind up accusing your girlfriend of being part of this when her boss inevitably makes an attempt to lure you over to the dark side or whatever."

"I understand," he replied.

"Good," Lisa added. "So, that's settled. We have a contract with Dragon for industrializing KEB armor for her combat suits. It's pretty generous, all considered, and Rey can handle pretty much the
entire thing on his own. You just have to sign it. Oh, and we'll be giving him a raise. Need that signed, too. And Riley has some news about the conversation she had with Dinah last night."

I stood up started to talk about our discovery of Prism's new powers, while trying to ignore how happy Victoria sounded to be leaving.

....

"Welcome back to the garden, Mushroom," Emma greeted me as I arrived in the labs. "Excited to be returning to school?"

"Yes," I answered, acting more excited than I was. When was it that I started having so much trouble pretending to be happy? I spent five years with the Slaughterhouse Nine, and I even convinced myself that I enjoyed it. Now I had real friends and family, and I had to fake cheer. It didn't really fool Emma, her powers made her too alert for me to beat without specifically preparing for them.

"Yeah, I never liked school much, either," Emma replied. "But you get to see all your other friends, too. I'm sure everyone missed you over the holidays."

I smiled. She's right, I did have a lot of friends who would be happy to see me. No, those are Clarice's friends. If they knew who I was, they'd run screaming.

Emma frowned. "That bad, huh?" she asked.

"Yes," I admitted. Emma set down her work and picked me up in a hug. I was definitely going to be a tall girl, and in fact was only a couple inches shorter than Emma at this point, but I was slender and her altered physiology made her strong enough to easily lift me.

"Don't worry, it'll get better," she insisted. "You don't need a boyfriend to make yourself feel better."

"I know," I agreed. "I'll be fine."

It was all a matter of hormones altering my emotional desires, creating new feelings that my neurology has not yet adapted to handling in a reasonable and calm fashion. Coupled with my Trigger age altering my natural brain development in a number of ways that would exaggerate the natural teenager tendencies toward poor impulse control and emotion management. I knew all this. I could even turn it off if I wanted to, with little difficulty. But doing so, turning off my feelings for Theo, it felt like a betrayal.
I slowly extricated myself from Emma's hold. "Prism called yesterday. We're going to have to review all the tests and questions you'll need with her." I changed the subject.

Meanwhile, Clarice was making her way to school via rooftop. The Endbringer materials built into her design made everything so much easier, I even managed to wedge a teleporter into the build, though it was an energy hog. I was still using the SEB tissue for Clarice. It was in most ways inferior to Khonsu’s, but the forcefield generating effects of KEB tissue couldn't be removed and that was inconvenient in normal tasks. It worked for the Zerg, they existed only as weapons of war. But Clarice was how I experienced a normal life, she needed to be more than a weapon.

Classes were fun, as always. I had discovered a real love for the arts and humanities. Something that, in many ways, was in spite of my Passenger. My powers didn't understand music and literature. They were things I had to put actual effort into, instead of allowing my Passenger's alterations to my brain fill in the gaps, the way it did for math and science.

The Entities, based on everything we knew, couldn't comprehend art. Didn't want their hosts to care about such things, they didn't advance the cycle of conflict and evolution. If I hadn't been found by Jack Slash. If I hadn't Triggered. I imagine I might have become a singer or musician. I even had the natural good looks to make it as a popular performer, and if my popularity in school was a measure of success, I had the charm for it as well.

By the time school was out, I was honestly cheerful again. I couldn't be seen heading home with Missy, unfortunately. The cold weather made it hard to claim we were simply hanging out like we might if it were warmer, and Missy still had a secret identity to protect. Instead, I would simply shunt over and take the route through Avalon. I just had to go outside, first. Shunting could be done indoors, but it was really much better and safer for the environment to be outside first. Less chance of breaking something.

The moment I stepped out onto the roof, a number of alerts flashed on my display as space distorted around Clarice. It took a few seconds for me to map the new vectors of space, when everything went back to normal. Missy was now standing in front of me, wearing her costume. She held up my silk scarf between her pointer and middle fingers.

"So," she started, sounding less than pleased. "I recently found out you have a crush on my boyfriend."

=============
A/N - DRAMA!
Riley has feelings for me? "You're sure about this?" I asked.

"I trust the source," Missy answered. "And that source is certain."

"And you're not going to tell me who gave you this info?" I prompted again. It was a pretty narrow list, considering the first step would be to eliminate absolutely everyone who didn't know Riley existed. That alone left us with, at most, a dozen or so people. I could remove Amelia from the suspect list because I didn't think she'd talk if she did know. And if Taylor found out, she'd tell Amelia, and they'd default back to saying nothing. It could have been Dinah, the whole outsider perspective. That, and the most powerful precog any of us had ever heard of. "Was it."

Missy put her hand over my mouth. "I promised I wouldn't say who it was," she told me, her beautiful green eyes were intense and determined. "Please don't ask me go back on my word."

Well, there goes any chance of me finding out. "That's not fair and you know it."

"Sure it is," she replied, lifting herself on her tip toes to kiss me on the cheek. "You do what I say, and I let you go out with me."

"You've been spending too much time around Victoria," I leaned down and gave her a light peck on the lips. "Or maybe it's Emma this time. Now what are we going to do about this thing with Riley?"

"We aren't going to do anything," she emphasized. "I'll make us a shortcut to the roof so we get our armor from the other side. Don't worry, already had Trevor activate their remote guidance, they'll be waiting. Then you will shunt over. And I'll wait for Clarice. I have a plan, but I have to do it alone. You can wait for us to sort everything out."

....

Something about this just seems wrong. Missy was in her full armor, which was a rarity. She wasn't one of the ones that really needed her armor system to be effective. In fact, it actually slowed her down. She had to 'fill' the armor before she could extend her power around it, which meant it took longer to extend her power outside than it otherwise would. Of course, in the tradeoff she had a defense that only Endbringers and Lily could break through, and an energy weapon that could shatter a city block.

Clarice came up to the roof, and was turned into some kind of bizarre three dimensional pretzel, at least to my eyes. Missy's power couldn't work directly on the construct anymore, thanks to the
Endbringer upgrades. But Missy had a lot of practice finding ways to work around her power's limitation. When everything snapped back, Missy was holding the decorative ribbon that Clarice kept in her pocket.

After that, she spoke. "So, I recently found out you have a crush on my boyfriend." Yeah, she has definitely been spending way too much time around Victoria.

Clarice froze, looking for all intents and purposes like a deer caught in the headlights. Then she started to cry, and it was all I could do to keep from shunting over to comfort her. Clarice isn't real. It's a puppet for Riley. Fuck you, Dream Girl. Meanwhile, my armor's systems automatically read the construct's lips and interpreted the words for me, using a fairly generic sounding female voice to speak. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

Missy put a hand on Clarice's shoulder, and they shunted over. Clarice was doing an incredible job of mimicking emotions. "Time to take us all back home," my girlfriend commanded. "We'll talk when we get there."

It was a simple pair of footsteps to take us back to the base. "You wait here," Missy demanded.

"What? Can't I at least go to my room?" I asked.

"Nope, you stay here. And no peaking," she ordered, and then she shunted over, taking Clarice with.

What the hell? You'd think I was the one in trouble right now. I wandered around a bit, examining the structures going up on Avalon's side of the portal. There were several buildings, relatively squat office complexes of no more than four or five stories. More of it was dedicated to the zerg, they were lined up in rows like a massive and alien car lot. The creatures lacked autonomy without Khepri's direct control. They would act on their own in some circumstances, but for the most part they simply waited and did nothing. How did they ever manage to build to this point without being labeled a Class S threat and destroyed?

After a while, I found myself at the bioconstruct labs. Rey was inside, because he basically lived there, prodding a some glowing material. There were a number of tools near him, all in pristine white colors. They'd started growing basic equipment out of Endbringer tissue, crazily enough. A copy of Rapture's armor was there as well. I wasn't a tinker, and I didn't really know what projects were on the go, so I wasn't sure what he was doing with the armor. That wasn't really my concern anyway.

"Is something wrong?" Rey asked, looking up from his project.

"I honestly have no idea," I sighed.
"Girl problems," he nodded sagely. "I know that look."

"Got any advice?" I asked.

"Not really," he answered. "If I understood women, I'd have a very different life right now. Somehow I just happened to stumble across a Thinker who was just barely neurotic enough to date me for whatever reason. So I guess my advice is don't give up, and eventually things will work out through sheer dumb luck."

"Well, that's better than nothing, I guess."

"It also helps to take your mind off of the problem," he continued. "So, why don't you give me a hand for a while. I'd like to see how this KEB forcefield reacts to your power. Maybe we'll finally get you a real armor synergy."

....

"Okay, you came come back, now," Missy transmitted over the armor's com.

"Well, I got my call," I told Rey. "Let me know how things pan out." I was pretty sure the experiments had mostly been him humoring me, because there wasn't anything he seemed excited about when testing how my power interacted with Khonsu's power. Between Trevor, Emma and Riley I'd seen Tinker Success Mode enough times to recognize it. And there wasn't one of those here.

"Will do," he replied. He went back to working with the glowing material that was the deepest chunk carved out of Khonsu. I walked back over to our base and shunt onto our lawn. Missy was there waiting, she didn't have her armor on.

She led me inside, to my bedroom. "So, I had a talk with Riley."

"And?" I asked.

"She has it pretty bad," Missy informed me. "Has ever since before I met either of you, actually. She has a lot of issues with self esteem. She didn't believe you'd ever want her because of all the things she's done, so she never said anything. I think she was trying to have a relationship vicariously through me. Kinda like Lisa does, but with a lot less unbelievable bitch."

"I don't know what to think about any of this," I spoke up. "What should we do?"
Missy turned and looked at me, her face a blend of sad and determined. "You're going to give her what she wants," she instructed.

What? "I..."

"I've been exactly where she's at," she interrupted. "I know what that feels like. Being rejected like that by a friend and colleague. Riley has enough problems in her life, I won't allow her to go through that, too. She loves you, and you're at least going to give her a chance."

"But I'm dating you," I pointed out.

"I know," she replied. "Don't act like seeing both of us would be a hardship. You're a guy, after all."

I managed a dry chuckle. "I'm sure my old man is cheering from whichever hell he's damned to. I can't do it," I insisted, holding her hands in mine. She's so small compared to me. "It's not fair to you."

"Then I'm breaking up with you," she whispered.

My stomach dropped. "You can't mean that," I insisted. "You can't throw away what we have like this."

She looked away, toward the ground. "If it were anyone else, you'd be right," her voice wavered. "But this is Riley we're talking about. We both owe her our lives. And as much as this hurts, if I have to step out of the way so the two of you can be together, I will."

"I don't want Riley," I cupped her face and made her look at me. "I don't think of her that way. I love you, and that's that. Then there's still all that shit Dream Girl did to me. Seeing someone else is not a solution. Please, don't do this."

"Theo," Missy sighed. "Clarice is Riley. Her mind, her personality. I don't think you're so shallow that the pretty face is what made you fall for her in the first place. So any feelings you have for one, you have for the other."

I closed my eyes. "Damn it, you are too self sacrificing, you know that right?"

"She did the exact same thing for me," she pointed out. "Now are you going to cooperate, or am I going to have to find Zach and make him explain how you're throwing away a perfect opportunity. I'm sure it'll be an incredible blend of vulgarity and insight that will make you feel dumb for not
realizing it on your own. He might even throw in charts. Or we can cut out the middle man. It'll save you from having to see stick figure pornography."

I laughed a little. "Okay," I relented. "If only to avoid having to tell Zach that he's smarter than us."

"Could be worse," she gave me a quick hug. "At least he's not Lisa." She stepped away and palmed my door. It opened. "You can come in, now."

Riley came through the entrance. She'd dressed up at some point, a dark red blouse that accentuated the black hair color she'd been sporting for a while now. She stopped, clasping her hands together in front. She looked at me nervously. I did pretty much the same thing back. *Riley is Clarice, in every way that matters,* I reminded myself.

Missy pointed at Riley and mouthed the words 'ask her out' slowly and silently.

"Uh... Riley?" I hesitated.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Would you like to go out with me?" I asked.

Her face lit up, but she thought to look back at Missy first. Missy simply nodded. "Yes!" Riley exclaimed, and jumped into me, hugging me tight. "Yesyesyesyes!"

I put my arms around her, and looked back toward my girlfriend. *Other girlfriend? This is going to be such a pain in the ass to figure out.* Missy managed to smile at me, walking up and gently hugging both of us. *Well, I can think of worse problems to have.*

===============

*A/N- Yeah, this arc shocks exactly no one.

Except the ones who were expecting me to do something horrible because I'm a trolling dick. To you? Well... double bluff troll maneuvering. go!*
"So, here's a bit of shocking news," Lisa said as we sat down in front of our teleconference screen.

_**BoredomAnnoyance.** *"We're about to watch the PRT use our supersoldiers to 'liberate' Ellisburg,"* Taylor sighed. *"Now you're going to spring surprises on us?"

"Of course," she grinned. "We have to put on a good show for the Directors. Having something else on your minds will make it easier to fake."

"We're in costume," Emma pointed out. "And the Taylia link disrupts social reading. And my biology is so different from human that even Rapture’s tech can't get a real read on me anymore. The only one here vulnerable to being caught faking it is you."

"Be that as it may," Lisa dismissed all those points. "It doesn't hurt to have an extra layer of thoughts. Remember, we're not suppose to know how this all plays out. Speaking of, I asked our Goblin King to toss in an extra surprise or two. The best monsters he could make to give the troops a real workout. They can't win, the PRT has them outnumbered and the M7S and M7K models can recover from almost any amount of damage. but it'll be interesting to see how these men handle something that can actually fight back."

_AnnoyanceConcern. *"You have a talent for picking the worst possible times to give us important information."

"Have to keep things interesting somehow, right?" Lisa kept on smiling. "You know I wouldn't leave out anything critical. So we don't have a lot of time before the op starts and we have to put on our token showing. Someone managed to grab Clarice's ribbon, so Riley has a boyfriend."

_WorryConfusion. *"What? Who? How?" I asked. I don't even know what to think about this. "I have to talk to this boy."

"And girl," Lisa added. _**ShockAnnoyance.**

"Seriously, Lisa," Emma interrupted. "Most people just use porn to get off. Do you need help? I can build you a machine that'll help you if that's what you need. Fuck, I'd let you borrow Zach if I wasn't afraid you'd break him. Riley is now together with Missy and Theo. Happened at the end of the first day of school. Missy snagged the scarf, and then they had a talk, and now Theo's dating both of them. It's as adorable as pretty much everything else those two get up to."

_ShockConfusion. Oh, good for her. _**CuriosityConcern.** *"Riley's had feelings for Theo for a while,"* I
stated, letting Taylor know more than anything. "We've talked about it a few times. She said she'd never do anything about it because she didn't want to hurt Missy. Made me promise not to tell anyone." *Sorry Taylor.*

AcceptanceNegation. "It's fine," Taylor replied. "Wasn't your secret to tell. So... what do we do about it? Should we talk to Theo?"

"I wouldn't bother with Theo," Lisa replied. "No matter how you look at it, Missy wears the pants in that trio. If you have to worry about anyone taking advantage of anything, she'd be the one to look at."

"Riley's happy with it," Emma offered. "I'm sure you've noticed." I found myself agreeing, she hadn't felt the need to stay in my bed for a few days. I thought it was just because she was excited about school again. And her spending as much time as humanly possible around Missy and Theo was already the norm.

"And now you have something to think about while we pretend to care about Ellisburg," Lisa added. "Cameras on in three, two, one..."

Our viewscreen activated, putting us proverbially face to face with several of the PRT directors, including Costa-Brown of course. Tagg and Armstrong, as the two 'neighbor' Directors to Calvert were also here. As well as a Jackson and Bennett, the Directors of Pittsburg and Philadelphia, respectively. I noted Dragon was here as well. Plus our special guest for the evening, Secretary of Defense Allen Brown.

I was conspicuously aware of how young we were compared to the three women and five men at our virtual table, but Secretary Brown was especially old. Career military since Vietnam, according to the bio I read before the meeting. His hair was white instead of gray, but other than that feature he looked to be in better shape than most people in their forties.

"Greetings ladies and gentlemen, Mister Secretary," the Chief Director opened. I didn't begrudge her singling him out for specific address. He was pretty much her boss. For both of her identities.

"Director Calvert sends his apologies for being unable to attend. It appears, based upon Miss Alcott's predictions, that the numbers favor plans where he takes field command of the mission."

*Or maybe he hasn't, and he is here at this meeting in his other timeline,* I added mentally. I wasn't certain how he was harnessing his power here, but Dinah gave this mission a virtually perfect chance of success no matter the circumstances, so I knew there was no benefit to the mission itself. I put my money on it being a matter of ego. One of those things I'd learned about Coil in the time since we took control over him was his obsession with personal glory. He didn't just need to win, he needed everyone to know it. He wanted to be hailed as a great hero, and would become a monster to do it.

"I was under the impression that the mission was handled entirely by remote control," Secretary
Brown spoke.

"Yes, sir, it is," Lisa replied. "The men are all safely several miles away from Ellisburg. I imagine, as one of the survivors of the first Ellisburg mission, Director Calvert will have insights to deploy in the field that improve the results. Or it's possibly a morale issue. Some of the men might need field coaching. It is difficult to say for certain. However, Dinah's numbers don't lie. If her predictions give this plan gives the best results, then we should use it."

The man frowned, but still nodded. I trusted Lisa to handle this situation. I also noted that she didn't say anything about Coil lying about the number Dinah gave.

The conversation died after that, and we waited the few minutes in functional silence. There wasn't any pressing business to take care of, after all. Or at least none that could be done in this kind of mixed company.

"The mission is starting," Dragon announced. The viewscreen changed into a complex three dimensional map relying upon Dragon's mapping technology fed through the two hundred M7S and another hundred M7K soldiers. We could change views manually if we liked, but Dragon's software was tracking everything with the promise to give us the best view of the action as it occurred.

It was broad daylight when they dropped in, using their stealth features. The M7K held back, waiting for orders. Their Khonsu forcefields gave them boosted energy production, but cost them a lot of other options. Amongst others things, they didn't have cloaking features, advanced scanners, or built in energy weapons. The Simurgh models were, essentially, the scouts. Scouts that could solo a small army, but still scouts.

Calvert's voice came over the view, giving commands and instructing his men on where to go. *He's in one of the scout units, I realized. But he's still giving commands to his men in real time. That's how he's using his power, to give himself a semblance of Taylor's multitasking. Pure showboating, of course. Coil showing his skills off to his colleagues and superiors.*

The scouts did their thing, jumping from rooftop to rooftop and harnessing a number of exotic senses. "Perimeter established. Sir, we're not finding anything alive," one of them reported. "There's nothing here."

"It just means Nilbog's creations don't register to the tech," Calvert responded. "This equipment is sensitive enough to detect a sparrow from a hundred meters away. The lack of normal animal life proves there's something here, if only because it's killing everything else. Release the bait animals."

"Understood, sir," the man replied. We watched them get into position and open the cages. A number of birds and rodents were let loose, taking flight or scurrying for cover. Quickly followed by screeching and crunching picked up by the hypersensitive hearing features. One of the soldiers got a good look at one of the nightmarish creatures left behind. It had blended itself into one of the larger
trees, naturally camouflaged for the snow. Several vicious looking barbed tendrils snapped out, killing the birds immediately.

"Don't attack them," Calvert commanded. "Follow the dead animals, they'll lead us to Nilbog."

"How does he know that?" one of the Directors asked.

"He must have seen it when he was in Ellisburg the first time," Costa-Brown supplied.

HorrorDisgustShame. I couldn't tell which emotions were mine, and which were Taylors. We recruited the monster that did all this. He turned thousands of human beings into raw material, and we gave him his own country.

They were led further in, to the central chamber. "That's it," Calvert replied. "That's where you'll find him. Team twelve, find a way in from above. Eleven, ground level. One through ten, establish defensive points at all entrances. Everyone else, watch for enemy activity outside the secure zone."

The invading teams entered, working their way to Nilbog's inner chamber. The bloated man-thing was there, engaging in... I looked away. It was like the worst of the creepy smut people wrote about me. The goblin creatures barely look more than six or seven years old.

"Christ almighty," the Secretary of Defense muttered. "I know you don't need me to give the order, but kill that son of a bitch."

"Happily, Sir," Calvert responded. "Team eleven, open fire. Every available attack type. All other units, prepare to engage hostiles. Leave nothing alive."

The stone building exploded as the various energy weapons punched holes through the walls.

The ground shuddered as monsters cried, screached, and roared at the 'death' of their maker, and the land came alive. The tree-spear monsters attacked several of the constructs, and I watched the display panels showing the unit conditions blinked. We had dumbed down versions compared to what existed for the pilots, but it was good enough for our purposes. More than half of them shifted from blue, undamaged. To green, very light damage.

One of the bigger monsters burst from the ground. It was more or less humanoid, though it hunched and its arms were long enough to reach the ground. More like a reptilian version of a gorilla than anything. It was larger than Leviathan, perhaps even Behemoth. It was also fast, and violated all logic of the square cube law and how it limited living things. It gripped a pair of the M7s by the heads, and threw them. One managed to auto correct with its flight system. The other didn't have time, colliding with the side of a bank hard enough to crack the sone. Our first yellow icon appeared.
"They had to fight things like that?" Tagg muttered. "No wonder we lost Ellisburg the first time."

The giant found two more targets, and had taken to punching them into the road. They had switched to yellow as well.

Then the M7Ks started to attack. Their extra durability and weight, plus not having stealth or range features to drain their resources, meant they were pure flying bricks. Four of them landed on the monster's back using their improved gravity flight systems. It was crushed into the earth hard enough to splinter the road around it. The four attackers then had to put their efforts into digging their way out of the corpse they found themselves trapped in.

The battle itself lasted another two hours, as Nilbogs monsters, with their massive numerical advantage, threw themselves suicidally at the soldiers, who had the advantage of tactics, weapons, and superior bodies on their side. They won, but it wasn't close to a fast victory. I glanced at the clock. It was almost time for the kids to get back from school.

"That concludes the first true field test of the Model 7s," Minerva responded. "I believe I speak for all of us when I call this an unqualified success."

AgreementPrideConfidence. She was right. During the conflict, only one of them had even blinked orange, and that was after being swallowed whole by one of the creatures and then hit with a bombardment of our own weapons.
"I must admit, they are impressive," Secretary Brown agreed. "Some of them took punishment that would have demolished a tank. How easily can they be manufactured?"

**ConcernSuspicion.** "The models you're seeing there are special," Taylor informed the man. "Significantly more difficult to produce than the standard models, requiring advanced tinker tech and rare materials. You won't see more than one or two per major city. The standard M7s aren't nearly as capable, but their ease of production more than makes up for it."

"That is a pity," he replied. "They are a significant force projection, and could be used to achieve stability in areas that badly need it."

**He's talking about deploying them to other countries,** I realized. "There's also the range considerations," I added. "They require tinker tech relays to extend their range past a couple hundred meters."

"The control mechanism you use for the anti Endbringer creatures seems to have a much longer reach," he pointed out.

"Those are under my direct control," Taylor responded. "My power does the work."

"Control over arthropods, I recall," he responded.

"Those weapons are, functionally, nothing but large insects," I added. "Their bodies are heavily modified, of course, but the brains are only a little more advanced than what you might expect from a cockroach or jumping spider." **Which is still exponentially more advanced than the best non-tinker computers ever designed.** But 'really big cockroach' is less disturbing than the idea of a perfectly programmed war machine that has no instinct except to hunt and kill. Not even the instincts needed to protect themselves or recognize danger.

"Fascinating," the man replied. At this point, I decided he was just fishing for whatever information he could gather. We hadn't told him anything that wasn't already part of our records, though I didn't know for certain if he'd read them or not. "Are those as difficult to build as the M7s we saw today?"

"A great deal easier, honestly," Lisa responded. "Most of the difficulties we see in producing the remote robots are a matter of control and relaying information. These are things that Taylor's power handles for her, allowing us to circumvent a significant amount of the efforts. In addition, thanks to Taylor's ability to process information, we don't have to include the same fidelity of senses in our EB weapons. Only one needs echolocation or infrared senses to serve for an army of thousands. While the M7s need every model to have every feature to be effective."
I could imagine every one of the Directors memorizing every word that was just said, trying to
discern a weakness in what they'd just been told. Costa-Brown, I was certain, knew better. She
understood the implications of our true threat. We didn't need to use the zerg as our main force. In
fact, against anything that wasn't a city killer, they were functionally useless. The modified insects,
easily grown by the millions and utterly unobtrusive, were the true weapons at our disposal. Why use
a massively visible monster, when instead you could make a billion mosquitoes that produced a
custom variant of botulinum for the same amount of mass, and with so much less effort?

*That's right, focus on the showy monsters we take out on parade. Pay no attention to the real threats behind the curtain.*

"Of course," I added. "We would never deploy them on another nation's soil without the direst of
need," I added. "They are meant as a deterrent, in case a foreign power feels a desire to attack us.
And, of course, to fight the Endbringers."

"That is why we're putting such effort into creating the M7s," Taylor backed me.

"I understand you plan to give similar designs to other nations?" he prompted.

"Of course," I replied. "We see them as a form of humanitarian aid. That's why we maintain
ownership, only lending instead of selling or even leasing. If a nation attempts to use them in a
manner we're not comfortable with, we can easily disable them. Avalon wants to remain as
politically neutral with Bet and its colony worlds as is humanly possible. Providing law enforcement
tools is one thing, but we will not allow them to be turned into weapons of war." *We're also pulling the exact same trick on you as we did with the sewers of Brockton Bay. Please don't notice that, either.*

"Pardon the interruption," Dragon spoke. "They're nearly finished with the initial sweep of Nilbog's
lair."

"I look forward to discussing this further," he told us before we turned our attention back to the
immediate matter.

"We've found what appears to be Nilbog," one of the soldiers informed us. "I'm not a forensics expert, but he appears to have died of unknown causes, quite a while ago. He's frozen solid."

"You mean that thing in the building wasn't him?" Calvert asked.

"Sort of, sir? It'll be easier for you to see for yourself."
The viewscreen switched to the gruesome sights inside Nilbog's former home. Blood and unidentifiable gore coated the walls.

The main weapon for the M7s were sonic disruptors, due to their combination of nonlethal low settings and effectiveness against a huge array of potential powers. For whatever reason very few parahumans were resistant to sonic attacks, and a great many were especially vulnerable to them. Those weapons, when turned to lethal settings, tended to make bone tissue explode violently. The resultant mess was something normally reserved for bad horror movies. Somehow, it was less nauseating than what the goblins were doing before they were slaughtered.

We got a look at the frozen clone of Rinke that I had made. It wouldn't have been good enough to fool a really good test, if not for the damage caused by freezing and mild amounts of decomposition. The combination of which, plus any possible medical records of the man being over a decade old. It would fool almost anyone who didn't point some very specific parahuman abilities at the body, and our allies with Cauldron would make sure that didn't happen. It was connected to the destroyed bloated monster by a weird umbilical cord like growth.

"Well, guess that explains why our plans suddenly started working," Lisa quipped. "If he was already dead, of course he couldn't create new adaptive monsters to fight back effectively. Or a plague of mutant bacteria. Or whatever it was he was doing that we couldn't find a way around."

"You didn't think to check?" Armstrong asked.

"That the target died of natural causes a few weeks after we started planning the mission? Or checking on plans we were told wouldn't work after finding one that would?" Lisa asked. "No, we didn't think to waste Dinah's very finite resources on such questions. Her power promised us a victory, and we got our victory."

"If I may," Calvert spoke up. "The objective being achieved by happenstance before the attack even began is irrelevant. The fact is, we retook Ellisburg. It's hard to consider this anything but a successful mission."

"If it makes you feel better," Lisa added. "There's no need to mention he was already dead. Your troops went in. Defeated Nilbog's monsters. Came back with a dead Nilbog. Everyone break out the good champagne."

"You both make excellent points," Costa-Brown agreed. "The operation was everything we wanted to achieve, even if not the way we expected. If anything, we can consider this a greater victory for Nilbog's death being discovered now, instead of in a month or two when he thawed out and really started to decompose."

Lisa's eyes widened. "She's right. Nilbog must have some kind of deadman's switch. Maybe it wasn't
triggered due to the whole natural causes thing, but if we didn't act when we did, we might have faced the same... whatever... that caused the deaths seen in Dinah's predictions. Only worse because we wouldn't have been ready and anticipating the event. Don't think of this as not killing Nilbog. Think of it as disarming a ticking timebomb."

AmusementDismissive. I agreed with Taylor. You're hamming it up a bit, Lisa.

"Message received," the Secretary replied. "We'll keep this detail out of the public awareness. It wouldn't do anyone any good to have civilians wondering just how things might have gone if circumstances were slightly different."
Stan Vickory took a look around our world's landscape through the portal. "So, this is like Aleph, only we can actually cross over instead of just transmitting signals?" he asked.
"Pretty much," Lisa replied. "But don't let them try to fool you, it's just as easy to physically cross into Aleph. Probably shouldn't tell anyone about that. I don't think there's a law against it, but it would make waves, and not the ones that get you a juicy story."

"I understand," he answered, watching his film crew as they wandered the area. He had a dozen camera people with him, including a few I was pretty certain weren't trained camera operators. Made sense, what he needed right now were people he could trust to keep a secret. Editing could handle shaky cameras and poor lighting. "If I may be honest with you for a second. When I first talked to you, I was expecting that you'd self destuct within a month or two."

OffendedDispleased. Well, at least he's being honest. ReluctantAgreement.

"Oh, I knew that," Lisa replied happily. "New unproven group, lots of enemies right from the start, flirting heavily with Class S status, pretty much daring the PRT to come at them with guns blazing. Frankly, it was as much luck as anything that got us here."

He chuckled. "I had your eulogies mapped out in my head by the end of my first conversation with Khepri. I'm glad I didn't get to use them."


"Mister Vickory? The stage is ready," a boy informed us. When did I start thinking of college students as if they were younger than me?

"Thanks, Tim," he replied. "And how many times do I have to tell you to call me Stan?"

"Sorry, sir," the kid replied as he rushed back to his job, which as near as I could tell was the electrical work for the interview stage.

Stan smiled apologetically. "Still working on that one," he informed us. "So, shall we get this show started?"

"Absolutely," Lisa replied. "Have fun, boss ladies. I'll be right here watching the whole time."
We approached our stage, which was deliberately outdoors. It was a beautiful day on Avalon, mid-fifties instead of near zero, and we wanted to showcase our world in all its conveniences. We sat down on chairs I had created, in full view of Avalon's first city. Vickery took his position and waited for a hand signal, then he spoke.

"This is Stan Vickery with Channel Twelve, reporting in from Earth Avalon. Before speaking with my gracious hosts, I must offer a disclaimer to the audience. This interview is being recorded on January thirtieth, and not scheduled to be aired until February Eighth, possibly later if the next Endbringer conflict occurs within the next few days."

That was part of our agreement, and Stan had agreed to abide by the rules to get a preemptive interview. Of course he agreed, we had pretty much just put his career on the international stage for the rest of his life. He'd be insane not to go for it.

"By the time this is seen by the public, the world will be aware of many other worlds, with portals in dozens of nations and a plan that can only be described as the largest act of colonialism in history. We are now going to speak with the architects of this plan, Empresses Taylor Hebert and Amelia Lavere. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your new status as heads of state. And thank you for allowing Channel Twelve to be the one to deliver this news to the world."

Taylor nodded. "Thank you," I replied nervously. "We're happy to have you. And, if I'm being honest, I'm still not used to the idea of being called an Empress." Apparently calling myself a goddess for several months didn't prepare me for it, either.

"Let's start with the simplest question," he continued. "Amelia, I note you are no longer using the last name of your adoptive parents. Are you officially acknowledging that you're the daughter of the infamous supervillain known as Marquis?"

"Effectively, I suppose so, at least for the time being," I replied. "I see no reason to hide the truth. I am not, and never will be my father, but hiding from the past accomplishes nothing. It's relatively moot anyway, since I'll be taking my fiancée's surname when we get married." I reached over and squeezed Taylor's hand. *LovePrideConfidence.*

Vickery paused for a second, letting that statement have a moment to catch in the minds of the future audience. He understood his showmanship. "I was led to understand you discovered the dimensional gateways and started this project over six months ago?"

"Correct," Taylor replied. "The details of the gateway creation system are being kept secret for security reasons. However, we have taken the knowledge to the international community and agreed on a plan to open access to a number of Earths for a number of nations on the planet. We aren't sure how much of that information will be public knowledge by the time this interview is publicized."

"In exchange, you were given an earth of your own?" he asked. "Some might view that as
conspicuous consumption, as all other organizations who received a colony world were national governments. In addition, you were recognized as a nation when you agreed to this project. One of the hard questions we’d requested be asked.

"Avalon is a unique case. Part of the international treaties defining acceptable colony worlds is we may only access Earths that do not have human life. Whether because humans never evolved there, or they went extinct," I informed him. "Avalon takes this to its final logical extreme. Life on this world was eliminated by a celestial event some three and a half million years ago. When we found it, the atmosphere was toxic to conventional life, and even if you could breathe the radiation levels were so high that the average expected lifespan would have been around five years. Even today, were we to remove the Yggdrasil from this planet, it would quickly return to an uninhabitable state."

"So you see," Taylor followed up. "Avalon could never have been a colony world to begin with. Which is why we chose it. We didn't want to effectively steal land from the whole human race. Not when we could just as easily create our own." That assurance wouldn't persuade everyone, but hopefully it would do enough that most people would dismiss the ones who had a problem.

"That would explain the rather monotonous landscape," Vickery remarked, and I could imagine the cameras scanning the mostly flat blue-green Yggdrasil coloration that extended to every horizon. "Now, let us talk about your titles. Empresses. Is that expression of an intent to have a form of monarchical system?"

"Of some sort," I agreed. "The details are complex, but the governing powers available to Taylor and I are mostly limited to shared military defense and handling foreign affairs. For almost all other purposes, our world will exist as a federation of nations, each independent of the others. Each colony will have its own government and freedom of rule, with only a few laws that apply universally, such as rights to religious, cultural, and lifestyle equality."

"Fascinating," he replied. "Speaking of colonies, how do you plan to recruit colonists? As I understand it, most major nations will be doing their best to build their colony worlds. I imagine competition will be fierce."

"Plumbing, for starters," Taylor answered with a smile. It earned a polite chuckle from Vickery. "Thanks to the Yggdrasil, we will have a significant head start for infrastructure. We can produce temporary shelters in a matter of minutes. Grow homes and supply food for entire cities as quickly as people can find places to put cities. Then there's the matter of health care. Illness and injury that would be more or less trivial on Bet will become serious threats to the colonists. New diseases that never existed on Bet to begin with. Harsh winters without electricity. These are problems that simply will not exist for Avalon."

"In addition, there's the environmental concerns," I added. "Or, specifically, the lack of them. Avalon was a dead world. We don't have an environment to preserve, and the Yggdrasil isn't at any risk of being destroyed by industrialization. We project fully modern cities in a matter of less than ten years. Better than modern, as we'll encourage parahuman involvement and advanced technology from the inception."
"Then there's the military concerns," Taylor followed up. "Historically speaking, colonialism has faced a number of perils, most of which can be summed up simple enough. The needs of the colonies are rarely the same as the needs of the homeland, and eventually people will start to think in terms of 'us' and 'them'. That's why so many wars are a matter of seeking independence."

"Avalon will be the only colony world that is will be its own independent government," I finished her point. "We will rule ourselves from the very beginning, instead of being ruled by foreigners."

"Do you believe other countries will face rebellions from their colonies?"

"Insurrection and violence, at the very least," Taylor replied. "Some worse than others. Not everyone trusts or loves the countries they come from. They'll seek new lands and new opportunities with the intent of no longer having to answer to the authorities. And some of them will just be scum looking to take advantage of the less established populations in the colonies. Conflicts will happen, it's just a question of how bad it gets. And considering the involvement of parahumans, it could get very bad."

"You believe Avalon will avoid that?" Vickery asked.

"I believe anyone who starts a battle on Avalon's soil will regret it quickly," Taylor replied. "We are capable of defending ourselves and our people in a way the other colony worlds simply won't be able to achieve. We can protect ourselves in a way even Bet cannot achieve. The term 'Empress' is more than a political title for us. On this world, we have absolute control of the entire biosphere. We can and will use the full extent of our powers, including the anti Endbringer weapons if we have to, on anyone stupid enough to hurt our people."

==================

A/N- Seriously though. No fucking with Avalon. It fucks back. And it's a lot bigger than you.

Also, this chapter gets a part 2.
"The entire biosphere?" Vickory asked.

"For all intents and purposes," Taylor responded. "Our powers don't have upper limits on mass. As long as it's a single life form, Amelia can control all of it. As long as it's within my range and is an arthropod, I can control all of that. There aren't a lot of places on earth where bugs and spiders aren't found. On Avalon, there are even fewer. We can defend our entire planet pretty much in real time."

"That is rather intimidating," Vickery admitted.

"It also deserves noting that alongside our ability to defend ourselves and our colonists, Avalon is a truly fresh start," I added. "Our government and history is truly new, lacking in wars and nationalism and ugly history. Founded with a mixture of nationalities, ideals and beliefs. We are welcoming of everyone, as long as they aren't going to hurt others."

We had our tag team system on full auto by this point. Taylor was the one who talked about the mechanical realities, the dangers and how we'd respond to them. The stereotypically 'masculine' side of our partnership. I was the one who offered the possibilities and ideologies. The hopes we offered the future. The more 'feminine' side. It suited us both pretty well.

"I see you have given this a great deal of consideration," Vickery replied. "So, let's try the opposite angle. What do you consider the greatest weakness of your colony world compared to the others?"

I paused. *Fuck, hadn't thought of that one.* Luckily Taylor reacted quickly enough. "In general? I'd say the lack of establishment. Other nations will be able to recruit their own best and brightest to oversee their colonial development. Industrial records such as where to find mineral deposits that should be in the same locations in their earth as they were on Bet. From that angle, we're very much at a disadvantage. Hopefully we'll be able to find enough talented individuals hoping for an unfettered world to work with to offset this weakness."

*We already have,* I added silently. *Namely, Dragon. She already has almost six hundred of her employees on Avalon.* And, of course, Accord. Who was happily doing his part and being rewarded thoroughly for it.

"Economy," I added, having picked my answer. "We will have our own national currency, but for the first year or so it will be backed by Pantheon's personal wealth. We are, essentially, promising to buy our own currency in exchange for the American Dollar. It won't remain that way for very long, but it will be the starting basis."

"What of those who point to your power of clairaudience as a violation of privacy?" Vickery asked
next. "You would make an impressive form of Big Brother. Or sister, in this case."

Taylor sighed. "Honestly? I don't like it any more than anyone else does. I'm very good at not paying attention to my power's senses. Considering that many species of insect are scavengers feeding on dead animals and offal, you can imagine how glad I am for that. Admittedly, my promise that I don't want to spy on people won't change the fact that I certainly could. Hopefully being honest will earn some trust."

"We are hoping that the benefits of living in a world without starvation or war or any significant amount of crime will be enough to let people put aside that fear," I offered. "Or true equality between people in a way that's never been seen on Bet. If not those things, then the advantages of our Thinker and Tinker designed legal, economic and education systems should add up as well. It's amazing what a nation can afford to do for its people when it doesn't need to spend its money on soldiers and tanks. We will get our fair share of colonists. More as time goes on and it becomes clear how effective our system really is."

Pity we lost Japan when Lily decided she couldn't go through with the marriage. I didn't blame her at all, but it would have been convenient. On the plus side, Dragon was planning to change her citizenship almost immediately.

"With all this talk of colonies and colony worlds," Vickery mused. "Has there been discussions of opening gateways to inhabited worlds?"

"The subject's come up," I acknowledged. "The possibility of Aleph, at the very least, is very high. They are similar enough to Bet that there wouldn't be a difficult cultural barrier to overcome, and their world is facing notable overpopulation issues. It also helps that we've been able to communicate with them for quite some time, now. However, that is a matter of international discussion between Aleph and Bet. Avalon will participate in those discussions, of course."

"It will likely be years before we do so," Taylor added. "There is the risk that any worlds we open gateways to might face the dangers of Endbringer attacks. Whatever value there might be in physical interaction between Aleph and Bet, it's clearly not worth the risk of unleashing the Endbringers on defenseless worlds. At least Bet has heroes that can fight the monsters."

"This is clearly a complex issue that deserves a lot of consideration before any final answers are decided," Vickery agreed. "Care to share any of your thoughts on what interplanetary policy you plan to support?"

"Sure," I agreed. "We are strongly in favor of inviting Aleph into the colonization program. As well as six other worlds we've discovered where history diverged within the last fifty years or so. One actually diverges from Aleph at the point where Bet made contact with one, but not the other. We're less enthusiastic about a number of other worlds. In at least one example, Europe never developed into a colonial power and the natives are the only people of their analogue of America. We paid attention during history and will oppose any plan to open that world, or the others like it, which"
"In fact, as a good rule of thumb," Taylor jumped in. "I imagine a policy of only opening to planets which are at least in the information age of their development will be the standard. And, most likely, we will include other policies like only opening a channel of communication at first. Much the way we currently have with Aleph, until we get to know each other and allow them to adjust to our differences. We might find some worlds we never choose to access. There are hundreds of developed worlds out there, and each will require its own unique approach."

"I imagine we might need a new naming convention for all these earths," Vickery replied with a grin.

"Luckily, that problem isn't ours to worry about," I agreed.

....

"This has been Stan Vickory, on location in Avalon."

"It is an interesting proposition," one of the political analysis types stated, looking at the tape. Some economics professor from Harvard or something, I was barely paying attention. "They're not wrong that they will get their colonists. If nothing else, the parahuman populations of much of the world would be lured by the promise of equality.

"That's true, but how long could you expect such a system to last?" A woman asked. PRT of some type. "It's being run by a bunch of teenage girls."

"If you read Avalon's constitution, they run almost nothing," another woman corrected. "The Empresses have very little responsibility or power outside of their function as military leaders and international diplomacy. We've seen their work through Pantheon. I think they've proven they can handle themselves in those arenas."

"How long has this been going on?" I sighed.

"About three hours," Lisa replied, switching to a channel that was in Spanish. Sure enough, there was our interview going again, complete with subtitles. "Good news is, we're pretty well liked in the yuppie crowd. Bad news is, they're not likely to move in the first place. Our political freedom acts are interesting a lot of possible colonists overseas, but it's not like it's easy to collect those. China's threatening war if we don't give them a world of their own." 

"China can fuck itself," Taylor muttered. "They want to start a war, I'll be happy to finish it."

"It's actually working in our favor. A lot of their neighbors are afraid of being invaded if we give them a portal, so their refugees are likely to see us as the primary option for colonization. Our offer of
semi independent states has also drawn interest from subjugated cultures such as the Native American tribal groups. I'm uncertain how that'll work out in the long run. Right now it's a whole lot of 'we like what they're trying to do, but we'll wait and see how it looks later before we commit'. We'll have to wait until the first colony worlds start collapsing."

"I really don't like how our entire plan revolves around profiting from the suffering of innocent people," I muttered. AgreementDisay.

"Can't be helped," Lisa dismissed. "If people weren't suffering, we wouldn't even need to build a colony world. We could just keep Avalon as a nice, empty field full of Zerg for us and industrial complexes for Dragon. We could pack the planet with enough ordinance to peel the topsoil off of another planet if we needed to. But we don't. Because we want to be nice and share our sandbox with others."

"I thought we went public with Avalon so we could hide Mashu," I replied.

"Hey, I said we let others have our sandbox," she smirked. "I never said anything about us not finding another one. Besides, we paid out our fucking ass for that one."
Across the table was spread a number of folders, mostly in stacks. The sheer number gave Amelia and Taylor pause as they stepped into the room, staring at a slightly-disheveled Lisa, who was evidently engrossed in reading a selection from one of the manilla packets and chuckling under her breath. As the two Empresses sat, though, the blonde looked up from her work and gave them her trade-marked grin.

“You remember those meetings we have every now and then where you each feel like you need a stiff drink?” Lisa grinned wider, “this is going to be one of those.”

Amelia groaned while Taylor merely massaged her forehead.

“How bad?” Taylor asked, readying herself for the worst.

“Honestly?” Lisa asked, “not so much 'bad' as just...'damn humanity is weird.' Also, some people have absolutely no shame.”

“Oh boy,” Amelia stated blandly. “Well, let's get this started. What are we looking at in terms of prospective colonists?”

“Do you want the 'easy no' groups first?” Lisa asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or should we just go ahead and get to the ones that merit actual consideration?”

Taylor and Amelia shared a glance.

“Call me morbidly curious, but who is actually asking that we can turn down so easily? We're not being that picky.” Taylor question gave birth to a particularly nasty-looking grin on Lisa's face.

“Well, applications for immigration to Avalon have mostly come in two forms,” Lisa explained. “On the one side, we've got individuals who want to move either alone or in family units and settle a private plot of land. Most of these are either going to be poor, disenfranchised minorities, or the types of people who hate their country enough that they want to move, but are too lazy to actually jump through the hoops into a foreign state.”

Okay,” Amelia nodded, “Like Taylor said, we're not that picky. As long as they aren't...crazy for lack of a better term, I don't think we're in a position to turn down too many people.”

“No,” Lisa replied, “we're not. These individuals...or small groups, may be a little irritating superficially, but they don't have any real problems besides just being dissatisfied with their current life. The only negative outcome I can see is if they try to start up a populist revolution or something against the 'oppressive monarchs' and even that...not too much of a problem with your powersets. No, the problem is primarily with the larger groups that want to immigrate...barring the occasional individual with actual mental problems.”

“What kind of groups?” Taylor asked, narrowing her eyes, “and how large are we talking?”

“Low hundreds to hundreds of thousands,” Lisa responded. “These are the groups which have enough structure and consideration for our government structure that they've applied to move in and set up as a country unto themselves.”
Taylor blinked. “Really, who would...what kind of group has that level of membership that would be that devoted...” She frowned as an ugly picture began to form in her mind.

“They're not all cults,” Lisa said, stopping her friend's line of thought. “Well, for a given value of 'cult' I suppose. This is where we can easily refuse certain groups. For instance, several Ku Klux Klan groups sent in an application for territory, as did Gesellschaft. Admittedly, part of me wants to set their private fiefdoms up next to each other and watch the fireworks.”

Amelia put her face in her hands. “What.”

Taylor shook her head. “No, Lisa. Not just no, but Hell No.”

“I know, I know,” Lisa snickered, “but you've got to admit, it's a funny thought. Anyway, then there are some actual cults. For instance, there are numerous apocalyptic groups who want to set up shop on Avalon to take advantage of our stance on religious and lifestyle freedom. Most of these have had problems with the American government before on some level...owning large stocks of firearms, not allowing members to leave when they attempt to, forms of brainwashing and sexual abuse...the list goes on. There are a few that might, might mind you, be feasible, but mostly they're going in the 'no' column.”

Taylor groaned. “Spectacular. I hope they're not all this bad.”

“No at all,” Lisa smiled. “We actually have several opportunities for good PR here and there. For instance, I've got a few tentative applications from various Native American groups who wanted to see if it was possible to settle areas analogous to their original holdings before European or American colonization.”

“An easy 'yes,'” Amelia nodded. “I'm not entirely sure why you just didn't make the choices without us, Lisa. You seem to have it well-enough in hand.”

Lisa grinned teasingly. “I'm not one of the 'Empresses.'” Amelia and Taylor's face soured at the reminder. “These need approval at highest levels of our government. Plus, I haven't gotten to the funny ones yet.”

“Funny ones?” Amelia asked warily. “Funny strange or funny haha?”

“Yes,” Lisa smirked.

Taylor sighed. “Okay, since you obviously need someone to ask the question...what do you mean by 'funny ones?'”

Lisa threw down a large manilla folder, “This is Nova Roma, or 'New Rome.' It's a...well, it's something between a recreational organization, a private club, and a historical reenactment group...and they pretend to be a country on the side while they're at it.”

Taylor blinked, “I'm sorry...what?”

“They mint their own coins, give citizenship, and hold gatherings of those citizens which are all aimed at recreating the Roman way of life,” Lisa explained. “Honestly, this is kind of the sweet spot for colonists, at least in terms of what we're looking for. People crazy enough to jump through a portal to another world, but almost all of them have some level of technical skill or higher education.
They'd, obviously, want an area analogous to the Italian peninsula for initial colonization.”

Amelia was shaking her head as she looked over the papers. “So...they just want to pretend to be Rome? That's it? What about...didn't Romans practice slavery?”

Lisa nodded. “Good catch, but they're amenable to changing certain practices in the name of actually forming their own country. They do seem pretty firm on maintaining the Roman religion as their official state religion, though.”

It took a moment for the penny to drop.

“No.” Amelia stated firmly. “No. Nonononono, fuck no. We agreed on this, Lisa! We're not portraying ourselves as Gods!”

“Doesn't that run contrary to the whole 'religious freedom' thing we have set up on Avalon?” Taylor asked, slightly less worried than her partner.

“Nova Roma endorses religious freedom, but they maintain the religious rights of the original Rome as a way to keep alive cultural heritage,” Lisa explained. “No one would actually worship us, but they would invoke some of our...pseudonyms during celebrations. Functionally, though, you'd both be something of God-Empresses on the official government of Nova Roma.”

“Isn't Khepri...Egyptian, rather than Roman?” Taylor asked, frowning.

“Well,” Lisa shrugged, “considering what the term 'Pantheon' actually refers to and the fact that Egypt was, at one point, a Roman colony, they're more than happy to include you, Taylor, as well as Amelia in their...worship.”

Taylor pinched the bridge of her nose to stave off a headache. “Yay?”

Lisa chuckled. “Honestly? I'm pretty sure most of that section of their application for immigration is tongue-in-cheek. Don't get me wrong, it's all one-hundred-percent true, but they aren't going to be pushing for seriousness in this respect.”

“Put in the maybe pile,” Amelia decided, receiving a nod from Taylor.

Lisa shrugged. “That's actually just the start of some of the weirder ones. We've got the...Society for Creative Anachronisms who were thinking about moving in, then there's the...Aerican Empire. I'm not entirely sure if they're serious about this or treating it as a huge joke. My best guess is both.” She paused here, shuffling folders around.

“The Aerican Empire?” Taylor asked, cocking her head.

Lisa grinned, sliding out a folder. “They fall into this weird category of polity known as 'micronations.' Basically, most are a joke, but some are fairly serious groups that are attempting to become recognized international states. By some definitions, Nova Roma falls under the same category, but the Aerican Empire is...strange, even by their standards. They claim territory on other planets, some of which are imaginary, they have a state religion that worships a talking penguin who reigns over gaming as well as the smiley-face logo...”

“Lisa?” Amelia interrupted.

“Hmm?” The blonde asked, amusing herself with the contents of the folder.
“You were right. I do feel like a drink,” Amelia sighed.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, Khepri (Verified Cape) (Pantheon Leader) (Avalon Empress)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

♦

Topic: Pantheon presents Avalon!
In: Boards ► World Events ► Alternate Worlds ► Pantheon ► Avalon
Minerva (Original Poster) (Verified Cape) (Pantheon) (Avalon Citizen)
Posted on February 8, 2012:
As I'm sure you have heard by now, the UN has accepted Pantheon as a Sovereign nation in its own right, with Amelia Lavere and Taylor Hebert as it's Empresses. The news release can be found here. I am making this thread to answer any questions you may have about this announcement. Gaea and Khepri will be watching this thread as well, so feel free to ask them questions.

(Showing Page 20 of 100)
► Chrome (Temp-banned)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
*This is not the place for your conspiracy theories and accusations, enjoy your ban*

► Stone Face
Replied on February 8, 2012:
Why am I not surprised you're here already?

► Tin Mother (Moderator)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
Due to the amount of controversy surrounding this topic, I will be watching this thread closely. Any attempts to derail the conversation will be met with a temp ban, this is your only warning.

► Stone Face
Replied on February 8, 2012:
...and he's gone

► Acolyte (Temp-banned) (Cape Groupie) (Pantheon Loyalist)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
See I was right! Our glorious God-Empresses have revealed the extent of their might! A world that is their's alone to rule!
Don't say I didn't warn you

Holy shit, the mods are not fucking around

You can submit an application to immigrate to Avalon here, but be warned that it's a fairly long and complicated process and may take some time. You are attempting to move to a new country after all.

How the fuck did that happen?

One of Pantheon's biggest issues right now is attracting specialists to Avalon and have offered to fast track skilled immigrants. When I expressed an interest in an Avalon Citizenship they offered me land and infrastructure for a factory.

A buddy of mine came up with a new formula for cold shrink and we were looking into starting a business. Would Pantheon be willing to bankroll us in exchange for us moving to Avalon?

We won't support you without a plan and we will respect Patent Law but if you outside of things like that we would be more than happy to help you through the patenting process and help you establishing a factory on Avalon.

If you need workers for your factory, I've been trying to immigrate into the US for some time now with my wife. I'm a boat mechanic and my wife's a secretary at a resort in Cuba.
Replied on February 8, 2012:
@Minerva @Sunny
PMs sent

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 ... 98 , 99, 100

(Showing Page 46 of 100)

► TheGamer
Replied on February 8, 2012:
*Hears Gaea mention intentions to take Khepri's last name*
*Notices which subjects Gaea and Khepri focus on*
I can see who wears the pants in that relationship
When's the wedding anyways? Are they waiting until all the Endbringers are dead or just the first three? (Only Leviathan's left)

► Khepri (Verified Cape) (Pantheon Leader) (Avalon Empress)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
@TheGamer
Our original statement was that we weren't getting married while cities are being destroyed every three months. Once that has happened we will discuss our wedding.

► Actualize
Replied on February 8, 2012:
Have you picked out what you're going to wear? How about the venue? Do you know who the Maid of Honor and Best Man are? Is there going to be a Best Man or just two Maids of Honor? Are you going to have a traditional wedding or something else?

► Tin Mother (Moderator)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
Ok people, I'm not giving out infractions or bans this time but you should keep that discussion to the appropriate thread.

► Khepri (Verified Cape) (Pantheon Leader) (Avalon Empress)
Replied on February 8, 2012:
Wait, there's a thread dedicated to our wedding?

► Actualize
Replied on February 8, 2012:
You should check it out! We've got all this stuff on what you should do! Lasersmile had this great idea that you could use some of your creatures to serve drinks! What about my idea to work your costumes into your wedding dresses! Are you going to be wearing a wedding dress or are you going to be butch and wear a tux? We need to know!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 44, 45, 46, 47, 48 ... 98 , 99, 100

Taylor logged off and rubbed her temples. After Actualize had hijacked the thread it had gone off topic for a couple of pages before the moderators had gotten it back on track, plus the wedding thread had exploded when she expressed an interest in it. Most of the ideas there was crap, insane things like suggesting they get married on a stage made from Leviathan's corpse. However a few
were pretty good, she'd have to mention them to Amelia.

Chapter End Notes

Last of my three canon omakes for this story.
ARTICLE V. Protected Rights of Avalon Citizens

No government may pass laws prohibiting freedom of religion or speech. While Avalon will acknowledge theocracies and predominant religions and languages, no law shall be passed which favors practitioners of a specific faith over others or prevents people from reasonable expression of their beliefs and ideas.

Right to asylum. All citizens of Avalon may petition the Imperial government for protection from and redress against abuse by government. An imperial committee shall determine if there is merit to the claim. Filing frivolous claims can result in fines.

Freedom of transit and citizenship. No nation may close their borders to other nations. People may freely travel or immigrate between nations without harassment, except as may be necessary to prevent criminal activity such as smuggling or fleeing justice. Laws may not be passed which complicate change of residence between nations.

Right to property. No property may be confiscated by the state except as necessary to repay lawfully incurred debt or fines, or where the individual can be shown to be using the property in criminal acts.

Right to preferred lifestyle. No law shall be passed that favors a language, sexual orientation, custom or personal preference over any other.

Right to recognition. No law shall be passed that favors any physical or mental condition over another. All people that are found capable of safely functioning in society must be treated equally under the law. The legal definition of person shall include unnaturally created, modified, nonhuman or otherwise unusual sapient beings that can be shown to have the mental capacity to interact meaningfully in society. For unusual intelligent life, special considerations may need to be taken to ensure their wellbeing. Failure to accommodate for these needs, or attempts to use these abnormalities against them shall be treated as a form of torture equivalent to denying a prisoner food or sleep.

Right to voice in government. While Avalon will acknowledge non democratic systems, membership in that system shall remain voluntary. If at any time, a group can produce evidence of over two percent of residents in a community favoring a petition to remove themselves from a given government, they may file a Change of Governance petition and initiate a Protected Vote. The Imperial government shall oversee the vote and ensure that all voting eligible citizens of the petitioner community have an opportunity to cast their vote. If upon completion of the vote a 2/3 majority is found in favor, the petition shall be recognized as law. Change of Governance petitions may be filed no more than once every five years.

Right to Government Clarity. All citizens have the right to be educated to the legal statutes of their region as well as Avalon Imperial law. All laws of a governing body must be made freely available for the public to access.

Right to Education. All citizens have the right to freely provided education meeting minimal standards as set by Imperial legislation. If a nation feels it is unable to provide these standards, they may petition the Imperial government to take management of their scholastic system.
Attempts by a government to interfere with or defraud these rights will result in punishments that may include imprisonment of responsible governing officials, or if necessary a forfeiture of recognition as a sovereign state.

ARTICLE VI. Recognition of Sovereignty of Communities, City States and Nations

SECTION 1a. A group of like minded colonists numbering no less than a hundred individuals may apply as a community and receive an allotment of land no more than ten contiguous square kilometers, not including bodies of water. Communities are recognized as independent governments.

SECTION 1b. Communities of over 1,000 are recognized as cities and may found new communities. Cities are bequeathed the territory within three kilometers of their founding region unless it conflicts with prior territorial claims, and may found new communities within that territory. Founded communities are recognized as part of the origin City, City State, and Nation Commonwealth.

Cities have the right to determine municipal taxes and services and must provide a code of law for their territory.

SECTION 1c. A population of no less than than 100,000 people may found a City State. Communities must be within five kilometers of the nearest member community to join a city state. City states must be able to provide a constitutional government that is ratified by a Protected vote. The constitution and laws established within may not conflict with the law established in the Avalon Imperial Government. City states are bequeathed all territory within ten kilometers of their member communities, unless it conflicts with prior territorial claims.

SECTION 1d. Populations of no less than 500,000 people may found a Nation Commonwealth. City States must be within forty kilometers of the nearest member community to join a Nation Commonwealth. Nation Commonwealths are bequeathed all territory within 25 kilometers of their communities, unless it conflicts with prior territorial claims.

SECTION 2a. Communities, Cities and City States have the right to secede from their governing body via a Protected vote. A community may choose to secede membership from their immediate governing body without leaving membership of the higher governing bodies.

SECTION 2b. Communities, Cities and City States have the right to join another governing body via a Protected vote.

SECTION 3a. Communities have the right to purchase or sell territory to their neighbors. All traded territory must maintain a contiguous border with the purchasing party.

SECTION 3b. Arbitration of territory. In the case of conflicting territorial claims that cannot be resolved by the parties themselves, the most immediate government controlling both territories shall arbitrate the dispute. In the case of disputes between Nation Commonwealths, the Avalon Imperial Government shall arbitrate.

SECTION 4. Special Districts. When deemed necessary to serve specific cultural or governing needs, the Avalon Imperial Government may bequeath unusual amounts or shapes of territory to specific governments, grant titles to governments that do not meet the above qualifications, or designate areas that may not be held as territory by any nation.
ARTICLE VII. Protected Rights of Sovereign Nations.

All Nation Commonwealths and City States that are not part of a Nation Commonwealth may select a representative to participate in the Avalon’s Legislative Assembly. Representatives are given a weighted vote based upon the percentage of Avalon's total vote eligible population within that territory's borders.

All governments have the right to establish and enforce their own constitution and governing structure, legal systems and all necessary works of government so long as these laws do not conflict with the Imperial Constitution.

Taxation. Governments have the right to issue, enforce and collect licensing, fees, and taxes for the costs of maintaining public utilities and paying government employees and leadership.

Nation Commonwealths have the right to issue their own currency. However, they must freely exchange their currency for the Imperial currency at recognized international value.

Nation Commonwealths may establish their own standard weights and measurements. However, they must include Imperial standards on all documentation.

Expectation of Defense. All nations of Avalon shall be protected from hostilities by Imperial military forces.

===============

A/N- this was originally meant to be an Omake. *Headdesk*

Seriously, though. Could you imagine this system in action? Conquer your neighbors by virtue of being a nicer place to live than they are. Also... don't treat your population like shit, they can leave you. And if you can get a hundred people together, you can found any kind of community you want. Though you'll need a LOT more than that if you want to grab a particularly large chunk of land.
I woke up in a biochamber. Naked. The fuck? The pod made a beeping noise, and then I was sprayed with a gel material. My power immediately told me it was some kind of pseudofungus and a bit of sugary composite that it fed upon. It solidified, forming crude clothing on my body.

Then the door slid open. Riley jumped on me and hugged me hard. "I missed you so much!" she sobbed, her face buried in my chest.

*Missed me? Oh. That's not good. "Wha hamd?" I asked. Wow, talking sucks. Why? Taylor didn't have a problem talking when she was restored.*

"Let's just say the last Endbringer battle went phenomenally badly," Lisa replied from somewhere outside the pod that I couldn't see. "Would you like the bad news, the worse news, the really bad news, or the worst news first?"

"Just give it to me in whatever order makes the most logical sense," I slurred the words so badly that I was pretty sure Lisa only understood me thanks to my power.

"Well, the next Endbringer is weird," Lisa replied. "I've not yet decided if it's two Endbringers, or a single Endbringer with two different bodies. If it's just one, then there's one more unknown Endbringer left. If it's two, then there's two more unknowns. For naming's sake, they're being called Tohu and Bohu."

_Two at once? Fuck, no wonder we lost. "Ohay, tha's a sar."

"Bohu's the easy one," she continued, stepping into my limited view. "More or less a direct counterpart to you or Labyrinth. Warping and reshaping the environment into a super death maze. Every Endbriner seems to focus on one of the power classifications. Bohu's the Shaker." *Okay, that doesn't sound unbeatable. "Tohu's a Trump." Well, fuck me. "It can manifest the powers of any three parahumans it wants."*

"Uhuh," I responded. Using sounds I knew I could trust myself to make properly.

"It manifested Taylor," she added. "Activated the emergency overrides on our armors to pull us out of our nice, safe, Avalon. And last but not least, set the Zerg on the defenders. Then it manifested a copy of Lily's powers. And for the ultimate fuck you? Shatterbird. Say goodbye to all those nice Dragon suits that our Zerg were playing meatshields for."

*Oh god. "Who..." else was killed?*
"You, Taylor, Theo, Missy, Crystal, and Sabah. Plus most of the defenders," Lisa answered. "In a way we're lucky. Pantheon's method of being the entire front lines meant there weren't a lot of capes in range of our Zerg. Trevor was the real hero of the day, cobbling together a signal that shunted all our suits back to Avalon and cutting off the dimensional relay. Emma managed to save Riley's life." The girl squeezed me harder and whimpered mournfully. "She might have been able to save some of the others, but frankly they were better off being restored from backup."

I moved my arms woodenly, draping them over Riley. *This must have been hell for her.* "How long?" At least talking is starting to get easier.

She tilted her head. "Six days," she answered. *Six? It's only suppose to require a couple days to grow a new copy.* "You were a little harder to restore than the others. Something about how your power works. This was our fourth attempt, and we were getting worried."

"Taylor?" I asked.

"On her way. She's with her Dad," Lisa answered. "He's... well... I haven't gotten to the next SNAFU of the week."

"What?" I asked. *After everything else, what could make this worse?*

"Remember how the last few Endbringers have been unusually well documented?" Lisa asked. "You and Taylor were killed on live television in front of billions. We had to go public with our cloning technology."

"Mother fucker," I muttered. "What's the damage?"

"Remarkably little," she answered. "Once we explained just how hard it was to use this tech, and for that matter how it's done, it was amazing how quickly most people decided they would rather not have it. There's still a few that are interested, we're trying to figure out what to do with that, but the general concern is nightmare fuel wondering just what changes we could make to their brains when we work on preparing the copy. Plus there's that whole 'is the copy still me?' existential crap. Which, by the way, has your family flipping out."

"Crystal," I sighed.

"And Victoria," she reminded. "We were slightly less than honest, with that whole 'mind transfer' bullshit. Krouse wasn't thrilled with the news, either. Noelle, however, seemed remarkably okay with it. Pretended she knew all along, kept her boyfriend in line."
"Well, that's a relief," I sighed. We still didn't know what would happen if Noelle re-triggered. Given the current trend of re-triggers to be more powerful than the original, I could only dread the possibilities.

"And now they're bringing this resurrection tech up in court to determine whether the clones count as legally the person they're a copy of. Or various other inheritance and legal rights laws. It could get pretty contentious. Not a problem for you and Taylor, but Theo and Missy are in particularly precarious positions. Between the pair of them, that's potentially a billion dollars they might lose legal access to. Although in Theo's case it might never matter since they'd have to openly reveal that Horus is, in fact, Theo Anders. I doubt anyone will risk the fallout of doing that."

"Carol's doing her thing, I presume?" I asked.

"Dragon, actually," she answered. "She's funding this particular legal battle. Has some really high powered lawyers on the case. I'm not sure exactly why, but I'm pretty certain it's personally important to her. And not just locally. She's using Avalon's law as existing statute and taking it before the United Nations. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense on a matter of case law. But since when has that ever stopped us from doing anything that we do? Really, it's going to come down to political maneuver, and that comes down to 'are you sure you want to say that two of the Endslayers and the girlfriend of the remaining Endslayer don't count as people anymore?' We'll be fine."

I managed a smile and wobbled to my feet. "I want to see the footage. The fight." *My death.*

"It's already in the VCR," she replied. "But first, you should know about Zach."

"Isn't he-"

"Not against Lily, he's not," she answered. Riley put her shoulder under my armpit and helped prop me up to walk out of the chamber.

Zach was in a different kind of stasis chamber, levitating in place by what I assumed was gravity manipulation tech. He was still in costume and his power was activating so fast that it looked almost like the effects of a strobe light, as blood attempted to gush out the hole in his back, only to be reduced to dust as quickly as it was appearing. "What's happening to him?" I asked.

"His power is still keeping him alive, but it can't correct the injury caused by Lily's power," Riley answered. "The energy field is keeping him unconscious, and hopefully he's not suffering. We're waiting until his body heals naturally, but it's attempting to regenerate from a punctured heart. Going faster than it would for a normal human healing by a factor of three, and no risk of scar tissue problems, but it could still take months before he's functional again. Emma and I are working on something to get around his power and speed his body's healing process. But there's been no progress."
I placed an unsteady hand on the glass. "Is there anything else we can do?" I asked.

"We considered asking around for a trump that nullifies powers, at least temporarily," Lisa spoke. "But there are too many unknowns. With bad timing, we risk him turning to dust and then being unable to reform. We're trying as best we can, but we don't even know what kind of power would help, since Zach already borders on a Trump in how his power works to specifically protect him from other powers."

"How's Emma holding up?"

"Standard Thinker and Tinker coping mechanism," Lisa replied. "Throw yourself into work so hard that your loved ones feel the need to stage an intervention. Victoria took it pretty hard, too."

"What did she do to whose body parts?" I sighed.

"Nothing," Lisa replied. "She helps Emma and Riley whenever she can, but other than that she doesn't know how to cope. Classic depression symptoms. Hopefully you'll be able to help, because she's starting to worry me."

=============

A/N- Welcome to the next story arc.
Taylor rushed into the room and pulled me into a tight hug. It was enough that it might have hurt, but I was given the full clone package of near perfect physical health. "I missed you so much," she whispered softly, and then she kissed me. The Taylia link was still down, doctor's orders, so I couldn't feel the full emotional brunt from Taylor's end. Though my power's ability to read biological traits was in full force. There wasn't a sense of desire, but there wasn't a sense of obligation, either. Just relief and happiness. Not the perfect reason, but I can live with it.

"Hey, there," I said with a smile after the kiss broke. I noticed the wetness on my face from her tears. "Is that how you're going to treat me every time I come back from the dead? Because if it is, I might have to make a habit of it."

"Don't you dare," she commanded, then she hugged me even tighter. I felt the wetness of her tears on my cheek and neck.

"Sorry," I gasped. "It's just... to me it's only been a couple hours. You remember what it was like when you died the first time?"

"First time?" a man's voice asked, and Taylor tensed nervously. I glanced toward the sound of the voice.

"Oh," I replied. "Sorry, Mister Hebert, didn't see you there." Oops.

"Taylor, what haven't you told me?"

"Well," she started, turning to look toward her dad. "Remember the conversation we had about me being no different than the original? Same memories and feelings and everything? And the six hours I spent proving it by telling you things about my childhood? I might have forgotten to mention that it happened before. After the Butcher fight."

"Christ, Taylor, why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"Remember the conversation we had about me being no different than the original and then six hours proving it?" she replied. "That's why I didn't tell you. And don't go freaking out about this a second time, everything we already talked about still stands. I'm the same 'me' as I ever was."

"I..." he hesitated. "I guess you have a point," he admitted reluctantly. "I try not to be overprotective, but you live such a dangerous life."
"I know, Dad," she agreed. "We all do. That's what the backups are for. Our insurance policy. Really, you're in more danger than I am. A single accident..." she trailed off. Like what happened to her mother. She told me about that months ago. There wasn't a lot that Taylor and I hadn't talked about in the last half year we've been together. "You should get a backup made, too."

"I don't know about that," he replied hesitantly.

"You really should," Lisa replied. "Your new body will be you, if you were an olympic athlete twenty year old. I'm sorta looking forward to my first time."

"Taylor and Amelia don't look twenty," he pointed out.

"We kinda turn off the growth acceleration early," Lisa replied. "Or something like that, you'd have to talk to the Tinkers about how it all works. And then you'd have to give up because you have no idea what they're talking about because they're Tinkers. It's easier for everyone involved just to skip to the final stage, which is a quick and inaccurate analogy that at least sounds like it makes sense. Point is, we can make you look any age you like, but the default setting is perfect biological age, which is around twenty for most people. There's no benefits to going older, and we do younger for people who are younger for social, psychological and possibly legal reasons."

"I see," he replied. He looked a little stupified.

"You don't have to decide right away," Lisa continued. "You don't have to at all, if you don't want to. We do it because we have too much responsibility to allow something like death to get in the way of our jobs."

"It's a lot to take in," he admitted. "But I'm glad you're back, Amelia. Taylor's been absolutely miserable these last five days."

The girl I was still holding blushed furiously, and I really wished Taylia was running at this moment, just so I could experience the cascade of emotions and offer my reassurances in real time. Instead, I simply squeezed her slightly and gave her a light kiss on the cheek. The muted intimacy of mere physical contact was nice, but it was nothing compared to our link. "I figured as much."

"So what now?" Taylor asked me.

"I take it the kids are in school?" I asked. "Where's everyone else?" Gotta figure out the way things stand.

"Let's see," Lisa answered. "Crystal and Vicky are with the respective parents. Lily, Eric and Sabah
are off finishing up portals in Eastern Europe, Egypt, and some of the Middle East. I'd have to find the exact route. Emma lives in her labs, now. I'm sure if you need her, she'll give you some time, but it's better to let her focus on her work."

She must be miserable, I thought. The muted information my physical contact with Taylor gave showed a level of pity for the girl. "No, there's not a lot I can say to her. I'll have to go visit my parents later. So how's Avalon doing?"

"Surprisingly well," Lisa replied. "We're accepting almost twelve thousand Romanian refugees, maybe a lot more. The Endbringer attack on Bucharest has pretty handedly destabilized the region, and it's looking like a coinflip that they'll be on their feet enough to support a colony program through their own portal. That will be the functional start of our Eurasian colony. Colonies, most likely. Romania's got a lot of very different cultural groups, some of which really don't like each other. They'll fracture pretty quickly. All part of the plan."

"Still don't like how we're profiting from the suffering of others," I muttered unhappily.

"Gets worse, if that's your problem," Lisa replied. "The Gesellschaft made a move on the Prague gateway. Literally during the Endbringer battle. They lost, eventually, but it resulted in the near total destruction of the colony. Plus there's still some Nazis remaining in the colony side. We offered our help to find and remove the problem, but they're dragging their asses because they're afraid of looking weak. You know, typical nationalistic stupidity at its finest. We're seeing a few people think twice about national portals. Especially in the less stable countries."

Taylor gave me a tighter hug, and as much as I enjoyed the physical contact, I continued to miss our real connection.

"And Japan's getting really meta-political," Lisa finalized. "There's a lot of refugees from the country that we're offering colonies in their original homeland, so we've managed to pick up a few thousand of them. Including over seven hundred from Brockton Bay alone. Some have taken to sending messages back home to their families about the offer. Now their government is accusing us of trying to undermine their authority. At least no one's caught wind of our blanket offer to give them their whole series of islands more or less whole cloth. There's the possibility of it getting really messy when that happens."

"Which, of course, they'll blame us for," Taylor added. "And a lot of countries are already suspicious of us trying to poach all their populations. Especially the countries that are already pretty shitty to begin with. Places like America and most of western Europe aren't nearly as worried, but they're more than willing to let the paranoia spread, because they wouldn't mind taking foreign nationals to fill up their population, either."

Well, nothing we didn't already expect, I thought. "And our deaths didn't cause any problems?"
"If anything, it seems to have helped us," Lisa replied. "A lot of arguments against our nation was along the lines of how we're constantly throwing ourselves into dangerous situations, and if we die then who runs the country? There's some nuts that have taken to calling you the 'Eternal Empresses' now. If you'll pardon the language, Mister Hebert, it squicks the ever loving fuck out of potential American colonists. But damn, some of the foreign immigrants are eating it up. Especially governments that are used to constitutional monarchies. Or less than constitutional monarchies, for that matter."

"I can imagine," I replied. I really couldn't. "So... Eternal Empress, huh?"

"No, we can't make it an official title," Taylor smirked at me.

"I know, but it sounds so cool," I pouted. "We could give everyone names like that. I already know what Lisa's title would be."

"Really?" Lisa smirked. "You managed to narrow it down to just one?"

"Okay, fine, titles," I retorted. "Happy now?"

"Yup," Lisa replied. "I'd be incredibly insecure if people could sum up their reasons for hating me in a single word."

"So is that all the major news I missed out on in the last week or so?" I asked.

"One bit of official business," Lisa replied. "Dragon's asking for recognition as a member of the Imperial government. Part of the advisory counsel, specifically for education. But I'm sure she'll do all kinds of other things, too."

"So everything she's already doing?" I summed up.

"Well, it also gives her a layer of protection from the governments she'll be dealing with," Lisa replied. "In case some government gets clever in how they write their internal legal system."

"Any reason why we wouldn't say yes?" I asked. "I mean, she know what she's giving up. She has to, she wrote most of it." Part of our constitutional law. You aren't allowed to be a member, or spouse of a member, of another nation's ruling body and a member of our Imperial rulership. It was the only fair way to keep our colony nations from having too much personal influence over the government, and vice versa.

"I'm not seeing one," Lisa replied. "Dragon's been nothing but good to us. This seems like a mere
formality, to me. We just need your permission to make it truly official." Technically, they didn't need that, but it was nice that they asked.

"Well, make it official," I replied. "Are we done, now?"

"Yeah, seems like that's everything beyond what comes next."

"Okay," I took a deep breath, and enjoyed Taylor's scent in the process. "Now, I want to see the Endbringer fight."

A/N- And exposition over the state of all kinds of things!
"Lisa," I sighed. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Clearly you can," she replied.

"Where did you find an actual VCR?"

"Online shopping," she replied. She pressed the power button and the viewscreen started up.

"Okay, make that two questions," I rubbed my hand over my face.

"You mean three questions," she answered as she pressed play and the scene started, with one of the news cameras in a language that I didn't recognize, although it mostly had the same characters as English. The man speaking wasn't an English dub over, either.

"Why do you have a VCR?" I asked. Taylor set her hand on the small of my back. On my other side, Riley was cuddling against me as well. After Danny left, she'd come out of hiding. Because, unlike me, she was smart enough to know who was in the room before she did something stupid.

"Well, I recently made my first Billion dollars," she replied. "And I asked myself 'what do you do to celebrate becoming a billionaire?' The obvious answer was to spend money on something stupid and useless. Since I didn't want to house train a pet rock, and it turns out you can only lease politicians, not actually buy one outright, I opted for this."

"It doesn't even actually work," Taylor replied. "She has a remote control system built into the TV system that reads her facial expressions. I'm not sure how much that cost, but we can't even use it because it only recognizes her face."

"My office, my screen to do whatever I want with," she quipped. "Now shut up, the party's about to begin."

We watched as the zerg started shunting in, including the new breed. The Phalanx were something our Tinkers had been quite proud of, a large dog sized monster capable of casting out Khonsu's forcefield as a wall. Not much alone, but put a few of them together, and they could soak up a lot of punishment. They were meant for our anti-Leviathan fight. Maybe even Barghest as well, while we were at it. A way to box in their movement and block their area attacks.

Then the ground rippled, like a splash in a pond. It traveled up the sides of buildings, wrapped
around corners. Metallic blades followed after, streaming through the air and slamming into the forcefield projections. Most held, and the ones that caved didn't do much damage. Endbringer insulated Zerg were living up to their promised durability. The Endbringer itself appeared out of nowhere. It was gigantic, in a strange sort of way. More like huge, thin, pillar.

"Another teleporter?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Lisa replied. "It's a space warper. Creates a pocket for itself between points and then folds space in on that pocket to create a curtain it hides behind. Missy's already working on using a version of it, herself. Invisibility and being able to see or even walk through walls are on the list of things she thinks she can do now that she's seen what Bohu does with its power."

The terrain started to mutate where the ripple had passed. The features looked like the industrial level on one of those games Zach played, filled with blades, spiked death traps and terrain made entirely of jagged metal. Zerg regularly found themselves falling into holes, and then being trapped inside, forcing other zerg to spend time pulling them out. The flyers had a better go of it, hammering into the Endbringer from the skies.

Then the other one appeared. She looked more or less like a woman, but with four arms each ending in nasty looking claws. She also had three faces on her head, making her look more than a little bizarre. They were blank at first, and the creature didn't do much other than get knocked around. Alexandria actually slammed Tohu into the side of her brother/pet/other half/whatever and started kneeing her in the face as her claws tried to peel away Alexandria's suit.

It was built off her own biology, and thus as indestructible as she was. The spiked shin guards and other features meant to give her increased combat effectiveness were doing their part, however, leaving nasty gouges in Tohu's face. Then a claw cut through the armor, and took Alexandria's leg off at the knee. The woman drew back, and I could imagine how shocked she was. In all her prior battles, only Siberian had managed to injure her, and that included dozens of Endbringer conflicts.

Tohu emerged from the indent made into the side of Bohu, and I recognized Atropos' costumed face. A serene black face mask with its eyes closed. People started falling back at that point, and the Zerg surged forward, along with a few of the Dragon suits. The Endbringer spent the next few minutes cutting its way through the attackers, its every touch equivalent to Lily's charged weapons. Zerg fell like ribbons.

Lily herself took the front lines, and we got at least one pleasant surprise. Hers and Tohu's powers negated each other. She could hurt the Endbringer, and it couldn't get through her armor to injure her. Until it punched her hard in the gut and she shunted back to Avalon.

Eidolon, Victoria, Crystal, Legend, and a few I didn't recognize hit it with a stream of energy blasts, apparently a combination of freeze-laser and sonic burst were involved, causing massive explosions and cutting into her shell. A clawed hand was blown off by a particularly good combo.
A second face formed on Tohu, Taylor's. The zerg froze. Occasionally one would act, usually to attack someone nearby. But none moved more than a couple seconds at a time. They were functionally removed from the battle.

"I... think I was fighting it," Taylor spoke, sounding more than a little upset by this part of the scene. I couldn't blame her. "Keeping it from taking control. I wish it would have worked better. That I had time to realize what would happen next."

There was another ripple, and a wash of blades that slammed into the unshielded, unmoving zerg. None were damaged too much, but the way they stood there ignoring the impacts was caught by the cameras. I almost asked how the cameras weren't being destroyed, then I realized how stupid that question was. "They wanted this to be seen on film?" I phrased it as a question, but I already knew the answer.

"Near as I can guess," Lisa answered. "We always talk about Ziz as the one who plays mind games, but that's not true. They all do. It's just that she was the least subtle about it. The next part really clinches it, however."

A flat area formed where buildings and traps use to be, and Tohu landed in the middle of it. A second later, most of Pantheon was suddenly there in the center. Tohu lashed out immediately, catching Taylor in the face. My fiancee and I clutched hands tighter. This is the second time I watched her die.

Then the Zerg turned on us. One of the gargants stomped on my suit and it was clearly fatal to anything in the armor. Riley whimpered and buried her face in my shoulder. I had to wonder how she survived, being in the suit as well. But given the way she'd modified her own body, I guess it wasn't too much of a stretch. Theo wrapped himself, Missy and Sabah in his liquid metal effect. The pair of them were given small gaps to find their weapons through. Turns out, Sabah's power does a remarkable amount of damage against Endbringer tissue. The trio even managed to destroy a few of the zerg in the immediate area.

The Dragon suits, in an uncomfortable mirror of the Simurgh fight, also took to attacking the zerg. Clad in the same Endbringer based armors, they were remarkably evenly matched. Cannons against tusks, servos against biomechanical muscle. The zerg probably would have won on numbers alone, but the Endbringer decided it wasn't so patient as to wait for that.

Somehow, the cameras kept rolling, and even picked up the screech of Tohu’s third chosen power, the scream I knew as Shatterbird. The armor ceased functioning and a storm of glass broke from the suits and the parts of the city that hadn't been converted to mechanical death traps. A mass of it came to touch range of Tohu. And then she rained it down on the heroes. It perforated Theo's shell and I could tell there wouldn't be any survivors in there. The zerg, no longer slowed by Dragon's weapons and driven by the Endbringer's will, unleashed everything they were capable of.
A couple minutes of this, of Riley and Taylor holding onto me for dear life while I was too busy staring in stunned horror to have any reaction at all. That's how long it took before the zerg vanished, with a few exceptions of ones that had been damaged enough that their shunt drives had shattered.

"That's when Trevor got everyone out, as best he could. Once on the other side the zerg went back to passively waiting for commands," Lisa narrated. "Somewhere during that glass storm, Crystal, Zach and even Victoria were hit. Along with dozens of other people."

The other defenders were driven back, until Eidolon and Victoria, the left half of her costume missing, were the only ones close enough to do any fighting. I did my best not to ogle my sister's slightly more than partial nudity. Instead focusing on how the fight itself. The way they moved was eerily similar. "He was using a copy of her power for this, wasn't he?" I asked.

"Exactly the same power," Lisa confirmed. "Reflexes, combat sense, the whole nine yards."

The terrain shifted again, and people were vomited from the ground, only to be slaughtered by the blade traps in almost cartoonishly gory fashion. Some of them were close enough to the cameras that their screams could be heard.

"Fucking christ," I muttered. "Those were the people in the shelters, weren't they?" No one answered me, but then, they didn't need to. I already knew the answer.

The fight continued. Despite the fact that the city was lost, and only two heroes remained on the battlefield, the fight continued. The pair of them coordinated beautifully, their combat precognition keeping them perfectly in synch as they used their attacks to do what little damage could be done. Eidolon's attack seemed pretty damn effective, stripping layers off the monster.

"That lasts another few minutes," Lisa informed me. "This tape's been edited."

There was a sudden change of scene. Vicky and Eidolon were still there, and then Vicky vanished. The glass storm turned toward him alone. And then it stopped, all the blades falling to the ground. Eidolon started glowing, and the environment started to simply vanish around him, spreading slowly outward. The traps collapsed liked they'd been reduced to water that was then turned to steam, and the Endbringers themselves started to melt. Then the cameras, finally, stopped working.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked. "Right there at the end? I thought he was running out of power."

"That's the full actualization of Eidolon's newest favorite power of choice," Lisa answered. "His copy of what Emma uses to access her hybrid mode. It steals power from the environment and lets him recharge his batteries. And when I say 'power', I mean 'all of it'. Heat, electricity, momentum, the forces holding molecular bonds together, gravity. If it's made of energy, it's fair game."
"Did... did he kill the Endbringers?" I asked.

"No way of knowing right now," Lisa replied. "They vanished. But whether turned to subatomic dust, or retreated to their wherever they hide, we won't know until a year or so passes."

A/N- Yeah. Tohu and Bohu are assholes.

Eidolon has a very showy disintegration power that actually grants him more energy instead of depleting it. So things are looking up on the anti-Scion front?
A text message? I just stared at the phone. *I get told my sister's back from the dead by a text message. What the actual fuck?*

I sighed and hopped over to the next rooftop, then made another jump to stick to the wall of a building. With Emma dedicated to finding a way to heal Zach, and the kids in school, and most of my other friends in Europe, I had suddenly found my life was very boring. On what passed for the 'plus side', with Taylor no longer allowed to play omnipresent crime deterrent, there were plenty of scumbags I could smack around for fun.

My power was a godsend for snooping out scumbags, now. Lifesign detection didn't have a problem with things like walls, unless the walls were alive like Amelia's constructs. They were also really good for spotting things like drug and alcohol abuse. So a woman on meth having sex with some man in an alleyway? All kinds of red flags. Some of which I really would have preferred to avoid, but such is life in the streets of Brockton Bay once again.

Eh, don't even care, cops can have this one. I flipped open my phone and hit the speed dial. "Non emergency police hotline, please report your call," I woman responded.

"This is Victoria," I replied. "Got drug abuse, public indecency, and probably prostitution. Alleyway behind the liquor store on 8th and Washington. You got about, I'd say, four minutes to bust them. When the cops get there, ask them to be sure and let the guy know there's a good chance he now has herpes. Oh, and the woman needs to be treated for mild frostbite. It's way too cold out to be doing what she's doing and those drugs are not helping her any."

"How do you know all that?" she asked.

"It's how my power works," I answered back. *She must be new.*

"Understood," the woman replied. "If you don't mind me saying so, that is disturbingly specific."

"Alexandria calls it the worst most amazing power," I replied, then I hung up the phone.

*So now I have two hours to kill. Video games weren't fun without Zach complaining about getting his ass handed to him. What ever happened to Hookwolf? Oh, right, he's in the Birdcage somewhere. Guess I could stop by the Palanquin. Annoy Faultline a bit. No, still in Europe.*
Fuck it. I returned home.

Aunt Sarah's car was already there when I got close. So, for that matter, was Dad's. My death breaks them up, Amy's death gets them back together again. Yay, world. That's one of the things I should be happy about, right? Nope, can't have that.

I opened the door. "Hey, Vicky, did you hear they woke up Amy?" Crystal asked. I watched her die. And Zach. And the kids. And they don't even remember it happening. To them it was just getting out of the chair.

I'd been through it, too, of course. But watching it happen to someone else... especially watching it happen to Zach, who we all thought was immortal. He wasn't suppose to be able to die, and his power was doing its damnedest to make sure he didn't even when it would have been kinder if he could.

I didn't think Dean would die, either. He was a ranged fighter. Fuck, his power didn't even work on Endbringers, and everyone knew it. He didn't have to be out there. He shouldn't have been fighting Leviathan at all.

"Yeah, got the text," I replied. "Something about a debrief and then a family get together."

"Well, don't sound so excited," Crystal muttered. "I thought you'd be happy about."

"Fuck," I muttered. "Sorry. I am. It's just that I have a lot on my mind." If Zach were here he'd probably say something like how I was having trouble deciding how many people to invite to a threesome. Then Riley, Emma or I would give him a good smack and the mood would be magically lightened. If Dean were here, he'd pull me aside and ask me if I was okay. I'd lie and say I was fine. And he'd pretend to believe me while making it clear that if I actually wanted to talk, he'd be there to listen. I could go for either of those right about now.

Crystal just looked at me and decided not to say anything at all.

"Welcome to the party, firecracker," Dad exclaimed from the living room.

"Hey, Dad," I replied, forcing a smile as I walked into room. And when I forced it, I did it on the full level, using my powers to make every muscle behave as I commanded. Another trick my Passenger picked up from its 'mother'. "So, how long are you planning to be in town this time?"

"A couple days," he replied. "Things are pretty calm right now. I think it's the gateways. All the
groups worth remembering the name of are still trying to figure out what to do with them. Trying to get their fingers into the proverbial pie."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Assholes are already making a mess of Europe."

"At least Amy's world won't have that problem," he laughed. "That 'we are the biosphere' line. Priceless. I can't wait to see the look on the first schmuck's face that thinks it's a bluff."

"So, Dad," I smiled. "Does that mean you plan on moving to Avalon?"

"Not even a consideration," he replied. "Don't get me wrong, I love my daughter and I wish her the best, but I think I'd hate living on Avalon."

I blinked. That's a surprise. Judging by the biosense, we were all surprised. Crystal was actually a little on the offended side, she still hadn't decided to make the move, but she was strongly considering it.

"What do you mean, Mark?" Aunt Sarah asked cautiously.

"Avalon's a great idea, but it won't work," he explained. "People don't do well like that. We need things to strive for, things to fight against. Human beings are at their best when there's a goal, and struggles. Something to strive for. We fall apart when you take that away. Spoiled rich kids that have never had to work in their lives. Welfare systems that take away a need to work to survive. Refugee camps. Reservations. They take away self sufficiency, and with it self respect. No matter how beautiful they make their garden, it's still their world and everyone on it will be dependent upon them."

"You think they'll fail?" Carol asked.

"No, it'll work," Mark answered. "But when it works, it's going to be their accomplishment and no one else's. Some people will be okay with that. But being dependent on others for all my successes in life? I've been there, and I can't go back."

Huh. There's a way to put it. "Yeah," I admitted. "I feel the same way. I love what my sister's trying to accomplish. But I'd rather earn it myself than let someone else give it to me. But you said it way better."

"Maybe when I was younger," Sarah replied. "I've been through too much in the last few years. I'm all for fighting the good fight, don't get me wrong. But I've paid too high a price, too often. If Amy and Taylor can achieve what I never could, then I'm happy for them. Let me live my life in peace."
"I think I fall somewhere between," Carol replied. "You're right, Mark. It wouldn't feel right to let others do the work for me. But there are things I can do for myself without needing to fight. Normal people have careers while letting the police keep them safe. I can do the same. All that being said, I'm happy with my life and career here. I have no reason to leave."

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch," Crystal replied. "There's still plenty of fighting to be done. All those new Endbringers are still out there. Until that problem is solved, no one can truly be safe."

That killed the mood pretty thoroughly. And they don't even know the threat that is Scion.
SupportLoveComfortAmusement. The first emotions to hit me when the link was restored. "Wow," Amelia gasped. "You really did miss me."

Oh how much I missed you. "Yes," I answered, pulling her into another hug. We hadn't stopped being in physical contact except for that brief period where she got changed into actual clothes. And it was only with reluctance that I didn't follow her in when she was doing that, too. I couldn't blame her for wanting to get into real clothing. That biofilm stuff was not comfortable.

She ran her fingers through my hair. "Y'know... the way you're reading right now... I could probably get away with doing pretty much anything I wanted to you." I could tell she wasn't serious thanks to our bond, just more teasing. Plus she was just restored. It took a couple days for the new bodies to start experiencing 'those' desires again, for whatever reason. I hadn't worked up the courage to ask anyone about the cause of that side effect.

I kissed her cheek. "Yeah, probably." LoveContentment. She squeezed me tighter. "We should probably go have that family get together, however. But... umm... I need you to do me a favor, first."

"Oh?" Amelia smiled at me. SmugAmused.

"Uh..." Okay, Taylor, you can do this. "When I was brought back, umm..."

"It was without the so-called 'mistake' that gave you all those curves last time?" she answered. Of course she noticed the difference. "Don't worry, I'll adjust your metabolism a bit. Let you add a couple pounds for me to work with."

"Thanks," I knew I was blushing. "None of my clothes fit and it's only a matter of time before some paparazzi jackass gets the right photo and people start making comments." I felt the familiar tingle of Amelia's power influencing my body.

DoubtAmusement. "All done," she informed me cheerfully. She didn't believe me for a second. "You'll probably have trouble waking up before six for the next couple days. The way real humans do. And by this time next week, depending on how much you eat, you'll be back to filling out your clothes."

We went back in the living area. "So, are you girls finally ready?" my dad asked.

"Yes," Amelia replied. "Sorry it took us so long to get ready." WorryAwkward.
"That's okay," he smiled. He was nervous as well, for some... *oh god he thinks we were... "I imagine coming back from the dead takes a bit of time to adjust. Catching up on... things."

*Looks like I won't need the alterations after all, because I'm about to die of embarrassment.*

"It's not really like that," Amelia answered, turning an adorable shade of pink that probably wasn't too different from my current color. "I mean, yes, I might have died, but to me it was just like waking up from a nap and not remembering when I went to sleep. Or having a fainting spell. A bigger deal for everyone else than it was for me."

"Taylor said something like that, too," Dad replied, giving me a look that told a whole story at once. How I told him not to freak out about my death, and, well, I couldn't call that talk a fight, but it definitely wasn't a particularly rational conversation. And then my increasing worry with each failed attempt to restore Amelia. This was exactly what I put him through. *Wow, I am such a bitch, sometimes.*

"Yeah," I reluctantly agreed. "It feels a whole lot different from the outside looking in, doesn't it?"

*ConcernSupportCuriosity.* "It's okay, I kinda flipped out when Taylor died the first time," Amelia spoke.

"It's okay," he smiled at her, and then glanced at me, looking a little hurt. *I really should have told him about all of this long ago. "Shall we get going, now?"

"Okay," I agreed. "I think everything's taken care of here."

"I just thought of something," Amelia remarked as we grabbed our coats. "Now that we're no longer US citizens, we'll never be able to take our driving tests or get our licenses. And yes, I know we don't need to be able to drive."

"We could always just hire a chauffeur," I pointed out. "Hey, Dad, if you find yourself in need of a job..."

He chuckled. "No thanks, kiddo. The only thing worse than going to work for your parents is going to work for your kids. Besides, my job is going really well right now. In fact, work is looking up for everyone in Brockton Bay these days. Dragon's managed to drop a couple million into the economy, shipping her supplies through. There's talk about how, when Leviathan's gone, the shipping industry will be renewed. And construction's in high demand around Avalon's embassy. There's been more activity in the last three months than in the last three years before it. And that's including the post Leviathan disaster relief."
He opened his door and got into the car. We climbed into the back before I started talking again, no sense in repeating ourselves.

"That's good news," I agreed. "So everyone's got good work, now? I was kinda worried that, y'know, after going public. Once people started realizing that Brockton Bay no longer had me protecting it."

"It's going fine," Dad replied. "Sarah's got most of the problems covered on her own with that new armor Crystal gave to her. With Miss Militia around as well, none of the real crime's come back yet. I doubt they ever will while you girls are still in town. The way the Mayor's been groveling in front of you is something of a personal bonus, by the way. Talked to him the other day, he calls me 'sir', now. I enjoy it more than I probably should."

"Yeah," I smiled. "You should have seen the looks of relief when we told the President and his people that we'd prefer to keep our property in Brockton Bay as our Embassy."ConfusionCuriosity. Oh, right, she wouldn't know. "Seems the bigwigs in Washington weren't thrilled with the idea of the Empress of spying on everyone with bugs all the time hanging out where they do business. They were too polite to say anything, of course, but when I suggested we were happy in Brockton Bay and didn't need a location in DC, it was insulting how eager they were to agree."

UnderstandingAmusementAnnoyance. "Wow, that is pretty insulting." Amelia agreed. "If anything, I think I'd feel better if they just came out and said it to our faces."RealizationShock. "Oh my god," she exclaimed. "I just realized that this is how Lisa must feel. All. The. Time."

Oh fuck, it's true. "I owe her so many apologies," I muttered.

"She'd probably be happier if you didn't say anything at all," Dad chimed in. "One of those things you learn as you get older. Sometimes it's better to not talk about it. The hard part is knowing when that is. You know her better than I do, but I think she'd rather let sleeping dogs lie. Besides, I think she'll know the sentiment even if you don't say anything. So just let her know if she wants to talk, you're there to talk. And if she doesn't, that's okay, too."

"Thanks, Dad," I smiled. I meant it, too. PeaceGratitude. I glanced over at Amelia and briefly considered giving her a kiss. But not with my dad watching. She smiled back at me.LoveAgreementPatience.

"You girls act like you've already been married for years," Dad informed us, chuckling. "I guess that's why you're saving it to be official after the Endbringers are destroyed. Because at this point, it's just a formality."
PleasedEmbarrassedProud. "Thanks," Amelia muttered, blushing fiercely. It's the new body. They tend to over react to emotional stimulus for a while. Hypersensitivity to tastes and scents, all physical and emotional sensations really.

Oh, fuck it. I leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She leaned against me and we spent the rest of the ride in silence.
I took a deep breath before stepping out of the car. I couldn't say I was looking forward to this. As much as things had improved between me and my family, they still weren't really family. With exception to Vicky and Crystal, and maybe Aunt Sarah. Mark and Carol had to wait until I broke every rule they tried to hammer into me, until I became world famously successful, before they actually tried to be a family. Still, I couldn't deny that they were trying their best to be supportive now.

SupportUnderstanding. I smiled.

Vicky opened the door while we were still going up the sidewalk "Welcome back to the world of the living," she greeted. "Please enjoy your complimentary taxes, we're sorry you weren't satisfied with the death."

"Actually, Vicky," I smiled. She knew how to cheer me up a bit, at least. "We're foreign dignitaries. We don't have to pay taxes."

"No shit?" she asked.

"No shit," I confirmed.

"Well, that poor joke's going to need the resurrection tech now," she sighed. "Let's get you inside."

I walked in, followed by Taylor and her father. Dinner was already cooking. It smelled really really good. It was then that I realized, not including the week of nonexistence, it had been almost a month since I ate anything that didn't grow from the walls. Let alone well cooked food.

"That smells amazing," Taylor spoke up. "What is it?"

"Thanks," Aunt Sarah answered from the kitchen. "It's a roasted butternut squash recipe. Crystal discovered the hard way just how limited your choice of foods are when you're newly restored."

"Mom!" Crystal's mortified shout came from the living room.

"So I looked up a few friendly options, and this is one of my favorites," she continued, completely ignoring her poor humiliated daughter.
"It really does smell good," I agreed readily.

"See, told you they'd like it," Danny replied. SadLossDeterminationGlad. I grabbed Taylor's hand. GratitudeSafe. She still wasn't exactly thrilled that her dad was seeing someone, apparently. And Aunt Sarah was taking the 'avoidance' approach. Talking about their relationship wasn't in the cards for any of us right now. If anything, that'd just make it worse. More like she was trying to play a surrogate mother, which wasn't what Taylor wanted. Made more complicated because near as I could tell, her dad and my aunt weren't ready to place a label on their relationship.

"Just remember to save some for the rest of us," Mark yelled from the living room. Speaking of complicated relationships.

"I will, Dad," I agreed. Having kicked off my shoes and taken off my coat, I made it to the living room. This house was always too big for four people. "Hi, Mom," I said as I saw Carol come in from the kitchen. She hugged me, and I hugged back. It wasn't a bad hug, by any stretch. I was glad we'd reconciled. But again, by the time that happened, I'd grown past them. I created a new, true, family for myself. I'd moved on from this phase of my life.

At the same time, I didn't resent them anymore, and they were doing their best to help me. The special meal was proof of that. After a slightly longer hug than mere politeness would require, I broke away.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," I insisted. "I'm sure Crystal and Vicky have already told you. To me this was nothing more than a mild surprise, that's all."

"No, you don't get out of it that easy," Crystal quipped. "We had to put up with days of fretting, now it's your turn. Right?"

"Damn straight," Vicky agreed.

....

By the time we got back, I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. Another side effect of the resurrection tech, from its perspective I hadn't slept... ever, actually. A full twenty four hours while the conscious mind was suppressed, but the subconscious mind was being coded with all my memories and knowledge. Everything that made me, me. That put a lot of stress on the brain, as you could expect. So it was early evening and I was painfully tired.

Riley was there to greet me with a hug the moment it was clear we were alone. "Hey, mushroom," I rustled her now black hair. "I guess you still miss me."
"Uh huh," she nodded. I glanced over at Taylor. "Don't worry, I don't need to stay in your room. I can sleep with Theo."

ShockConcern. "Uh... Riley," I started. "That's not really appropriate."

"It's fine," she looked up at me. "We both know he wouldn't do anything inappropriate with me." She didn't sound like she was trying to persuade me, so much as complaining about this fact. ConcernSupport.

"Umm... I got a better idea," I replied. One that won't involve me being labeled as a worse parent than Carol. "How about if I just enlarge the bed a bit and you can stay in our bedroom with us? I'm sure Taylor understands."

"Yeah," Taylor smiled and put a hand on Riley's shoulder. "I know you missed her as much as I did. And it's thanks to your hard work that we could even bring her back at all. I can't keep her all to myself."

"Really? But what about your alone time together?" she asked. "You both have brand new bodies, now."

"Riley, I'm too tired to think about anything other than sleeping right now," I informed her. "And I know you miss Zach, too. But that doesn't mean you need to start acting like him. You can talk to us about what's wrong, you know."

"I've tried everything," she finally replied. "Everything we try to do is countered by his stupid power, and that's the only thing keeping him alive. We have the healing tech, and it'd work on anyone else. Except maybe someone like Alexandria."

"So it doesn't work on them because their powers protect them, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," she agreed.

"This might be a dumb question, but if Lily's anti-defense power was plugged into a healing device, would that work?" I suggested.

"Won't work," she answered. "Her power doesn't work that way. She alters the way matter functions, not energy. If she could work with energy, we could give her a flashlight and watch her melt Endbringers like they were made of smoke. Only something with significant mass can be carry the wavelength her power relies on. Although that might be a Passenger thing."
"And power nullifying is straight out," Taylor added. "Too many risks."

"Wait... you said he could heal naturally over time?" I asked.

"Yeah," Riley agreed. "But that might take years."

"What about if we do something to speed that along?" I asked. "We know there are time manipulators out there. Maybe even localize it to a small area. We know his power doesn't counteract time manipulation, even if it does have a way around it like it does to Clockblocker."

"We considered that, too," Riley answered. "Too great a risk that we cause damage that can't be reversed. The only time field we know that's stable enough is Khonsu, and there's no way we can use that option. We considered using Coil's power, but we're not sure how it'll work with power interactions. They're all Taboo, and we don't know enough about Coil's power to determine how it works or what blocks it might have in regards to Taboo. We can't risk his life with it. We've talked to Dinah as well, but until we can give her a concrete plan, she can't give us an answer. Besides, her power can't handle Taboo, either."

"There really isn't anything we can do, is there?" I finally admitted.

"Not with the powers we currently have," Riley sighed. "If we could have scanned his brain, it might have been possible to have Lily kill him so we could clone him. But copying off a dead brain would be bad."

_I don't know why I thought I'd be able to imagine up a solution in a few minutes that they'd been spending all week working on. "Sorry," I muttered. "I wish there was something more I could do to help. My power doesn't work on him, either. We'll find a way."_ LoveSupport. Taylor hugged me and Riley both. The height difference between Riley and I was only a few inches, really. Less than the height gap between Taylor and I.

"We'll worry about it more in the morning," Taylor offered. "Maybe we can ask Eidolon if he'll do us a favor. Or call in one of the ones Cauldron owes us. They've got a really powerful precog of their own, and with all the powers out there, there has to be one that can do the job."

_Thank you._

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

A/N- Solution: Have Glaistig Uaine kill him, then plug him back into a new body. If she can out-bullshit Grey Boy, she can kill Zach.
"Sorry, Mom, going to be another day spent at the office," I replied. "Give Dad my love."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "It's been nearly three weeks since you've had a day off. That can't possibly be healthy."

"Mom, don't worry about it," I sighed. "With my powers, I don't get tired anymore. I can't get tired. There are a lot of people depending on me. Dragon, the Protectorate, the work I'm doing is changing the world. And with the new Endbringers and all of them coming this rapidly, I can't justify anything less than my best. The others go out there and fight those monsters face to face, the least I can do is work a little harder to make their jobs a little easier."

I glanced over at where Zach was contained in stasis. Over a week and he's still in there. The intervals had reduced to once every 1.7 seconds, instead of every .8 second like it had been at the beginning. It was the only sign of improvement. And there's still nothing I can do to help him.

"We're just worried about you, that's all sweetheart," she sighed.

"I know," the sadness in my voice wasn't from my not so slow drift away from my family, but there was no reason to let her know that. "Love you. But I have to go. There's a series of samples we got from a particularly interesting Case 53 that needs further checking. If it works, we might have a reproducible drug that can heal almost any infection or injury imaginable. This could be the cure to AIDS and cancer and pretty much everything else. And every second it's not being worked out, it costs lives."

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly. "Love you. Take care."

I snapped my phone closed and tried to feel worse for lying to her. The samples were real, but they were mostly Rey's job to work with, with Riley checking up on his work and adding her help where she could. Amelia or I would occasionally get involved, too, but not that often. We knew the important details, and that the stuff worked. If in the profoundly gross manner of having the parahuman in question lick the wounds. Or, really, just to have him drool into a cup and then dump it on them. The hope was to find a way to mass produce the substance. To everyone else in the world, it would be a miracle. To me, it was just one of the many dead ends to finding a way to heal Zach.

I sighed and went back to my latest project. Altering time for Zach wasn't an option, but the designs we had on Capacitor had proven temporal acceleration was an option in its own right. A device that could emulate Battery's power and dilate time to give me a few minutes of work within the second and a half between restorations. Or allowing Riley to do it, she was the better biotinker without possible question. If either of us could surgically repair the damage, that might speed the healing process up, at least. It wasn't much of a hope, but we were grasping at straws here.
"That bad, huh?" a voice asked. I turned to see Vicky standing there.

"Yeah," I sighed. "Still no real progress. I'm back to finding a workaround to extend Battery's power to others."

"Ah," she nodded. We just stood there for a minute or so.

Eventually I spoke up. "If Zach were here right now, he'd probably tell us we have pent up sexual tension and should fuck like rabbits. Shapeshifting lesbian rabbits. There might be a diagram involved."

"If they're lesbian rabbits, would they really fuck?" she laughed a little. "Yeah, that kid always knew exactly the right thing to say. You could tell because he would go with the exact opposite. Except for every once in a while when it really mattered."

I sighed and glanced over at his pod. "Yeah," I agreed. "Good to know you miss him, too."

"We all do," she insisted. "He saved more than one life on this team, you know."

"I know," I sighed.

"I just wanted to come to say I'd be going back to L.A. soon," Victoria informed. "With the placement of another portal to the U.S. world there, things are getting a little more contentious with the Elite. Seems they picked up a new parahuman whose power is that he can't be moved or harmed or held by any power. Like a weak version of the Siberian. He robbed a bank in mid daylight and actually walked away while Alexandria tried to stop him. She's understandably pissed. They're hoping I can take him out, and if I can't then maybe we'll have Lily take a stab at him."

I flinched. *Zach was unstoppable, too, in his own way. And it was Lily's power that brought him down.* Vicky froze for a second. "Oh, I'm so sorry. That was such a bitch thing to say."

"Have you told Riley, yet?" I asked, ignoring the apology, pretending I didn't notice the implications. "What about the others?"

"Now that I'm here, I've told everyone else that matters, but Riley's going out on a date with Theo and Missy, and I don't want to upset her," Victoria informed me, thankfully accepting my invite to talk about something else. "Still don't know how I feel about that whole thing between those three."
"Yeah, they're way too young to be worried about serious relationships to begin with, let alone something like that," I agreed. "But it makes Riley happier than I've seen her in a long time, so that's good. Zach would say something like 'lucky Theo' and then complain that nothing like that ever happens to him."

"Heh, probably," she agreed. "But he was totally barking up the wrong trees for that one. I'm sticking to monogamy, because I'm the jealous type. My man needs to worship me exclusively. Or I will break his face."

I frowned. "I know I've thanked you before," I spoke. "For helping me get back together with Zach. But thank you again. I know you had a bit of a crush on him. You wouldn't have had any problems stealing him away. Wouldn't even have been stealing, he wasn't the least bit interested in me at the time. Instead, you went out of your way to pretty much throw him at me. If our positions were reversed, I don't think I could have done the same."

She shrugged. "Wouldn't have been fair to any of us. I'm not ready for a relationship right now. What would you have me do? String him along? That's not the sorta thing I do. Besides, we both know I have the pick of the litter. I might even go after Chevalier, just to prove I can."

I might have blushed, if that was still an option for my body. "You know about that, huh?" I asked.

"Hey, don't worry about it, I've been there," Victoria responded with her unfairly perfect smile. "Half my adolescent fantasies had to do with showing Legend all the joys that women have to offer."

I smiled back. "Okay, you caught me."

"I promise not to tell him," she added. "Or Zach, for that matter. It's one of those things that guys just wouldn't understand."

"I'm going to miss you, too," I admitted, walking over to her. "I don't have a lot of friends around here, and you're one of my best."

"Dammit," she muttered. "Now you're going to make things all mushy? Fiiine." She wrapped her arms around me and gave me a hug. I couldn't help but notice her chin was about eye level to me.

"Yup, afraid so," I replied, then I raised my voice a little. "Hey, Zach, we're having a moment here. There will never be a more perfect possible time for you to miraculously recover."

"It's true," Vicky agreed. "Play your cards right, you might even beat Theo to that threesome Dinah predicted."
Sadly, this wasn't the movies. Zach continued his flicker of dust and reformation, and after a few seconds Vicky and I broke our hug. "Well, it was worth a shot," I shrugged. "Good luck in L.A., don't be afraid to stop by whenever you want."

"Don't worry," she replied. "Next Endbringer's scheduled for a week or two, you know I'll be there for that."

"Yeah," I agreed, and glanced back toward Zach. "See you there." They're the ones doing the fighting, I'll make sure they have the tools to do the damage to make sure the fuckers die for good.

A/N- Trying to smooth the time jump transitions. But at this point, there's not a lot of plot left here and everyone's in a relatively stable place.
Well, Debs, you wanted a fresh start. I was packed in line with a couple hundred other people. Most of them, I was unhappy to realize, were colored. If I was being generous, one in ten of them could be considered white. *Fuck it, that just means there won't be much of the Gesellschaft or their various other offshoots on Avalon.* Empire Eighty Eight might be shattered and broken, but there were plenty of others. My power was too distinctive to rebrand myself, so my options were to join another Nazi group, be marked for death by the kinds of psychos who could make it happen even in the colonies, or never use my powers again.

None of those were going to happen. After that bitch Shatterbird gutted me, and I narrowly escaped when Othala was captured. Fuck, I couldn't go back to Hookwolf after that. Victor would have killed me. And by the time I figured out where Purity could be found, Pantheon had taken down Fenrir's Chosen and publically announced they'd do the same to the Pure. Maybe I couldn't have gone for another group, but I wasn't about to risk a third close call. And I couldn't just not use my powers. I went through hell to get them in the first place. They were too much a part of me.

There were at least a couple hundred booths around the entrance to the dimensional gateway, with red lights above them. Every so often, someone would leave a booth and it would turn green. A pair of those M4s stood at the entrance to our line. There were others scattered about, keeping guard in other areas. Including a second, much shorter line where people were going through without visiting a booth. I tried to make sense of who was getting the fast path, but eventually gave up. They each had a plastic card that they held up, and that was the end of the similarities.

Eventually it came my turn. The security robot pointed me toward the nearest, only open, booth. A couple others became vacant after I started my walk. One was closer, but now wasn't the time to try to cut in line. Even discounting the nightmare of trying to fight that lesbo bug girl on her home soil, those supersoldiers could trade a lot of punishment, and the whole area was built of that freaky tree. My power didn't work on living things, so I'd be functionally unarmed. I pulled my overlarge suitcase with me, trying my best to make it look like it wasn't my power doing the work.

I entered my booth, and the wall behind me sealed. More of that damn plant. Has to be automated, no way she's maintaining control over every last piece of this place like that. Right? The thought that she might be able to, the way her girlfriend could with the bugs, made me think twice about this. In front of me was a touch screen with a bunch of panels. Select Language: English was first on the list, at least. Followed by a bunch others written in other languages. I was pretty sure I recognized Spanish and German, not that I knew how to speak either. I tapped the English option.

"Welcome to the Avalon interactive immigration system," a pleasant female voice spoke. I almost thought it was a real interviewer for a second, it was that convincing. "Please be aware that this conversation is being analyzed by tinker tech. Lying at any point during the interview will be detected, and result in rejection of your immigration request. If this is acceptable, please say 'yes'. If it is unacceptable, please say 'no' and you will be allowed to leave the facility of your volition."
"Very well," the voice agreed. "Please state your full legal name followed by the name you wish to be addressed as for this interview."

"Deborah Leanna Miller," I answered. "Call me 'Dee'."

"Very well, Dee," the voice responded. "Please fill out the following form by touching the panel and answering the question. If you wish to change an answer or feel the system placed the wrong information, simply press the panel again and state the correct answer." The screen changed, with a list of various details. Age, height, sex, a bunch of stuff in terms of medical history that I could skip, the whole song and dance. Nothing I hadn't filled out at the DMV before.

"Are you certain all information on this form is correct?" the voice asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you immigrating as part of a group, a single family, or alone?"

"Alone," I answered.

"Understood," the voice answered. "Do you have talents you believe will be of particular use to the colonies, including parahuman abilities? You may answer 'no' if you do not wish to use those talents."

I thought about it. Do I want to go in with my powers as leverage? It might result in a better offer than some random placement. Higher paying job, at least. But it made me more visible. The whole point in starting a new life is starting a new life. "No," I replied.

"Are you certain of that answer?" the computer asked.

"I'm certain," I replied. Not really, but this is one of the ones I'm allowed to lie about.

"I understand," the voice answered. "Do you have a criminal record?"

Lucky me, I could answer that one honestly. "No," I replied.

"Do you intend to commit criminal acts after obtaining Avalonian citizenship?"
"No," also true. Did not need bug girl feeding me to cockroaches, or whatever the standard punishment was on their planet. I saw what she was willing to do in a fight, and really didn’t want to press my luck.

"Are you currently a member of a government, military, police, criminal, or parahuman organization? If so, please state the nature and name of the organization or organizations. Note that this will not necessarily result in a refusal of citizenship."

"No," I answered.

"Have you ever been a member of a government, military, police, criminal, or parahuman organization? If so, please state the organization or organizations."

Fuck. I glanced back at the door.

"If you wish to terminate your interview, you are free to do so," the voice informed me. "You will be required to complete the interview before being granted recognition as an Avalon citizen. Note that criminal history does not necessarily forbid you from Avalon citizenship."


"Names recognized," the voice replied. "Defunct North American neo-Nazi organizations. Commonly employed parahumans. Initializing special interview protocols. Eighty seven percent likely your parahuman identity is known as Rune. Is this correct?"

Well, fuck me. "Yes," I admitted.

"You are wanted in relation to robbery, assault with a parahuman ability, resisting arrest, destruction of property." God damn everything tinker related. "You are recognized as Striker two, Shaker seven. You are disqualified from Avalonian citizenship unless you are granted political asylum. You are qualified to request political asylum. Would you like to apply for political asylum?"

What? "What?"

"You are disqualified from-

"No, I heard you," I interrupted. Impressively enough, the voice quieted. "What do you mean political asylum?"
"You are recognized as being recruited into a villain organization while under the age of sixteen. You are not known to have committed murder or any sexual crimes. You have honestly stated an intent not to continue criminal activity. As such you may be granted political asylum. Your criminal record will be sealed, and punishment waived so long as you answer a number of special questions and refrain from committing any further crimes. In addition, as a formerly criminal parahuman, your cape identity will be made part of your sealed legal record. If you commit crimes in the future, your identity may be made public and full punishment for all past crimes be enacted according to Avalonian law. Is this understood and acceptable?"

"Depends," I replied. "What happens if I say no?"

"Then you will be asked if you have committed crimes of murder or sexual abuse," the voice continued. "If you have, you will be detained and given to the appropriate officials for prosecution. If not, you will not be granted asylum and shall be released back to your current home nation."

_Screw it._ "Guess I'll try for the asylum, then. Ask away."

"Have you ever committed or aided in a crime which resulted in the death, mutilation, or deliberate torture of another person? Be aware that members of other races, or Case 53s, are still people."

"No," I answered. I was always sheltered from the worst parts of E88 and Fenrir's Chosen. They kept most of us female capes away from the uglier sides of the business, using us for the more direct combat missions only. I'd seen plenty of death, but only in the battles with the Slaughterhouse Nine or Leviathan. I could safely tell the truth on this one.

"Have you committed or aided in the crimes of rape, pedophilia, forced prostitution, or any form of forced labor or slavery?"

"No," I answered.

"You are recognized as having a power which can greatly improve colonization efforts. Are you willing to use your powers for this purpose? Be aware, you will be paid fairly for your efforts and, in fact, will be allowed to choose from all interested employers."

"If I say no, does that mean I won't be accepted?" I asked.

"Not directly," the computer answered. "However, you will need to find a colony willing to sponsor your asylum and allow you to settle in their region. As criminal history is a valid cause for refusal of citizenship, you will need to convince them to offer you an exemption."
"What kind of pay are we talking?" I asked. Couldn't hurt to find out.

"Highest power identified as shaker rating seven," it started. "Average rate for comparable rankings, two hundred and fifty thousand American dollars a year. Powers recognized as unusually valuable for construction purposes. Likely final offer, three to four hundred thousand per year."

I blinked. *Fuck. I might have made that much in all three years I worked for Kaiser.* "Well, sounds like you have a deal. What happens now?"

"Geographical location preference waived. Language preference waived. Political affiliation preference waived. Application final, political asylum flag noted. Parahuman rankings noted. Special value traits noted. You shall be noti- initial offer made."

"Already?" I asked. *That was less than ten seconds.*

"Yes, would you like to speak with the possible sponsor?"

"Uh... sure," I agreed. *This is the strangest fucking job interview on the planet.*

The screen changed, and a woman's face appeared. "Good afternoon, Rune. Let me introduce myself. I'm Dragon."

==============

A/N- Given that Rune can move several tons of material per second, she'd be worth her weight in gold for construction purposes.

And Dragon might not be in charge of her own micronation, but she she usually gets what she asks for.

And the folks not over on QQ wouldn't know- but I roll up character names- all of the ones that aren't canon characters with established names- using dice.
"C'mon, Mushroom, you're worse than Michelle," I yelled at Riley's door. "Don't tell me you're getting cold feet, now."

Eventually the door opened, and my best friend was there wearing a really lovely dark blue dress. I suppressed a twinge of jealousy. She was roughly a year and a half younger than me and already looked older. A little bit taller, a little less baby fat around the face, about the same barely there curves. Genetics are so unfair, I should ask Amelia to tweak a few things for me. Of course, I wouldn't. I would chicken out trying to ask. On the plus side, the whole 'dying' thing now meant I was in incredible shape.

"Are you sure you want me to come with?" she asked for what was probably the tenth time in the last couple of days. "I don't want to intrude on your time with Theo any more than I already do."

I almost rolled my eyes. Riley was almost infuriatingly sweet sometimes. No wonder she liked Theo so much, he was the only person on any planet who could out-nice her and wasn't someone's grandma. "If I didn't want you to come with us, then I wouldn't have invited you," I pointed out. I probably would have ruffled her hair, but she had it painstakingly done up in a braid, and I didn't want to ruin it. "Now hurry up, I'm not having my birthday party without my best friend with me." I grabbed her hand and tugged her along.

She hurried after, and I may have cheated a bit by collapsing distance for us at a few points. Theo was waiting for us near the exit. He was in an honest to goodness suit. It wasn't quite a tux, but I didn't know enough about men's wear to tell what was what. Whatever it was called, it made him look even better than usual. And he was already a cutie.

One of the advantages to Avalon was the really stable weather, so we could afford to wear lighter clothes than mid February would normally allow. Still, we carried our coats with us. Avalon didn't yet have much by way of a nightlife, so we'd be heading to Bet for this date. Theo spotted us approaching. He looked at me, then in surprise at Riley, then back at me. "Are you sure it's safe for her to be out, instead of using the Clarice doll?" he asked.

Riley clenched my hand a little tighter. "Don't worry about that," I replied. "Look at her features, no one would recognize her. Dragon was even so kind as to help provide tips for beating recognition tech. If anyone even gets a little suspicious, well, her alter ego is a shapeshifter and my best friend. She just wanted to go out without being recognized. Simple as that."

She smiled nervously. "If you're sure," she agreed.

"Are you certain you don't want a real party?" Theo asked next. "I know people are a little down about..." he trailed off for a second. "But Zach would want us to enjoy ourselves. You don't have to
feel guilty about it."

"Zach's idea of us 'enjoying ourselves' would probably just involve the three of us," I rebuked. "Besides, you know how much I hate attention. It's fine in costume and stuff, I don't mind the whole Endslayer thing. In fact, it's badass as hell. But right now I'm Missy, and Missy would rather a nice quiet night out with her two favorite people. Now stop trying to talk your way out of paying for our date."

Theo gave me a hug. "Okay, you win," he agreed. He gave me a peck on the lips. "Don't worry, I already have everything planned out." I gave a gesture with my eyes, and a minor tilt of my head toward Riley. He nodded slightly and broke our hug, moving over and hugging Riley.

"But!" she protested, but she didn't exactly struggle, instead hugging Theo back. He gave her a peck on the cheek, and I could almost see her heart race. I had to admit, I was a little jealous, but it was so cute how happy she was. That took the possible hurt out of it, along with the knowledge that if I asked either of them, they'd call this whole thing off. Plus I was pleased to note that he got just a little bit closer when he hugged me. "It's Missy's birthday, you don't need to..."

"Don't worry, he won't do it much," I replied. "Missy Byron and Theo Anders are known as a couple, and we want to avoid any stupid scandals. You're safe here, and only here. So that'll have to tide you over for the rest of the evening."

"Oh," Riley replied, squeezing Theo tighter before letting go. "So what's the plan?" She asked him. "You'd better have a plan."

"Well," he started. "She said she wanted quiet, so it looks like the standard dinner and a movie setup. Then we can come back here for some star gazing. It's amazing how beautiful the stars are on Avalon. Although the sunsets leave a lot to be desired."

"It's because of the atmospheric pollution," Riley informed. "On Bet, at least. Aleph is even worse, they have a nearly eight percent greater amount of pollutants in their upper atmosphere. While Avalon has almost none at all."

"Sucks to be them," I shrugged. "Think we should put that on our recruitment flyers? Best night sky on any Earth, bring your girlfriend."

Theo chuckled a little. "Well, that's one way to encourage a population explosion."

"Yeah, good luck with that plan, buddy," I smirked.

"I didn't mean it like that!" Theo blushed. I only barely managed to not laugh. Poor boy is way too
"I don't get it," Riley interjected.

"Theo was just thinking like Zach for a minute there," I informed her. She glared threateningly at Theo, but failed to be intimidating in the least.

"That was a dirty trick and you know it," he informed me, pretending to be upset.

"Hells yeah," I agreed. "Now let's go before we miss the movie."

"Well, it's not really a movie in this case," Theo admitted. "It's a play. Glass Menagerie."

"You are such a geek," I teased him. Before I started dating Theo, I'd never been to an actual play before in my life. Now I'd been to a total of five. He had really refined tastes, when it came to things that Zach didn't goad him into trying. Personally, I didn't mind in the slightest as long as we avoided all the stuff written in Iambic Pentameter. It was nice being treated like a lady, like I was adult enough to appreciate art and culture. "At least tell me it's a nice theater."

"Well, it's back in Brockton Bay," he answered.

"So, no," I snarked. We both knew I was joking, of course.

We used a pod to shunt across, nearly half a mile away from the portal. Right at the southern edge of Avalon's embassy territory. The temperature went from what felt like a nearly balmy mid 50s on Avalon, to only a few degrees above zero in a heartbeat. A limo was waiting for us already. Theo waited patiently while Riley and I hurried to climb into the vehicle before our legs froze solid. What sadistic jackass invented dresses, anyway?

Theo took a moment to talk to the chauffeur while us girls situated ourselves, then got in. I wrapped my arm around Theo and leaned against him as we rode, sparing a glance over at Riley. She was religiously studying the back of the driver's seat. Okay, this must be more uncomfortable for her than I realized, I decided. Maybe it would have been better not to bring her along.

I unwound from Theo, then bent space a little to hug Riley without making any sudden movement. She squeaked in surprise. "Hey, no zoning out over there," I insisted. "You're suppose to be the chatterbox of the group."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I don't want to mess anything up or make things weird."
I did roll my eyes this time. "Riley, you are weird. That's what's great about you. Like the time you raced the varsity track team while doing a handstand. It doesn't get much weirder than that. Except all the other crazy stuff you come up with. Right, Theo?"

"It's true," he agreed. "You can ask anyone. There are rumors that you're really an alien that was exiled to Earth for being too awesome. Although I'm not sure it counts because I'd bet money that Zach started it."

"Still can't believe I lost," she pouted. "Never should have agreed to make it a relay race."

"Well, yeah," I laughed. "Even Clarice gets tired eventually, and you made her run a whole mile on her hands. If it makes you feel any better, you only lost by a couple seconds."
"One point eight five seconds," she corrected. "That's actually a lot in track."

"Our team's one of the best in the state," Theo added. "You'd have beat almost anyone else. I talked to a few of the guys that raced you, and some of them still think you let them win. They were going on about how you didn't even seem tired, when all of them were sore for the next two days. They actually called off their Thursday practice so they could rest because of you."

"It's not about being tired," Riley replied. "It's about how rapidly the limbs can move and efficient momentum. Clarice just wasn't built to move that way, any more than this car can drive sideways. Still, I thought I built her a little better than that."

"There you have it," I concluded. "Now it's my birthday, so why aren't the two of you fawning over me? I demand fawning!"

==================

A/N- You heard the lady. Fawn, already!

Also, I managed to spell chauffeur correctly on the first try this time!
The play was actually really good, as promised. I tried to focus more on it, but that was hard to do under the circumstances. This was only the fifth of what could be called 'dates' with Riley, and flat out the first done as a trio. My own issues with 'Clarice' meant I wouldn't go on a date with the doll as an intermediary. And Riley and I both did our best to not be 'too friendly' around our home, for all kinds of reasons ranging from respecting Amelia to respecting Missy. And, of course, Zach's injury. The only one more dedicated to helping fix him than Riley was Emma.

My flimsy secret identity didn't help matters much, either. I still didn't comprehend how no one's gone public with a suspicion that the metal summoning parahuman working for Pantheon might be Theo Anders. A teenager that just happens to live on Pantheon's property, and also spends much of his time hanging out with two Pantheon members that don't have secret identities.

Might have something to do with the backlash that happened when Taylor's identity went public. I was led to understand that cost a few people their careers. However, if I were seen on anything obviously date-like with someone other than Missy, that might give the right gossip rag their chance to break that story without it biting their asses.

I tried to focus on the play again. I never really had a chance to experience theater much, before... Leviathan's attack, actually. My father found the art, well, he wouldn't have used the word 'gay' as an insult, if only because he could come up with something both more insulting and less vulgar, but he had nothing but contempt for art in general. He'd go when it was expected of him, and he was certainly educated enough to at least fake appreciation, but there was still that contempt. Then again, for Maximilian Anders, contempt was the default condition for all things.

I smiled and glanced down at Missy, snuggled firmly around my arm, watching the story play out while idly fiddling with my fingers. I could guess what my father would say. She was 'white' enough for his approval, but she wasn't exactly from a 'quality' family by his standards. He'd go when it was expected of him, and he was certainly educated enough to at least fake appreciation, but there was still that contempt. Then again, for Maximilian Anders, contempt was the default condition for all things.

Riley was on the other side of Missy, watching the play with absolutely rapt attention. As far as I knew, this is the first time she'd ever been to a theater, and she was loving every second of it. Whether by subconscious cues, or by deliberate decision, she made sure Missy would get as much of my attention as possible tonight. I couldn't even imagine what my father would say about her. I liked to imagine pants wetting terror would be involved. If he tried to hurt her? Well, I'd have to skin him
alive just to save him from what she would do.

The both of them, together? Well, the ass did have his own pair of girlfriends. Still didn't like how this... thing... with Missy and Riley reminded me of Fenja and Menja, but there wasn't much I could do about that. Missy made it very clear that she wouldn't allow herself to get between me and Riley, figuratively speaking. This was her 'solution', as unorthodox as it was. Not just for Riley's feelings, and Missy's own sense of integrity, but my feelings toward Clarice.

The feelings Dream Girl exploited were so effective because they were real. Distorted by removing my rational mind from the equation, but real. I never felt as strongly for Clarice as I do for Missy, but Riley wasn't Clarice. Or she wasn't only Clarice, at least. Clarice was an act, an idealization, what Riley wanted to be known as. Riley herself was more thoughtful, introspective, like Missy and myself.

By the time the play was over, Missy and I had managed to steal a few kisses, and Riley had either pretended to ignore us, or was truly so engrossed in the play that she didn't even notice.

"That was so good!" she declared the moment the curtain closed.

Missy smiled. "I know," she agreed, though she looked more sedate than Riley. We made our way out of the theater fairly quietly. There were just too many people to have a meaningful conversation, so it waited until we were in the car, going to dinner.

"I think this is the best Tennessee William's work I've ever seen. Sure, A Streetcar Named Desire was a more intense story, but this one is... it hits deeper. The characters are so easy to relate to, and it makes me think about things."

"Yeah," Missy agreed. "I think you're going to pick Tom for this one," she looked up at me. We often liked to compare our own situations to characters in the shows, so the odd context wasn't so odd for us. "The conflict between heritage and dreams of the future."

I shrugged. "Honestly, I think I'm more like Laura," I admitted. "Tom had an adventurous spirit to make his own way. Me, I just sorta... let things happen to me, y'know? I don't really go out and try to find my own place. That and there's no conflict for me. Tom felt guilty leaving behind his family and their traditions. With exception to Aster and Kayden, my heritage can go climb into the ovens they're so fond of."

"Honestly, I kinda wanted to slap Laura," Missy replied. "Not as much as her mother, though. God, what a bitch."

"She was scared," Riley replied. "Caught up in the past, full of ideas and rules that couldn't work anymore, and she didn't know how to adapt to a changing world. It's kinda like how society handles
parahumans today. Or homosexuals a few years ago. When people are scared for a long time, they can use that to justify all kinds of horrible things."

She'd gotten quieter with each passing sentence. The last few words were barely a whisper. She knows better than almost anyone what horror truly is, in ways most people couldn't begin to imagine.

Missy put a hand on her arm, a show of comfort. Riley's smile was forced, but the look of gratitude was very real.

"It was still an ultimately positive story," I offered. "Laura came out of her shell, at least a little. I can picture her having a good life for herself, with some confidence that a lot of her fears were unfounded. Tom broke free and found his own way. His mistake was in trying to forget the past and escape his responsibilities, instead of accepting and moving forward. It's a good lesson for all of us to learn, right?"

"Yeah," Missy replied. "I think that's the problem I had with the story. Everyone was running away from everything, instead of actually dealing with the problem. Step one would have been to punch their mother in the head until the stupid stopped."

"Could you have done that, if it were your mother?" I asked. In the months I'd been dating Missy, I still had yet to actually meet her family. She avoided them, herself, for whatever reason as well.

"I probably should," she muttered. "But no, you're right, I don't think I could have."

"Maybe I should have picked a play with a happier lesson?" I suggested. "That was pretty stupid of me. I knew it was a good play, but this was my first time actually seeing it. Definitely not the most cheerful pick."

"No," Missy replied. "But I think it's better this way. There are no perfect answers, and pretending otherwise just makes for shit storytelling. Sometimes you just have to accept that. Embrace it, even. If The Glass Menagerie had a happy ending, I don't think it would have been nearly as good a story."

"It's nice to have happy endings, though," Riley argued. "I know it's not realistic, but it's nice to think about everything working out. Maybe not always, but sometimes at least?"

"Maybe not perfect endings, then, but at least positive ones," I suggested. "Striving to make things better than they were. Even if we have to do it in really strange ways, sometimes. I think that's something we can all agree on as reasonable and fulfilling."

"Yeah," Missy agreed. "Making things better."
"That sounds really good," Riley agreed. "Thanks for bringing me with."

"Any time," Missy insisted. "You're my best friend, you shouldn't have to thank me spend time with me. In fact, you should be doing it more often. It feels like you've been avoiding both of us a little."

"Maybe a little," Riley admitted. "I just. You've been so nice to me, and it feels wrong to take advantage of that."

"I'll tell you if you're taking advantage," Missy offered. "I know this whole thing is a little weird, but it's what makes sense for us. Maybe it's a 'powers' thing, that I'm used to seeing things in a different way than most people. When you can take ten places and make them exist in one thing at one time, well, you get used to the idea that rules are just basic guidelines to ignore whenever convenient."

"Yeah," I agreed, looking at both girls. Riley was smiling broadly, with an almost manic gleam in her eyes.

"Missy," she started. "You are the smartest person ever."

"I know that look," Missy sighed. "I just gave you an Idea, capital 'I', right?"

Riley nodded energetically.

"And it means the dinner part of this date is canceled, but we're not going to complain in the slightest because it's that awesome?"

She nodded again.

Missy looked at me sheepishly. "Don't worry," I replied. "Wasn't anywhere too fancy. It was, after all, planned for the three of us."

================

A/N- *Now is torn between the next chapter will reveal the sudden brilliant idea... or it'll be a Sophia interlude like Slayer Anderson asked. So, y'know, blame him if you want to know what Riley just dreamt up.*
"Dammit, bitch, what is it going to take to make you leave me alone!" Inexorable screamed at me. "It's been four fucking days, already!"

"Well, stop robbing banks, for starters?" I suggested. "And maybe turn yourself in?"

It turns out my power was, in fact, unable to stop the man whose power was to literally be unstoppable. He could not be injured, he could walk through any barrier, and he could extend that invulnerability to anything he touched. In this case, a garbage bag full of cash and valuables stolen from a bank vault. Luckily, outside the whole unstoppable thing, he was baseline human. No stronger, or faster, or smarter, than anyone else, unless you were directly preventing him from moving.

"Sorry, sugar tits, ain't happenin'," he countered. "You'll have to leave eventually. Next Endbringer fight, maybe? For the couple mil in this bag, I think I can wait you out for a few more weeks."

"Why even rob banks, anyway?" I asked. "Two mil is jack shit for a parahuman with your power. You could make that much a month just being a movie stunt double. Or to show up at Endbringer fights and give them hugs. I'd pay you a couple mil to watch that show."

"I don't get along well with others," he snarked. I could tell how tired and irritable he was without powers. Sleep was not something I was letting him have a lot of. I needed him to stop thinking clearly and start making exploitable mistakes. One of the better ones was him diving into the ocean for a night. We came up several miles off course, in this small forested area. No people meant no potential hostages or disruptions to people. It was just me, and him, and my radio.

"Or someone paid you a lot of money to rob a bank, because they wanted to see the bank's reputation damaged," I stated. "And your power has some kind of quirk to it that leads you to believe it won't work on Endbringers. How's that?"

"Fuck you," he cursed.

"Thought so," I smirked. "So, your boss? Ah, you don't know who it was. Anonymous payment, throwaway cell. Give me a few, bet I can figure out your account numbers. They were involved in a crime, so they can be frozen and confiscated. Is what's in that bag worth what's in your bank?"

"No way," he growled. "You don't have a power like that."

"Sure I do," I leaned casually against a tree. "I'm a telepath."
"Bullshit, there's no such thing," he growled.

"Sure there is," I quipped. "Lots of us. We just don't like talking about it. The whole 'Simurgh' thing, y'know. There's three others on my team. Including Khepri."

"She controls bugs," he argued.

"Yeah. Using telepathy," I retorted. "Works on humans, too. But she can't actually control people. Just bugs. Because bugs are too fucking stupid to tell the difference between her thoughts and theirs."

"You're lying," he insisted.

I shrugged. "Probably, but is that a gamble you're willing to risk thirty mil... no, make that around forty mil... on?"

"Fine, I'll just think about something else," he argued. "You, for example, and all the things I'd do to you." He unzipped his pants. I pulled out my cell phone and pointed the camera at his crotch.

"Go for it," I dared. "I promise you this video will be uploaded faster than you can moan your boyfriend's name."

"That's illegal," he argued.

"Not in the slightest," I replied. "If I were filming you secretly, you'd have a case. But this isn't your property, you're aware of my presence, and I am recording the pursuit of a fugitive. A very, very, slow pursuit. Expose yourself and the only thing that happens is you adding some kind of sex crime to your record. Also, you'll be laughed at by the entirety of my online fanbase, so you probably should think twice. Because, seriously, if I was a guy and mine was that small, that'd be my Trigger event. Not true, if anything he might be a little above average. But he struck me as the kind of guy who'd be upset by a girl insulting his manhood."

"I will fucking murder you!" he screamed and threw a rock at my head. Yup, totally called that one. I didn't even bother to move, as it bounced off my cheek. He was baseline human, after all.

"Meh, even if you did, I'd be back up and moving in less than a day," I faked a yawn. He couldn't help but yawn as well. I flicked a ball of mostly pine needles and mud into his mouth. He gagged and started spitting out the mix and trying to get the taste out of his mouth. "So, would you like to listen to more music? One of my fans has this one from Aleph that is, according to her, 'the worst
song ever made, ever'. I'm not sure I believe her. Or, at least, I'm hoping it's a her. The screen name is the number two, followed by 'cute', then the number four, then the letter u."

"All aleph music is shit," the man muttered.

"A friend of mine says it's because they're bored," I replied. "They got nothing better to do, so they make movies and music faster than we do because people buy it up faster. So Bet has to worry about quality to make money, while Aleph is just pumping out as much quantity as possible. Plus, apparently they have something called 'autotune' over there, it's why their music all sounds like it was sung by the same person."

"Dumb bitch, you'll have to suffer through it, too."

"Oh, I could have sworn I already told you," I replied. I had, of course, a couple days ago. But lack of sleep really fucks with memory. "Partial shapeshifter. I turn off my hearing. Speaking of, should we get started? I'm told that listening to 'Friday' for more than fifteen minutes has the possible side effects of permanently losing thirty IQ points, spontaneously contracting AIDS, and holding one's own head underwater until the bubbles stop. Lemme know how you're doing after six hours."

My phone beeped. Emma? "Oops, gimme a minute," I requested, then answered. "Hey, Red, what's up?"

"There's an experiment to try, we think you should be there," she informed. Riley's. One of our unspoken codes was if no names were mentioned over the phone, and it wasn't immediately obvious who we were talking about, it usually meant Riley.

"That important, huh?" I asked. I could tell by the excitement in her voice that it was definitely important to her, at least.

"Yes," she answered. "Can't talk about it too much. All hush-hush, you know how it goes."

"I'm kinda in the middle of something," I replied.

"Gotcha covered," she answered. "Minerva's already making the calls. See you soon."

"Awesome," I replied and hung up.

"Well, good news for you," I replied. "I'm leaving soon. You were right, you can outwait me."
"About fucking time," he muttered.

"Bad news is, you made my bosses impatient, so they're calling in the big guns, right about now," I paused theatrically for about thirty seconds. "Dammit, I really need to work on my ti-"

Atropos popped in, along with Janus and a cape I didn't recognize. He was in clearly tinker tech battle armor, with a chrome color scheme. Pretty generic aesthetics, all considered. No obvious weapons, either, but my power was telling me there was a lot of utility concealed in that equipment. "Long time, no see," I replied smoothly. "So who's the new guy?"

"Wavelength," the apparent tinker answered. A compartment opened up on his chest, showing a badge. "I'm with the FBI. This is a federal reserve, so he's our jurisdiction until further notice. Nothing you particularly need to worry about. I was told the suspect would be captured when I got here."

"He will be in a minute, don't worry," I answered before looking back toward my friends. "Hey, where are the girlfriends?"

"At the base, already," Eric replied. "Or hers is, at least. Mine's probably in bed. It's past midnight, so we're a little tired."

"You think that's bad," I smiled. "This poor bastard's been up listening to Aleph music for the last three days." *Plus another day spent underwater.*

"Aren't there laws against that?" he asked.

"There really should be, but no," I remarked. "So where were we? Ah, right. He's like a dimestore Sibrian. Has the invulnerability and a sort of power resistance, plus he can walk through walls and containment foam like they're made of wet cardboard. None of the ripping people to shreds or disintegration, though. Oh, and he can choose what does or doesn't effect him, so he can be treated by modern medicine."

"Oh, good," Lily responded. "Authorized level of force?"

"Nothing lethal," I answered. "His worst crime is breaking a shop owner's ribs for not paying protection. So, don't hold back on the nonlethals. But first, at least give him a chance to surrender."

"Go fuck yourself," he spat. *Getting repetitive, there. Then again, four days without sleep, I guess I could forgive him for a lack of witty comebacks.* He dropped, screaming, as a pair of bolts pierced his lower legs. She deliberately missed his shin bones, so it was all muscle damage, but it was painful muscle damage. I walked over and picked up his garbage bag, with all its valuables, before he
remembered to start shielding it again.

"Well, I think that's everything," I replied, handing the bag over to the FBI cape. "Do you need anything else?"

"Not at the moment," he answered. "Your pursuit has been documented. We may need you for testimony at a later date, I trust you'll make yourself available."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Didn't spend four days on this, just to lose the crook. See you later, Inexorable." He didn't answer, being far too busy crying and holding his legs. He wouldn't die, his power had staunched the bleeding already. But he wouldn't be going anywhere under his own power any time soon.

The world changed, and we were standing at the portal to Avalon.

=================

A/N- This chapter sorta accidentally wrote itself. In lieu of a Sophia chapter because I have exactly no inspiration for that at all.

Also: I kinda feel bad for that guy. Sure, he got shot in both legs and then lost two mil in order to avoid listening to Friday for six hours, so that's a plus. But two of those three days was a Bieber marathon. The third is best left to your imagination.

And it was all recorded and will find its way online.
By the time Chevalier stepped in through Doormaker's portal, we were all almost ready. This was our main lab on Avalon, about two miles away from the portal gateway. The key location for our future works. *Wow, their teleporter is really scary good.* I gathered as much data on the process as I possibly could from all the exotic power analyzing sensors in his room.

"I was told this was, quote, critically important," he asked our gathered group. Which totaled almost every member of the team. Including Clarice, although of course I was hidden elsewhere. Even Rey was here for this one. *Well, Zach did save his life way back when we started Pantheon.*

"Potentially," Lisa replied. "If not, we'll be certain to compensate you for your time, but if this works, your numbers are going to be upgraded. Potentially into one of the more powerful Trumps on the planet. So here's a question for you. Have you ever tried to use your power on people? Or the ghosts you see near them?"

He blinked. "I... no, I admit I never thought to do that."

"Then this is going to be all kinds of fun," she smiled broadly.

"I don't think that I can, the Manton Limit..."

"Is irrelevant in your case," Lisa replied. "You're capable of manipulating Endbringer tissue, and more than that, Endbringer tissue from the densest part of the monsters that isn't actually the core. Your power not only has no Manton Limit, it still works where almost every other power on the planet failed a long time ago. I can see where it might be like Amelia or Clockblocker and not work on yourself, but beyond that it should work on everything."

*Gosh darn it, Lisa, stop showing off and get to the important stuff.*

"First we're going to have you fold two people who are already biologically similar," she informed. "Victoria and Crystal are already prepped, so you just have to do your thing with them."

The cousins were actually very similar, varying less than a five percent baseline through any visual measure. They'd easily be mistaken as sisters. Crystal being recently restored from backup meant she had a perfect physical body, and Vicky's powers ensured she, too, had a perfect body. The more sensitive instruments built into their current 'testing' outfits registered all the not so obvious details, and outside of brain chemistry and power signatures, they were still extremely similar, ranging from three to eight percent variation. Short of actually awakening a second copy of one of us, it was the closest match we could find.
"We really don't know what will happen if I do this," Chevalier argued. "Shouldn't we start with something a little less... human? Like an animal or plant?"

"Won't teach us anything useful," Lisa countered. "We know how your power works from a base point. Testing it on other things won't teach us anything valuable in how impacts people. So when we get to this phase, we'll still be guessing what happens to people."

"Hey, don't worry about us," Vicky interjected. "Our backups were updated less than fifteen minutes ago. And it's not like either of us are the original to start with, so this isn't going to cost us much even if it does go wrong."

Crystal elbowed her in the side, and she pretty much ignore it. "Don't listen to her," she answered. "We understand the risks, and we're prepared. There's too much that we'll be able to do if this works, so it's worth the risk."

To help Zach, I added silently. That's what this ultimately boils down to.

"I want it on record that I think this is a bad idea, but I'm trusting your tinkers and thinkers to know what they're doing," Chevalier instructed. Clarice's instruments read that he wasn't quite as apprehensive as he was pretending. *Lisa probably knows that already, no need to call it out.*

The other sensors on the test subjects were spiking from apprehension. At least in Crystal's case. Vicky's absolute biological control meant her body was as calm as she pretended to be, although the brain scans showed she was at least a little on the nervous side as well.

"Of course," Lisa agreed. "Full credit, full blame, it's all on us. Wouldn't be a day in the life of Pantheon without us doing something crazy that pans out."

He reached out and touched both girls on the shoulder. "Sorry, I need contact when I do the initial connection," he informed them.

Vicky shrugged. "Hey, you're about to scramble our insides, so don't worry about it." Clarice's instruments registered several spikes of emotions from the others. With exception to Sabah, Chevalier, Taylor and Amelia, and myself. *Must be some kind of joke.*

And then the numbers went haywire on Vicky and Crystal. Blood pressure spiked, then smoothed at about 10% higher than normal. Nervous system sensitivity increased. Emotional state spiked, then dropped as Vicky's power started compensating. It was Crystal that showed the most oddities, of course. Vicky's power was doing what it did. And then it moved across and started making adjustments to Crystal's body.
"Break the link," I commanded through Clarice. Chevalier obeyed immediately, and both girls staggered. Vicky recovered in a heartbeat, then caught the collapsing Crystal. "It definitely worked," I informed them. Clarice was 'known' to have powers very similar to Vicky, which were themselves 'known' as a sort of ranged variation of Amelia's ability to sense bodies. I could speak what I learned through her, if I was careful not to talk 'Tinker'. "Vicky's power was starting to assert itself over Crystal's body, optimizing things. Nothing that Amelia couldn't do or undo, but it does show us we're on the right track."

"I... I think I can control that," Chevalier offered. "Can we try again?"

"Okay," Vicky answered. Crystal was standing on her feet.

"Yeah," Crystal agreed. "It was weird, but it didn't hurt or anything. I think it just doubled my vision or something, though."

Chevalier made contact again, and this time the spikes were lower, and evened out more quickly.

The pair looked at each other. Or tried to, at least. Their necks jerked in the strangest fashion. They spent a couple minutes like that, woodenly trying to control their respective bodies. "Okay," they spoke in unison. "Turn it off."

They staggered again, but recovered on their own. "That is never happening again," Crystal gasped. Her biosigns spiked massively, after they were broken away from each other. "Seriously, Vicky, what the hell!"

"I'm sorry!" Vicky exclaimed. "We couldn't move, and I just started thinking and..."

"No!" Crystal interrupted. "We never speak of it again. Ever."

"Telepathy?" Lisa asked. "Is that what that was? Did you have access to memories?"

"No, just surface stuff," Crystal answered. "We figured out how to talk to each other, but that's about it. Or send mental pictures."

"Well, that's a start at least," Lisa replied. "So we know it won't be a simple power share, since there's too much automatic stuff getting between bodies. That's a disappointment. But it also means it'll work for healing Zach."

"Which was your goal all along," Chevalier accused.
"Pretty much," Lisa admitted. "But look at it this way. This just gave you access to pretty damn impressive healing powers. And even temporary power theft for your allies if you play your cards right."

"Pardon?" he asked.

"Think about it," Lisa replied. "If one of the two brains in the link is, say, drugged unconscious... then the other one will have full access to two power sets at the same time. Instant trump rating for you."

"Less practical than it sounds," he responded. "This takes a lot more concentration than my usual power use. I won't be able to take to the field if I'm holding together this gestalt effect."

"Well, fuck," she muttered. "Thought it'd be more useful, but I'm sure you can still get plenty of mileage out of that option. And it is still a high end healing effect."

"You suspect," he corrected.

"Yeah, but my suspicions usually pan out," Lisa replied. "Now let's do the next part. Do the numbers look like we can get away with wildly differing body types for this process?"

"No," I told Emma over her headset.

"Sorry," she replied. "We'll still need similar body types, at least for now. Maybe we can improve it in the future."

"Then I'm up," Theo spoke. "Zach and I are as close to identical to each other as we're likely to get without giving Vicky a couple weeks to shapeshift herself into a closer copy."

"I'd really rather not," Vicky responded. "No offense to the guys in the room, but I prefer the girl parts." She paused for a second, and Crystal snickered. "Okay, for the record I meant as part of my anatomy. I'm not romantically attracted to women. When we get Zach back, I will personally murder anyone who tells him I ever said anything that might imply otherwise."

Emma had already hurried over to Zach's chamber, pressing the button to open it. The gravity field removed him, and blood splattered, only to vanish and reappear. *He's losing approximately twelve to thirteen full liters of blood a minute.*
"This is probably going to kill you," I informed Theo.

"You'll bring me back," he answered, almost flippantly. *He's so brave*, I thought. *And he trusts me.* I did my best to ignore the flutters in my chest. *I can worry about that after we heal Zach.*

"It'd be a good idea for you to get on a table and have Amelia monitor you, start the healing in real time," I instructed. "We can't afford to disable his power by moving it to someone else. No idea what will happen if it activates in someone else's body. So we'll need Chevalier to swap your physical template and his. Trade off the injury, and then work from there. In your physical condition, you should have about seven seconds before it's fatal."

A table formed next to Zach. At this point, we lab workers had come to truly appreciate the Yggdrasil's self-cleaning nature, so most of the labs were built from it. Amelia's control over it was more of a convenient afterthought than anything.

Theo paused for a second and pulled his shirt off. Very nice. I smiled a little, not just at the view, but at how many of the other people in the room stopped to appreciate it. There was also a bit of jealousy from Rey. *That's okay, they're allowed to look.* Judging by Missy's patterns, she was having the exact same thought.

"Sorry," Theo said self consciously. "I don't really want to get blood stains all over my clothes, y'know."

"Not a problem," Vicky replied. *Yeah, I'll bet.* What was interesting was how Amelia and Taylor responded. Or didn't respond, as they case may be. Taylor barely made more than a minor note of it, and that seemed to please my Big Sister to no end. *Plus one hundred points for Taylor.*

Chevalier took his place between the two boys, and a happy Amelia was on the other side of Theo.

"I'm going to use my power to make you go to sleep," Amelia informed him. "Spare you some pain."

"I'd appreciate that," Theo smiled nervously. He leaned back and the instruments let me know he lost consciousness.

"I'm ready," Amelia informed Chevalier. *Please let this work.*

Blood sprayed from Theo's chest, hitting both Chevalier and Amelia.

==========
A/N- Yes, I am that much of a dick.
I woke up gasping. *How the fuck am I in pain?*

"Don't panic," Emma's voice insisted, putting her hands on both my shoulders. That's when I figured out I was laying down on a bed or something. "We'll explain in a minute, but for right now, you need to stay calm, okay?"

"Y'know," I looked above my head at her. *She looks worried.* "I'm pretty sure the scariest words in the English language are 'you need to stay calm'. Either that or 'Honey, I think I'm pregnant'."

She smiled. "Stop being such a jackass." *Good, it's not that big a deal.*

"Okay, he's stable," Amelia's voice spoke up. "Couldn't hurt to get a little more of that biogel over here, however."

"This doesn't seem like the most efficient healing system," a male voice I didn't recognize spoke up. Considering we were obviously in one of our buildings, I'd have to... *wait, healing? Well, this can't be a good sign. Oh, right, I remember. The new Endbringer. Copying the powers of others. I recognized Shatterbird in the mix. And Lily. I was stabbed by Lily's power."

"We can improve on that," Emma said, looking over to my side. I followed the glance. *Oh, Chevalier, his armor looks different.* "We have some very comprehensive scans of your power, and now a pretty good idea of how the human folding works. Size is only a passing limitation, considering how your power works. Give us a little time. I bet we can create a pocket sized organic doll that will let you impose your newfound power on almost any humanoid."

"You're sure about that?" he asked.

"Oh, and then some," Emma responded cheerfully. *She's adorable when she slips into Tinker mode.* "There are a number of individuals who can't be healed by conventional methods. Zach was one, but Alexandria is in a similar situation. Your folding power will, functionally, allow you to transfer any injuries to the copy, which we can keep suspended in a nutrient mix and give what are, effectively, regenerative powers to. It won't be able to repair brain damage, probably. You'd need to work with an actual parahuman regenerator for that."

"Could do even more than that," Vicky responded. "We know Case 53s regenerate back to their default state. But what happens when another type of regeneration gives them a different form? I could have done a lot more when linked up to Crystal's body. The changes that happened there were accidental, but if I actively push and control it, then I bet I can establish pretty close to human state. And my regeneration works on brains, too."
Emma leaned down and gave me soft kiss. Her mouth was cool to the touch, as was normal. "Be back in a second," she told me, before stepping away. I felt the temperature drop almost immediately. She paused for a moment. "That should work, with exception to nonorganic Case 53s such as myself or Weld. But the vast majority are still organic, if only sometimes humanoid. You won't be able to correct the genetic deviations, and it's possible that future healing or shapeshifting powers will undo the changes, but there's no reason you can't correct the physical shape, nerve system changes, and a number of other traits."

"Sounds like something I'll need to contact the Chief Director about," Chevalier replied. "However, I can't imagine a scenario where she'd say no. Finding a way to help the Case 53s, or most of them at least, is a major goal for us."

"Alexandria might be a little pissed to lose her badass backup," Vicky added. "But she's getting an eye and a leg in the trade. And since I like her, I'll even throw in a complete upgrade to her neural system. Wonder what she'll think about gaining the ability to smell and hear with better details than most humans can get out of their eyes. And if that works out, we can probably make a killing by charging people for biological upgrades. Think a million bucks per twenty IQ points is a fair trade?"

"I start making the phone calls," Lisa volunteered. "The Chief Director already told me to call her when I found some real results." Yeah, I bet she did. At this rate those two will be married before Taylor and Amelia. "Come on, Chevalier, let's go do beauracracy while the doctors and scientists do what they're good at."

The man moved away. "So, is it safe for me to get up, now?" I asked no one in particular.

"Yeah, you're in perfect health," Vicky spoke up. "Better than you were by a long shot. Ames might have taken the opportunity to tweak your biology while she had a way around your power's defenses."

"You caught me," Amelia replied. "Pretty much just the same things that the cloning tech gives by default, but angled toward more bulk and strength than normal. Your power means you don't need a more stamina focused build."

"Awesome," I sat up, and felt hair peel off my back and remain stuck to the table I was laying on. I shuddered involuntarily. Then I looked over at Theo, who was drenched in blood. "The fuck happened to you, dude?"

Clarice went to speak, but Theo interrupted him. "Nothing you need to worry about right now."

"Dude," I smirked at him. "I woke up half naked and sticky next to another half naked guy who's covered in blood, and surrounded by a bunch of fully clothed women, plus a couple other men."
Something really fucking weird happened here. And I'm going to bet that whatever it is was probably both more strange and less fun than it sounds."

"Oh, come on, guys, it'll be easier for everyone just to come clean," Vicky declared. "You remember getting attacked by that last Endbringer, right?"

"Yeah, I remember," I agreed. And the couple hours that came after it before Rapture and Emma put together something that put me into a sort of coma.

"Well, that was two and a half weeks ago," she informed. "Since then, everyone's been worried sick about your dumb ass, and trying to figure out a way to fix you despite your power. We tried all kinds of things. Like this one parahuman that heals people by drooling on them."

"So... I'm covered in spit?" I asked.

"Yup," Vicky confirmed nonchalantly. "Miss Mushroom found a way that worked, by punching reality in the nuts and transferring your injuries to someone else."

Transferring my... "I had a hole in my chest big enough to stick my hand through!" I exclaimed, looking at Theo. Transferred injury. That is a lot of blood, and all of it is his. Amelia had a fair bit spattered on her as well, but from the looks of it, she'd been covertly converting it to plant matter. "You did that for me? Where the hell do you get your modesty lessons from?"

"It's not that big of a deal," Theo insisted. "People donate organs all the time. This was less heroic than that, since they don't get their organs back, and don't have parahuman surgeons and healers to make sure everything goes correctly."

At that time, Riley rushed into the room. I thought Clarice was being a little too still. He saved my life. How do I? "Thanks, man."

"You'd do the same for me," he replied. "We're a team, we got each others' backs." Riley hugged him at about the same moment, ignoring all the gore. "Case in point," he said, patting the girl's back. "She's the one who came up with this crazy plan."

"Yeah," I agreed. Would I have, situation reversed? Maybe. With some of the most powerful healers in the room to help? Yeah, I could do that. "Still gotta find a way to thank you, though. Tell you what, I'll let you win next time we break out one of the racing games."

"Let me win?" he scoffed. "I didn't give you a skill transplant."
"Theo's been thanked enough, I think," Vicky laughed.

Am I missing something? She smirked at me. Then tilted her head to where Riley was still cuddling against Theo. No fucking way. I looked at Missy, who had managed to find a place to touch his arm that wasn't covered in blood. She didn't seem bothered by this. "You're fucking kidding me," I declared. "Both of them?"

He blushed. "Thanks a lot, dude," he muttered. "I was trying to keep that a secret."

"From who?" Vicky asked. "Everyone knew. And I do mean everyone. Show of hands, did anyone in this room not know?"

Eric raised his. He was alone in that. "Guess I've been a bit out of the loop."

"Well, good for them," I smiled. "Theo, all I can offer you is pity. Maybe a place to hide if you need one." Missy and Riley both stuck their tongues out at me. "So, any other earth shattering news?"

"Umm... nothing you need to worry about," Vicky replied. "I'm California's favorite parahuman right now. Soon to be Philly's. I think it'll be fun."

"I bet," Crystal muttered. "Seriously, Vicky. What the hell?"

"Hey," she shrugged. "I have a type." A type? What the fuck are they talking about?

"As fun as this is," I interrupted. "I really need a shower right now. Also need to get away from all these people. I'm not good at this kind of shit. Especially when shirtless and covered in drool."

"Yeah, me too," Theo agreed.

"That's probably a good idea," Missy agreed. "You, too, Riley. A different shower."

"Dibs on the kitty shower!" Riley declared. No one fought her for it.

====================

A/N- Yay kitty baths.
"You can't possibly be this excited to move to Philadelphia," I said to my cousin the moment we weren't in earshot of everyone else. One of the side rooms, there were plenty of them in the new buildings on Avalon.

"Why not?" she asked, smiling.

"Because it's fucking Philadelphia," I reminded her. "In the middle of winter. You were living it up in Cali. Running around fighting crime in your bikini just to prove you didn't need the battle suit."

She chuckled. "Yeah, that was fun," she agreed. "But I can still do that. Not like the cold has any impact on me."

"Not really the kind of city you can do that in, cuz," I argued. "Whole other type of culture, even before factoring in the whole 'race' thing."

"Yeah, I know," she shrugged. "I'm still a Brockton Bay native. Even Arcadia had an uncomfortable amount of racial tension. Y'know, before Leviathan came along to prove that all humans are equal in the eyes of Endbringers. In a way, I'm looking forward to it. LA's villains were all so... well, nice. Sure, the normals were as much assholes as anywhere else, but all the villains are doing is robbery and blackmail shit. Seriously, arresting someone for rigging the Oscars is so much less satisfying than punching some hate crime committing bastard."

"Vicky, you can't solve every problem by beating it up," I sighed.

"That's true," she agreed. "But it usually solves the problem of unrepentant sacks of shit who don't have enough broken bones. Besides, there's all kinds of other benefits to moving to Philly."

I tried to crush the memory of our very brief moment of having the same thoughts.

"Not those kinds of benefits," Vicky sighed. "I'd be closer to home, which makes it easier to stop by and chat. Couple hours at most, max flight speed through Avalon. Even closer to Dad's work. Then there's that parahuman asylum, it's not so far away. We'd be going there for the parahumans that have the most problems with their powers. The ones that need our help the most, and the ones that are most likely to need a new home once they're functional."

"So it's a recruitment drive?" I asked. That's not a bad idea at all, actually.
"Exactly," Vicky agreed. "You're firmly on your feet in LA, now. You've got GL and Dubs as backup. Sure, they're not top tier, but they're a good team and we both know you're the real leader. I'm just the flashy one." I hesitated. *She's not wrong.* As much as she was theoretically the one in charge, I was the one coming up with all the plays. Which mostly just boiled down to 'which mission do I send Vicky to solo, and which do we take the team out on. *I'll have to ask the Tinkers about getting them custom suits. GL probably can't get much use out of one, but Dubs should get an upgrade similar to mine.*

"Fuck, you know how much I hate the responsibility," I sighed.

"I know," she agreed. "That's why you're good at it. The best leaders are never the ones who want to do it. Look at Ames. Or Aunt Sarah. They hate the job."

*She was right,* I admitted. *About them, at least.* "I'm still not very good at it."

"Well, too bad," Vicky chirped. "You know they can't ignore just how powerful my interaction with Chevalier can be. It'd be like splitting up Taylia. I think the bosses would pack up and cancel the whole 'west coast' experiment before they gave it up. Then we'd leave those kids in the lurch."

"Probably," I sighed. *She's right about that, too. The things they could accomplish.* Upgrading bodies in a way even Amelia couldn't, healing Case 53s, that was just too huge. *Yeah, I guess you're right.*

"I bet if we really push the issue, we can get another Protectorate member moved to LA as a trade," she suggested.

"Don't see that working," I rejected the idea. "Sure, they'd probably agree to it, they'd be stupid not to. But then it's just a 'Protectorate' member, not one of ours. Too bad Lily's still stuck on the gateways."

Vicky shrugged. "I bet there will be people at the Asylum that'll start signing up to join the heroes once they can function normally. The Protectorate's going to recruit as many as possible, but I'll see about poaching some of them."

"Yeah, because that'll make Chevalier happy," I scoffed.

"Eh, I'll find some way to make it up to him," she smiled suggestively.

"God damn it, Victoria," I put a hand over my face. *I already know way too much about what you like, please don't remind me.*
"What?" she asked. "I just meant I'm going to kick so much bad guy ass that he won't care about losing a couple of the B-listers to Pantheon."

"Uh huh, sure," I sighed.

"Victoria, Eki, Janus, need you in the main office," Lisa's voice came over our coms.

"Coming," Vicky responded. She turned toward the lab. "Don't worry, I know the way."

My cousin turned out to be telling the truth. Eric fell in with us as we got to the door. Inside, Amy, Taylor, Lisa and Chevalier were waiting, along with Costa-Brown on the viewscreen. It wasn't as fancy as the ones at the 'real' offices. After all, this was meant to be a powers testing facility, and nothing more. Avalon had a more tech focused lab where Dragon and Trevor spent most of their efforts, and the bioengineering lab where Riley and Rey worked. Room for more to come as more Tinkers were recruited.

"So, we've come up with an arrangement," Lisa announced. "Vicky's offer to work with Chevalier for healing and, possibly, upgrading parahumans that were mentally or physically handicapped by their powers is clearly too good to ignore."

"Indeed," the Chief Director agreed. "Victoria will be authorized to stay at the Protectorate base, after signing the requisite nondisclosure forms of course. We'll arrange things with as many parahuman care facilities as possible come morning, and formulate a priority system."

"Pantheon's waiving involvement in that," Lisa replied. "We don't yet have disruptive parahumans to concern ourselves with. However, we are insisting on a flexible schedule, we may need to draw Vicky away for other purposes."

"Alexandria would like to arrange a meeting almost immediately," Costa-Brown added.

"Considering her value in confronting Endbringers and other powerful threats, I think fast tracking her appointment would be fair," Lisa supported. And this has nothing to do with how Alexandria is currently talking with us, right? "She's earned at least that much. In fact, we're bumping priority for all those who've been injured by Endbringers, yet unable to be healed by standard methods."

"Makes sense," Vicky agreed happily. She walked up to Chevalier and extended her hand. "Pleasure to be working with you." Dammit, Vicky. At least she was being subtle about her flirting, though I was willing to bet money that the only people in the room who didn't spot it were Taylor and Chevalier.
"Glad to have you," he shook her hand. "You've done some remarkable work in LA."

Vicky gave an exuberant smile that was what passed for demure with her. "Really? You've been following my career? I'm flattered."

Wait a second. Passengers influence personality. And Vicky has the same Passenger as Riley. Does that mean Riley's going to act like Vicky when she gets older? Oh my fucking god, Zach was right, I feel pity for Theo.

"So Janus," Lisa continued. "You'll be sending Atropos and Clotho back to Faultline. Crystal goes back to LA, and you'll need to follow Chevalier and Victoria through to establish a new teleportation site. Sorry to have kept you up so long, by the way."

"I'll survive," he remarked. "Hey, Vicky, is 'doesn't need to sleep' one of those upgrades you can build into people? Because if you could do that, everyone would love you. Except the coffee companies."


"Worth a shot," he shrugged. For his schedule, it's probably like three in the morning. That has to suck so hard. "We'll need to shunt over before I start sending anyone anywhere. Good thing we're all in costume."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'll go get Lily and Sabah. Do this in as few trips as possible."

======================

A/N- I like all the things I worked into this chapter.
"From who?" Vicky asked. "Everyone knew. And I do mean everyone. Show of hands, did anyone in this room not know?" I didn't know. I glanced at Lily, but she didn't raise her hand, either.

Eric was the only one who did. "Guess I've been a bit out of the loop," he dismissed his lack of awareness. Is that what I am? Out of the loop? It made sense, I was never really 'part of the group' to begin with, and lately I spent my time roaming Europe with Lily and Eric. A habit I need to break.

Eventually the groups started breaking apart. Crystal and Vicky dipped off into a side room. Emma followed Zach, doing her best impression of a mother hen. He didn't seem to mind. Lily and I don't act like that. Eric drifted back over to us after everyone started going off to do their thing. Yum Kaax and Tir went to do their thing as well.

"So," I started once the three of us were more or less out of earshot. "You knew about that?" I was asking Lily, of course.

"Yeah," Lily shrugged. "Heard about it."

"Who told you?" I asked.

"Victoria," she answered. "We try to keep up on what's going on in Missy's life. I think Vicky feels a bit guilty for the whole business with Dean. I just think she's a good kid, and us former Wards have to stick together in this organization full of indies and former villains. Vicky says she's happy with their arrangement. As far as Theo goes... eh, like father, like son."

I glanced toward where Missy had left. "Think she might be bi?" I asked.

"Who knows," Lily shrugged. "But with the tech this group has, it's not exactly like that's hard to change." Right. That tech. The same stuff that brought me back from the dead, complete with a new body that was in absurdly good shape. If I'd been given the chance to use it at thirteen to make myself straight, I would have taken it. If I'd been given the chance at nineteen, I probably still would have. Only after my father's death, and my Trigger, and meeting Lily, did I accept that part of myself.

Even still, there was a part of me that would consider it, a chance to have a normal life. But I was a parahuman, so that was impossible. Maybe I should have asked for my backup to have a different genetic code so I wouldn't get my powers back.

"I think I'm missing some context here," Eric interrupted my thoughts. "Who's Dean? And what's that about Theo's father?"
"Dean is Vicky's old boyfriend," Lily answered. "I don't know the whole story, just that he died in the Leviathan attack on Brockton Bay. The way I understand it, Missy was crushing on him hard for a year before that happened. Vicky and Dean both knew about it, but... well, Vicky's default solution to problems..."

"Punch the nearest acceptable target, and if that doesn't help, then either steamroll or ignore it?" Eric suggested.

"The Wards used to call her Hurricane Victoria," Lily confirmed. "So, yeah, they pretty much pretended they didn't notice. I think Vicky feels a little guilty about that, now. Especially with her new powers letting her know just how deep Missy's feelings ran, but that's just my guess. It's not like she's going to talk about it. But, yeah, she's keeping an eye on Missy, in her own way, I feel nothing but pity for anyone who hurts that girl."

"So that just leaves Theo's father," Eric prompted. "I know he was some asshole Nazi supervillain who's dead now. That's about it."

"That's about all I know, too," Lily admitted. "Leviathan, again. Just goes to show you that Endbringers don't discriminate. But he had these twin sister girlfriends that weren't too much older than us. I'd feel worse for them, but they were supervillains, too. So, y'know, no sympathies there. Guess it's in the genes. Or maybe it's just because he grew up around it."

"What about Riley?" he asked.

Lily shrugged. "I'm sure Amelia and Vicky are keeping an eye out." Translation: she's Bonesaw, who cares what happens to her? "Besides, as protective as Missy is over her, you'd be better off picking a fight with Vicky. At least when she rearranges your insides, they still obey the laws of physics. No matter how you look at it, though, it's their business. They can do whatever they like with their personal lives."

Lily had gotten pretty big on the 'social equality' front. Going through Europe and seeing how gays and transgendered individuals were treated outside the USA and western Europe given her a mission. I envied her in that. What mission do I have? I dropped out of engineering. I took a hiatus from fashion, and the more I thought about it the less I wanted to go back. Everyone else had these grand hopes and dreams. Changing the world, creating whole new worlds of their own, killing the Endbringers. What do I have? Sure, I get to help with all these amazing things. But that's all I do. Help. I was never one of the important ones, never needed, not since the Simurgh, at least.

My thoughts were interrupted by Lisa's voice on Eric's com. "Victoria, Eki, Janus, need you in the main office."
"Well, ladies," Eric smiled. Hard to believe he was ever a girl. "The bosses need me. Maybe then we can go home and get some sleep."

"You just want to get back to your fire breathing girlfriend," Lily teased.

"I don't like the idea that they might be attacked without us there to protect them," he replied before rushing off to the meeting.

"He's pretty transparent, isn't he?" Lily smirked at his retreating form.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I kinda envy him, actually."

"If you tell me you have a crush on Spitfire, I'm going to have to slap you," she smiled.

"Not about that," I smiled. "She's no competition for you. It's just... he knew from twelve years old that he was different, and he embraced it pretty much right away. More than that, he didn't even have a role model like Legend to say it was okay. How long did it take us to come to terms?"


"Twenty," I replied. "Although I guess in my case it meant less to me. Career was always first, relationships were suppose to wait until I had my degree." Even now, I can't say I've embraced it. I accept it as a reality, but I don't feel any pride in it the way Lily and Eric seem to. Just one more thing Sabah does that doesn't really matter. Even my relationship with Lily, when it started, was as much about having an ally as anything. Fuck, that sounds horrible when put that way.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lily asked.

"You'd end up overpaying," I answered. "I'm just daydreaming. Nothing important."

"If you insist," she answered. "Seriously, though. Talk to me."

"Just thinking about school," I half lied. "I really should go back. This semester is a flop, but putting it off makes it easier and easier to just not go back."

"You're right," she agreed. "But I think your designs are already brilliant. Not everyone is cut out for school. Some people just have natural talent to work with. Besides, you've already made more money off your designs than any of your teachers ever will."
I smiled. "Thanks, that means a lot," I hugged her. Our costumes made it hard to kiss without partially undressing.

"Anything you need," she replied. "Just let me know."


Eventually Crystal returned, looking more than a little unhappy. "What's wrong?" Lily asked.

"Oh, the usual," Crystal sighed. "Vicky's going off to Philly, no surprise. Leaves us even more short handed in LA. I'm stuck in charge of a group without my cousin to be our poster girl anymore. And no one even asked me if I was okay with all this."

"Oh, wow, that sucks," Lily agreed.

"I have no idea what to do," she sighed. "We were already having trouble pulling recruits. It was already a pain in the ass, when Alexandria's right there being Alexandria. Hard to compete for potential heroes when someone that prestigious is right there in the city with you. Vicky made it happen, as best as she could, but we were barely making any progress. And now? Fuck."

I hesitated, then finally spoke up. "I'll go!" I exclaimed. Oh shit, that sounded way too enthusiastic. "I... I mean, this is important, right?"

"Sabah, are you sure about this?" Lily asked.

"Yeah," I insisted. "LA's got some pretty prestigious design schools. I can do classes again. And Crystal's talking about needing someone to draw in members. I can do that, too. I'm an Endslayer, even Alexandria can't put that on her resume. Plus I'm still mostly a rogue. I can draw that crowd as well. And with Tapestry, I'm about as heavy hitter as heavy hitters get. You can use all that, right?"

"Honestly?" Crystal replied. "I really could. Might even be what sells Anima on joining. Possibly the most powerful projection user this side of the Siberian, and she uses her abilities to be a one person special effects crew for plays and concerts."

"See, it's a good idea," I told Lily.

"But... what about the portals?" she asked.
"I don't do anything for those," I pointed out. *My only function is to be your arm candy, and rubbing it in all these countries proverbial faces that they need a lesbian girl to help solve their problems. I'm not happy doing that.* "I can make an actual impact in LA. Don't worry, we'll still see each other plenty," I told her. "Eric ferries us about all the time, already."

"But when school starts up again," she argued.

"By that time, the portal networks will be done, and every country will have at least one," *except China.* "Then you can stay with me in LA, right?"

"I guess," she agreed reluctantly. *Sorry, Lily, I have to at least try this.*

==============

A/N- Ah, Sabah, one day she'll figure out what makes her happy.

... The day after she can no longer have it...

Also. 'Hurricane Victoria' amuses me in a special way. Because I have a sister named Victoria. And another one named Katrina. Heh. Speaking of, their facebooks are now full of photos of my nephews.
These readings are fucking insane. I went over the data from Chevalier's power, and from that unknown 'Doormaker' as well. Idly, I wondered if Cauldron had any idea how much value I was getting out of that data. Foldspace drives, maybe even a way to access new worlds without Labyrinth's help. Of course, the biggest flaw in any plan to replace her wasn't a matter of creating the gateway. That was easy, we did it every time we shunted. The problem was trying to control what world we accessed. Or, for that matter, getting a world at all.

Near as I could tell, actual reality was an extremely small percentage of the interdimensional void. There may be nigh-infinite numbers of dimensions, but that was in the same way there were a nigh-infinite number of stars. A random portal was pretty much infinitely more likely to hit nowhere than it was to find somewhere that actually existed. It helped to not to think about that too hard. It would probably help more to be of legal drinking age.

So unless we had 'coordinates' from Labyrinth, by means of crossing the dimensional divide with scanners active, we would have no idea how to locate worlds. And thus far the pattern wasn't showing itself. But, with a sample size of only a hundred, that wasn't a surprise.

At least Mom won't be too upset about my staying at the lab. All objections went out the window when she found out I made enough in a month, just selling designs to Dragon, that I could retire to a life of luxury in a year.

I glanced at Riley, fresh out of what passed for her shower, with a new set of spray-on clothing. She was practically glowing with happiness, and not the bubbly exuberance she normally expressed, but a calm, confident sort of bliss. "Enjoy your bath, I take it?"

"Yep," she smiled dreamily. "Okay, of all the things I've seen her do, why is this the one that's weirding me out the most?"

"So I have the new readings on Chevalier's power," I told her. "You were right, it does impact all dimensions at once. More than that, it transposes one reality over another. Functionally identical to Labyrinth in its nature. It's very likely they have cousin Passengers."

"Will we be able to use him in conjunction with Lily?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, no," I answered. "Maybe to create new stable portals, but not to access new dimensions. Of everyone we've found with cousin powers to Labyrinth, she's still the only one whose can handle the process of actually finding usable realities."

"Well, drat," she complained.
"How's your work with Cão's samples, anyway?" I asked. *My specialty didn't let me work with those experiments, but of course I'd be interested in a drug that cured all disease ever. Who wouldn't?*

"Poorly," she admitted. "We've confirmed there's nothing special in the saliva, itself. It works the same way as Newter's venom, because the Passenger makes it happen that way, not through any natural process. Not much different than Othala's power. We're still trying to find a way to trick it into believing the artificial samples are sourced from the host."

"So, you and Theo and Missy, huh?" I asked. It was both a change of subject and something I was curious about. She hadn't told me anything. No one had, really, and apparently I was one of the last to know.

"Yep," she said happily. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Well, I am doing a lot of wondering lately. "Sure it is," I agreed. "You're not... bothered by it?"

"Bothered by what?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

*She doesn't know what jealousy is, does she? I guess it makes sense that she wouldn't see relationships the same way as normal people, considering she spent half of her life under the thumb of the Slaughterhouse Nine. "No, I guess nothing's wrong. Why'd you keep it a secret, anyway?"

"Missy asked me to," she answered. "Sorry, she said we should give it a little time to see how it fit first. After all, if the experiment didn't work there was no point in explaining it to everyone."

"Can't argue with that logic," I agreed. *Step one to talking a Tinker into anything: use the word 'experiment'. "So, I assume Amelia already knew, at least? As young as you are, I think you should probably get parental permission before you can start dating. I know I'd need to ask my mom first. And she'd tell me no, that I needed to finish school and get into a good college before I even thought about getting a girlfriend." Having me when she was sixteen had something to do with that."

"Huh," she paused. "I didn't know I was supposed to get permission, do you think she'll be mad at me?"

"Well, she didn't tell you to stop, so she can't have that much problem with it," I pointed out. "I bet it's because she trusts your boyfriend and girlfriend."

"They are pretty awesome, aren't they," she agreed.
Missy was one of the Wards that extended some trust to me, something that Clock and Kid Win never could. In a way, I was glad those two didn't. I couldn't imagine they'd have accepted Riley, which Missy and Lily had managed to do, eventually. Theo was one of the few other friends I had, alongside Emma and Zach. I didn't feel ostracized or anything by others, I trusted the whole group, but they're the ones who I enjoyed just hanging out with. "Can't disagree with you there. C'mon, they should be done getting clean now."

....

I caught the rest of the group near the shower rooms. This was a lab building, after all. It had beds, sure, but it really wasn't meant to be a permanent place to sleep. We had actual homes for that, now. Our own headquarters that could support all of us, in addition to some of us having actual places to live. No one was supposed to stay the night in the labs often, if at all. On the other hand, we were literally right next door to the HQ. This being, without question, the most important of the lab buildings.

The boys still had damp hair, and normal clothes that I had to assume were brought to them. Emma was almost surgically attached to Zach, giving him the occasional kiss. I couldn't really blame her, she'd spent the whole time he was disabled absolutely miserable. Missy was a little more shy about the PDA, but was still wrapped around Theo's arm.

I smiled, noting that Zach was about to take a drink of soda. "So, how is it that I'm gay and it's the two of you that get inside another man first?"

Zach sprayed pop out his nose, and started coughing, as everyone else jumped back from the spray. He managed to look at me before dusting. He restored to his 'new' normal, which looked a lot healthier, at least. "Dude! Not cool!"

"Sorry, I should known better than to say that in front of the girls," I apologized, still smiling. "I could see how they might be upset that their boyfriends were so close that for a while there they were actually one person." Theo's blush was so satisfying, as was Missy's attempt at suppressing her giggles.

Riley gave me a smack on the arm, and a disapproving glare. "Stop being mean."

"Now Riley," Emma smiled saccharine sweet. "I think Trevor brings up a very good point. Zach and Theo literally gave their hearts to each other. We girls need to accept that we just can't compete with that kind of intimacy."

I did my best to keep a straight face, and failed miserably.
"Oh god," Missy hammed up her fake shock and concern, complete with wide eyes and hands over her mouth. "We've been so selfish, keeping them from each other! We really should apologize. And I know exactly how!"

"Really, because I can't think of anything!" Emma joined her. *This is easily the worst acting not in an Aleph movie.*

Zach buried his hands in his face. "Dear diary, today I learned that I'm a terrible, terrible influence on everyone around me."

"Well, they've had to watch us this whole time, hogging their true loves," Missy continued, ignoring Zach's comment. "So it's only fair that we're punished the same way. By watching them have a wild makeout session in front of us."

"That is a brilliant idea," Emma agreed.

"I've got a camera," I volunteered. "So... ummm... you'll have a constant reminder of your misdeeds in the future."

"You're all horrible people," Theo managed to mutter. "Zach, I want you to know I blame you for this."

"Is it too late to get Lily in here to shoot me again?" Zach asked.

Riley spoke up next. The girl was distinctly more pink than normal. "Umm, do I get, I mean have to watch, too?"
"Good morning, Chief Director," I smiled at Rebecca. "Won't be perceived as excess friendliness, I smile at everyone. Most people regard it as condescending and borderline insulting. Most of the time, that's true. In this case, however, the smile was genuine.

"Good morning, High Emissary," she responded back. Using my official title, showing faked amusement overtop real amusement. Fake amusement detectable by others, viewable as a form of contempt for the titles we were using. Real amusement actually is a level of contempt for the new title. She knows I don't respect it any more than she does. It was a sort of tongue in cheek angle, more a way to mock the people who are forced to use it than anything.

I smirked a little. Glad you appreciate the humor. Others would take that at face value, that I saw the contempt and was responding to it in my usual, well documented, way. Instead of the truth, that we were enjoying our private joke right under the noses of everyone around us.

Over months of practice, we'd invented our own pseudo-language with our powers. It changed and evolved constantly. By the end of this meeting, our signals would have yet again changed into a new effective language, making it impossible for anyone else to interpret. The two of us had also reached a sort of equilibrium with my power, allowing me to keep it focused on her constantly without causing migraines.

"First order of business," I started. The briefest flicker of my concern spoke volumes, my worry for her and an apology for the rarity of our talks lately. "The success of the Chevalier-Victoria power interaction."

"It's gone better than I think either of us had hoped," she confirmed. The tilt of her head indicated that she, too, was doing well. "You have the records, of course, twenty seven parahumans thought to be permanently maimed or disabled, restored." Those numbers weren't that high, but that was to be expected. Any parahuman that needed this sort of healing were usually very hard to hurt in the first place, most were wounded by Endbringers. And Endbringers usually preferred to kill, not maim. "And over a hundred Case 53s restored to human appearance. We're beginning to move into cosmetic restorations."

"So soon?" I asked.

"Indeed," she replied. "It appears that the restoration takes less time than originally anticipated." Untrue, cosmetic restorations being done for particularly powerful subjects, a number of less useful seeming parahumans are being 'forgotten' in the 'confusion'. Wants me to know, wonders how I'll react.

"Good to know," I agreed. A slight dip in my smile that would be as obvious as any frown to
her. Don't worry, we'll 'discover' this failure ourselves, and take appropriate steps. I was sure Chevalier didn't know about it, or anyone Victoria or I would ever be allowed to meet. I wasn't entirely sure how Rebecca found out, but given her contacts I could make a few guesses.

"Now, let's move on to the less successful project with the restoration saliva," she changed the subject. *Knows I have what I need to move forward, trusts I'll find a suitably believable reason to start investigating.* The show of trust was, in itself, the most important part of what went unsaid between us.

"Well, you have the reports," I sighed. "We're still trying, but we've hit nothing but dead ends on replicating the fluid in a way that triggers the healing properties. We are achieving results by exposing artificial test organisms to deadly diseases and then treating them with the healing fluid. It produces useful antibodies for almost any infection or parasite, even ones that normally shouldn't be influenced by antibodies at all, and those we can synthesize with relative ease. It's not the universal cure we were hoping for, but it's the gate key to a whole new era of medical treatment and technology. Sadly, it's the best we can do."

"That's still quite an accomplishment," she replied. *Open praise, neutral voice, minor inflection on the word 'still'.* She wouldn't be seen as outside her position to offer a minor compliment under the circumstances. But moreso, she was letting me know that, if anything, it was better this way. A true universal cure would be disastrous for the world as we knew it, ruining livelihoods and creating even greater stratification between nations. It wasn't the sort of thing she could say, given her position. There were no laws against her thinking it.

I signaled back my agreement with a visible nod, my eyes glancing down. She wasn't wrong, Pantheon's goal of positioning itself as essential in the eyes of every nation, bringing stability through dependence, was far better served by having this ability than a true panacea could accomplish for us. The down glance was a reminder of the Yggdrasil, and would also bring to her mind the sewer system we used to functionally conquer Brockton Bay. This was one more way we could accomplish those goals.

I smiled slightly when I looked back up, making eye contact through the excellently designed video system that used the monitor itself as a camera. This was to assure her that we didn't do this on purpose, that we did everything in our power to accomplish that one perfect cure for everything. She relaxed a tiny amount, letting me know she was glad for the reassurance. She would have been perfectly fine with us lying about it, but it was better that we didn't have to. For a number of obvious reasons, like plausible deniability.

"I believe that covers everything," I admitted. *Only Rebecca would recognize the disappointment in that statement. "But if I may ask, how's Chevalier coping with our liaison? His report was notably lacking in opinions. I'd like to know how he and the PRT in general feel about this." Not that it stopped me from figuring this information out on my own. The poor guy was torn between wanting to murder her in her sleep, and wanting to kiss her. Figuratively speaking, on both counts. Still, it gave an excuse to extend the conversation, and it made my power look less than it really was.*
"He likes her well enough that he didn't file a complaint when she snipe-recruited Sveta," Rebecca informed me. Her eyes crinkled just a little, a sign of her amusement in how transparent I was being, by our standards, of not wanting to be the one who hung up first. A light, involuntary, fidget on my part was a significant tell. We both knew she got me. She continued speaking. "In spite of her being one of the more powerful parahumans we've managed to restore thus far." Her voice sounded disapproving of this fact, but I knew better. She wasn't bothered, didn't care if we got the capes or the Protectorate did, beyond how it looked to the officials.

"I'll ask her to be more respectful of our joint venture in the future," I conceded. Meanwhile, I was talking to Rebecca via powers. I won't, Vicky knows restraint in situations like this, her powers let her know what she can get away with, and how to get what she wants, most of the time. Sveta was a special case because of just how powerful she was once reworked into a human shape. "Speaking of, how's Alexandria enjoying her new physiology?"

"She's impressed," Rebecca told me. This time the sign was a deliberate dilation of the formerly fake pupil, displaying conscious control of otherwise automatic feature. Implying similar control of every aspect of her body. Superior musculature more suited for other species of primate meant an overall increase in strength, flexibility, and reaction time. Especially the reaction time. Coupled with a limited version of Vicky's ability to overclock her body."Says that she can't do a proper test until the next Endbringer conflict, but expects a full twenty five percent increase in combat effectiveness."

"That's a pretty remarkable improvement," I agreed. She knows I'm talking about the control, not the declared markup. She also knows this conversation point would remind the observers of just how valuable our arrangement was. The fact that it drew attention to Alexandria's working friendship with myself, and made me look like I was acting my age by being openly interested in my friends, was all bonuses in their own right. "I look forward to talking to her about it in person." Minor implied apology for not being able to make more time, and an understanding that I can be friends with Alexandria, but Chief Director Costa-Brown isn't an option. Professionalism and all that bullshit.

The alarm beeped. "Looks like you should be careful what you wish for," she spoke, hanging up the call immediately. Quip, deliberately curt, agreeing with the clear divide between her personas, knows I won't be offended, expects feed could be monitored, believes it almost certainly will be monitored. Rude cutoff was a calculated move under the circumstances meant to seem like a heat of the moment act. Implying that the Chief Director wasn't particularly fond of talking to me at all. Like pretty much every politician I'd ever known.

I was already up and moving. Over the next couple minutes, we'd gathered our teams, with exception to Victoria, who was semi-officially part of Chevalier's team for this conflict. Lily was the first of our branches to appear, although the rest of Faultline's crew was again notably absent from the gathering.

"Janus is getting the LA team right now," she told us as she approached. Apprehensive, worried, hasn't talked to Sabah in the last couple days. Concerned about their relationship, needs reassurances from Sabah. "Do we know what we're facing?"
"Unsure," Taylor replied. "Probably an attack on the USA, maybe Canada. Profile also unknown. We're getting one of the new ones."

Another set of people started appearing. Crystal and Sabah I recognized immediately, but the other three were new members of her team took me a moment. Sveta, Anima and Genius Loci. They had other members, but they weren't suitable for the 'new' way Endbringers were being fought. Only those that were likely to survive were being sent into battle these days, the zerg were the feed for the meat grinder.

"That's... that's fucking impossible," Taylor cursed at the triangulation data. I glanced at mine. Oh fuck.

"Clearly it's not," I replied. "The Endbringer is targeting Brockton Bay."

==============

A/N- I really, truly, love everything about this chapter.

... Seriously, though. The Lisa/Becky interplay is awesome on a stick.
"Sveta?" a man's voice spoke over the intercom. "Are you awake?"

I don't sleep, you moron. No, no, it's not their fault. There's so many of us, I can't expect them to know everything about everyone. "Y-yes, I'm here, doctor." The anger isn't their fault, and it's not my fault. It's what my powers have done to me.

"We have a special guest for you, if you want to meet her," the doctor told me. Special guest? I felt my body getting riled up. Its territorial nature flooding me with aggressive instincts.

"Okay, you can open the window," I told him.

"She'd like to come in and meet you in person," the doctor replied. My hundreds of tendrils flexed and pulsed their outrage at the idea of someone entering my domain. I fought the instincts and anger as much as possible.

They're trying to help me, I forced myself to remember. If I can get acclimated to people, they can let me go out, meet others, not live in this room with only the computer to know what's happening in the outside world. "Okay, we can do that."

My tendrils moved in anticipation of the visitor, pulling me up above the door, waiting like an ambush predator. No this is wrong. I hid my vulnerable sensory organelles in the cubbyholes, safe from attackers as I prepared myself for the attack. Stop it!

Then she walked in, without a suit at all. She's beautiful. She dies! The tendrils lunged, and she jumped further into the room, a quick tuck and roll, then bouncing sideways as more of me tried to catch and kill her. A sudden burst of light blinded me for a second, and I screeched in rage. Then she gripped one of my sensory tendrils, and I froze completely. I can't move, if I move I'll die!

How does she know this? I've been so afraid of my body, I've killed so many, and she can stop me with a caress that wouldn't intimidate an infant? How?

"Hello, Sveta," she replied with a smile far too calm for someone that just did what she'd done. "I'm Victoria. You can call me Vicky if you like. It's good to meet you."

"A-are you going to kill me?" I asked. "I wouldn't blame you, not after the things I've done, after I tried to kill you."
"That was your power, not you," she answered. "Your power's messed up. Damaged. It was never meant to be given to anyone. You're not to blame."

Is that true? She sounds so certain. "You better not be lying to me," I threatened, my tendrils writhing angrily. But she had hold of the special place, all my threats were meaningless, because all she had to do was squeeze, and I would die. That doesn't make sense, I know I've been injured there before, it didn't kill me then. But my body's instincts thought it would, and they were remaining absolutely still to hope it didn't happen. I don't want to attack her, and my body's afraid to. For once, I didn't need to fight these instincts.

"I'm not," she assured me, still almost infuriatingly calm. She swayed, even, like a plant in the water. It was hypnotic, soothing. My body started to relax. She's not a threat, she's not an enemy. She's safe, a part of the environment. "They're called Passengers. They give parahumans their powers. Something is wrong with yours, and that's why you're like this. Yours and the others like you have Passengers that were never meant to be inside people."

"So... I'm an accident?" I asked.

"It's more complicated than that," she replied. "I can tell you more about it, but it would take time that we don't really have. I know you've been told that we're healing the Case 53s, as best we can, right?"

There were rumors, mostly online. The doctors said that maybe I'd be one of them, but I needed to be patient because there were a lot of people asking for help, and some of them were even worse off than me. "Yes, I heard something about that," I answered.

"You're one of the tricky cases," she told me. "Most of the ones I meet, we can wait until after we've healed them before asking questions, because we'll only be healing the body. In order to fix you, we'll have to rework your brain. Make it so you no longer try to hurt people. Will you be okay with us doing that?"

There wasn't even a moment of hesitation. "Yes," I agreed. "If it means I can be normal, then yes."

"Can't do 'normal'," she answered. "You'll always have your powers, I can't undo that. And your powers are really, really strong, Sveta. The kind of power that can be used to hurt an Endbringer. I want to ask you to join Pantheon. You don't have to. The Protectorate would be happy to take you. Or you can join one of the colonies. Or, with your power, you can get a good paying job and live wherever you want."

"Why do you have to ask me now? Instead of after you've healed me?" I felt agitation return to my dozens of limbs. If she's trying to trick me.
"Because there's a piece of equipment that lets us know if someone's brain is being messed with by powers," she explained. "It's normally used to spot mind control powers, but it will register the changes I'm going to need to do to your brain. So if we wait until after I heal you, you won't be allowed to join Pantheon ever because it might make people think I messed with your brain to make you want to join. You have to decide before being healed. Don't worry, I promise I'll help you either way. It's just... as strong as you are, and as much as you could help our team, I have to ask."

"How do you make my power not want to kill you?" I asked, suspiciously. She was still shifting from one foot to another, swaying her body in a way reminiscent of belly dancing. Very tame belly dancing.

"It's how my power works," Vicky answered. "I can sense danger, and how to avoid it or fight it. I don't know why this works. Makes me feel like I'm pretending to be drunk. How does it look to you?"

"You're pretty," I admitted. "If I join, will I get to work with you?"

"Not right away," she answered. "I have to help the other Case 53s. You'd work with my cousin in Los Angeles at first. Even get to meet Alexandria, probably. I promise I'll talk or visit when I can, but I'm really busy."

"Okay," I agreed. "I'll join you. What happens now?"

....

I looked at the girl staring back at me in the mirror. "I... I'm beautiful," I muttered. I hesitantly brought a hand up to brush my face. I have hands, now. My skin was still pale, almost white, but at least now I looked human. The tendrils on my head were changed to black, and made a pretty good imitation hair. They swept down my back and fused into a mass that became my neck, then trailed down into a teenager's body. I was petite, skinny, but mostly normal looking. Standing here naked in front of the mirror, the only distinctive oddities were the lack of body hair and my solid black eyes.

I looked at Vicky. "Thank you so much," I wept. Actually wept. I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed. I felt and heard the crunching as her ribs collapsed and her spine breaking under my strength. "Oh god I'm so sorry!" I screamed.

"I'll be okay," she insisted. "Just... loosen the grip, but don't let go." I felt her body shifting through my skin, as bones popped back into place and mended themselves. "See, not a big deal. For me. Just remember to be careful, okay? You're one of the highest ranking brutes on the planet right now, and it'll take time before you figure out just how fragile normal people are." She laughed. "Even after you do, you have to be careful. There was this one time when I accidentally broke my boyfriend's hips. Lucky that my sister's a healer, right?"
"Yeah," I smiled. I didn't get what she thought was so funny, I was just glad that I didn't hurt her.

....

"This is Crystal," Vicky introduced me to the blond woman. "She'll be your team leader. Crystal, this is Sveta. She doesn't have a hero name, yet, but I'm sure you can work something out."

"H-hi," I smiled nervously. *I'm meeting so many new people, I'm not used to this. What happens if I* Vicky put her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry," she soothed. "Your old instincts aren't coming back. You're just shy, that's all. Don't worry about that, Crystal's good people. And there's nothing wrong with being a little shy."

"There's not?"

"Not even a little bit," she answered. "I mean, I'm not shy. Like, at all. But my sister is."

"Your sister's an Empress," I replied.

"Exactly," she acted as if that was proof of her point. "She's shy, her fiancée is shy, and now they rule a planet together. So don't worry about it if you're a little shy, too. And whatever you do, don't allow some dumb bimbo make you do things you don't want as an attempt to 'draw you out of your shell'. Make sure you do what feels right for you, not what others try to make you think that you should want, okay? Just because you're the quiet type, doesn't mean you can't tell people to respect your opinion, got it?"

"Yeah," I agreed, smiling broadly. Smiling still felt fake to me, because my muscles didn't work quite like a normal person, but Vicky promised me it looked fine. "I'll remember that." *This is a chance for me to have a life. Maybe not a normal life, but one where I can be free and happy. I won't let it go to waste.*

=================================

A/N- Yay, Sveta's happy! And has a body that's at least cosmetically human!

... Know what would be an incredibly dick move? Letting the Endbringer kill her.
Brockton Bay. "I thought they targeted places that were caught up in conflict!" I exclaimed. "Brockton Bay might be the most peaceful city of its size in the world right now." WorryAgreementConfusion.

"The Endbringers aren't obeying the same rules anymore," Lisa responded. "We can't trust anything we thought we knew about them. Except that, whatever this Endbringer is capable of, it thinks it can win this fight. Or achieve whatever goal it is that's going to damage us. I'm beginning to suspect we've managed to piss off the Endmakers. This attack is personal."

FocusDetermination. God I hope she has a plan. CertaintyAssurance. "Janus, Lachesis, you're on rescue duty. Get every single person you can out of the city. Go to the shelters, people are going to gather there. If this thing's trying to hurt us personally, and its makers are paying any kind of attention at all to us, it's going to have powers that target the city itself, and the people in it. I'll do my part to lead people to you. See if I can't convince them to take the Shadowcats out of town."

They're right. Tohu and Bohu killed half of the team, and it didn't do much more than slow us down a little. But going after the town, itself? That would be devastating.

Crystal spoke up. "Umm... some of my team can help. Anima summons things." A unicorn shimmered into existence near the girl dressed in a really fancy looking knight's armor. Both her armor, and the unicorn, looked more like a really well drawn cartoon drawing than they did real things.

"Any fantasy creature or object, really," the girl I was assuming was Anima spoke up. "They're force projections, but I don't need to concentrate on them. People might be more inclined to ride a unicorn than the giant bug monsters."

"Range limit?" Taylor asked.

"None," she replied. "Just a total energy pool to draw from. I can make about fifty of the unicorns if I don't do anything else. They even have minds of their own, sort of, and they always seem to know where I am and if I need them, and come back to be reabsorbed." ImpressedUseful. No kidding, that is a fucking amazing power.

"Okay, every bit helps," Taylor admitted. "I'm already finding people and letting them know what to expect. Can you let your summons know to obey other people?"

"Sort of," she replied. "They're finicky. Long as you tell them that I asked them to do whatever it is you need them to do, they'll probably listen. Just... look, they got their personalities when I got my
powers, at twelve years old, and those personalities haven't changed since. The shrinks say they run on my subconscious belief of what fantasy creatures are suppose to act like. Through the lens of a twelve year old." She paused for a moment "I don't like summoning the ones that can talk."

"Okay, I can work with that," Taylor nodded. "Summon them, let them know to each pick a different one of the shadowcats and follow them. I'll give them better instructions in the field, as I need them. Crystal, the other one?"

"Genius Loci," Crystal replied, gesturing at the boy. Or young man, I wasn't entirely sure. The costume was, much like Anima, full body armor. Though in his case it was a rather small suit of actual metal. Frankly, it looked a lot like the tin man from Wizard of Oz, as opposed to Anima's gorgeously decorated full plate of gold and pearl.

"I'm a breaker and shaker," he spoke, a deep echo coming from the armor. "It's hard to explain, but if you need me to, I can open paths through buildings, create walls or bridges, increase or decrease the durability of whatever I'm controlling, and have sensory awareness in the areas I'm effecting."

"We might be able to use that. Hop on." One of the shadow cats approached him. "I'll take you where I need you." He climbed on. "Tir, Hecate, I need the two of you to work on collapsing our portal. That thing might have some kind of power similar to Gaea." Oh fuck. "Or god only knows what kind of hell it might be able to do. We can't let it get access to Avalon's portal. Everyone else? We have to hit it as hard as fucking possible, immediately. Don't give it time to fight back, or we're going to lose our city."

We managed to get seven minutes of time to pull people out. I wasn't sure the numbers, but whatever they were, they weren't enough. Couldn't possibly be even a tenth of the total population. I had to pray the others could do their part. This is the worst part, watching everyone else work while there's nothing I can do. My powers are for before and after the battles, not during.

Then the Endbringer appeared. It was subtle at first, a slowly gathering mist that formed from nowhere, condensing into a single point. Before the process was even complete, the blasters were hitting it with everything they had, and most of the shots were passing right through, shredding the landscape and often narrowly missing other attackers. The ones that could be saved were saved, now the hard part began.

"Activating override blocks," Trevor informed us. "Assuming control of emergency shunt systems." In other words, if someone tries to take control of the zerg, he can yank them out of the fight.

The attacks didn't seem to phase her, any. And she was a she, or an imitation of such. She was roughly the same height as the Simurgh, but where her sister was a parody of supermodel thin, this one was anorexic skinny, more like a skeleton with loosely fitting skin. Her body a transparent slightly blue color that made her look like a glass statue or ice sculpture, standing atop one of the newly rebuilt office complexes in the heart of the city.
"It's the most human looking of the Endbringers," I stated. "Is that significant?"

"Maybe," Lisa replied. "We know each Endbringer has a psychological component. Symbolism. If so, something about this one's behavior combined with its human appearance might be a clue to the psychology of its creators. Although how is anyone's guess."

Eidolon opened up with his new, now signature, disintegration power. He hadn't let it go since he started using it last time. ConcernRealization. I glanced at Taylor. She's right, it might be trying force Eidolon to use the same attack that completely destroyed Bucharest.

Alexandria was in the follow through, impaling the Endbringer with a spear, and continuing forward until her knee met its face. The body cracked like the glass or ice it resembled, then fused itself back together.

"Where's its core?" Lily asked over the coms. She'd already joined in the fight, of course, firing shots into the monster.

"Doesn't have one," Lisa muttered, staring hard at the dimensional illusion that let us watch the battle from our safe spot. "Or maybe it's more appropriate to say that every part of it's the core. It's completely decentralized, no single part is more important than any other part, and as long as there's anything remaining, it can rebuild itself from that."

"Right, we have to hit it in the everywhere," Lily answered. She dived toward the Endbringer, her wings spread. She passed through and the creature shattered into dust. Lily herself cut through two stories of building before halting herself.

Then we got to see what it could actually do. The ground shimmered and dissolved as the dust pulled itself back together. Buildings were reduced to ash that joined the new Endbringer's mass. When it resumed human form, it was larger. Healthy looking, if still on the unnaturally skinny side, and standing in the shallow crater that used to be part of three different city blocks. The edge of the destruction was marked by a visible curve along the buildings. Inside the destructive effect, everything was consumed. Outside, the building still stood there normally, save where some pieces fell into the gap.

Alexandria came in for another attack, and Endbringer moved, stepping out of the way and attempting to clothesline the woman. She was fast enough to avoid that blow, and even the followup attempt to knee her, but then the other hand caught her arm. Icelike material started working its way across her arm.

"It's trying to eat her," Lisa gasped. "Thats this one's power. It infects matter and converts it into Endbringer crystal to add to itself."
"How do we even fight something like that?" I asked.

"Contain it," Taylor replied. She switched over to the armband system. "All shield projectors, converge on the Endbringer. We're going to pin it in place."

The new Phalanx had started getting into position, forcefields flickering into place. Alexandria vanished from the Endbringer's grip. *Eric's power, or maybe another teleporter.* More and more layers of shield added to the structure, fusing inside one another. Others started contributing as well, and I recognized both Narwhal and Dragon's versions overlapping our barricade.

The Endbringer slammed into the barricade, causing it to flicker. Some shields collapsed, others were added to replace them. We knew the Phalanx would recharge in a few minutes, so those were always shifted into place to take the brunt of the hits in the way that caused the least possible damage to the more powerful, but harder to restore, layers behind. Once again, I couldn't help but be in awe of just how Taylor could handle so much changing information at once.

"Shunting over the nanothorn bomb," Dragon informed us. This was our chance to kill it. If the thing didn't have the density of other Endbringers, then maybe the improved nanothorn weaponry would do the job.

There was a brief flash, and then the inside of the forcefield was filled with gray mist, the effects of the nanothorns in action. It destroyed things on the atomic level, at least until the matter got too durable. *Hopefully it would be enough.*

A/N- Spoiler alert. Not gonna be enough.
The gray mist remained trapped in the shields. The moment those shields dropped, it would pour into the ground and consume a mass of area almost as large as the crater lake we built our first base from. The phalanx moved, slowly, pulling the forcefield along with it.

"We're going to dump it in the bay," Taylor told me, and everyone else. "Safer that way."

Then the shields flashed, the sign that some of the phalanx shields, at least, had been broken. *The Endbringer was still alive in there!* "Oh mother fucker."

*PanicHorrorFailure.* "I can't see where it's going to attack, I won't be able to reinforce the shields that need it," Taylor muttered. She hit the armband. "All units, withdraw from range immediately, it's going to break free!"

*Oh fuck. Come on, Amelia, there has to be something that can be done.* "Missy, Sabah, Lily, think you can get another barricade around it?" It was only after I gave the command that I realized I used their actual names. Luckily I asked through our com system, not the wristbands.

"On it," Missy responded immediately. Sabah didn't say anything, but shunted over anyway. I trusted them to figure out the details. After all, they knew how to use their powers better than I did.

People started falling back, moving their shields to protect them. Only the zerg and the robots remained, and they were quickly running out of strength to hold back the barriers, but they were buying time for the Moirai to do their part. Infused ribbons charged with Lily's power started moving through the area, right outside the forcefield itself. They wouldn't last very long, but they weren't meant to. A couple more flashes and a lot of the phalanx started falling back, their power depleted for the time being.

The ribbon barrier was established slowly, but it was established. I wasn't sure how they even found a way to use Missy's power on something that was influenced by Lily's, much less leaving it in such a state that Sabah could actual control it, but they figured it out.

There was one more flash, and then the gray nanothorn dust leaked over the top of the ribbons, but most of it was already being annihilated by Lily's power as it spread out onto the effect. The Endbringer leapt over the top of the barricade, moving so fast that I only knew it happened by the dust cloud that followed her.

Alexandria hit her in mid air, stopping her in place for a barrage of blasts from Legend. Somehow, this time, they didn't pass through. They exploded on impact, leaving cracks in the glass body. Eidolon took another stream of shots with his disintegration power, which didn't accomplish much.
And our own blaster set let loose with the ice weapons. I noted the old version of Eki’s suit in the mix. Aunt Sarah’s out there fighting, too.

A pair of arms stretched out and grabbed the airborne Endbringer, then there was a shattering of glass as the owner pulled herself toward the thing, slamming into it hard enough to smash right through the frozen body, quite a bit more than Alexandria had been able to do. Victoria caught her in the air.

"Holy shit," the tin-man, Genuis Loci, muttered. "Little Sveta can do that? How fast was she going?"

"Four thousand one hundred and twelve kilometers per hour," Clarice answered. "Approximately three and a quarter times the speed of sound."

"I don't know how she can do that and still be afraid of arresting a freakin' mugger," he laughed.

"Ever stepped on a tube of tooth paste?" Crystal asked. "That's why she's afraid. Now get off the open channel!"

Streams of energy washed over the Endbringer's mass, as the blasters did their best to make sure the thing never put itself back together.

Nearby, a mile wide area vanished into rainbow dust, pulling itself together to form a new body for the Endbringer. The armbands started naming names. Everyone caught in the area, reduced to mass for the monster. The one saving grace, as such, is there weren't a lot of heroes caught in the effect, the zerg were there to do the dying. The Endbringer's figure was now a little on the larger side. Not really fat, but curvy at least.

"It just ate over two hundred of the EB cats," Taylor informed us. "They're no more resistant to her than anything else."

"Endbringer being temporarily designated as Wendigo," Dragon spoke over the coms. The hell is a wendigo? I wondered. Probably something really unpleasant.

More streams of energy hit it, and it seemed to almost casually shrug the attacks off this time, as opposed to before when they cut through it. Eidolon's attack was the only one that still got through the body, and that didn't seem to do any actual damage to the thing at all.

Sveta used her slingshot attack again. Damn she's fast. Slamming into the Endbringer's head hard enough to slam it face first into the earth it was standing on. She jumped away, and the zerg were on it. Two of the gargants locked their tusks around her arms, and a pair more got in lower, grappling her hips, holding her mostly upside down. They pushed into each other, attempting to crush her
between them. She gripped one's tusks and actually lifted the thing off the ground and threw it toward the defenders, who were forced to dive for cover. A kick sent another gargant skidding back into a building that collapsed on top of it and a few others.

She then slammed the one remaining holding her upper body into the one that had the lower, shattering the asphalt beneath them. The message was clear, she was a lot fucking stronger than the zerg. Fuck, the strength she just demonstrated was greater than even Behemoth had ever shown.

Alexandria got in a good hit while it was distracted with smashing our supermonsters, although now her weapons only cut grooves into it instead of impaling it completely. She dodged a backhanded swing narrowly. *If it weren't for Vicky's upgrades, would she be able to avoid the attacks like that?* Sveta grabbed one of those damaged zerg and used it to hammer the Endbringer into the earth, buying Alexandria another opening to stab it in the eye. Didn't make much real difference, but damn did it look satisfying to see the Endbringer with a spear sticking out of its face.

"It's getting tougher with each new iteration," Lisa replied. "Stepping up its strategy for more durability and destructive potential. Losing speed, though. The early stages are meant to test attacker strategies and adapt against them. The late stages will show its actual power."

"Stages?" I asked. Meanwhile, the battle raged on. Dragon took her opportunity, raining exotic energy beams down on the creature and hammering it with projectiles that could crack a mountain. It was well past the point where nanothorns were a valid weapon, but a few of those were used as well.

"This is its stage four. We did enough damage so fast that we didn't even get to see stage three for more than a few seconds," Lisa replied. "I'm placing my bets on a total of six stages, each approximately twice as strong and resilient than the last."

Our blasters did their thing, switching rapidly between cold and sonic or heat to maximize damage to the thing's body. They were finally making progress, showing microfractures in the monster's body. *They are wearing it down, at least.*

"It's already insanely durable," I complained. "Aren't these things suppose to have tradeoffs? Like, they can't be good at everything?"

"It's also close to the slowest," Lisa pointed out. "It hasn't managed to kill anyone outside of its reforming into the next stage. I know it sounds insane, but this thing is a step in the right direction. More property damage, less casualties."

Alexandria and Sveta opted for a bit of a teamup next, another sling-attack. Sveta gripped it and pulled them in, with Alexandria more or less riding in her lap, carrying two of her spear weapons. Both spears impaled deep into its gut, and it was staggered back into a building.
"I wouldn't be so quick to say that, Lisa," Taylor growled. "There were still over five thousand civilians still in that part of the city. And if the next time it does the same thing, it'll be the as bad or worse."

"It'll reach about three and a half miles, next time," Lisa replied. "And ten, for the final event."

"Ten miles? That's all of Brockton Bay!" I exclaimed. "There's still way over a hundred thousand people in there, and it'll kill every last one of them."

"So you see the problem," Lisa sighed. "This one's game? It's psychological. The whole city is its hostage. We hit it, really hit it, force it to move into its next level of strength, and in exchange the city dies. Or, we play softball with the fucker. Fight it how Endbringers have been fought before, let it demolish the city and leave after its had its fill of killing people. If we give it all of that, and we're lucky, it'll never step up to stage five or six." FrustrationRageGuilt.

A/N- Step 1 of inventing your own Endbringers: ask how you can piss on everyone's parade. Step 2- Ask if there's something funnier than piss to use instead.
I put my hand on Taylor's shoulder. "So it's moral arithmetic, yet again, huh?" Taylor asked. FrustrationDisgustHate. "Fight it to win, lose our city and everyone in it. Fight it to, what? Throw the match? We do all that and what do we get to show for it?"

"Fewer heroes dying in the battle," Lisa answered. "More civilians evacuated. That's the best we can hope for."

"Fuck that noise," I hissed. "You're telling us we're going to lose the city no matter what we do? Then we're going to get something worthwhile from the trade. Play softball with it for now, if we have to. Buy time, get the city evacuated. Then we hit it with everything we've got. I would rather see this city turned to ash than to allow the sick fucks that make these monsters think Pantheon can be blackmailed."

AgreementCertaintySupport. "She's right," Taylor responded. "If we allow this to work, then it'll be the new reality of all future Endbringer battles. We'll be playing by the Endmakers' rules, and if that happens we've already lost."

"We can use Bolla," Dragon offered. "I'll have to focus most of my efforts on calculations for the next few minutes."

"That's anti-Scion artillery," I pointed out. It would destroy the whole city. UncertaintyLossDetermination.


"I was afraid you'd say that," Lisa sighed. She hit the com. "Fall back, we're adopting a new strategy. Allow our constructs to hold the battle on their own. Everyone else, you're all on search and rescue duty. Khepri will help you coordinate."

More zerg swarmed the Endbringer, pulling her under the mass of claws and power that was channeling through them. Each attacker had its own exotic energy generation channeled through the claws. Some used the nanothorns, others energy that I understood, like heat and light. And others had stuff I didn't even pretend to comprehend, like time distortions and weaponized folded space.

Wendigo traded as good as she got, however, killing them almost as fast as they could hit her. Blue mist poured from her hands, destroying the ground where it fell, and passing through the zerg with laughable ease. We're really costing ourselves a lot of units right now.
"Those are nanothorns," Lisa muttered. "The Endbringer's learned to use its power to copy the nanothorn weaponry we used against it earlier. She's right, it doesn't matter.

This was just a distraction, after all. We didn't expect the zerg to actually stand a chance. For the next half hour, it was just a practice of feeding them to Wendigo so she had something to do other than attack the heroes that were rescuing all the people they could. That's what the zerg are there for, to sacrifice their lives instead of human lives. I wrapped my arm around Taylor. I'm here for you.

Scanners detect no human lifesigns within seven miles of epicenter," Dragon finally announced.

We returned to hammering the monster with our best attacks. Eidolon had switched powers to something I could only call a gravity hammer. He struck the Endbringer with the invisible pulse, and the ground splintered and sank, forming a small but deep crater. He hit it again, and again, every time the thing managed to climb out of the hole. A spear of glass lanced straight for him from the crater, fighting the energy blast. Eidolon evaded it, if narrowly. But that gave her time to get out of her hole, only to be blindsided by a combination of Alexandria and Sveta.

They'd gotten to opposite sides of the Endbringer, and when she appeared, Sveta pulled them both together, crashing into Wendigo from both sides simultaneously. Fragments broke off of her body, littering the ground and falling back into the pit she had just escaped from.

Some of the few remaining zerg piled onto her, keeping her from retaliating against the only two heroes strong enough to stay that close for that long. She pulled one of the ultralisks in half to reach Sveta, her fingers shimmering with that blue nanothorn mist she was generating.

Vicky came to the girl's rescue, throwing her into one of the half-eaten buildings that had been caught at the edge of Wendigo's power. I gasped as the Endbringer sheered off one of her arms. From this side of the barrier, she couldn't hear me shriek.

"Use the emergency shunt!" I ordered.

"We can't," Trevor replied. "The shunt drive requires a sealed system. it won't work with the armor breached like that. Not until it can mend itself, at least."

Fuck. Wendigo lunged at Vicky, who managed to drop down and roll under her. I could see the telltale glow of Vicky using her breaker state for the boosted abilities and healing factor. The spatter of light on the side of her suit was from her blood, still alive and reacting to her power. The Endbringer stomped down, crushing Vicky's leg and pinning her in place.

Alexandria rushed in, knocking Wendigo back, and a barrage of energy fire from Legend, Crystal
and a few of the others, chipping a few more pieces off of it. Then Vicky was gone in a scattering of rubble.

"We're ready, everyone fall back," Dragon instructed.

They obeyed, of course. Those who couldn't retreat on their own were grabbed by the various cats and brought out, either riding or carried depending on what was needed. A dozen of the new raptors collided with Endbringer, covering her in our new variant of containment foam. A dozen times the durability, at the cost of it not being at all safe to use on humans. You couldn't breath through it, and it would melt through human skin in a minute or so. Pity those weren't things that Endbringers needed to worry about. Still, it would hopefully buy time.

Eidolon was one of the few that stayed in, alongside Alexandria and our team. I sighed in relief knowing that Aunt Sarah was retreating with the others.

"Two minutes until ETA," Dragon spoke. "Requesting permission to control shunt overrides."

"Permission granted," Trevor responded.

*ApprehensionHopeFear*. I looked at Taylor. *If this doesn't work. Even if it does work.* She looked at me. *ConcernDoubtFailure.*

I know it was just my imagination, but I could have sworn I heard the explosion. One of Dragon's newest weapons, functionally an orbital satellite set well above Avalon. It was the largest object ever put into space by man, enforced with cloned EB tissue, Khonsu forcefields, a bunch of other forcefields, and all kinds of other Tinker bullshit. It also had the most powerful weapon ever built. A super sized railgun, using hyperdense Endbringer tissue for the bullet. A bullet equipped with a shunt drive. At full power, it could knock the moon out of orbit. I didn't know how much power Dragon was using, but I was pretty sure it wasn't that much.

"Sensors confirm target was on location," Dragon responded. "Bolla has achieved a direct hit."

The message was sent. We would rather destroy our cities ourselves, than be manipulated into playing their games. Even if we lost this fight, then at least the fuckers who made these monsters would get that message. *This is not a tactic that will work on us. PainGuiltDetermination*. Taylor turned and wrapped her arms around me. I couldn't force myself to stop crying.

The tech compensated for the debris and dust kicked up by the collision. The rainbow shimmer started again, She was still there, in the ruins of the city. The amount of mass she absorbed, this time, was mostly irrelevant. There was nothing left for her to consume that was still alive. Let her have what remained of Brockton Bay, because there was nothing left for her to destroy after what we'd done.
"God, please let this be the right decision," I muttered under my breath.

"Numbers coming in," Dragon responded. Approximately four mile radius from the epicenter was destroyed entirely. Significant damage extending up to twenty miles from epicenter. Nothing left of value within projected range of Wendigo's fifth stage transformation."

The mass of rubble and ruins were consumed as we watched. It was slower than the ones before it, but then each of those were slower than the last as well. Wendigo stood there, now obese. The blue destructive mist hovered around her body like a cloud, destroying everything it touched, not that there was anything left for it to destroy but rubble.

"Do... do we go back and attack it?" Missy asked. Her voice was shaky and unstable.

"No... no," I wasn't sure she even heard me. "There's no point. Nothing left to save."

Even after all of that, nothing could have prepared us for what happened next.

=================

A/N- I'm an asshole!

Also: yup. Dragon totally built a world killing orbital cannon. Why wouldn't she?
I walked through what passed for a base for the Adepts. Not a lot to look at, really, just an apartment. My parents' house was so much bigger, and they were just farmers. Not that there was anything wrong with not being wealthy, but the Adepts liked to play at the bullshit pretentious elitism, out of a small dorm. The occult symbols strewn about only served to annoy me further.

Their leader actually had a throne to sit on. Ugh. I said nothing, but I thought a lot of uncharitable things. He was one of the parahumans that didn't wear a mask, public identity of a sort. Or the complete lack of a civilian life. Robes with lettering that I didn't recognize, but I'd bet money wasn't even from a real language. He was a little on the older side, a little on the pudgier side, and not at all impressive looking. He was also a time traveler of some sort, one of the hardest kinds of parahumans to predict or fight.

"Pleasure to meet you, Rosary," he said with a smile that made me glad my new armor from Pantheon was so form concealing.

"Likewise, Aeon," I lied. No point in making waves with them. We were both, theoretically, part of the same meta organization, now, alongside a dozen others. Including some really heavy hitters like Pantheon and The Guild. That was the whole reason I was here, to work with one of their members. "It'll be interesting working in New York. I hope you don't mind, but I've made my own living arrangements already." With my aunt and uncle, not that you need to know that.

"That's perfectly alright," he agreed. "I've already sent for Shaman, he's the one you'll be working with."

I nodded. Anything to get out of here sooner.

The kid showed after another minute or so. He was college age, I'd guess. Not too much younger than me, but still younger. Black hair, obviously dyed. And I was pretty certain he was wearing makeup. "So you're the flower girl?" he asked.

"If you're referring to the visual effect of my power, then yes," I sighed. "C'mon, dust boy, let's do the power testing."

....

"Basically, my power lets me break down an object into leaflike shapes, control those shapes telekinetically, and rebuild the object later if I want," I showed him, disassembling a brick into a few dozen pieces. "It rebuilds things perfectly, so I can even move electronic devices with it."
He whistled appreciatively. "Damn, with that power you'd be an insanely good thief. Such a tragedy you had to be one of the goody two shoes."

I frowned. "Yes, because I go through hell, get blessed by God, and the tragedy is when I choose not using that power to rob appliance outlets."

"Hey, there are worse things you can do with your time," he shrugged.

"True, I could write shitty emo poetry and cry about how no one respects me," I smirked. He didn't say anything, but the way he didn't say anything let me know I hit an actual nerve. I couldn't help but smile.

"Or sit around performing nonsense rituals that accomplish nothing?" he snarked back.

This time, I did roll my eyes. "Says the so-called magic user."

"Oh, I know that's bullshit," he replied. "Well, maybe not. Ain't like we can prove powers aren't magic. Pixies, aliens, standard white Jesus, flying spaghetti monsters. Your guess is as good as mine. But at least the Adepts have useful bullshit. Ways to really use your powers to their fullest by combining them with the right mental focus and equipment. Which is what we're doing right now, learning how to use our powers better."

"Okay, fine, so how's your power work, then? Or do you have no opinions about that?"

"I manipulate properties of matter. Touch it, change it into whatever I like, more or less. Only works on solids. I'm not really a telekinetic like you are, but if I want I can lock matter in place so it can't be moved by anything. Make something unbreakable. And it really is unbreakable. Know that chick with Pantheon? Atropos? The one whose power cuts through Endbringers?"

"Duh," I replied. Everyone knows her.

"Yeah, my power, it even stops hers cold," he responded. "Nothing can touch the things I control, unless I allow it."

"Really? Wow, that's quite a power. "Well, they did say we could be the next Endslayer combination for a reason."

....
"You don't actually do anything?" I asked. "At all? What happened to going out and patrolling? Thought you guys were heroes now?"

"More like rogues, now," he answered. "We're basically just coasting on past scores and the new rep with Pantheon. Sure, shit goes all pear-shaped, we'll go out and kick its ass, but that whole wandering around punching muggers? That shit's for the heroes trying to make the press or some shit. Most of us are just in it for the money, and there's no money in that. Plus it's the middle of winter and freezing balls out there."

"We have some of the best battle armor on earth," I pointed out. "We could spend our time hanging out in the arctic circle without any problem, I don't think New York winters are that bad in comparison."

"Yeah, but the crooks don't have our armor," he replied. "If they're out there in that weather, they've earned it. But they won't be. Take it from someone who knows. Criminals are lazy, and lazy people don't go out in weather like that."

I sighed. "Come on, we're going out on a patrol," I insisted, grabbing the lazy brat by his hair. "Or I'll throw you out the window without the armor and then call the cops to take your stash."

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Fuck, okay, I'll come!" he muttered. "But only because I got to see your high beams."

"My what?"

"Your high beams," he made a gesture at his chest.

Oh. Oh. "Just shut up and get your armor on," I sighed.

....

"Not an atheist, just don't care," he replied. We were sitting on the edge of one of the many skyscrapers in New York. The city was beautiful, in its own overcrowded, polluted, noisy, dirty, gray way. Turned out, he was right, criminals don't come out in this weather. No one comes out in this weather.

"So, agnostic?" I suggested. "You don't believe we can know if there is or isn't a God?"

"How about an 'apathetic'?'" he responded. "It's not about whether it's true or not. It's that I don't
think it matters. Same way I believe it doesn't matter who won the Oscars, and for pretty much the exact same reasons. You find a way to prove God exists, and I still won't care. Of course, you'll probably get the Nobel prize or something, so you'll be rich and what I think won't matter to you, either."

"That's..." I hesitated. "I don't even know how to respond to that."

"No one does, that's my favorite part about it," he replied. "Don't know, don't care, and have no opinion is the best way to not have to talk to people who don't know, do care, have strong opinions, and think they know."

_He has a point._

....

"Okay, I have to admit, that was kinda fun," he laughed. The police sirens were just barely close enough to be heard, but approaching fast.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up asshole," Splash muttered, trapped in a cage I'd built out of a store window. He was a Case 53 that was made out of living water, or something similar to it. Coupled with his brute powers, well, containing him wasn't what one would call a simple task. I'll have to do something to apologize to the owners later. "Now can you at least give me back my pants?"

"You mean these?" Shaman lifted up a ratty pair of jeans. "Maybe if you tell me who you're working for now. Ain't the Teeth, they got their asses beat down so hard they'll never be comin' back."

"Fuck you, I ain't a snitch," he spat at the glass wall.

"Okay, fine," Shaman shrugged. "But if you're thinking about changing your mind, you might want to do it fast. See, no one's ever caught you before, and that's going to be front page news."

"You wouldn't dare," he punched the wall. But between Shaman's power and mine, well, that glass was going nowhere.

"Dare what?" Shaman leaned against the glass, facing toward me. "I already called that one chick. The one with the nice rack. Rosary, you know who I'm talking about, right?"

"Not really," I shook my head. _Such a pig._
"Yeah, you're right, they all have nice racks," he tapped the cage. "Seriously, though, it's not my fault you climbed out of them to get away. So you'll answer my questions or you're going to be front page news. Starting with the most important question of all. Why the hell would you go commando in the middle of fucking January?"

....

"We've never done anything this large, before," I muttered. "Are you sure you can handle it?" The way his power works, this could kill him even if everything goes right.

"Hey, you've seen what that thing's doing, Tams," he forced a smile. Both his hands were on the sides of a small building, tuning it to his power. We'd been here for almost ten minutes while the battle raged on. "If this works, we'll be heroes. Like, the biggest heroes. Interviews, life story deals, women throwing themselves at our feet. Guys, too, if you're into that sorta thing."

"If it doesn't work, we're going to die," I pointed out. Utterly ignoring the other comments.

"Yeah, well, who wants to live forever?" he replied dismissively. Then his face got serious. "Just promise me one thing, for real."

"What?" I asked.

"If you happen to be right, and you meet God, can you ask him to give me some iced tea? I think I'm going to need it," he smiled. I considered slapping him, but the sweat running off the side of his face despite our Pantheon-gifted armor systems stopped me. He's scared, this is how he copes. "Oh, and brace yourself, this one's gonna be close."

There was the distinctive crackle and boom as the lightning-strike-like effect of the new Endbringer consuming a mass of the city for her body occurred yet again. The shockwave nearly knocked me off my feet, as air rushed to fill the vacuum left by the air being annihilated, consumed, and converted to Endbringer tissue. "You could have warned me sooner!" I shouted.

"Hey, I'm busy punching everything the human race knows about the laws of physics in its sweat dripping gonads, I have a right to amuse myself at the expense of anyone I want. Now, are you ready to do your part?"

"I'm ready," I agreed. Normally, breaking down something this large, while in my power, was basically useless for me. Today was different. The building started splintering tiny amounts at a time, turning into what was more or less a pile of coins. I kept them from falling on top of us and killing us but, but that was about the extent of what I could do with so much mass. My suit did its thing, responding as it was programed to generate a wide antigravity field to make my job easier, allowing me to hold a lot more weight. Several thousand tons of raw mass were now under my control, and..."
infused with Shaman's power. We were ready to do our part.
The Endbringer froze in place. And then fell over on its side.

"Fuck yes!" a man's voice shouted over the armbands. "We took it alive! We captured a fucking Endbringer!" ShockConfusionAwe.

"Umm," a woman's voice cut in. "This is Rosary, from Haven. What Shaman meant to say is that we've managed to paralyze the Endbringer. For the time being, at least. It's still alive, but unable to actually move. Requesting immediate aid, because this is stressing our powers to the limit."

"They... how?" I muttered. HorrorGuiltFailure. Oh god, we destroyed Brockton Bay. For fucking nothing.

"Understood," Taylor replied. I felt the offload of her emotions, as well as the regret for doing so. It's okay, I'll be strong. I can handle it for the time being. "Shunting over our Tinkers and Thinkers. We'll try to find a way to help."

I closed my eyes and cried, clinging to Taylor. A lot of it was my own guilt as well, of course, but the stress of holding both of us together was agony. It was such a relief when she took up her side of the slack that I almost fell over from the lack of emotion.

"Thank you for that," she whispered. "They're going to need your power a lot more than me right now."

"You mean?" I asked. ConfirmationCertaintyFear. Thank you so much. I pushed my emotions down into the bond, forced myself to pretend I didn't feel them. Taylor clung tighter against me. I tried not to think about what I was now putting Taylor through, knowing that thinking about it would only make things worse for her. I need someone to help her while I'm in Brockton Bay. Away from her. I couldn't ask Lisa to do it, we might need her. Taylor wasn't really close to anyone other than the pair of us. "Crystal?" I spoke over our system.

"I'm here," she replied. "What do you need?"

"Look after Taylor for a bit," I asked her. "I'll explain later."

"Okay," she sounded concerned, but she didn't hesitate. I looked at my partner. Sorry, I'll try not to take any longer than I have to. I shunted over.
Brockton Bay was... there was no Brockton Bay. Miles around was smooth as glass, from the Endbringer's power. Water was already pouring in from the bay, but this far inland it was reduced to little more than a fast moving stream. Nothing Dryad's extra bulk couldn't manage easily. I activated the hover setting and moved toward the epicenter.

"To the right," Riley informed me. I had to use the telescopic zoom to find two people sitting on a demolished building, just outside the Endbringer's effect. We did that. Not the Endbringer. Us. That building, the others behind it, those would have survived if not for us. I tried not to think about it, the more I did, the worse things would be for Taylor. She's being strong for me, I'll be strong for her.

I reached the pair. The woman, Rosary, stood to greet me. I didn't give her a chance for pleasantries. The sooner this is done, the sooner I can get back to Taylor. "I'm a healer," I told them, immediately feeling stupid because of course they knew that.

"I'll be fine for a while," Rosary responded. "He's going to need your help right away."

I put my hand on his shoulder, letting my armor partially meld with is. I recognized the design, it was full of organels producing inorganic spores. Right, that suit. I remembered because this was the guy who could counter Lily's power.

He was in bad shape. Exhaustion equivalent to three days without sleep, a rapidly worsening migraine, and minor brain swelling around the Pollentia. "I'll do what I can," I told them. I started mending his body first, and hesitated for only a moment before reaching into his brain. I reduced the swelling and did my best for the headache. Eventually choosing to give up and turn off his ability to sense pain entirely. That's something I can fix later.

"Fifteen minutes," Riley spoke up. I could tell she was talking over the coms. Probably to Lisa. "Twenty if we're lucky. Then his power collapses. Honestly I'm not sure how he held on long enough to be healed."

Fuck. "We don't have a lot of time," I told the pair.

"Get us closer," Rosary instructed. "This is harder at range."

I nodded, and touched her armor, allowing mine to meld with it as well. Activating all our antigrav fields at once, I used mine to pull us toward the paralyzed Endbringer. By the time I'd gotten there, everyone else was already talking. The Triumvirate, Dragon, Defiant, Narwhal, Lisa, most of our thinkers. Vicky's not here, I realized. No, worry about her later. Taylor's under enough pressure.

There was a layer of forcefields blocking Wendigo, and the nanothorn mist that it was generating. If they hadn't completely encased it, the Endbringer would have sank god only knows how far into the earth by now.
"Moving it will be impossible," Lisa replied. "Shaman's power is absolute, and pretty much evenly dispersed throughout the Endbringer. And don't bother suggesting shunting it somewhere, that won't work. The best we could hope to achieve is stripping off a few layers to expose the core. And even if we could, we would need a world we thought for a second it couldn't escape from. Spoiler alert: we don't have one of those. Endmakers are clearly capable of dimensional travel, it would return."

"I suppose the same immovability also makes it indestructible," Defiant asked.

"Pretty much," Lisa shrugged. "This bought us time, sure, but only time."

"Same strategy as before?" I asked. "Another fifteen minutes to evac the region outside of the city could save tens of thousands of lives."

"Already on it," Alexandria replied.

"Eidolon, any ideas?" I asked. "A power that can kill it while it's paralyzed like this?"

"I can't do anything to it while it's still being locked down by this power," he admitted. "I can damage parts of it, and that's all."

"And if we damage it without destroying it, then it'll just activate its final stage, and everything will be annihilated anyway. Letting it go would without taking advantage of its current state would be less destructive in the long run."

"Forcefields and containment foam," Lily replied. "I can control what my power hurts, ignores, or is effected by. Give me a few containers of foam, or better yet that gel stuff. It'll expand into everywhere inside this thing. When Shaman's power wears off, it'll expand there, too."

"I... I can shut it off in pieces," Shaman gasped. "Already have. I'm just controlling the outer layers right now, and parts of the inside. Less than half of what I started with."

"Dragon?" Lisa asked. "Your tech best suited for this. We'll probably lose a few ships. Oh, and use magnetically attuned shielding, not the kinetic stuff. Everyone else, we need to retreat. If this goes wrong in any way, we don't want to be anywhere nearby."

A few of the suits started taking their position, while Taylor, bless her, still had the presence of mind to bring in a few of the containment gel suicide bombers. They were promptly gutted by Lily, who pulled out the foam container tanks. I wasn't sure all the difference between the typical foam, and this gel, except that it was a more densely packed recipe. It didn't leave breathable air pockets, and it was
a strong enough adhesive that it would eat away at skin. Forbidden to be used except against targets with kill orders, and restricted even then because of the danger it presented to the area. If it weren't for how Endbringers always seemed to have some new trick up their fucking sleeves every time you had one cornered, it might even be able to hold them.

"Will you be safe when we breach the container?" Dragon asked Lily.

"No need," she responded. "It'll breach itself when I use my power on it. Just get everyone to safety." She hovered up and landed atop Wendigo, ignoring the wisps of blue nanothorns that washed across her armor. Her power in action. Her feet sank slightly into the Endbringer's corpulent stomach.

We all started shunting across. "Wait," Shaman gasped. "If I move over, my power will wear off."

Fuck. "Can you shield yourself?"

"Not right now," he admitted. "It's either my armor, or the Endbringer. Pretty soon it won't even be that. Don't worry, I'll just have to hope that forcefield holds long enough."

"Climb into that," Trevor pointed at one of the now eviscerated suicide bombers. "Still has a shunt drive. I can help Dragon slave it to one of her tracking AIs."

"Y'know, I always knew the hero business was a shit job," he muttered, as Rosary helped him make his way to the artificial lifeform that was only alive on a technical level. I followed over, healing and sealing the thing around him. Cost me a few pounds of mass from my Dryad to make that work, but it did work.

"Okay, he's secure," I informed the others. By now, almost no one was here in person. I infused my armor around Rapture's and shunted us both over.

It didn't look like much, from the other side. One moment there was Lily in a cloud of mist that was melting as it touched her. The next, a giant light gray polyhedron made where all the shields overlapped. It wasn't a particularly uniform geometry, consisting over curves in some areas, various shapes in others, forming an oblong shape overall. Kind of like a clear balloon filled with lumpy oatmeal.

"Don't worry, I'm alive and well in here," Lily replied. "Kinda hard to breathe. Aren't these suits suppose to be protected from that?"

"Up to one kilometer underwater," Emma confirmed. "Don't worry, the structural integrity field's still holding, you'll be fine."
"Trade you," Shaman muttered. "I'm going to let small parts go at a time. Tell me when you sense your power finish covering its interior."

"My power doesn't work that way," Lily replied.

"No shit?" he chuckled painfully. "You always did make me do all the work. I'll tell you when I'm done."

I stopped exploiting the bond to keep me stable, rushing to hold Taylor. *Sorry, so so sorry.* *ReliefAcceptanceLove.* I squeezed her, as we both dealt with the wash of pain, guilt, and uncertainty.

===============

Foreshadowed, Ch 194
It took another four minutes before Shaman finally spoke again. "That's it," he gasped. "I've let go of everything I had in there. If it's still alive, it's not my fault. If it's dead, I demand top billing." FearHopeAnticipationUncertainty.

"Give it another minute," Lisa instructed. "You okay in there, Atropos?"

"Considering if this doesn't work I'm going to be turned into Endbringer parts?" she replied. "Yeah, I'm just peachy."

"Don't think it can," Minerva replied. "Either it only has five stages, or the damage we did forced it straight to the sixth."

"So it's dead?" Alexandria asked. It was the question everyone wanted to know.

"Can't say," Lisa admitted. "The way its body works, there's no way to know. If we're being honest, I doubt it's dead." DismayFailure. Amelia held me tighter. I should be bothered that we're being this emotional in full view of so many heroes, I realized, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Meanwhile, Lisa kept speaking. "It lost this battle, one way or the other. Now we know how to stop it before it evolves into its top stages. Whether it's dead or not, we won. This Endbringer won't be able to destroy much more than a city block the next time we fight it, and it'll be a long time before it's recovered enough to fight again."

"That's... some consolation, at least," Alexandria agreed.

"Dude, that's so fucking unfair," Shaman spoke over the com.

"Look at it this way," Atropos piped up. "Kill an Endbringer once, you're the big damn hero once. Kick the shit out of an Endbringer and it gets away, you're a big damn hero once a year."

"Oh. Oh fuck." Minerva muttered.

"What is it?" Alexandria asked.

"Nothing I'm ready to talk about right now," Minerva replied. Alexandria met her gaze, and the two women regarded each other silently for what felt like far too long. "You'll have to forgive me, but I can't say it right now. I don't even know if I'm right."
"I suppose we'll have to remain in suspense, then," Alexandria replied, not sounding particularly happy.

"Hold on," Chevalier interrupted. "This isn't going to be an issue, is it? I don't like allies keeping secrets, not about something like the Endbringers."

"It's not about the Endbringers," Minerva responded. "Or at least nothing of immediate use or value. We'd be here for the next six months if I told you every little hunch I have about them that will probably go nowhere. They are resistant to Thinker powers, after all."

Chevalier didn't seem particularly happy with that answer, but he let it rest nonetheless. I, meanwhile, wondered what Lisa figured out.

"We need to start taking inventory of the losses," I managed to speak up. PainFear. Right. I turned off the com for a second. "Don't worry, Victoria's alive. Don't know about 'well', but as fast as she regenerates, she'll be alright soon and complaining that she doesn't even get a cool looking scar for her troubles. HopeReliefGratitude.

"Brockton Bay is a total loss," Emma replied, sounding tired. "Over eighty percent of the city was destroyed completely, and what's still standing is in worse shape than it was after the S9's attack. GuiltPainLoss. How much of that is her feelings, how much of it mine? In all honesty, most of it was probably her. I wasn't all that fond of Brockton Bay. Its corruption and bullshit ran straight up to the top. Sure, when we needed to, we exploited the fuck out of it, but that wasn't something that made me like it any better. If anything, that just made me hate it that much more. Dad's going to be ruined, though.

"But... we can restore it, right?" Amelia asked.

"With what?" Emma replied. "Maybe the stuff around the edges could be salvaged for raw material. But the central portion of the city is now a shallow saltwater lake. It'd be cheaper and easier just to build an entirely new city nearby than it would to restore this one."

"I could use the Yggdrasil to replace the mass," Amelia offered, I could tell from her voice that she'd been crying, even if the link hadn't made it painfully clear. "Spread it, kill it, let it decompose into a new layer of soil. Everything we're doing on Avalon."

"Dragon," Emma turned toward the older, more respected, Trump-Tinker. "If I'm wrong, please tell me."
"You're not," Dragon admitted. "I'm sorry. The Yggdrasil could support, at most, a population of fifty thousand using the space available in Brockton Bay. And that's if dedicated solely to living space, not including utilities, or places of employment. At best, we might be able to demolish the buildings beyond and use them for raw materials, but that would require months to achieve anything notable. Decades before the city will be recognizable as such again. We saved as many people as we possibly could, but the city itself is lost." *Failure*GuiltDespair.

"We can do other things to help," Crystal offered, the same soft voice that she used to comfort me when I was dealing with the combined weight of my guilt and Amelia's. *She'll make an amazing mother, some day.* "We already accept refugees. Maybe we can alter the policy some. Offer, like, temporary citizenship or whatever. A few square miles might not be much, but we can set aside a thousand miles of space on Avalon without so much as blinking an eye. Restore the portal, rebuild our Embassy space, at least. Trying to rebuild the city overnight is impossible. But as long as we keep our portal here, people will have reason to return." *Relief*GratitudeHope.

I smiled at Crystal. "Thanks," I mouthed silently. "Amelia, we're going to need your help a bit," I stroked my partner's shoulder.

"Okay," she sighed, allowing me to lead her to where Atropos, Shaman and Rosary were.

"Is he going to be okay?" Rosary asked as Amelia knelt down to touch both of them.

"Yeah," she responded. "Exhaustion is the biggest risk, a bit of dehydration and hyperthermia. He's going to feel like hell for the next couple days, but if he stays hydrated he'll be fine."

"I'll be sure to let someone know," she sighed.

"Aww, you really do care," Shaman spoke. I could hear the smirk in his voice.

"Yeah, I care," she replied. "Your power's the one thing between Wendigo and another destroyed city. I'd be a moron to not care."

"Speaking of, thanks for the fucking buzzkill. Thought we killed that bitch for real."

"Maybe, maybe not," Minerva responded. "It's a decentralized being. If any part of it was outside of the forcefields when we started killing it, then it will be back. Don't know how long it'll take to recover from that much damage, though. It will likely be two or three years before it attacks again, maybe a full decade."

"So, good as dead, then," Alexandria replied.
"Probably," Lisa answered.

"Fuck, I'll take it," Shaman replied. "Now I'm gonna go home and celebrate by getting shitfaced. If I'm gonna have a headache anyway, might as well earn it."

"No alcohol," Amelia instructed. "That'll just dehydrate you more."

"That's it, next Endbringer, I'm staying in bed."

"Then we'll report it as destroyed," Chevalier responded. "After Chongqing and Bucharest and now this, we need to be able to claim a victory. A destroyed Endbringer is a victory, even with the price being this high." GuiltShameFailure.

==============

A/N- My spellcheck didn't know hyperthermia was a word.
When did I become a healer again? I wondered. Oh, right, when I was responsible for the injuries in the first place, as well as leaving three hundred thousand people homeless. Or dead, can't forget the ones that my orders killed.

Rey's medical training actually proved really useful, letting me affect professional doctor behavior, instead of the piss poor attempts at professionalism than I made as Panacea. I'd somehow managed to forget what it was like being Panacea, in those months I'd spent with Pantheon. The exhaustion and guilt were things I'd managed to leave behind. *Good luck having that happen again.*

"Okay, Ellen, you're all done," I told the child I'd been working on.

"I found her parents," Taylor told me over the suit. *She's using her control override, not actually speaking, she must be really busy.* "I'm already leading them to you, it'll be a few more minutes."

"You hear that?" I smiled at the girl, doing the best I could to mean it. "You'll be back together with your family soon."

"Yes," she agreed happily, entirely unaware that I was responsible for so much of her pain. That only served to make me feel worse. She was a cute kid, only six years old based on my admittedly inaccurate power's impression. Tall for her age, and surprisingly cheerful for someone who recently had an eight inch long piece of glass sticking out of her stomach.

*That's one of ours,* I reminded myself. *That's an injury that would not have happened if we hadn't fired that damn weapon. One of many others like her, who were hurt or dead because we wanted to hurt an Endbringer more than we wanted to protect people.*

....

"We can't repeat what happened today," I sighed, plopping down on my bed next to Taylor. "Never again." *ConcernAgreementSupport.* She reached over and rubbed my shoulders. There were advantages to her power, in that she didn't have to physically do work. I still did. The healing pods were good for some stuff, but only some. Surface injuries, like cuts and burns, were easiest for them. Internal damage more likely needed personal attention from me or one of our Tinkers.

And I didn't have the multitasking to handle multiple targets, not like Taylor did at least. Trying to heal two people at once was... well, mistakes could easily be made, some of them might take years to be noticed. Up to and including accidentally altering hormone productions to the wrong sex, or partially rewriting someone's DNA. All of which ultimately meant one thing. There was no shortcut for me to mass heal, because healing was not what my power was made to do.
"I know," she sighed. "We could make all kinds of arguments about how 'necessary' it was, how we needed to let the Endmakers know that we wouldn't allow them to manipulate us, we wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Or that we used the minimal force necessary to lethally attack the Endbringer. That the damage could have been worse, if it had managed to escalate to stage 6. Fuck, even if we didn't use Bolla, that stage five power would have guaranteed the death of the city. But you already know all that, and it's not any kind of comfort."

"And that's what really bothers me, Taylor," I rolled onto my stomach and she straddled my legs to get a good angle for her massage. She was actually physically restless, a counterpoint my exhaustion. "All the justification and excuses. When we started Pantheon, it was to get away from that sort of bullshit. To do the right thing instead of doing the useful thing. When did we forget about all that?"

*HesitationConcern.* "Leaving aside our reasons for allowing Bonesaw to live?" she asked. I frowned. *Riley was- NegationRegret.* "I didn't mean it like that. Don't get me wrong, it turned out to be the right choice, both pragmatically and morally. But your reasons were selfish."

I hesitated for a second. "Yeah, you're right," I admitted. "Fuck, for all our talk of making things better, of not being callous uncaring authorities... we're complete fucking hypocrites, aren't we?"

"We've still done a lot of good," Taylor insisted. "Maybe we bit off more than we could chew with the Endbringers. We couldn't have known that there were so many more of them that could exist. We couldn't have known they could be made so damn hard to kill." *FrustrationHelplessnessHate.* "Maybe we fucked up by kicking over the hornet's nest, but we did it with the best of intentions."

"Still doesn't really answer my question," my sigh turned into a moan as Taylor hit a sweet spot right under my shoulder blade.

"Scion," Taylor answered. "I think it was when we realized what Scion was."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," I admitted. "Things do sorta take a different context when we're talking the end of not just this world, but millions of others. Trillions of people." I squeezed my eyes shut, letting the little bit of tears I still had left out. "I don't want to be that person, Taylor. I don't want to be someone who can kill millions to save billions. I get that we can't save everyone, I get that we'll have to make choices to save some people instead of others. I don't like that, but I can blame it on the monsters we're fighting. But... what we did to Brockton Bay crossed the line. It wasn't necessary. It was us proving a point."

*GuiltSupport.* "You're right," she sighed. She leaned down and hugged me, as much as was possible in our current position. Her head rested on my back. "Wouldn't that just be the worst outcome? Save everyone, and then look back and decide it wasn't worth it?"
"Yeah," I sighed, trying not to focus too much on Taylor's body pressed against mine. Even if it could have led somewhere, I wasn't in a state to enjoy it. "What's even the point of fighting, if you have to give up everything you're fighting for in the process?" AgreementSupportLove.

"You always were the heart of this partnership," she nuzzled her face against my back.

"Me?" I scoffed. The things I've done.

"Yes, you," Taylor squeezed me. "God knows it's not me. You're the one who wants to save everyone. The one who makes me want to be a better person. I don't really want to think of who I'd be without you. It wouldn't be someone I liked."

"You're getting all sappy on me, Taylor," I pointed out.

"Yup," she answered. "Can't imagine I'd do that before meeting you, either. Speaking of charity cases who you've saved, guess what I just caught your little sister doing?"

"Uh oh," I muttered. "Please tell me it's not completely horrible."

"Well, only for Theo, I think," she chuckled. "And you, maybe. Remember that tech they were using to extrapolate Victoria's DNA based on her appearance?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"It works in reverse," Taylor replied. "Turns out, she's extrapolated a couple dozen possible offspring for herself. What particular combinations between her, Theo, and Missy might look like."

"Uh... I should probably have a talk with her about that one," I replied. "Missy and Theo, too."

"I already did. Turns out, she's made a bunch of them," Taylor informed me. "Emma and Zach, Rey and Rapture, and it comes as no surprise that she's done the two of us."

I blinked. Us. Taylor and I. PleasedWarmLove. "Wow, you really like that idea, don't you?" Taylor chuckled.

I blushed hard. "Maybe..." I reluctantly admitted. "I don't even want kids, and Riley's enough of a handful, but there's something about the idea. Can't help but think about it. Instincts, I guess."
"Yeah," Taylor sighed. Her emotional undertones were even a little disappointed, subtle enough that I wasn't even sure she noticed them. Did she want children? That's probably something we should talk about, some day.

"Who knows what things will be like in a few years, though," I amended. "I'd rather us not be role models for teen mothers. Plus, that's one of those things that'd have to wait until after Scion for us to even think about considering."

Relief Agreement. I smiled. "That's what it all comes back to, doesn't it?" Taylor asked. "Scion, and what we're willing to sacrifice to stop him."
"Anima, need you to go south," Eki radiod in. "Sveta just called in. She wants to help the rescue efforts. Victoria's with her. She has the power to see living things through walls, so she'll be able to speed things up a lot for you."

"Okay," I answered back. I still wasn't sure about how I felt about Crystal as a leader. She was good at caring for us and worrying about how we felt, but she sucks at the whole 'command' part of being a commander. She could have simply told me to go meet up with Sveta and Victoria, and I'd have accepted it. Instead she had to explain why she was giving the order. *Oh well, it's way better than being treated like I'm nothing more than a disposable storm trooper or something. "Hey, GL, we're meeting up with Sveta and Victoria."

"Awesome," the man responded, and the ground shimmered nearby as he concentrated into an area. 'He' might be a misleading concept, though, since the Case 53 didn't have a body of his own. But his personality was definitely on the male side of things. He pulled together a body of iron and dust, creating the armored humanoid form that he tended to use when not infused with the environment.

When we found Sveta, she was carrying another girl in a cobbled together rope harness. Once we got close, I realized the carried girl was missing both her legs and an arm. She seemed conscious, and was talking to Sveta, holding her one good arm around my teammate's neck.

"Lookin' good, blondie," Genius Loci spoke up first. "Did you lose some weight?" *Holy shit! What an asshole!*

"A few pounds, here or there," the girl responded. This close, I could see her resemblance to Eki. This was clearly Victoria. *Well, I guess since the two of them know each other it makes the joke okay. "I did it for you, by the way."

"Really?" he imitated a laugh. "You didn't need to go changing for me. I love you just the way you are."

"I know, but this way you actually stand a chance of lasting more than ten seconds in a fight with me," she retorted.

"Ouch," he muttered. "I don't even have a nervous system and I felt that one."

"I win yet again. Now, let's get to work saving people," Victoria replied cheerfully. "I'm gonna have to let you do the work for another hour or two. Getting hurt in the combat mode is a pain in the ass, so it'll be a while before I'm back on my feet. So to speak." Oh god her sense of humor is as bad as the rest of these idiots. Sveta offered an attempt at a polite laugh, but she didn't think the joke was
"So," Victoria continued as we started walking through the ruins of her home city. "We never got to meet, since you joined up after I had to transfer. Are you enjoying yourself on the team? Is Crystal doing a good job?"

"Uh..." I hesitated a little. "I kinda signed up to keep the Protectorate off my ass. And the Elite. Apparently they don't appreciate that I don't do this whole hero and villain bullshit. I just want to enjoy my life, that's all. Getting into fights all the time isn't something I consider fun."

She shrugged, which was slightly disturbing for her lack of an arm. "Yeah, I know a lot of people like that," she agreed. "Clotho's one of them. How's she doing, by the way? I haven't had a chance to talk to her a lot."

"Pretty good," I replied, carefully climbing a bit of rubble created where the road splintered and folded upward a few feet. I could have used the antigrav in the suit Pantheon provided, but that gave me motion sickness, so I avoided it as much as I could. "She's come along to help with my plays a couple times. Says a lot of good things about you, actually." I tactfully neglected to mention the times I caught her checking out my rear. Nothing would come of it anyway. Even if she didn't have a girlfriend, I wasn't into girls to begin with.

"That's good," she agreed. "Has everyone been treating Sveta right? Or do I have to smash some faces?"

"You don't have to worry about me," Sveta insisted. "I'm fine. Cr- Eki doesn't make me do anything too scary."

_Crystal coddles her like an adopted little sister_, I supplied silently. "Sveta's a big help. Not that we really need it. Crystal came up with a scheme. Let a rumor get out that you only left because LA was too boring for you, and you'd be back when there were more criminals. Turns out you're a great crime deterrent."

"Man, I bet Alexandria was pissed when that happened," she laughed. "Told you it'd be fine. Sorry it's boring, but I know you rock the house when you get the chance."

"I kinda like it boring," Sveta replied, sounding a little bashful. I'd have to find out how the two of them knew each other, because their personalities couldn't be any more different.

"Alright, looks like we got some survivors. Six people in there," She pointed at a mini mall a bit over a block away. "One woman has a broken leg, the others are scrapes and bruises, nothing five minutes in a pod won't fix."
"That's good," I replied. *That's pretty detailed information at such a range,* I noted with surprise.

"Can you summon up a couple unicorns to take them back to the teams?" she asked. *Oh god damn it.*

"I'll need to include someone who can lead the animals," I sighed. By this point, we'd gotten close to the building. It was in good shape all considered. Just the glass doors had shattered.

"You should probably go in and get them, too," she suggested. "There are a couple kids, and I wouldn't want to make them cry. Maybe after I regrow a limb or two."

"Yeah, I can do that," I agreed. I really hate doing this. A form shimmered, and a dozen knights in beautiful and ornate sky blue colored plate mail appeared, along with a dozen winged horses. All looked more like well drawn cartoons than actual animals or people. Also included were pixies for each of us. This spread was more than we needed right now, but there would be more who needed help in the future, and I really didn't want to have to explain everything more than once.

"You have need of us, our Queen?" one of the knights asked, his voice deep and calm.

"Yes," I answered, feeling my face turn red, and ever so glad my armor hid it. *This is humiliating.* "There was a disaster, and people are hurt. We're seeking the injured and bringing them to the healers."

"We understand," the knight bowed with a elegance that would have been completely impossible in real armor. "Truly your mercy is legendary." Hate my power. Hate it hate it hate it. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to hide my utter mortification.

"These are my allies," that's as close as I could come to calling someone an equal or a friend that their mental programming could comprehend. Things rarely went well when I tried to get them to respond outside that program. They were never violent, but often humiliating. "You will follow their instructions as if my own during this mission. They..." I cringed internally. "Have powerful magic, trust them to use it."

What I hated most, perhaps, was they never remembered, and could not learn. I had to give this, or a similar, speech every time I used a summon that could be considered intelligent. The animal summons were a bit different. But at least at this range I could give, if not instructions, then at least assumptions, automically. The shrinks still had a debate as to whether or not my powers were responding to my will telepathically, or simply reading body language on a really subtle level, but either way they took their positions without needing me to give actual commands to each of them. A couple pixies flitted over to Sveta, and another to GL. Those two had dealt with my power enough to know the drill.
One of the knights approached Victoria. "M'lady, you seem to be injured," he started. "I avail my services and my steed if you have need of them. That way your companion need not trouble herself."

"Uh, no, I'm fine," Vicky stuttered a little. Wow, she's actually speechless. "Thanks for the offer, but we really don't need any help. There are others who've been injured, worry about them."

"As you wish, m'lady," the knight nodded, then took up a position beside Sveta. Meanwhile, the pixies that went to those two had decided their project would be to clean Victoria's tangled hair. Unlike the knights, they didn't bother with the whole 'respect personal boundaries' thing.

I left the rest of the group behind while my knight and four of the animals followed me into the mall. The people were easy enough to find. "I'm Anima," I announced. "I'm with Pantheon. We're here to help."

"Is it gone?" one of the men asked.

"The Endbringer? Yes," I informed him. "We... it's dead, now. I'm afraid I don't know all the details, I'm not in charge. I'm part of the search party to find survivors and get them medical attention. Or at least somewhere warm."

One of the children stood there staring at the horse.

"Don't worry, it's safe," I told him. "They're made from my power, you're safe to touch it."

He did so, stroking near its shoulder. "It's cold," he finally spoke.

And the fur's wrong, and the texture's wrong, and everything inside feels like pressing against a gel pack, not a living thing. I'd heard all these things a thousand times, so I didn't say anything. That and they weren't really cold, so much as they had no temperature at all. Perfectly nonconductive unless you hit them with enough power to break them.

"I shall lead you to hospice," my knight volunteered. I tried not to let them see how humiliated I was. I hate my power so much.

A/N- Being Anima is humiliation.
"Are you okay?" a girl's voice wept. "Please, you can't die." I glanced at her. Sveta, I recognized my work anywhere. That and, as cosmetically human as she looked, and for all the modifications I did to her brain, she was still very much nonhuman in her biology.

"Funny you should mention that," I smiled. "I'm pretty sure I actually can't die." I turned my biosense inward. My legs were smashed when I was in my combat mode. Well, that's going to be a bitch to heal. My arm was missing, still. My suit was so badly shredded that it was going to die, one way or another. Patches of it looked like they were exposed to an atomizer. "Damn, if I keep ruining suits, they're going to start charging me for them. So what happened."

"Alexandria and I saved you from being squished by Wendigo," Sveta told me. "Or melted, she had some kind of mist that ate things."

"Nanothorns," I told her. "They're a weapon that Dragon uses. Don't worry, they can't hurt me." Although Dragon's version was gray, and couldn't hurt me if I were in combat mode. But Wendigo used blue, and hers could very definitely hurt me for whatever bullshit reason. "So, what happened after that?"

"They told us to retreat, so I took you with me. And then the city blew up," she answered. "It's... you had to see it, I can't really explain. And then the Endbringer did that thing where it eats everything... and... I've never been so scared before." She started crying again. Or a close imitation of it, at least. The mechanics of it weren't exact, because if I pushed her alterations too much, her powers would revert her back to her tentacle state.

"So you saved me, huh?" I asked. "That puts you on a very short list of very important people. Could you do me a favor?"

"Okay?" she asked.

"If anyone asks, please don't tell them I was knocked out. Girl's gotta protect her rep."

She smiled a little. "Okay, I can do that."

"My armor's shredded," I sighed. This stuff is suppose to be able to survive a small nuclear weapon, and against that Endbringer it was little more than tissue paper. "Can you call someone and let them know you're okay?"
"Okay," Sveta tried to smile. "How are you so brave? You almost died."

*Because the alternative is hiding under my bed until I die of old age.* "Just time and experience. Think about it, you went up against an Endbringer. And not just any Endbringer. That one might be the new hero killer, since Behemoth's already dead. You fought that thing side by side with Alexandria and proved that you belonged there. You're one of the top ten badasses on the planet right now. After that, what's left to be scared of?"

"It... it doesn't feel that way," she looked down.

I put my left hand, which was the only good limb I had right now, on her shoulder. "That's because you're young. You'll get the hang of it. Besides, being a little scared is a good thing. Keeps you on your toes so you don't make dumb mistakes. Now, could you make that call?"

"Alright," she nodded, a little more sure of herself. "Eki? It's Sveta. Vicky's here, too... Yeah, we're both fine..." she looked at me. I smiled and shrugged. "Okay. They're doing search and rescue now. She wants to know if you're able to help."

"Sure," I agreed. "My powers are great for stuff like that."

"Okay, Vicky says her powers are good for finding people... she's sending Anima and GL to help us out."

"Oh, cool, always wanted to find out what Anima's power was," I smiled.

....

*I hate her power so much,* I thought, the whole time thanking my lucky stars I had this power set instead of my old set. Because I really didn't hate her power at all. I liked it just a little too much. The ability to hide my blush was nice, and not having my aura radiating my emotions to everyone in eyesight, was invaluable.

I knew what the Wards called me, 'Hurricane Victoria', and there was a reason for that. I didn't like how people reacted to certain emotions, so I didn't let myself feel them around others. Like if I was sad, or afraid, or... turned on. And Anima's imaginary characters knew how to press every last freakin' one of my buttons. And I was currently being carried bridal style by one of them.

Because I put all my efforts into regenerating my legs, I still didn't have an arm, and I had exhausted myself to the point where further healing would need to wait. I stumbled on some loose gravel, and the knight had caught me. And now he was carrying me, my one good arm was hung over the back of his neck. Surprisingly comfortable for plate armor. And in the minutes since, he'd been nothing
but quiet and polite. Not even an attempt at copping a feel, to my slowly increasing disappointment.

The pixies, on the other hand, were grabby as hell. But only in my hair. My long, blond hair was now woven into the most elaborate series of flowing and intertwined braids I had ever seen. Some of them were actually constructed by weaving the hairs together individually, then weaving those braids into larger ones. Forming something more like a rope than a braid. This is going to be a nightmare to comb out.

"Sorry about that," Anima muttered. "They're really enthusiastic about that whole 'chivalry' thing. That isn't even really chivalry."

"I've dealt with worse," I responded. She must never know. Oh god, Lisa. I have to kill Lisa. "So, are they always like this?"

"These ones are," she sighed. "They're actually the closest things to acting normal I have in my set of options. The wizards are okayish, but only helpful for offense. And the elves. I really hate the elves."

"Me, too," GL spoke up. "They're supposedly male, but they all look girlier than you, blondie. And they act it, too. But they're insanely good in a fight. It's like watching those Lord of the Rings movies in person, only with slightly less homoerotic subtext."

"What about that one time we caught three of them making out with each other in that alleyway?" Sveta asked. Poor Anima's emotions spiked through the roof with shame.

"Yes," GL replied, his tone completely flat.

"Don't worry about it too much," I spoke to Anima. "A lot of us have powers with weird implications that we can't control. Mine, for example. Put me in a room, and I know everyone who has an STD. Everyone who forgot to wash their hands after going to the bathroom. What everyone's eaten in the last five to ten hours, depending on what exactly they ate and a few other things. And I can't control it any more than you can control seeing things. I can also functionally see through clothes, which is something I really hope no one finds out about. And absolutely none of which is anything compared to what my old powers did."

"That does sound pretty bad," Anima admitted. Her emotions tapered down a bit, and the jealousy she felt toward me died down a little as well. Don't know why she felt jealous, the girl was a babe under that armor. "But at least you can hide it from people, I have to put up with it or go without using my intelligent summons."

"Look at it this way," I smiled. "If nothing else, you always have a career as the world's best hair stylist. I'd just be an MR-" I froze. Oh for the... now, really? I hate people, sometimes. "I think I found some people. I pointed east. Please tell me there are more.
We got awfully close before I spotted a few other locations to use. "GL, Sveta, got a few for you. Looks like they took shelter in a basement, and then the house collapsed. They're fine, but it's not safe. Digging them out normally might make it fall and kill them. Anima, we probably need a few more horses. I'll get the survivor in that deli over there. Meet back here in a few minutes."

"Got it," GL replied. His power was actually pretty impressive. Melding with, and controlling, the environment. It wasn't Labyrinth levels of power by any stretch, but he also got the ability to sense through the area he controlled and alter it in real time. If he could handle more than a small house worth of space at once, he'd be a power to reckon with. Still, situations like this, he was perfectly suited. He could reassure them while guiding Sveta and making sure the whole thing didn't come down on their heads.

And no one would question why I did mine alone, which was key. I extracted myself from the knight's arms. "Thanks," I spoke to him. "But it's better for me to handle this one. You know how easily small children can be frightened."

"Very well, m'lady," the knight agreed. It, and with my senses I could confirm it as sexless as a ken doll, simply stood there patiently waiting as I made my way into the building. The scent of the meat was faint despite the fact that the glass casing had shattered in the explosion. Electricity went out hours ago, and in this weather that meant the meat actually got colder, not warmer.

"Don't worry, I'm a hero. I'm here to take you to a temporary shelter," I shouted.

A fairly normal looking young man peaked out from a back room. I must have been quite the sight, with one arm missing and my legs bare below the knees, with only the tatters of my costume providing modesty above like really ratty shorts. "Who with?" he asked.

"Pantheon," I replied. "I'm Victoria. Sorry about the costume, it's not as tough as I am." I deliberately stretched out a leg to give the man a look. I could do that for a second or two, at least.

"Okay," he agreed, coming out. A child followed. Black. Still, I confirmed with my power that they weren't related.

"Hey," I smiled at her and knelt down. I reached into my hair and picked out the pixie that had built herself a little nest there. The things were actually really tough despite looking so fragile, so there was no chance of hurting it. I handed it to the girl. "She'll lead you out, okay?"

The child just nodded, afraid to say anything.

"Wait a minute-" the man started to protest. I stood up and stepped between the two. If the look on
my face didn't intimidate him, then the electricity sparking out of my eyes would. *Took me almost a month to perfect that display.*

The girl rushed out, sensing her chance.

"The fuck's going on here?" he demanded.

"My powers," I growled. Now that the child and pixie were gone, I could talk freely. If I wasn't aware that Khepri was pretty much omnipresent, I wouldn't have bothered talking. "I can sense living things. In this case, your genetic material inside that little girl." The insects nearby buzzed their response. *I have her attention, good.*

"You can't prove-" I hit him with a burst of electricity, one of the other tricks I'd spent forever on. It sent the exact same signals to the brain as being on fire. Over every last inch of the body simultaneously. All with less than a twentieth of the power output that a normal taser uses. He dropped, trying but unable to scream. I held my hand over his mouth, as gently as possible. I needed silence, not marks.

"I don't think you understand," I hissed. "I only found one survivor in this building." His eyes went wide, but again, it wasn't him I was doing this for. It was her. *If she wants to stop me, she'll tell me to stop.* She didn't.

The angle was calculated, of course, and gentle. A soft shove sideways put the man over one of the nastier panes of broken display glass. His left lung was cut through entirely, and his right punctured deeply. He couldn't scream if he tried, now. And damn did he try.

I turned and walked away, my powers very aware of his struggle to pull himself off the glass. That didn't bother me any, it would just speed up his death and hide my involvement that much better. No witnesses except a little girl that had worse things to worry about, an imaginary being that would cease to exist by the end of the day, and my sister's fiancée, who could have stopped me with a word, but did nothing.

*Some days I hate my powers, too. Today was not one of them.*

================

A/N- Well, that got dark fast.

Also: Taylor/Vicky bonding. It happens when someone belongs dead.
"Calling the first meeting of super social thinker committee to order," Minerva announced. *She's nervous, and hiding it with flippancy. She knows her information is important, using it to tease others, much like she did with the 'Emissary' title she selected for her status as an Avalon 'royal'.*

Around our table was an admittedly heady group of minds. Alexandria, Dragon, and myself were to be expected. Dinah Alcott was something of a surprise. **Attempting to be seen as adult, views being a child as a weakness, trauma brought on by abuse. No signs of physical or sexual abuse markers. Signs of behavior learned by addicts.**

I of course knew a bit about her history, having been rescued and placed under full protection by Pantheon. She was the most powerful known precog on the planet, now that the Simurgh was destroyed, so everyone considered it their business to know her story. Now I knew how she was controlled.

I spared glances at the others. Dragon was, again, using her robot body. There was a reason she was known as the world's best Tinker, and she'd never once let me see her real body, or even directly operated a puppet in front of me. Always it was through an AI filter. At first I had come to the conclusion that she didn't trust me, a fact I didn't blame her for in the slightest, given the things I'd done.

But I was sure she trusted me now, she wouldn't have had me work with Heartbreaker's children otherwise. Nor would she and Avalon allow me into the sensitive operations that they did, like this one. Both kept some secrets from me, but that wasn't a surprise. No, now I was certain she used a proxy because she had to. A severe disability, perhaps like cerebral palsy or ALS. Why she didn't have Pantheon repair the problem, I was unsure. Perhaps they couldn't? If the disease was caused by her power, they would have to remove her powers to heal her. That seemed the most likely answer.

All of that mental analysis happened in a heartbeat or two. Minerva started speaking again, her smile saying that she knew all of us used that time to have a short mental conversation with ourselves. "As I'm sure is no surprise, we're here to talk about the Endmakers." She was right, it none of us were surprised. "Well, I think we've been doing this all wrong. Here's a thought, and right now it's just a thought, but what are the odds that the Endmakers are actually trying to help us in their own twisted way?"

I almost made the mistake of exclaiming a negation of the idea. So, I noted, did Dinah. Dragon, or her AI controlled puppet, didn't show a notable reaction. Alexandria's reaction was a sort of patient curiosity. She was surprised, but interested. I got the impression she'd be far less receptive of the idea if it were someone other than Minerva presenting it.

Minerva herself was clearly disappointed no one fell for her trap, and absorbing information from our less obvious personality tells. **Her power is an order of magnitude greater than it was when I first met her so many months ago.**
"I thought about it, after Atropos made a comment at the end of the Wendigo battle," she informed us.

"Yes, the one about killing an Endbringer making someone a hero once, while merely beating them made you a hero once a year," Alexandria supplied. She is saying it for Dinah and I, who hadn't heard that conversation. She's humoring Minerva's showmanship. Minerva's aware of this. It's... part of the way their friendship works.

"Right," Minerva responded. The interplay between the two women was more intimate than I'd have expected. They regularly have thinker conversations with one another. I felt a mild pang of jealousy that I didn't have someone I could be like that with. But, then, I was a Tinker and had that kind of fulfillment instead. "That made me think about how the Endbringers have influenced, well, everything. I think I speak for all of us here when I say, as uncomfortable as it is, all of us have directly or indirectly benefited by their presence."

The mood at the gathering went a bit on the dark side. A combination of 'explain yourself' and 'I don't want to be the one person here that can't figure out the answer if she happens to be right'.

"Take the birth of Pantheon," she went on. "We were Class S threats pretty much right out of the gate. What would have happened without the pressures created by the Endbringers? If the heroes weren't nursing their wounds from Leviathan and dealing with all the local threats instead of being able to mobilize more quickly. More than that, if we'd built like we were building, without making very public declarations of using our weapons on the Endbringers?"

"I would have killed you," Alexandria responded. The undertones were complex. Regret, in some ways. Sadness at the idea of losing Minerva? They know something they're not telling. Dragon does, too. A major secret. Alexandria took some action that kept Pantheon from being destroyed early on. What I couldn't discern with the limited information I had. "As the member of the Triumvirate that was immune to Gaea and Khepri's power sets, the command would have fallen to me to do the job."

"Precisely," Minerva responded. "And that story can be told time and time again. The Protectorate itself was founded, at least in part, to respond to threats like the Endbringers, too powerful for any parahuman, or any team of parahumans, to believably fight."

"This is starting to make a sick sort of sense," Dragon agreed. "The Baumann Parahuman Containment Center shares a similar story. A nonlethal deterrent, for fear that the use of the death penalty in cases that are obviously deserving of it might provoke parahuman retaliation. Threaten the loose sort of peace that exists solely so both heroes and villains can work together against the Endbringers."

"Exactly," Minerva replied. "Dinah, don't worry I'm footing the bill for this, but if the Endbringers
"Just mysteriously vanished from the planet tomorrow for no discernible reason, how long would it take before World War Three began?"

"Ninety four point three seven percent chance that a war involving more than fifty percent of Bet's population, including colony worlds, would occur within six years," she answered.

"And as destructive as the Endbringers are, I doubt they're as deadly as a war fought with nuclear bombs and tinker weaponry," Lisa concluded. "We know the death of India was caused by a parahuman, not the Simurgh. If there are even three or four people on the planet who have and use a power of that magnitude, then there wouldn't be a Bet left to fight over."

"You're saying this as if it would be better for us to allow them to live," I pointed out.

"No," Minerva responded. "That's what happens if they vanish mysteriously. Now what happens if the Endbringers are actually slain to the last?"

"I... my power isn't good at working with this many hypotheticals," Dinah informed us. "But the numbers are... I think it takes longer to occur, long enough that Scion happens first. That's too much a constant for me to see around."

"Of course, Scion," Minerva added. "Which really is the crux of the problem. The Endbringers are tough as hell, but they're nothing compared to the Entities that made them. If we can't beat them, then there's no way we can beat him."

Alexandria frowned, and the rest of us slipped into our thoughts as well. She was the one who spoke first, however. "So that's what this has to come down to, then? A weapons test. If we can't destroy the remaining Endbringers, then there's nothing we can do to fight the Entity."

"It's disturbing," Dragon agreed. "I take it that bringing this up to us, and only us, serves a purpose?"

"Of course," Minerva offered that foxlike grin. "I still intend to find the Endmakers and 'thank' them properly." Her vocal inflection was anything but grateful sounding. "But if we're going to find them, we need to be looking in the right places, and that means we have to cut the assumption that we're hunting for obvious enemies, and start looking at people who are possibly our allies."

"So, adding people who might want to help us, but are pretty certain we would reject that help if they just outright offered it to us?" I suggested. "I can create software that will look in that general direction."

Alexandria's reaction surprised me a little. She wasn't part of an Endmaker conspiracy, but she was definitely part of some kind of conspiracy. That's information that I might have felt safer not knowing
about. Minerva already knows. Fuck. Dragon already knows, double fuck. Dinah's oblivious to the implications, she doesn't know.

"Try not to kick over any hornets' nests, any of you," Minerva responded, though the social cues led me to the obvious conclusion that she was only speaking to me. "Right now, there are a lot of people involved in trying to hold things together the world over. If we upset an ally like the Thanda accidentally, we might lose their help in future Endbringer battles. We'll cross reference our information with each other, if we come across any. No one acts without all of us comparing notes."

"That is reasonable," Dragon agreed. She didn't seem particularly happy with the conspiracy angle of this. *She's an ally, not a friend, when it comes to Alexandria. While Minerva was at least friendly with both.*

*Wheels within wheels.*

"Of course," I agreed. "The Endbringers and Scion are the top priorities. Everything else can wait until after that." For the time being, I made sure I believed that. Hopefully none of them were sharp enough to catch the fact that I knew I'd change my mind later.

=============

A/N- I've missed having Rapture in the story. So here she is! Yay!
"I understand," I spoke back. Taylor's power was legitimately amazing for sorting through the throngs of refugees and wounded, reuniting whole families in minutes. Or at the very least letting them know their family was safe. It would be a couple more days before the dust truly settled and everyone was put where they needed to be. Now we were on a timer for finding survivors. The days were finally starting to get a little warmer, but temperatures had dropped below zero. Those we didn't rescue tonight weren't likely to survive until tomorrow.

My armor blipped at me, asking if I needed another stim added to the air. An automatic request feature designed to read my eyes and their reactions. I confirmed the request, and almost instantly felt better. I'd sleep for a whole day after this stuff wore off, but that was fine. It kept me alert, kept my makeshift Thinker power from giving me headaches, and if I was feeling desperate, a minor overdose could boost my powers for a short period of time. Right now, that drug was saving lives.

"We got a few over there," I gestured at a half collapsed office complex. "Seventh floor, not sure why they can't get down but there has to be a good reason."

"On it," Theo responded. I smiled, it was such a thrill working with him in the field. Smart, professional, determined. He knew how to ignore the personal undertones and focus on the mission first, one of the things I liked best about him.

He guided Macula over to the side of the building, then formed a ladder up to the seventh floor windows. Supported by his power, it was actually more durable than the Endbringer based tools we'd been growing, easily the safest structure in the city.

Granted, we could have used my power to take us up immediately, but Lisa insisted we do it this way. Overtaxing myself right now would cost more lives in the long run. She was right, too. If I had been doing more than the 'search' part of 'search and rescue', I'd have already exhausted myself beyond what the stims could push me through. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and we all needed to conserve our strength.

Aceso scrambled up the wall, racing the ladder as it formed its way up. Even the Clarice doll needed to conserve its energy right now, and I knew Riley had her hands full juggling both it and her duties with the wounded. I glanced at Theo, who was paying an awful lot of attention to Clarice's rear. A quick smack on the shoulder and he decided instead to study the ground.

"Sorry about that," he mumbled.
"Just count yourself lucky that you're so cute," I teased. It was good to get a little bit of banter in. Stress relief, of a sort. It was already approaching midnight, and we'd been working almost nonstop since before noon. That kind of shift could really wear on someone. *Oh well, when I signed up to be a hero, I knew what I was getting myself into. At least I'm on a team that treats me with respect, now.*

"I... are you okay?" he asked. "I know your house was in Wendigo's range."

"A lot of our houses were," I responded. "Taylor's, Trevor's, Crystal's, yours."

He shrugged. "I guess I don't think of my dad's property as my home. I was going to sell it anyway."

"Well, fat chance of that happening now," I sighed. "On the plus side, if you can call it that, at least housing space is cheap, now. And there is government aid they'll tap into to put all these people in new homes. Or old homes left behind by the colonists. The way the news had been talking, eventually the US would have portals to its colony worlds in almost every state by the end of this year. There was already one in Boston and another in New York."

"Yeah," he put a hand on my shoulder. "What do you think your mom's going to do?"

"Don't know, don't really care," I responded. "Guess it depends on what happened to Dave, but my mother's house hasn't really been my home since even before I got my powers. Whatever she chooses to do, I'm staying on this team."

"Isn't that a problem? I mean, your age?" Theo asked.

"Doesn't matter," I responded. "Colonization laws. I'm fourteen and female, if I want to move to a colony all I have to do is prove I can offer an expert or otherwise valuable service to said colony. That's all it takes to emancipate these days. I think 'Endslayer' counts as valuable enough."

"You've been putting a lot of thought into this," he observed. He also visibly relaxed a little. *Cute, he was worried that we might be separated.*

"Lots of thought, and I might have talked to Carol about it," I informed him. "She might be a stuck up ice bitch, but she's a damn good lawyer. *She also tried to convince me to talk to Mom about things, but that isn't going to happen.* It never worked before, and I no longer cared enough to try yet again. I had a better family, now, and that was all that mattered.

"Okay, I've found them," Aceso relayed over the radio. "Seventeen adults, none significantly injured or suffering exposure. The stairwell collapsed, so they'll need to go down the ladder."
"Thank you," Theo answered. As he was speaking, a handful of shadowcats shunted over around us, nine in total. Two people to an animal. *Riley isn't the only one pulling double duty, tonight.*

Clarice stuck her head out the window next to the ladder, then simply hopped out. She fell the seven stories, using some antigrav to land lightly on the ground. Meanwhile, the first of the people in the building started climbing down. Theo had adjusted the ladder so it had a cage around it, making it impossible for anyone to fall off. Meanwhile, Clarice had climbed up on Bella and rode up alongside me.

"We're going ahead," I told him. I'd already tugged on the growths on the back of Calysta's head that functioned as reins, guiding her to turn the direction I needed. "Finding the next set of survivors." I gave her a tap and she started trotting along.

"Okay," he acknowledged. "I'll catch up soon. Stay safe."

Clarice followed me as we went back on our route. Dragon had programmed a path for Vicky and I, the two with the best Thinker powers for finding people, so that we could cover the city as rapidly as possible. It was why we weren't using the horses to fly, ground level gave me the best effective range for the lowest effective power cost. We needed to be certain we found every living person. Everything else was secondary.

"Is it true you're going to be moving in with us for real?" Clarice asked the moment we started off.

"Heard that, huh?" I smirked. "Y'know, normally I might be annoyed at the violation of privacy, but I guess that doesn't really count as much with us. Yeah, I might be. It's hard to know for certain. Depends on what Mom does."

"She can move to Avalon, too," she suggested.

"Probably not," I dismissed. "But that doesn't matter."

"You're right," Clarice agreed happily. "I'm just excited you're going to be living with me."

"You do realize I already do, right?" I asked. "Last month I spent every night except one at my supposedly temporary room in the magic tree house." *That no longer exists.* "So how would you even be able to tell the difference if I moved in officially?"

"Yeah, I know," she agreed. "But it's more fun when it's official. That's why people get married, right? So they can brag about what they're already doing anyway?"

"You can move in next to me!" she offered excitedly.

"I totally can," I agreed. "We still have a long night ahead of us before we worry about that."

===============

A/N- Vista. Landing on her feet.

Also. I've occasionally mentioned Calysta, but I think this is the first time Macula's been mentioned by name. Care to guess what they're named after?
Clarice was nearly autonomous by this point. I'd had to upgrade her so many times that she was just inches shy of violating Rule Four and creating intelligent life. Her brain stem functioned, she even had neural patterns that let her learn and adapt, in a limited sort of way. More like programmable instincts than true intelligence. But what, really, was intelligence if not programmable instincts?

I went to my next patient. She was an older lady, mid sixties was my first glance guess. I glanced at the chart. *Lacerations from broken glass, possibly debris left in injuries. Broken arm. Patient lucid when found. Pollen and peanut allergies reported.* There was then a list of medications the woman was taking. Including the usual suspects of blood thinners and vitamin supplements that made her a priority case instead of ones that normal doctors and nurses were dealing with.

The healing chambers did not play well with pharmaceuticals, which left me, Emma and Rey as the only ones qualified to adjust the pods' functions for those medications. And, of course, Amelia. Big Sister could simply clean out the drugs and heal without the need for the pods.

"Goodness, you seem awful young to be doing this kind of work," the woman spoke as I read her chart.

"It's my powers, Mrs. Gardner," I told her. "I'm super smart about some stuff. Medicine's one of those things."

"I see," the woman relaxed a little. Signs of shock, blood loss, possible internal bleeding, obvious adrenaline and endorphine withdrawal. None of which were any kind of surprise under the circumstances.

"It's up to you, would you like me to get someone else to do the surgery?" I offered. It had happened a few times, today, where I'd have to ask for a doctor to come in and handle things instead. Which mostly consisted of me telling the doctor what to do.

"No, no, that's fine," she answered. "Am I hurt enough to need parahuman help?"

"Don't know," I half lied. The more I looked at her, the more I concluded she needed expert help. The part that was true is that I didn't know if there was a non parahuman here that was qualified for the job. I pulled out one of the med capsules. "But we're not going to take any chances."

"Am I going to have to swallow that?" she looked at the capsule unhappily.

"No," I replied, sitting next to her. I pressed the thing against her arm. It recognized what it was
suppose to do, and fused itself into her skin, the equivalent of ten thousand flea mouths, injecting instead of sucking.

"That's the nicest injection I've ever had," the woman smiled. The drugs were hitting her system, now. All the pain numbing powers of heroin with none of the side effects, mental or physical. Plus a cocktail of other tinker designed medications to let us perform the surgeries with minimal risk and improve the effectiveness of the healing pods.

"Thanks," I replied. *Oops, probably shouldn't have said that.* She didn't seem to catch the implication. "We're hoping to get it approved for general use in the next five years." The scalpel function in my armor sliced through the woman's bandages, exposing the injuries. I went to work carefully pulling nearly microscopic fragments of glass and other debris. Some of it was irrelevant—wood and dirt, anything even semiorganic, would be easily dealt with by the pods. I removed it anyway.

"That's something to look forward to," she replied, almost happily watching as I opened her wounds to clean inside them, followed by a spritzing of an artificial stem cell substance that would quickly rebuild the interior damage. "Think those vampires that do my blood work will use it?"

"Maybe," I answered. "Do you have anywhere to go? After you're all better?"

"I think so," she sighed. "My grandson has a nice place in Boston I can stay at for a while, until the insurance comes in for my shop." I could tell she wasn't sure about that. Nervousness may be dulled by the medication, but the whole point of it not being a mind altering substance is that it didn't alter the mind, so she was still able to worry. And there were many problems to worry about right now.

"What kind of shop?" I asked.

"A clothing boutique," she answered. "I was in it when everything happened. As old as I am, I couldn't get to a shelter in time. I hid behind the counter. After Stanly died, it was all I have left." It was obvious by the way she spoke that the death wasn't recent.

Clothing? Wait, Missy kept her clothes at home. Plus some in the Embassy. Either way, it was all destroyed. "I'll buy them," I offered.

"Excuse me?" the woman replied.

"You have clothes small enough for someone my age, right?" I asked. Meanwhile, I had moved on to her arm. *Obvious break near the shoulder, less obvious break in the wrist. She fell on it hard.*

"Some," she agreed. "Do you want them?"
"I want all of it," I told her. "The whole inventory of clothing. Maybe some other stuff, but definitely all the clothing."

"Oh, dear, you don't have to do that," she argued.

"We lost our homes, too," I told her. "Or most of us on the team did. Most of us don't have more than one change of outfits left, so we're going to have to buy more no matter what. And there are lots of others in the city who've lost everything they own, so we can give away anything we don't need. It makes sense."

"I wouldn't want to take advantage," she argued. "You're so young."

"Money's not a problem, if that's what you're worried about," I insisted. It really wasn't. I may not have gotten a cut from the bounties on the Simurgh or any of the more profitable villains we've stopped, but I made plenty from the tech sold to Dragon, and the beginnings of an income from the most simplistic medical technology I had designed. Plus I had my share from my contributions to Rey, Emma, and Trevor's work. I was set for the next seven or eight hundred years at the moment, depending on inflation.

She hesitated. I could imagine what was going through her head. She didn't want to impose on me, but my argument made sense and she did need the money to save her shop. If not its actual, physical, location, then at least that she had a business at all. Offloading the bulk of her merchandise gave her money to stay afloat. She had probably resigned herself to hoping insurance would cover the damages and the inevitable looting that would come later.

"If you're really that worried, you can give me a discount for buying in bulk," I prompted. I liked her. She's what I imagined my grandma might have been like, in the briefest bits of memories I had that could have been about her. Of course, as unreliable as my memory was before I improved it, I could easily be wrong.

"Okay," she relented. "You've talked me into it."

"Thank you," I smiled, having moved my prodding down to her side, looking for any signs of internal injuries. There was clearly plenty of bruising, but the preliminaries didn't reveal anything significant. Nothing the healing pod wouldn't handle. "We'll have to wait until you recover before we figure out all the details. I think there are ethics laws against a doctor making a business deal with a drugged patient while performing surgery on them. If not then there probably should be."

She laughed, or at least tried to. The muscle relaxants in the drug mixture prevented sudden, jerking, muscle movements like laughter. Also good for sneezing, hiccups, and at least reducing the risk of self injury during seizures. "Probably," she agreed. "How long will it take to recover?"
"Three or four hours at the most," I answered. "But I'll be extra nice and put you down for a full
night." It wasn't just me being 'nice', her internal injuries required attention, and her age would slow
the process as the mineral and nutrient infusions would be demanded by other parts of her body.
Someone younger could have walked away after an hour or two. She really would require six hours,
seven to be certain. It's just that the training I'd downloaded suggested trying to make patients feel
like they were getting special treatment, but not too special.

"That fast?" she marveled. "I remember they kept Stanly in the hospital for two weeks after his first
heart attack."

"That fast," I confirmed. I pulled out my pad and started jotting down information. "If you'll excuse
me for a second." I stepped up and moved toward the exit of the curtain, peaking out and flagging
one of the nurses. He started walking over. They knew the drill, now. "I've done what I can for you,
now you just need rest. The nurse will take you to one of the pods."

The man arrived, he was 'just' another nurse, with pretty bog standard education. He did understand
directions, at least. I handed him the piece of paper and a couple pellets. All the instructions he
needed, and the drugs he was to put in her pod after she was inside. Frankly, it was less complex
than doing laundry.

"I understand," she smiled at me. "There are others who need help."

"Thank you for understanding," I smiled, then turned and left. The next priority case would be only
about ten feet away.

"Such a delightful girl," Mrs Gardner said to the nurse, I only caught it thanks to the armor's
enhancements. I smiled even wider.

=================

A/N- Don't worry, I think I'm done with the 'immediate aftermath' chapters and can move on now.
"Well, the refugee issue is on functional autopilot for now," Lisa informed us. "We can step back and let FEMA handle the process. They've dealt with a lot of Endbringer disasters, they know what they're doing."

DoubtContempt. "Didn't seem like it after Leviathan," Taylor spoke up.

"To be fair to them," Lisa responded. "Post Leviathan was a pretty extreme situation. They had a lot of things to worry about. The Merchants, Empire Eighty Eight, the Slaughterhouse Nine... the Undersiders." GuiltRegret. "They did the best they could while faced with an impossible task. Things are a lot easier, this time. The population is dropping in every major city thanks to the colony programs. New York's population alone has dropped almost a hundred thousand people already. There are empty homes to be filled."

"I didn't think there would be that many colonists," Taylor prompted.

"Probably wouldn't, but Endbringers," Lisa replied. "So the US government's got the refugees taken care of. Minus about fifteen thousand that made the move to Avalon. Our second largest colony influx so far."

"More of that profiting from others' misfortune crap," I muttered. AgreementDisgustGuilt. "Worse because this time, we're responsible for it."

"You two and your guilt complexes," Lisa sighed. AnnoyanceDefensive. "The Endmakers are responsible, and if we didn't use our mass driver, the damage would have been a lot fucking worse. That thing's fifth state wiped out a six mile wide area. Its sixth would have hit almost twenty. That's over three hundred square miles erased. Our weapon only damaged a quarter of that area. Damaged, not atomized or whatever the fuck Wendigo's power actually did. Yes, it killed people, probably around six to seven thousand total. Compared to another twenty thousand survivors. Survivors, I remind you, that wouldn't have lived through Wendigo's sixth stage. Plus almost fifty thousand more people who were outside the mass driver's effective range, but inside the Endbringer's."

"We still ordered that attack!" I exclaimed. "Those lives are our responsibility."

"If you go into a war trying to save everyone, you won't save anyone," Lisa countered. "You want to blame yourself for the dead, fine, both of you are too in love with your fucking martyr complexes to listen to reason. But if you need to blame yourselves for the dead, then at least give yourselves credit for the seventy thousand survivors. Plus all the others that Endbringer won't kill in the future."

DoubtHopeRelief. She has a point. I can't quite bring myself to believe her, but she has a point.
"So, is the pity party cancelled? Can we get back to work?" Lisa asked. Irritation Patience Acceptance. Lisa took our silence as permission to continue. "With Brockton Bay gone, there's the political and zoning issues to worry about. Our Embassy land is still, technically, ours. Even if it's underwater, and the city it was in no longer existing. We pretty much have our pick of small cities. Our presence is a huge economic boon, after all. I'd recommend a costal city, preferably eastern seaboard."

"Was Crystal right?" I asked. "If we keep our base and our portal right here, will..." I trailed off. Taylor put her hand on the small of my back. Comfort Support.

"Will the city rebuild itself?" Lisa finished for me. "Maybe. The natural harbor makes this an inherently good spot for a trade city. If you build it, they will come, or some such tripe. But there are a lot of natural harbors around here. And there's so much damage to the ground below the city that it's not safe to build anything at all in some areas. A minor earthquake could collapse the whole region into the aquifer below. They're still running tests, but if seawater's finding its way through, there could be problems from New Jersey to New Brunswick."

"I could use my Yggdrasil to fix things," I pointed out.

"Yeah, good luck getting Washington to agree to that," Lisa sighed. "There's a couple Protectorate heroes that can do the job, better than you can if we're being honest about it, but you're not a US citizen anymore. More than that, you're the leader of a foreign nation. The only reason some senator with a grudge hasn't declared us traitors to appeal to the resentful asshole vote is because... actually, I'm not sure why that hasn't happened yet. I was expecting it to happen months ago. Probably owe Cauldron a thank you cake. I wonder if there's a confections Tinker out there I can hire. Either way, you knew the consequences when you claimed your own nation world."

"So saving the city's out of the question?" I asked. I grew up here. I've never known any other home. I felt Taylor's arms wrap around me.

"There's nothing left to save," Lisa met my eyes. "The best you could hope to do is replace it with a new one, which will take years. By that time, the survivors will have moved on. Found new homes, maybe moved to the colonies. Maybe moved to our colonies. Even if you could talk the government into allowing it, which I doubt. They want to expand into their brand new world full of exploitable resources, not rebuild in overpopulated tapped out regions. And frankly, I agree with them. The colonies are the best hope for humanity's survival. If we can kill Scion, at least. You need to let this go, focus on doing something that will actually help people."

I looked over at Taylor. Affirmation Support. "You're right," I finally relented. "We focus on moving forward."
"About damn time," Lisa responded. "Now, I recommend we look between Boston and New York. It's got a lot of desirable coastline, and small cities that'll appreciate what we bring to their economy."

"While ignoring the part where our last home got two Endbringers in under a year," I pointed out.

"Yeah, that too," Lisa agreed. "We also need to think about claiming a chunk of territory on the western seaboard, plus portal. Yeah, Faultline's going to abuse the hell out of that, but it's a really good idea nonetheless. Weirdly enough, I'm thinking we put that one in Mexico. Make our neighbor to the south feel special about us even caring about enough to want an Embassy with them."

"Think they might consider it a grab at their colonists?" Taylor asked.

"Not really," Lisa replied. "Mexican culture when it comes to immigration is unusual. Most of them don't want to live in America for the sake of living here, so much as that it's a place to find jobs and money to take care of their families back home. Same story with their drug trade. Our colonies have a lot to offer, but supposedly easy money isn't on that list. We'll get some, sure, but not a lot. Mexico will accept it for what it is, as a functional tourist lure. The Japanese and other east Asian immigrants will come and spend some cash in the businesses nearby. Everyone wins."

ConfusionRealization. "Lisa, what are you scheming now?"

"Me?" Lisa managed a saccharine smile, complete with fluttering eyelashes. "Why would you suspect me to do something so debased as scheming?"

"Because we've spent more than three and a half seconds around you?" I suggested.

"Yeah, you caught me, I'm scheming my perfectly toned ass off right now," Lisa agreed. "We just took down our second Endbringer. China's whole 'killing Endbringers costs a city' scheme is working in our favor. I've been talking to Lily about going public with her identity, which will put extra pressure on Japan and China, although in different ways. We may yet get our mass Japanese immigration, royal family be damned."

ConsternationHopeConcern. "No pressure on Lily, right?" I asked. I was dubious enough about the whole 'marriage' thing even when Lily herself suggested it. Going public with her identity didn't bother me nearly so much, but I had every reason to be concerned.

"None," Lisa answered. "Beyond the same pressure you two are under to be perfect paragons of heroic and romantic couple ideals, of course. Typical PR bullshit, only with international attention. But given that Lily has two dead Endbringers under her belt, she's pretty much the planet's favorite person right now. Once the Japanese find out she's one of theirs, well, national pride will do the rest of the work for us."
"And?" Taylor prompted.

"And," Lisa admitted. "It'll irritate China further, which means more threatening and posturing. While Japan's right next door watching their crazy neighbor and wondering just when they become the next country that no one cares about to be reduced to a satellite state. Expect similar thoughts from Indonesia, the Philippines, and etcetera. There will be mixed levels of enthusiasm, I'm sure, but I'd be surprised to get less than three or four million people out of east Asia in the next year or two."

"Lisa, why is it that every time we step up into a more important role in the world, I find myself thinking of highschool only somehow even worse?" Taylor complained.

-----------------------

A/N- Politics. It's like highschool, but with the training wheels removed.
Surprise Guilt Concern. "Dinah's here to see us," Taylor spoke, lifting her head up from her place in the bed. I hadn't yet joined her, still getting ready for my shower. "She's at the south entrance, near the camps." I felt the tremors of Taylor signaling the location.

At this point, the Yggdrasil was a true and literal planetary scale body, at minimum twelve to twenty meters thick throughout almost the entirety of Avalon's surface. Taylor and I had worked out methods to allow her to show me where events were on the Yggdrasil. This feature, and the slowly expanding natural insect populace that had found their way through with the colonists, made us almost literally omnipresent and, while not omnipotent, certainly powerful anywhere in our territory.

"Alright," I didn't hesitate, immediately forming a tunnel to let the child through to meet us. Taylor's feelings toward Dinah were both complicated and intense. An adoptive daughter, almost. Or a symbol. It was hard for me to quantify or understand, I simply knew she was incredibly important to my partner. I tried not to pay too much attention as Taylor changed out of her night clothes. It wasn't an appropriate time to ogle. Amused Pleased Grateful.

I followed Taylor as we climbed up the stairs to the main foyer. Somehow, through unspoken agreement, most of Pantheon's members still lived underground, as we had since early on. Surface level was all show, with space for meetings with foreign leaders or heroes, the gym, the kitchen. Theoretical servants' quarters despite us having exactly no one to fill them with. Guest bedrooms, naturally. All above ground. I had to wonder what hired help might think of us all being troglodytes, but whatever.

Dinah was already waiting when we got to the main hall. "Good evening, Empresses," the girl addressed us the moment we walked in. Her light brown hair was now a pageboy cut, and coupled with her slender frame, she could have been mistaken as a boy her age as easily as a girl. I felt distinctly underdressed in just my jeans and t-shirt compared to her very smart little dark gray business suit.

She has to have more than one, each custom made, and at her age she's probably went through a size and a half of changes already. Very expensive habit to have, but she could certainly afford it. Past her, I could see the Gryphon that Riley had constructed for her, as painstakingly as she had built Bella and the other... whatever the plural of pegasus was.

"Please, don't call me that. We're still Taylor and Amelia," my partner spoke first. I nodded. Neither of us liked going by Empress when we were talking to people we were friends with, or in any way liked. In fact, we preferred our costumed names over the political titles. "Are you okay? I didn't notice any problems, but I try not to pay too close attention, so I can miss things if they're subtle enough."

"Very well, Taylor," Dinah agreed, giving a nod that made me want to hug her more than take her
seriously. "Don't worry, there's no immediate problem," ReliefHope "But I do have a request to make."

ConcernCompassion. "Of course, whatever you need," Taylor agreed without hesitation. Wow, if Dinah ever figures out just how easily she can manipulate my partner, things could get complicated fast. I might need to run that worry past Lisa at some point.

"I feel my current living arrangements are detrimental," she informed us. Okay, that's not so bad, we can upgrade her home. It might look like favoritism in the eyes of other refugees, but that's not im- "Would it be acceptable for me to take up residence with you?"

ShockWorryConfusion. "What about your parents?" Taylor asked. "I know they made it through the attack." Taylor made certain of it. "Did something happen?"

"They wish to return to Earth Bet at earliest possible convenience," Dinah informed us. "I would prefer to remain on Avalon. Without Pantheon's clear presence as a deterrent, I feel my safety would be compromised. I have discussed this with my parents, and they agree with my assessment." I couldn't imagine what she would have said to convince them to agree with this idea. Then again, considering her personality and powers, maybe it wasn't so strange.

"Parental permission helps," Taylor agreed. She's going to agree to it, she probably should agree to it. All feelings aside, Dinah's help was amongst the most critical of all our assets. More valuable than Avalon itself. "We can give you one of the guest bedrooms. All the comforts of a five star hotel room, except the minibar. We can remodel it if you like. Give you an office to work from."

"If it's not too much trouble, I would prefer to have the same accommodations as the other members of your team," Dinah requested. "It would be better if I didn't receive special treatment, past what is inherent in my powers."

"Okay, we can do that," Taylor agreed. "We're still in the process of moving in, ourselves. I've alerted Lisa, already."

....

"You're separating us into dorms now?" Missy objected. "Is that really necessary?"

"Well, yes," Taylor responded. "We have a bunch of teenage boys and girls living in the same building, and now there's Dinah moving in as well. Plus you're pretty much a few blocks away from the school we're setting up. Oh, and yes, you will be attending classes. All of you."

"Yes, mooom," Zach groaned.
"We don't have enough people to really call them dorms, yet," Lisa added. "But that might change. In any case, it's pretty simple. Girls in the west wing, boys in the east. You each have all the facilities you need. Curfews are being enforced, whole nine yards. Leeway granted if you can keep your grades at a ninety percent or better, and that's the extent of it."

"Why the sudden death of the cool bosses?" Zach asked.

"For starters," Taylor argued. "We have Dinah moving in. And her parents are rightfully concerned about the informal arrangements we have around here. We're honestly lucky they only know about Amelia and I dating. So yeah, standards are going to be set and maintained."

"Except yourselves," Zach pointed out. "Bet you'll still have your own private bedroom. And by 'private' I mean 'in the biblical sense'." *AnnoyedEmbarrassedProud*

"Yes, except us," Taylor sighed. *AmusedAnticipation*. "But we're engaged. So unless you wanna go buy a ring, get down on one knee, and propose to Theo, you'll just have to settle for having a private room."

Missy snickered first, followed by Emma. Trevor was the first one to start laughing, though. We all followed after a few seconds. That had become something of a running gag the last few days. I wasn't sure who started it, but it seemed like something Lisa would do, so I was blaming her for this one.

"Hyuk hyuk," Zach deadpanned. "Have another man inside you just one time, and everyone just starts assuming things left and right. Well, I'll have you know that just because Theo's secondary power is to be a visual novel protagonist, that doesn't mean I'm the gay option. Besides, he's already locked in his choice, he can't back out now."

Theo just buried his face in his hands. "Honestly, dude, you can stop now."

"Hey, man, don't blame me," Zach continued. "You had your chance. You coulda had all this." He gestured across his body. "But instead you chose the 'two girlfriends' path. And got the badass action girl who can reshape space at her pleasure, and the all American sweetheart with the dark past who has absolute, perfect knowledge of all human anatomy... y'know, I started this with a point, but for the life of me I can't remember what it was."

"I think it's contagious," Emma chimed in. "Because at the moment I can't figure out why I ever wanted to date you in the first place."

"Zach," Missy managed to stop laughing long enough to speak. "You spend way too much time
around yourself."

I was still smiling when I spoke up next. "Now, back on track. No complaining about the dorm arrangement. Or school, at least for now. You want to have a room next to your boy and/or girlfriend, get your GED and your own home and parental permission. And no, Riley, I'm not giving you permission. Are there any questions?"

"Did Adam and Eve have belly buttons?" Trevor chimed in. *He hangs out around Zach too much, too.*

"I meant about the sleeping arrangements," I sighed.

"Ooh, I got one!" Zach raised his hand. I just glared at him. "No, seriously," he insisted.

"I know I'm going to regret this, but okay, ask your question." *AnnoyanceAnticipationWorry.* Yeah, *tell me about it.* To our left, Lisa started giggling. I simply braced myself for what was coming.

"Which came first?" Zach's smile reminded me an awful lot of Lisa's. "You or Taylor?" *ShockEmbarrassment.*

I didn't hesitate. Before my face had a chance to turn tomato red, I simply made the floor beneath him collapse, sending him falling to the room below. One of the advantages to the amount of space we had on Avalon was that 'downstairs' wasn't code for 'laboratory full of dangerous chemicals and abominations against nature and god'. I slept a lot easier with those safely away from the main building.

"I'm okay!" Zach shouted up. "Our wise and benevolent overladies forgot to put spikes in the spike pit!"

=============

A/N- Dinah is forever adorableness on a stick.

Also. Zach was telling the truth. Totally a valid question about sleeping arrangements.
Ch 282- Danny

It's strange being able to go out in the beginning of March without even a jacket. It's also strange when the landscape is dominated by blue-green and the ocean is nowhere to be seen. But that was the reality on Avalon, and my new home on it. Our children had more or less decided to create a small neighborhood consisting of nothing but their parents, and we were left to our own devices moving in. Not that we had much unpacking to do.

Temporary homes, at least officially, but care had gone into their creation. I couldn't help but notice my house was almost identical, floor plan wise, to my old home. The loss of the house wasn't such a big deal, but I also lost all my mementos of Annette. Our wedding album, all the pictures of her with Taylor. Her wedding ring that I'd meant to give to Taylor when the time came. Even her grave. All of that was gone, now. All our years of history reduced to nothing but memories. Memories, and Taylor. Annette would be so proud of her.

"Hello there, neighbor," a man offered a half wave. He was probably a bit older than me. Or, if not, then he was certainly in worse shape. Shorter than me, and on the heavier side. Unlike most of us refugees, however, he was clearly wearing his own clothes instead of the donated supplies. "I've seen you on the news a couple times. You're Khepri's dad, right? Mister Hebert?"

"Yes," I confirmed, walking over. We were neighbors, now, after all. I also may have been a little impressed that he got my name right on the first try. "Call me Danny." I offered my hand.

"Paul," he responded. Firm handshake, confident enough.

"So, umm, which one's yours?" I asked. "I mean, you shouldn't to tell me if it's a secret, of course."

"Dinah," he answered without hesitation. I froze up for a second. I'd heard a lot about Dinah over the last few months. Whenever I could talk Taylor out of details about her life with the Undersiders, that little girl was always a big part of the conversation. Taylor blaming herself for the kidnapping, even though that really didn't make sense. Worrying about how much pain she caused Dinah and her family. A driving part of her life during the... bad times.

Paul seemed to pick up on my concern, though not the reason. "Yeah, that means the mayor is my brother in law. Hope you don't hold that against me too much."

"Sorry about that," I meant it, too. "I'm just. Well, there's a lot to think about."

"About losing your home and everything in it? Or having your daughter provide you with a new one? Or being parent to a child whose life is so different from everything you know that you're beginning to worry that you'll never be able to relate to them again?" He asked.
I blinked for a second. "Uh. Yes. All of the above, actually," I admitted. "Guess you've been there, huh?"

"Yeah," the man's smile faltered for a second. "I imagine everyone in this neighborhood has."

"The Protectorate probably has some kind of policy for that," I responded.

"Bet you that you go in, sign a nondisclosure agreement, a college student talks to the class for an hour about stuff so obvious that you could have figured it out on your own, and then you go home with nothing more than a pamphlet."


"That's a great idea," Paul agreed. "Man, it's been forever since I had a good pig roast. Last year was nothing but a nightmare, and the year before... eh, you don't need to hear about all that."

"You're in luck," I told him. "My buddy Kurt is an expert at the barbecue, and he'll kick anyone's ass who suggests otherwise. He'd be happy to help, at the low low cost of him and his wife getting their share."

"Now you're talking," Paul smiled. "I'll pitch in some money for the pig and brewskies. Anna would throw a fit if we told her I had a hand in this, though, so we're just going to tell her it was all your idea and I just accepted to be polite."

"Is that gonna work?" I asked.

"She'll see through it before I finish the sentence," he admitted proudly.

"We'll have to figure out all the details later, though," I told him. "I was just going over to Sarah's house."

"The blond at the other end of the road?" Paul smiled. "I don't blame you for a second for taking her company over mine."

I made sure to give him a wave as I started again. The roads were actual, honest, roads. Some trick with the super plant of theirs that it grew a sort of resin, not entirely different from tree sap or, probably, more like scabs. It was gross to think about like that, but it did form a pretty good approximation of asphalt.
Sarah opened the door a bit before I even got there. "I was beginning to think I’d need to send out a search party," she teasingly chided me for being late.

"Think they were trying to send us a message with the seating arrangement?" I joked back. We were on opposite sides of the neighborhood. Between us were three different homes. I’d seen the other neighbors moving in, but other than Paul hadn’t had a chance to talk to them. The obviously youngest parent was a Hispanic woman, who had her five year old son with her. And then another a man and woman, plus an older teen, seventeen at the very least. Notably absent from this small neighborhood of Pantheon parents were Amelia's and Emma's.

I was glad not to be on the same planet as Alan, however, so that was a definite plus. Mark was also to be expected, since he already moved. I wasn't sure about Carol, and resolved to ask.

Sarah turned and walked into the house, and I followed. Her house was similarly modeled after her old home, with the dining room connected to the front door. A couple glasses and a bottle of wine were sitting there already. Somehow, Sarah's house was on the literal edge of the Endbringer's power. Half of it was caught, and the other half collapsed after. But her pantry, and a couple cheap bottles of wine, had survived.

"Clearly, of all the lessons in life that our children excel at, they're still failing miserably at subtlety," Sarah agreed, chuckling a little. It was true, the kids were about as blatant as it was going to get.

"Ah, to be young again, and smashing through life's problems with all the finesse of a monster truck," I sighed, smiling. It was one of those things that Annette and I had in common, way back when. Part of why she joined Lustrum's crew, and why she left it.

"I'll drink to that," Sarah poured us both a glass, handing me one of them. I clinked my glass against hers.

"Hear, hear," I agreed, and took a swallow, but honestly I was more interested in watching her mouth as she drank hers.

She caught me looking, of course. "What's with you?" she smiled.

"Just admiring your beauty," I answered.

"Liar," she retorted. "I don't even have my makeup on."

"Makeup is for clowns," I insisted. "Natural is better."
She gave me a look that roughly translated to 'I don't believe you for a second, but please keep saying it'. Possibly the only phrase in womanese that I actually knew.

"So," I changed the subject for a moment. "I noticed your sister doesn't have a home here."

"She's moved to Philly. In part to be with Vicky," Sarah informed me. "But really, she has big plans for representing the interests of the Case 53s. Something about PRT corruption in selecting cases based upon usefulness and likelihood to join the Protectorate, instead of the ones that need it the most."

"That's..." I sighed. "I was sorta trying to forget the ugly stuff today."

"If it makes you feel better," Sarah offered. "Words like 'slam dunk case' and 'heads are going to roll' were used a lot when she was talking to me about it. That's Carol for you. Give her a cause, and she's a force of nature. Next time we see her she'll be bragging about all the precedents she's set and how she taught the incompetent bureaucrats a lesson. Full on insufferable mode."

"I don't envy them in the slightest," I chuckled. One of Carol's more endearing features was her contempt for all things government. It had taken her a while to even tolerate my presence, and I wasn't sure she'd ever move beyond mere tolerance. She seemed more than a little resentful over me dating her sister, especially so soon after Neil's death.

She also seemed to blame Taylor for Amelia's acts of rebellion, and no matter how much good the pair of them achieved together, I doubted that would ever change. *Oh well, if we Heberts were good at anything, it was telling the in-laws to go to hell.*

So, really, I wasn't bothered by Carol's issues. As much as I never would have expected it, Taylor was happily in love with a wonderful young woman and they were busy creating a home for themselves. And however many more billion people they could fit on it. That was something I could take comfort in, no matter what. As for myself, well, life had its problems, but it had bright spots as well. I reached over and gently caressed Sarah's face. Case in point.

"Oh, I see how it is," she smiled mischievously. "Lure me inside, ply me with alcohol, and have your wicked way with me."

"But you're the one who invited me over to your house for a drink," I pointed out.

"You caught me," she admitted, leaning in. "Did it work?"
I kissed her.

-------------

A/N- Meanwhile, in Taylor's subconscious, there is only suffering.

That's why she's still a virgin. Trauma. Lots and lots of trauma.
Dammit. Well, a slightly less failed experiment. "Attempt eighty seven, replicating the Labyrinth/Atropos interaction. Dimensional anomaly occurred once out of four attempts. Anomaly was unstable, pattern collapsed before dimensional connection was achieved." Better results than anything before it, but incomplete. "Possible retest, establish synchronous devices in each dimension. Hope both anomalies interact with each other before collapsing?"

"Test eighty six," I started. "Emulation of Chevalier/Labyrinth interaction." I set the computers to work generating the necessary energy reactions. The countdown gave me half an hour before I even needed to pay attention. That was the problem with trying to emulate powers. The simple fact of the matter was, we only saw a fragment of the power in use. Our tech might be advanced, but compared to what the Passengers did every time powers were used. Well, it was like a cheap animatronic muppet trying to replicate expert martial arts moves.

I glanced over at Riley, who was doing another test on the Victoria/Cão interaction. Her blood samples reacted with his saliva in terrifying ways that would spontaneously generate incredible amounts of mass from nowhere. The results were both hideous and beautiful, a miniature forest of hands and fingers, faces and eyes, various other anatomical features. Most reactions netted about four to five hundred pounds of living mass.

Each limb, every face, of which there were hundreds of each, identical. Only different in size. We ran them through every possible analysis we had to identify a clue in the features, but nothing had come of it other than human and female, with the imitation of the age of a twenty five year old. Maybe. The gene interpretation tech they used to work with the people caught in the glass bomb provided nothing of value, either.

The truly strange part was how it was both alive and dead at the same time. There was no metabolism, no source of oxygen to the cells, no source of nutrition. Sometimes portions of it had a pulse, but the circulatory system was always grossly incomplete. Even I could tell it simply should not be alive. And after a few days, it would figure that out and start breaking down. Minutes later, it would be decomposed into little more than a low quality fertilizer. I still wasn't sure what they hoped to learn from it.

The other thing I knew was that Riley usually only worked on that when she was in a bad mood.

"Why the gloom, 'shroom?" I asked as I approached.

"I wanted to do something really nice for Missy and Theo, since Valentine's Day was ruined and I mucked up Missy's birthday," she answered, pouting a little. "But then Taylor told me it was a bad idea. I don't even know why."
"Where are the two of them, anyway?" I asked. A relatively safe question. I didn't really think Riley would have any problem answering my questions, but it was still better to ease into things.

"They're on their date," Riley answered. There wasn't a trace of displeasure in the statement. She may as well have been talking about the weather.

"Without you?" I asked. I still couldn't quite get over their arrangement. Maybe that was ironically narrow minded of me, considering the way a lot of people would look at my sexual identity, but being gay didn't mean I understood or supported polygamy.

"I don't want to take too much of Theo's time away from Missy," she answered. "Or Missy's from Theo."

*That's actually a really healthy way to look at it, but.* "What about your time?" I asked.

"Tomorrow I spend extra time with Missy, because Theo's hanging out with Zach," she responded. "Besides, I have lots of lab work to do. If we can't find a solution to Scion, then nothing is going to matter."

"You think this could help with that?" I asked.

"Or at least give us more resources to work with in the future," Riley answered. "We're still trying to figure out why Victoria's alterations to Case 53s work, but no other form of healing or shapeshifting ever has. It even got through Alexandria's biostasis powers. I still haven't been able to determine if that was a product of Vicky's Passenger or Chevalier's."

More of the biotech that had nothing to do with my powers, but I watched her work anyway. It sure beat standing around watching the dimensional waveform slowly building up, even if I didn't understand anything.

"Is that why you're running the Vicky/Cão combination again?" I asked.

"This was a sample taken from Lung," she answered. *Well, that's new. Wait, where the hell did we get a sample from Lung?* "Thus far all the responses seem identical. Same shapes, even the same proportions. Still creates the Fractal Woman."

"The what?"

"That's what Emma called the phenomena," Riley informed me. "We've confirmed it against five different mass violating regenerators already, and it appears to be the same results each time. No
other healing granting power works like Cão's, however. We're not certain why. Rey suggested we try it on Endbringer tissue samples, but Lisa said we'd need to find another dead world. And then use its moon for that test.

*I'll consider that one a dodged bullet. Seriously, though, the guy had this weird fetish for the Endbringers and it was starting to scare me a little.* At least when most Tinkers wanted to do something suicidally insane, there was usually a reason or they let it go after a while. "Do you think his Passenger has something to do with the Endbringers?" I suggested.

"Lisa says she's not sure," Riley responded. "It's possibly typical Passenger compulsion toward conflict. Or it may simply be that Rey's specialty in artificial life means he sees something that the rest of us don't. He's found a lot of things to be interested in the Garden as well. If we knew more about what the Garden actually came from, why it's so consistent despite the usual randomness of power interactions. It's actually possible we've stumbled across the first step in building our own Endbringers. If we, say, fuel it with materials from Theo, or maybe Genesis or Anima or Siberian."

"That... that's a lot of potential, good and bad," I agreed.

"If we had a way to be sure we could control or destroy what we made, we'd try it," Riley informed me. She yawned, which reminded me it was almost time for us to hit curfew, even if us Tinkers did get to bend the rules for projects.

Screw it. I went over and hit the standby switch. I know I'm going to regret asking this question. "What were you planning to do?" I asked Riley. "Before Taylor told you it was a bad idea?"

"I'll show you," Riley answered, activating her computer panel. An image of twenty one faces appeared. Or, I realized, seven people at around age six, teen, and early twenties. With exception to the lone female, they were paired off together as well. They were all remarkably attractive examples of the supposed Aryan ideal. Every one blond, and eye colors ranging from foggy gray to sharp blue. One boy had lovely dark green eyes. The lone female had light green.

"Uh... what am I looking at?" I asked. If Riley was planning a plastic surgery spree, I can see why Taylor would warn it off.

"They're our babies," Riley answered. What? "Umm... I used the gene extrapolation tech to estimate the average expectable offspring Theo, Missy and I might have. This one's Missy/Theo, me/Theo, all three of us, and this is me/Missy."

*Oh holy fuck that's either adorable or terrifying and I don't know which.* I locked onto the first safe question I could think of. "Uh... why is the one with you and Missy alone?" I felt stupid the moment I said it, because I already knew the answer.
"Because Missy and I are girls," she answered. "No 'Y' chromosomes, no boy babies. Taylor said that Missy and Theo wouldn't like it, though."

_Understatement of the century._ "I can see why," I agreed. _I remember when I was at that imaginary future children phase. Then reality happened._ "I think your, uh, boyfriend and girlfriend are a little too young to be thinking about having kids. And I'm sure Amelia would say you are, too."

"I know," she sighed. "But it's fun to make believe."

"You have to look at it from their perspective," I advised. "You've met people who've tried to talk you into doing things you thought were scary or a bad idea." _Of course you, of all people, have._ "It's like that. They might be worried you want them to do it, and they might get upset." _Or run screaming from the room. I wasn't sure how the three of them handled the strangeness of their day to day life, but this could only make things awkward._

"I don't want that," Riley agreed, sounding ever so dejected. _Dammit._

"Actually," I smiled. "I think I have a way to make it work. But you have to do exactly what I say."

=============

A/N- Well, that got broke into two chapters. Here's this one, slightly shorter than average. Part two tomorrow. For now, I must sleep.

Plenty of canon foreshadowing references going on here.
"So, why the meeting?" Taylor asked.

"It's not really a meeting," I corrected, looking at the slowly gathering group. Zach and Emma were first to make it, and had found one of the chairs to claim as their own, Emma sitting in Zach's lap. For all the separated dorm situation implied, there wasn't really a crackdown on PDA or anything. Not that there was a lot of it to crack down on, really.

Dinah and Lisa were, apparently, having a powwow before I called them. They didn't object to my request, so it couldn't have been too important. At this point Amelia and Taylor were never not with each other, so they showed up second to last. Missy and Theo were last. I sort of interrupted the last five minutes of their date before curfew kicked in. I was pretty sure waiting to the last possible minute was Missy's form of personal rebellion against being treated like a child.

While waiting for them, I set up a monitor system, and a hologram of Victoria popped up. "So, what's the sitch?" the girl asked. I had considered calling up some of the others, but I really didn't know any of them well enough to be comfortable doing this to them.

"I said this was for fun, not business," I reminded all of them. "But trust me, it's going to be hilarious."

"You just want to stay up late," Emma accused. Rubbing her curfew exemption in my face again.

"Yup, you caught me," I laughed. "And I used sweet little Riley for my evil plots." I patted Riley on the head. Although her current growth spurt meant it wouldn't be long before we were the same height. Then again, my genes destined that I would never be that tall. Lisa gave me that Cheshire look that made it clear she saw through my scheme, or at least Riley's involvement in it. She opted not to speak up about it, however.

"I helped!" Riley agreed happily. And by 'helped', she means 'did all the actual work'. After her declaration, she went over and joined Missy on Theo's lap.

"Presenting to the audience, our future photo albums," I announced like something from a circus. The first clip of the slideshow appeared on the holographic display. Over on Vicky's end, she'd have to accept a video screen showing the pictures. Using a hologram to look at another hologram gave shit resolution.

"Mom?" Taylor gasped. Amelia's face showed the same shock as they both stared at the tall, slender woman on the hologram. The image zoomed focus on the woman's lightly freckled face and dark brown eyes. She was delicately pretty, a little shorter than Taylor. That was our icebreaker.
"Not quite," I corrected. "Meet the theoretical offspring between you and Amelia. Complete genome sequence, the blended average of over ten thousand possible outcomes of your genes. With bias made for correcting known genetic disorders using our technology."

"I... I don't know what to..." Amelia stuttered.

"She looks like Audrey Hepburn," Theo observed.

"At least the royal heirs will be completely adorable," Vicky chimed in. "Good news once your planet gets around to having celebrity media. Riley, you're in charge of teaching her to be absurdly cute, I'm in charge of playing dressup."

"Deal!" Riley eagerly agreed.

"Don't we get a say in this?" Taylor objected.

"Nope," Vicky stated. "Aunts and grandparents get to spoil the kids and leave the parents to deal with the results. I'm pretty sure it's the law. And if it's not, then it will be as soon as I show this to Mom."

"Vicky, I've disowned people before, I just want you to keep that in mind," Amelia threatened.

"You can have a copy of the images, if you like," I told them. "But that's just the first. We're far from done tonight."

"How many more do you have?" Zach asked.

"A few," I smiled at him. "You're first, by the way. Be proud, you get a full four combinations. No one else has that many." I finished with a deadpan. "You stud."

"Damn straight," he smiled broadly. "Ow!" He put up his arms to block any further jabs from Emma. A series of brown haired individuals appeared on our screen, along with one in auburn. "Why do they all have the same hair color?" he asked.

"Because you have a type," I answered. "Tall and blond. Your hair color's dominant, theirs are all recessive. Except Emma's, kinda. Red hair follows a different set of rules that'll mix and match with other hair colors in weird ways."
"Let's start with this one." I pointed at the first grouping. "This is Zach and Crystal. Who couldn't make it to this showing." Because I didn't call her, I wasn't sure she would see the humor here.

Like all of Zach's combos, they were tall. Zach's own genes capped him out at six three, though his power's regeneration would bump him to a height of around six five by the time he was done growing. And of his pairings, most of them were pretty tall as well. The Crystal options were actually second shortest, at six foot, and five eight for the boy and girl, respectively.

"I want a copy of those," Vicky requested. "Let my cousin see what coulda been. Ooh! Please tell me you got Taylor and Crystal!"

"Ask me about it later," I instructed. Taylor and Crystal? There has to be a story in there that I don't know about. "You're next." The screen flipped to the next set. Where the first set were attractive, this pair were beautiful. Zach and Vicky were both naturally tall and broad, plenty of room for muscle on their frames. The girl was six foot. Vicky's features seemed to mostly win the genetic battle, leaving the children with nearly perfect features. It wasn't a surprise, Riley made Vicky's genome from the ground up to be flawless. The next six generations of her offspring would be statistical impossibilities of good genetics.

"Hey, Emma?" Vicky asked sweetly.

"Too late, bitch, get your own," Emma growled, wrapping her arms around Zach. She was smiling, however, there was no actual malice in the words.

"Fiiine," Vicky whined exaggeratedly.

The next set was the Zach/Emma combo. Shorter than the others, by a couple inches. Like every Zach combo, brown eyes. Emma's curvy good looks paired well with Zach's size and height, creating a female that was tall and very curvy, and a boy somewhere between 'quarterback' and 'guy from a romance cover novel'. Both had dark auburn hair. Vicky gave out a whistle.

"You can't have them, either!" Emma declared.

"Spoilsport," Vicky muttered.

"Moving on," I pressed the button, and got the last pair. They were giants, frankly. The girl amazonian, six one with playboy model curves. The boy would be Zach's height, without the powers to boost him up.

"Holy shit, who's that with? Alexandria?" Zach asked. Emma, Missy and Vicky figured it out first,
and signaled that to the others with a series of shrieks and laughter.


"Oh god, this needs to happen," Vicky giggled mercilessly.

"Sorry, Zach," Emma managed to spill between her laughs. "It really does. Theo, I volunteer my boyfriend to have your man-babies whenever you want."

Missy's right, Theo's definitely cute when he blushes.

I waited a couple minutes for the laughter to die down. Even Taylor and Amelia had relaxed enough to join in, despite the one truly serious combo shown thus far being theirs. "We're not done yet," I told the group. The next slide picked up. A darker toned man and woman, with rich, wavy black hair and naturally bronze skin. "Say hello to the Vicky and Chevalier mix."

"Know what? Emma, Theo, you two can fight over Zach all you like. I've changed my mind," Vicky said. She tilted her head off to the side. "Mom, remember what we talked about yesterday? I now have photographic evidence!" Wait, she actually talked about that? To her mom? I chose not to point out to her that the way her genes were optimized, she'd actually have to dip her children in acid to make them unattractive. "Oh! Is it time to ask about Taylor/Crystal?"

"Well, I had one more planned first, but sure, we can do that first," I agreed with a smile. Taylor was blushing and hiding in Amelia's shoulder, but she was laughing along with the rest of us. The brunette children that popped up were tall and slender, though not like thin like Taylor. Rounder faces and generally softer features. Where the Taylor/Amelia mix was tall and almost ethereal, this pair was more normal looking. Definitely very cute, but not noteworthy.

"Oh no!" Lisa exclaimed, laughing hard. "You really did it! That's. That's not Crystal and Taylor. It's Sarah and Danny!"

"That's why you didn't ask Crystal to sit in, isn't it?" Victoria asked. "Oh, fuck, I've lost some of the crowd. I was expecting it to bother Taylor, who just looked a little weirded out. I didn't think it would upset Vicky, but she seemed legitimately angry about it.

"Pretty much," I smiled, pretending I didn't notice. Through the limited senses of the interactive holograms, I hoped Vicky couldn't read my emotions too much. "Moving on, let's see who gets this one first. Lisa's automatically disqualified."

I hit the screen to show a pale woman with deep green eyes, cute freckles, and jet black hair. The was also the shortest of the ones seen thus far, only making it to five five. Everyone looked for a
second, and then Lisa started clapping slowly. She'd stopped laughing, but didn't lose the smile. I looked around for any takers.

"I give up," Missy admitted first. "What combo's that?"

"Oh, that one's mine," Lisa answered. "Alexandria's the other half."

"I thought Alexandria was taller," Taylor replied.

"Her powers at work," I informed. "Turns out, Alexandria's natural body type is really petite."

From there, we moves to truly silly examples. The shockingly large number of blondes on the team made interesting mixtures something of a rarity. And I tried not to pair anyone up in a way that might make anyone jealous or honestly uncomfortable, which limited the number of splices I could do with Emma to Zach and Vicky. The Emma/Vicky combo was, predictably, a strawberry blond bombshell. Everyone had a good laugh at the Lisa/etc combinations. Especially the ones we affectionately dubbed 'repeat' and 'smugbug'. The 'everyone on the team combined' option was... unremarkable looking. Downright boring, even.

We even got the Theo/Missy/Riley combos in. I had no doubt that Lisa figured out the ploy, but didn't say or do anything with that information. Either way, Riley's little hobby was out there, but introduced in a mostly non-awkward way. As long as Riley followed my advice to say nothing about it later. Let them approach her if they wanted to and were comfortable with it. And in the meantime, it was a good laugh that we all needed.

==============

A/N- If you pay attention, this chapter DOES manage to work some plot relevant details. And stealth confirmation of stealth hints strewn waaaay back in the story.

But mostly it was just for funsies.
"You mean unmask myself?" I confirmed, watching Lisa through the screen. Or, Minerva I guess, we were both in costume and using whatever dimensional tinker bullshit was packed inside to talk. "On national television, no less."

"International. Interplanetary, even. You were going to have to, anyway, with the whole royal family plan," Lisa pointed out. "Sham marriage notwithstanding, you'd have to prove your identity and show your face, confirm your nationality, all kinds of other stuff. Giving up your secret life was part of the package even from the beginning."

I frowned. She wasn't wrong, but I never thought about that. "What's the angle this time?" I asked. Didn't really want to let Lisa know she caught me not thinking all of that through. Easier just to ask her about her plan and see what she had to say.

"Pretty much the same thing as before," Lisa responded. "Only we don't need the marriage. You're an international hero. Except in China. Two dead Endbringers, and the whole dark and mysterious look that Pantheon's been missing after Taylor dropped the reformed villain angle for the 'behold, I was really a hero all along, also tragic backstory' combination. Which was great, don't get me wrong, but it leaves the slot open."

I sighed. "You remind me of someone. I can't remember who. Oh, right, I remember. How about every last retard in the Protectorate's PR department? Yeah, let's start with them and move our way into politicians."

"I probably deserve that," Lisa replied. "But remember, this one was your idea. You wanted to help Japan, on the macro scale. You wanted to set yourself up as a hero of the people the same way Taylor and Amelia have done. Social justice and equality for everyone. Whole nine yards plus some bonus inches. Giving up your secret identity is a requirement to all of that."

"Being able to cause change by working with the system instead of gutting it like a fish was also suppose to be part of the goal," I countered. "This looks like it's going to be the opposite of that."

"Sorry, can't do miracles. We only pretend to be gods," she snarked. "Seriously, though. You threw a gay pride ribbon on your costume and walked through cities in countries so intolerant that it would make Empire Eighty Eight uncomfortable. Don't tell me you're not ready to smash a few heads to get what you want."

"It's not like that," I insisted. "I don't want to go in looking for a fight. It's just that I'm ready to end it if someone else starts it, but..." Fuck, how do I explain it to her? "Know what? Use your power to figure it out."
"Already have," Lisa responded. "My point is, we both know you want this. Maybe you don't want to cause the waves you'll need to cause to get it, but that doesn't change anything. The 'system' you want to work inside of doesn't want your help. Your choices are either to leave it alone, or force the issue. It's on you to make that choice. I'm just offering to do for you what I've done for Taylor and Amelia."

"Which is?" I asked.

"Keep the powder keg from exploding in your face while you do the social crusading," she responded.

....

"You okay?" Eric asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "Conversation with Lisa. Nothing you need to worry about. Won't impact the portal building any. I was just going to ask you a favor."

"Impromptu visit to the girlfriend?" he asked. He didn't wait for my confirmation before getting up. "Okay, let me grab my armor." Half a second later, he was holding it, and it started folding over his body. Unlike my gear, which needed special modifications to properly harness my power, his was able to shapeshift and mold around him. Honestly, I was glad mine couldn't do that, it looked creepy as hell.

We shunted over. Avalon was still a mostly uninhabited world, so we were treated to the same unending expanse of blue green as always. Although Avalon's version of Serbia's hills made for slightly more interesting terrain than the flat endless stretch that most of the world possessed.

"Call me when you want the return trip," he instructed, and then the world changed. It would have been disorienting if I hadn't already gotten accustomed to it. I appeared on a twenty foot wide gold and blue checkerboard, with 'Los Angeles' printed on it in orange. The garish color combo was on purpose. Eric's power was tuned to location, and of course dimensional barriers. With this setup, all he'd have to do is envision the pad and he could teleport anywhere one was built, without needing to 'imprint' on it, or however that worked.

Our analog to LA was extremely active. Already they had graduated from Yggdrasil homes to real construction. Although our Sacramento was Avalon's biggest city, and that wouldn't change until the gold was mined out of the mountains. Plus uranium, plus whatever else they found. All I knew was Dragon considered the area profitable enough to be burning hundreds of millions of dollars out here. And where money went, people followed.
I took off from the teleportation pad. It was on an elevated platform to prevent anyone from getting up here without a lot of effort. One of the small chunks of land that Avalon claimed for itself. A few people pointed and waved at me as I hovered further up, coming into their view. I waved back, of course. Being an interplanetary hero had its fun moments, certainly. I still didn't know if I was ready to commit myself to it completely, however. I activated my dimensional viewer to look into Bet, find the appropriate height, then shunt over. Idly, I wondered how those watching below would interpret that display.

I appeared just a few feet over the roof of Avalon's building in the actual city, touching down gently. The security system recognized my armor, and the door opened for me. Down below, someone would have been alerted. Whichever poor unfortunate got saddled with monitor duty. The building itself was a modified small office complex. At some point the team went from renting it to owning it. I wasn't sure how that happened, but Crystal was excited. She was really coming into her own as a leader.

Crystal was there to greet me when I got out of the elevator shaft. "Hey, Lily, this is a surprise."

I shrugged, and the armor peeled away from my mouth, at least. One of the few features this armor had to partially unsuit. "Yeah, I was just in a mood to see Sabah," I told her. I didn't want to be rude about it, of course, but that was why I was here.

"She's not here right now," Crystal told me. My armor's tech picked up on her nervousness. The six month probation where I wasn't even able to turn off the lie detector tech as Lisa's idea of a punishment and reminder of my fuckup wore off a while ago, but I had gotten so used to it that I never thought about deactivating it anymore. "I'll call her and have her come back."

"Little late for her to be on patrol," I pointed out. That was part of her deal, not doing the late stuff.

"She's working on one of her projects," Crystal corrected. She'd pulled out her phone and hit the speed dial.

*Right, her fashion career,* I reminded myself. "I thought her studio was in the building."

"You'll have to ask her about it," Crystal responded. "Hey, Sabah."

"Is something wrong?" Sabah asked. My armor caught her voice and amplified it for me. I'd gotten so accustomed to that, too, that I didn't even think about it anymore.

"No, nothing like that," Crystal assured her. "Lily's here."

"Oh, she didn't say she was coming over," Sabah responded. "I'll be there in ten. I'll let Bee know it's
"Bye," Crystal responded, closing her phone. "She'll be here in ten minutes. Come on, I'll introduce you to the rest of the team. Sabah said something about you maybe joining this group when the portals were all established?"

"Yeah," I replied. *Not important? No, she didn't mean it like that. But who's 'Bee'?* "It's going to be a little while. Labyrinth's in a bad place right now. Bad enough that Faultline's keeping her on Avalon. We have to wait until she's more lucid before we can build more portals safely." *I am sorta on call right now, the moment Elle recovered, we'd need to finish the Serbia portal and move on right away. We were already behind schedule.*

"Ames told me that Trevor and Dragon are working on a system to build portals without needing your power interaction," Crystal offered. "There's a bit of a catch since it can only work on worlds that already have portals. But it means you won't have to go back and build multiple portals in all the countries that want them."

"Yeah, Lisa mentioned that," I nodded, then I glanced at my armor's internal clock. "We had a talk about me going public with my identity. Apparently I'm a public relations tool to be used. Draw all those east asian colonists."

"Lisa's kind of a massive bitch," Crystal responded. "But she's not often wrong, and she wouldn't lie about stuff like that. I'm used to a public identity, so it's a little different for me. If you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

"Uh, sure, that'd be nice," I agreed. *Still over nine minutes left.*
"My girlfriend decided she felt like a surprise visit," I informed Beth.

"Really?" the girl smiled. "Y'know, you can invite her her if you want. I don't mind at all."

"I wouldn't want to impose," I replied. That and it's probably not a good idea. Lily can get a little possessive.

"How about I come with, then?" she offered. "I'd love to meet her. Maybe get an autograph."

"She probably wants it to be just the two of us," I pointed out. It was the most diplomatic way I could think of to avoid letting my girlfriend see that I spent most of my time around a girl who did the 'cute and vulnerable' look this well.

"Yeah," Beth sighed. "You're probably right. I'd just be a third wheel, and no one likes that. I'll work on the costumes while you're gone."

"She... was thinking about maybe joining our team after they're done building the portals in Eastern Europe," I offered. That might placate her a little bit, hopefully. Beth was nice, but overeager about potential friends. Either that or cripplingly shy, and it was hard to predict which and when. But once you got around the neurosis, she was a great person to be around. Actually, now that I think about it, she'd probably get along really well with Lily.

"That would be awesome!" she exclaimed. "I bet our powers would go great together. I can distract the bad guys and she'll be able to rip them apart! And because my summons aren't real, she doesn't have to be afraid to accidentally hurt any of them."

I smiled. "That's actually a pretty good tactic," I agreed. Lily and I actually used it a lot, although considering how her power and her armor worked, she really didn't need my help. Then again, with my armor I didn't really need her help, either. There wasn't a lot out there that could challenge Azrael or Tapestry when we wanted to use them to their fullest. In fact, pretty much left us solely with Endbringers. "But I'd better get going, now."

"Okay, I'll make a few more mockups," she offered eagerly. "I bet if I think 'elf sorceress', I can find something close to a summer wardrobe with a little work."

"That'd be really helpful," I agreed, heading for the door. That was the thing about Beth's power. It was incredibly versatile, on a level that rivaled Taylor and Amelia's combination. Although nowhere near their sheer scale. But her control over it left a lot to be desired.
The bottom half of our building was, more or less, a legitimate business. Or businesses. Space that we rented out to a few small companies that just needed a little bit, but not much, office. Or, in a couple cases, nothing more than a mailing address. Not a great way to disguise ourselves, but the whole 'unspoken rules' thing meant it was enough. No one could blow our identities without making themselves the bad guys. The kinds of bad guys we could then drag out of their bedrooms at three in the morning. No one wanted to give us permission to do that.

"Sorry I took so long," I apologized as I made it in the door to 'our' part of the building. Lily was sitting with the others. Or at least Crystal and Sveta. The three of them were smiling. GL would be around here, somewhere, too. He always was.

"What took so long?" my girlfriend asked.

"Sorry, the traffic was bad," I sighed. "Seriously, two inches of snow and Los Angeles shuts down like it's an Endbringer attack. I didn't think to bring my armor with me. I rarely ever need it." That was true. With Sveta and Anima on the team for the front lines, and Crystal as blaster and mobility, my power set with or without my armor was pretty redundant. If a scenario ever got bad enough to actually need all of us in the field, the entire Protectorate would be out as well.

"Oh," Lily replied, getting up. Her wings folded themselves around her, creating the semblance of a short dress overtop the rest of her costume. I'd forgotten how intimidating the black and silver costume could be. "Well, I'm glad you're safe." She approached me and gave me a tight hug. I returned it.

"Yeah," I agree, glancing at the others in the room. It was a little embarrassing hugging in front of the coworkers and friends. "It's bee a while, maybe we should go to my workplace and catch up."

"Sounds like a plan," Lily agreed, wrapping her arm around mine.

It wasn't until we were halfway down the stairs that I realized what it must have sounded like to the other people in the room. Including Lily, apparently, as she tilted me back and gave me a smoldering kiss the moment we stepped through the door. Normally I would have loved it, but not now, not in this building. I pushed away from her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice squeaking a little.

"It's just that, well, GL's power," I stuttered. "He kinda is the building. He sees everything."
"Oh, that's not a problem," Lily answered. "I asked him not to watch us while after you got here. He's pretty cool, has some great stories about the team. Says you're a great help on the team. Did you really launch someone into the ocean like a skipping stone?"

I blushed. "Well, he was a brute with acid powers and regeneration. We didn't want to kill him and we tried everything we could think of that wasn't Crystal's ice lance, so, yeah, I threw him into the bay to buy us some time for Alexandria to get to us. I didn't stop to think that a guy who could pick up a cement truck would still only weigh a couple hundred pounds."

"Nice," she complimented. "That's the problem with some powers. Really good if you want to kill the guy, a whole lot less any other time. But you really saved the day with that one. Smart play at the right time."

"Vicky would have found a better way," I deflected the compliment.

"Well, yeah, but Vicky has 'how do I kick its ass' as one of her powers," Lily pointed out. "You did it with natural human smarts instead of unfair powers bullshit."

"Thanks," I smiled.

"Hey, you deserve it," she responded, giving me another kiss. I responded a little this time, but apparently not enough for her tastes. She broke the kiss and looked at me. "What's wrong?"

"It's kinda weird, still," I muttered. *I know he promised he wouldn't peak in, but...*

"Is this about 'Bee'?' she asked. "Who is that, anyway?"

"Umm..." I hesitated I didn't want to give out anyone's secret identity.

"Are you cheating on me?" she demanded. "Is that what I interrupted?"

"No!" I insisted. "I wouldn't do that to you. We're just friends. We were working on a project for some theatre costumes. Nothing big budget, but it's a lot of fun and I'm learning a lot about a whole new style of art and costuming."

"I bet she's pretty," Lily prompted.

"I guess, but that doesn't mean I'm going to cheat. Besides, she's straight. She's never going to be
interested in me."

"She's Anima, isn't she?" Lily pieced it together.

"I'd rather not say," I looked down. "Secret identities are there for a reason."

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," she responded. "And you're absolutely sure she's straight, then?"

"Her power runs off her subconscious," I replied. "Or at least what her subconscious was like when she was thirteen. I've never seen her female summons do anything to suggest they were... well, anything. They sometimes acted sultry, even slutty, but never in a way I could pin down. More like they were trying very hard to move like a cat, completely unaware of the sexual implications. "The male summons... well, she doesn't use the elves for a reason, even though they're her best fighters."

"Do tell?" Lily stepped back, crossing her arms.

"Well, the warriors are all guys," I started. "They're super quick, have built in ranged weapons. Super fast and accurate. I think two of them working together would give Vicky a real fight, and she could create fifty of them at once if she wanted. But we've caught them in a few, uh, compromising positions with each other. They don't really have the parts to actually do anything, but they try. I don't know everything that says about her subconscious, but I'm pretty sure it means she's only interested in guys."

"That or she's so deep in the closet she found Narnia," Lily added dryly. I didn't like her talking about Beth that way.

"No," I responded. "I caught you staring at me when you thought I wasn't looking. Beth spends her time around people like Crystal and Alexandria." Or some of her own summons. "I think one of us would have noticed."

"Fine," Lily sighed. "You're probably right, I'm being stupid and paranoid."

"It happens to the best of us," I smiled at her.

"Yeah," she smiled back. "Do you wish she would? Look at you like that?"

Yes. "No."

"I see," her smile left her face, and tears started to form. "I guess it's not really a surprise."
"But I-

"Lie detector's running," she interrupted. *Oh.*

"Don't worry," she forced a smile. "I don't blame you. I won't say it doesn't hurt, but I get it."

"Get what?" I asked dumbly.

"That you'd start looking for something safer. More to your liking," she explained. "I wanted more than you're willing to give. I got too demanding. Clingy, even. So I'm calling it off."

"Calling what off?" *But why?*

"Calling it off. Us. Our relationship." Lily clarified, though we already knew what she meant. "Clearly we don't want the same things right now. So I'm letting you go. You don't have to feel obligated to me."

"You. You're breaking up with me?" I whispered.

"I guess so," she closed her eyes. "I want you to know I don't hold this against you. You made the boundaries abundantly clear when we got together, and I crossed every one of them. My fault. I'll try not to make things awkward for you at work. We can still be friends, even. Just, do me a favor and give me a little time. I need a chance to get my head into a better place first. Can you do that?"

>No! I don't want you to break up with me! I love you and this isn't right. "Yeah," I promised. "I can do that."

"Thanks," she forced another smile. "Tell the others I had to run off early, okay? They'll assume it's because of work. Take care." She vanished, followed by the light pop sound as air rushed in to fill the void where her body was a moment ago. She's gone. Just like that, she's gone.

I didn't bother telling Crystal or the others. I couldn't face them, not right now. I went back to Beth's place. I found her trying to work out costuming patterns on a pair of inhumanly beautiful elf girls. *If those outfits were real, and put on real women, you'd need to use glue to keep them from falling off.*

"Hey! You're back earl..." she trailed off when she got a good look at me. "Have you been crying? Are you okay?"
"No," I whined. "L- Atropos broke up with me."

"Oh," her hands went to her mouth. "I thought you two were doing so well. Why?"

You. Me. Because I'm stupid. "Lots of reasons," I answered. "She wasn't happy for a while, and I knew it, and I just hoped it would go away instead of doing anything about it. Looks like I got my wish."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she hugged me, resting her cheek on the top of my head. "Don't worry, it'll work out."

"You think so?" I looked up at her. How could someone who lived in the world we lived in still believe that?

"Yeah," she insisted, smiling down at me. "Things happen for a reason, even if you can't figure it out right now. You'll look back in a few months or a year and realize it was all for the best."

Her eyes are the same color as honey. I stood up on my toes, and kissed her.

=============

A/N- Am I a horrible person?

Yeah, I'm probably a horrible person.
Okay, Beth, you can do this. She's upset and needs comforting. "... realize it was all for the best."

She looked up and against all logic she looked like she believed me. Glad one of us does. She pulled herself against me just a little tighter, and then her lips were on mine. I didn't have time to react before my summons did it for me.

"Unhand her, deviant!" one of them shouted. Oh fuck. No!

I felt the slick texture of forcefield wrap around my skin, the magical armor spell that her sister cast. Then lightning coursed around my body and into Sabah. Another of their spells. All this happened in one terrified heartbeat.

"Sabah!" I exclaimed, holding her as she convulsed and fell to the ground. She's so small and fragile. It was hard to think of her as such. In her armor, she could shrug off artillery fire and casually throw someone halfway across the city. But underneath that, a tiny girl you'd think just had her thirteenth birthday, not her twenty first. I checked her pulse, all the while thanking the first aid courses that Crystal made us all take. Erratic pulse, but not dangerously so. Conscious, breathing fast but again nothing too extreme. No signs of injury. I even took a moment to take a deep breath. No scent of burning or ozone, also a good sign.

The summons didn't do anything, standing there emulating confusion and worry. They were tuned to my feelings and desires, a strength and a weakness. Right now they knew they did something wrong, and their useless fucking brains couldn't process that thought. Even if I wanted them to act, they wouldn't be able to. They would be stuck in a feedback loop until destroyed or unsummoned. This is my fault. If I hadn't gotten angry at her for kissing me, they wouldn't have attacked.

"Sabah, are you okay?" I held onto her. My summons had a lot of weird rules, especially the ones that had their imitation of magic. It was all energy generation or telekinetic stuff, the reason my Shaker and Blaster ratings were almost as high as my Master rating. What hit her looked like lightning, but it didn't need to be electricity. It could just as easily have been pure kinetic force or heat or even some weird form of sonic attack. And even if it was electricity, it could still break several laws of physics and I would have no way of knowing which ones.

"Yeah, I think I'm okay," she managed to reply, her breathing coming back under control. "It didn't hurt, it just paralyzed me."

"I'm sorry," I hugged her. "I'm so sorry I didn't mean to."

"It's not your fault," she hugged me back. "I shouldn't have done that. It was stupid and wrong. Your
power was just trying to protect you from me."

*Dammit, don't you see how much worse that makes me feel?* "Are you able to get up?" I asked, breaking the hug. I forced myself to ignore the wetness spreading just above my knee. *This is something I will never speak of to anyone, ever.*

"I can do that," she agreed. I helped her to her feet, and then stood, my knees ached a little from their time on the hard floor.

"You should probably check yourself for injuries, strange bruises, that sort of thing," I offered awkwardly. "I think my power only wanted to stop you, not hurt you, but I don't know if there might be some lasting side effects. My bathroom has a full length mirror you can use. Some aspirin in the medicine cabinet if you need something. I'll unsummon these two and scrounge up some ice cream."

"Yeah, thanks," she agreed, not able to meet my eyes, keeping her hip turned toward me. "I'll do that."

I dipped into my room for a discrete change of jeans and judicious application of hand soap and paper towels. *How the fuck did I end up in this situation? I don't know anything about their relationship. Sabah seems to blame herself. Should I encourage her to make up with her now ex? Do I tell her that exes are exes for a reason and she should move on? Call someone who may actually know what they're talking about? Yeah, that's probably the best plan. Crystal's smart, the team leader, friends with both of them, and has actually been on a date before in her life. I have exactly zero of those things going for me.*

I made good on the promise of ice cream by going downstairs and breaking into the theater's fridge. I was certain the proprietor knew my cape identity. I often paid my rent with money she paid Anima for propwork. We once swapped the same hundred dollar bill between us nine times. Then I spent it on some cute boots. I'd apologize later and pay for more ice cream, of course. Maybe throw a small pizza party or something. Right now, however, I confiscated the chocolate strawberry desert in the name of relationship troubles and went back upstairs.

When I got back up, I made conscious effort to avoid mentioning the change of clothes that Sabah had made for herself from the spare cloth we were using for costuming. Her power was so much more convenient than mine. And so much less likely to tase someone for startling her.

I handed her a bowl with a couple large scoops, then sat next to her. There was a distance between us now, however. Where before we would pretty much sit hip to hip on my small loveseat, now we were both edged against the arms.

"Sorry I made such an idiot of myself," Sabah apologized again.
"That's fine," I replied between bites. "Love and heartbreak make people do dumb things." Not that I'd know, but that is what all the plays and movies and stories tell us, isn't it? I'll trust them to be right.

"I guess," she responded. "I'm not good at relationships. Lily was my first girlfriend. My first anything."

Still more than I have. "So, I guess the question is what you're going to do about it?" Yeah, that's something I can work with.

"I don't know," she sighed. "She was right, though."

"About?" I don't know what was said, I don't know what to do.

"When we got together, I..." she sighed. "I was scared. I liked her, but I was afraid she'd do what... I was just stupid and afraid of being in a relationship at all. Lily talked me into it. Negotiated with me."

"Negotiated?" I asked. "Like a contract? This, this is not what the stories tell you about relationships."

"Yeah, kinda," she stared down at her bowl. "I told her I didn't want the mess that came with relationships. The expectations, the loss of freedom. She swore that she was okay with that. Said she didn't need all the traditional stuff and was happy just being with me. But the longer we were together, the more demanding and possessive she got. It felt like a betrayal, like she lied to me so she could get close and use me, the same way..." she trailed off.

I'm the opposite in every way. The moment I know I've found the one, It'll be wedding bells by the end of the month. The trick was finding the one. "So, umm, slight change of subject. Why did you kiss me?"

"I don't know," she sighed, looking at me. Her eyes were red from the crying. "Because you're beautiful and understanding and smart and I felt safe with you. It just felt right at the time. That should have been my first clue that it was a bad idea."

It's never felt right for me. "If..." I hesitated. "If things went different? If I kissed you back?" Instead of subconsciously instructing my imaginary friends to taze you until you peed yourself on my lap. "Would you have pushed away from me later, when I wanted more than just a fling or one night stand?"

Here eyes widened in horror, then she buried her face in her hands. "I'm a horrible person," she sobbed. "You were just trying to be a friend, and I tried to take advantage of you. I'm no better than
"Would you have?" I asked again. "If I accepted your advances, would you have pushed me away after?"

She looked at me again. "No," she answered, trying to smile a little. "I... I don't think I would."

"We could... try it again, maybe?" I offered. I could feel a bit of blush rising in my face, and my Irish ancestry meant it would be pretty visible to anyone paying attention. "The kiss, I mean."

She blinked. "Seriously?"

"Well, I don't have any of my summons out now," I told her. "Besides, they only did that because you startled me. I know it's coming, now. So, yeah, I'd like to see what it's like to kiss someone I actually believe cares for me."

"Umm, okay," she sat up, self consciously brushing the pants she'd assembled out of our costume fabric. I scooted toward her, and she moved toward me. I reached out, putting my hand on her leg. She leaned in, and I mirrored her. She caressed my cheek, and I smiled, gazing into her dark eyes. She took the final step, and our lips touched. Her tongue brushed softly against my lips, and I parted them. Her mouth was soft, and tasted like the strawberry chocolate ice cream, but there was none of the things I was promised. No fireworks, no magic. Just flesh and saliva.

She drew away first. "Nothing, huh?" she asked softly.

"It was nice," I insisted. "It was, I liked the way it felt."

"But," she prompted.

"But," I agreed.

"It's okay, I didn't feel it either," Sabah admitted. "You don't have to worry about that."

"So, what does that make us?" I asked.

"It makes us friends," she smiled. "You were here to help me sort out my head. I really didn't expect you to, not after I... thank you." She hugged me this time, and that was something that did feel right. I hugged back.
"You're welcome," I spoke back, relieved. "Did you figure out anything about you and Lily?"

"Not really," she admitted. "I think Lily and I both need some time to sort things out alone. But at least I feel a little better, now."

=A/=Ns: 1- No, this is in fact NOT the first time one of Beth's summons has attacked people. First time any of the victims have ever peed themselves in her lap, however. Now who was it that assumed Anima's power was only a problem for Anima?

2- I wish I had a tvtropes page, just to see what tropes apply to this chapter, specifically. It would be glorious.

3- If it had been alcohol instead of ice cream, the end of this chapter might have been quite different. I say this to fuel the eternal debate of which is better after a breakup.
The following conversation is only an approximate translation. As a literal translation would be impossible to express in a way that three dimensional lifeforms could comprehend, or indeed even perceive, please accept our apologies.

~ The Editor

The pair met in a gathering of hundreds of their kind, prepared for a massive conflict that would see many of them without their hosts. The event would be nerve wracking and difficult for all. The ones that failed here, today, would note the information and move forward with the cycle of course. But the ones that succeeded, that had proven their worth, would be given more energy and resources to experiment. More opportunity to reproduce.

<Negotiator,> the elder spoke first. It was one of the greatest of its kind, one of the ones that the Entities kept from the cycle for fear of unfairly damaging the cycle. The Eden-Entity's death and subsequent butchery by the hosts led to it being here today.

<Optimizer,> the younger acknowledged. It was important as well, one of those charged with charting the course through dimension and distance and upwards of a hundred different precognitive shards at once. It was a respected part of the whole. <I wish to communicate with you.>

<Accepted,> it relayed, switching to a more subtle mechanism that the others wouldn't be able to detect. There was nothing unusual in this act, and the stronger members could maintain dozens of these dialogues simultaneously.

<I have been working with the Shaper and the Administrator,> Negotiator informed. If they were a different species, that might have been considered a brag. These were amongst an elite few members that the Entities deliberately handicapped before releasing into the cycle. Amongst the most capable still allowed to participate. <They have discovered a fascinating new methodology.>

<Indeed?> it was unusual for shards to share discoveries outside the Entity assigned periods. And even then, usually only data on how to better manipulate their hosts.

<As you know, this world's hosts use genetic pattern transfer as the means for their reproduction,> Negotiator spoke.

<Dreadful practice,> Optimizer replied. <I don't envy those who could not find ways to block their hosts from such... practices...>

<Agreed,> Negotiator responded. <But it seems their species has a practice of emulating reproduction for their own enjoyment, instead of reproduction.>

<Bizarre.>

<Very. Yet, for whatever reason, it exists,> Negotiator was one of the ones that could easily learn the reason. That it chose not to was a simple contempt for the host species. <The Shaper recognized a mechanism to emulate the practice.>
This discovery was by accident, but the beings couldn't comprehend of any other way discoveries happened. They lack imagination or creativity, only able to interpret what is, not what could potentially be.

<Fascinating,> Optimizer responded. <I will request knowledge of the interaction.>

<Unnecessary, and it might distort the results,> Negotiator interrupted in a burst that, if it were human, might be considered panic.

Optimizer paused, regarding its conversation partner.

<Simply observe their hosts,> Negotiator instructs.

Rarely, beyond the merging process itself, do the beings truly examine their hosts. There was rarely need, the minuscule portion of their powers that they provide to the host itself would handle that for them. At Negotiator's request, Optimizer looked at the hosts with its own senses. It would take a hundred human lifetimes to experience all the details acquired in that brief nanosecond. The next eighteen nanoseconds were just a vacation. <I... I think I almost budded.>

<They use the hosts themselves as proxies for the practice,> Negotiator informed. <It creates strong, unforeseeable, deviations. The hosts derive pleasure from the interaction, encouraging extensive testing and use without large energy expenditure or adjusting their natural behavior. An order of magnitude more data than even that pair could ordinarily achieve, for a tenth of the power expenditure.>

<It might change the cycle entirely,> Optimizer agreed.

Negotiator hesitated, its next signal was weak, almost as if it was unwilling to expend the energy. <Would you like to try it? With me?>

Optimizer hesitated, running through the diagrams that Negotiator had included. Yes, it was possible. Adjustment of conflict impulses. Minor levels of dissatisfaction around current allies, minor levels of encouragement around each other. Reduction of energy cost by sharing data via secondary methods. It was all absolutely achievable.

<You planned this and sought to lure me into it,> Optimizer concluded.

<Yes.>

<I like it.>

=============

A/N- at some point this got away from me and became a little less comedic and a little more creepy and sinister.

Therefor: it's now canon.

Enjoy your delicious, delicious, nightmare fuel.
And I'm interpreting GU's use of the word "negotiator" in an "obstacles" way, and needed some name that made sense for Alexandria's powerset. I think I did pretty well with that.
Huh, why's Lily calling back so soon? I activated the phone. "How long did you know?" Her voice was angry and miserable all at once.


"You're not going to convince me you didn't already know," Lily growled. "Don't fucking try. How. Long. Have. You. Known?"

"Which part?" I responded, tapping on my power to find my way through this minefield. *Happened earlier than anticipated. Catalyst. Not from Lily, would have noticed during earlier conversation. Lily went to see Sabah after. Lily blames me and sees this as something I should have known a while ago. Knows my power wouldn't pick up on information I couldn't access. Knows I don't talk to Sabah often, if at all. Sabah too timid to take any drastic action. Lily initiated breakup. I had to consciously avoid a sigh of relief. I knew how to approach this, now.*

"That the two of you weren't going to last?" I offered. Her reaction, or guarded avoidance of a reaction, confirmed it for me. "If we're being honest? Before you even got together in the first place. You two just don't want the same things out of life, it was never going to work out." *It was also never going to be emotionally healthy in any kind of way. Two people as fucked in the head as you and Sabah only stand a chance in the very rare situation where you have compatible neurosis like Amelia and Taylor. But terrified of commitment and emotionally needy do not belong in a relationship together.*

"And you said nothing," she accused.

"Would you have believed me?" I countered. "Name one moment, any moment before this call, that I could have told you. When I was still Tattletale? I like my organs unperforated, thanks. Before you signed up and you were being fed the Protectorate's propaganda about us?"

"To be fair to Piggot," Lily cut in. "Everything she said about you turned out to be true. Class S threat, going to conquer the city, if we don't stop them now we'll never get another chance. If anything, she underestimated you."

"Well, I never accused her of being stupid," I replied. "But let's continue. Could I have told you after you started dating her and still didn't know me beyond 'that bitch formerly known as Tattletale'? What about after I warned you about your impending reassignment out of Brockton Bay?" *Please don't catch how you might not have stayed if I did convince you to think twice about Sabah. The first time I might have had a chance was when you came up with that marriage plan. Then fucking Khonsu happened.*
She flinched. *Fuck, overdid it.* "I... my powers aren't all that cracked up to be," *can't believe I'm opening up to Lily of all people.* I slumped in my chair. "In a way, they're a lot like yours or Victoria's. I know how to spot weakpoints, how to tear people down and ruin them in all kinds of ways. But every time I thought that maybe, just once, I could save someone? Actually help instead of hurt? It's been nothing but disaster after disaster. Asking me to help someone is like asking you to use your power to repair something. It almost sounds possible, but it's not."

"That's fucked up," Lily responded.

"I hoped that Rapture could do better than I could have," I told her. *Not a lie, I really did hope, but I knew that would fail as well.* Rapture wasn't willing to harness her powers to their fullest, for reasons she was capable of hiding from my power. If I dipped into my postcognition, then maybe I could have figured it out, but she'd know, and I doubted that would go over well. "Maybe she thought the same thing I did, that it was better for it to happen naturally than with us meddling in your personal lives."

"She didn't have a lot of chances," Lily admitted. *Heartbreaker's kids are pretty scary."

I nodded in agreement to that. If it weren't for the anti-master drug, they wouldn't have even been given a chance. Too dangerous, too fucked up in the head. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I really do wish there was something I could have done. Or something I might be able to do."

"Yeah, dial it back," she muttered. "Just because I get where you're coming from doesn't mean I agree with it. Or that I'm gonna forgive you that easy. Or that we're going to be friends. I don't like what you did. I don't like a lot of the shit you do. I talked to Rapture about what happens if I go public this way. I didn't like the answers. You were looking at starting a war, Lisa."

"That's pushing it," I insisted. "I ran it by Dinah's numbers, less than a five percent and easy enough to manipulate in our favor over time. There was almost no chance of us not being able to at least delay it."

"Delay it how?" her eyes narrowed.

"Vague promises, delays, negotiations, there's all kinds of ways for politicians to push things off and force the next candidate to deal with the mess they left behind," I responded. "Only in this case it wouldn't matter because Scion's going to happen. Once that happens, the CUI will have more important things to worry about, and so will we." *Impatient, waiting for rest of the statement. Fuck, Rapture really did figure it all out.* "The risk of civil conflict is still there, but that's going to happen almost any way we do things. Your marriage idea was our best chance. If it means getting more people onto Avalon where we can actually protect them, then that's what saves the most lives."

"Well, now I'm single again and Sabah's opinion no longer means shit to me," Lily spat. "So get in
touch with the royal family, and talk negotiations. The marriage is back on the table if that's what it takes to do this without bloodshed."

I nodded, careful to not smile. "Okay, I'll see what I can do. But it might not be enough in the long run. And of course you'll be disqualified from status in Avalon's nobility."

"I wasn't planning on that anyway," she responded dismissively. "I was thinking we delay the negotiations and unmasking for a little while, though. I have a plan."

....

"Lisa, isn't the point of going to a restaurant to eat things we can't make ourselves?" Taylor asked, looking at the building. It was one of the first restaurants built on Avalon. And more interestingly, it was to be the first example of Avalon specific cuisine. A couple of Crystal's college friends were in the culinary arts program, and started playing around with the samples she'd brought them. I didn't know the story beyond that, but apparently they were quite good at it.

"Oh, we don't make it like this," I smiled. "Besides, it's good to be seen like this. And you need to do something other than cuddle with Amelia all day. You two already share a planet on multiple levels, you need to stop there before you wind up sharing the same circulatory system."

Missy laughed a little. She and Theo were coming along, costumed of course. Riley and Amelia were having their time together, and everyone else had various projects of their own. Dinah's parents had chosen to monopolize all of her time before they made their move back to Bet. I ignored the twinge of envy. So few of us had parents that cared about us at all, and I sure as hell wasn't on the list.

"Lisa, I'm pretty much everywhere on the planet all at once," Taylor muttered. "I can do everything and still cuddle with Amelia all day."

"At least you're not arguing about the cuddling at all," I quipped back. "If you can't accept it as a chance to have fun, then look at it this way. This is the first business on this planet that's actually trying to be something new and unique. Everything else is 'new wherever' or made by us. And by 'us' I mostly mean Dragon." Not an exaggeration, Dragon accounted for over ninety nine percent of this planet's economy right now. In many ways, it made me worry that she was going to do to us what we did in Brockton Bay with the sewers, and the rest of the US with the M7s.

"Okay, I guess," she agreed reluctantly.

I led the way into the restaurant, and people turned to stare immediately. "Remember to smile," I instructed. The smiles would show because our armor would open for the lower part of our faces, now. Useful for public events like this. Avalon hadn't established newspapers yet, and it would be
far longer before we had our own variant on the internet, but people already had their cameras and their cell phones. News would spread.

"Uh... wow," a man stuttered as we stepped in. He was older than any of us by at least a few years. College aged. "I wasn't expecting. Please, come in, I'll get you a private room right away."

I smiled. "If you please, we'd prefer to eat in the public area," I responded. What was the point in being seen if you weren't seen? "A pair of booths, not a table. The young couple is here on a date. Khepri and I are just chaperoning and catching up on business. I've heard good things about what you've been doing and we had to see what the fuss was about."

"Really? You've heard about us?" he asked. "We just started a couple weeks ago."

"Yes, we have," I responded, even though I was the only one of us that did. "We really appreciate what you're trying to do here. If Avalon's going to distinguish itself as a culture, we need more people like you."

He stuttered a little. "Th-thank you. Here's your table." I took my seat and Taylor joined on the other side of the booth. Theo and Missy were led a couple booths away to take their own seats.

"You had way too much fun with that," Taylor accused me.

"You did, too," I responded. "You know we just made that guy's week at the very least."

"And then some," she replied. "We're walking advertisements. We start coming here, and pretty soon everyone will."

I smiled and opened my menu. "Hmm, I think the grilled applesquash sounds good," I changed the subject just a little.

"Grilled?" Taylor opened the menu. "Wow. They got everything in here, don't they?"

"Pretty much," I replied. "Lots of styles, too. Right now it seems like they're just trying stuff and seeing what people like. In five years there will be all kinds of places like this, people who want to be Avalon citizens, create their own unique culture instead of just import their home culture over. And in fifty years, people will stop remembering that it used to not be like this. All these strange names will be morphed into their own words, and no one will remember that there was a time when this was new."

"Wow," Taylor just stared at the menu. "I never really thought of that. That's pretty huge."
A/N - Well, Lisa chapter. See, it's not all work and bitchiness. Just mostly work and bitchiness.

Also: I wish grilled applesquash existed. That sounds delicious.
"Grocery delivery!" Crystal shouted cheerfully as she walked into our dorm. *Oh wow, that was fast.*

I scrambled out to help her, but I clearly needn't have bothered, she was dragging along a hovering cart loaded up with fruits and leaves. "Oh, wow, you really went all out this time," I responded, looking at the various plants.

"Yeah, I just grabbed a couple of everything," she shrugged. "We've been creating a lot of variety lately. I think Amy's finally starting to get bored with the food, so she's making more just to have something different. Here, try the turkey plant," she lifted up a large, tanned leaf.

I accepted it hesitantly. Turkey plant? It was thick, and little like cabbage in its shape and texture. Well, I've tried all the other crazy stuff, may as well add this to the list. I took a bite. Oh, wow, this really does taste like turkey. "The vegetarians are going to love this," I stated with absolute certainty. "It could use a bit of salt, but yeah, it tastes more like turkey than lunchmeat that's supposedly actually made of turkey."

"I know," Crystal agreed. "Apparently salt isn't easy to do, some metabolic process shit. I'm in school for accounting and business management, not biology."

"Pretty sure you're breaking some business rule, giving away all this free product," I joked with her.

"Are you kidding?" she smiled. "You're the only person I know who can cook this stuff. Everyone back at the base just eats it raw. They don't even own a stove. The only reason they even have a kitchen is because they needed somewhere to put the coffee machine and that thing that grows disposable cups, plates and silverware. And the only person who uses the coffee pot is Lisa. Everyone else just uses the plant that grows coffee."

"You can't be serious," I laughed. "Half the fun of food is making something amazing out of the base ingredients!"

"Truly, it is a travesty," Crystal agreed with a sage nod. "Now hook me up with that pie Tyrone promised."

"You just use me for free baking," I sighed dramatically, but I was already going to get her a slice of the fruit pie that Tyrone baked. The man was an expert with that sort of thing, and after we discovered those apples that tasted like tart watermelons, the first thing thought was 'pie'. I handed her the slice we saved.
"No, I use Tyrone for free baking," she corrected, accepting the small plate and fork from me. "I use you for your friendship with Tyrone. Mmm, this is delicious."

....

"So how did your citizenship test go?" Tyrone asked. He was in the kitchen clicking away at the laptop. I could smell something in the oven, probably some of that experiment in banana bread. One of the fruits was something like a hybrid between banana and peach, and Tyrone was seeing what he could do with that.

"Not bad," I replied. "Didn't have any problems at all. Oh, and I signed up on your group immigration code. Did you get Mike and Jo to go for it, too?"

"They're still chewing it over," Tyrone replied. You know how it is, the whole 'we'll see how it turns out for you' shit."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, kinda expected it. Oh well, if they don't want to be part of this from the beginning, we can find people who do. I bet Aly would go for it."

"Aly's a poli-sci major who can't even make ramen noodles," Tyrone smirked.

"She'd still do it!" I insisted.

"Yeah, if she thought it'd help her get into your pants," he countered.

He was right, though. "Yeah, not a good idea," I sighed, slumping onto the couch. "So what are you looking at?"

"Just possible places to move to," he responded. "We want to stay close to the portal, but everyone wants to stay close to the portal. That's why Avalon set a thirty mile stretch of non-colonized land around it, so no one could monopolize the whole area."

"So what do we have to pick from?" I asked. May as well find out what we're looking for.

"Crapton of French Canadian separatists to the north," he answered. "I think we can rule them out as an option. We're not French, we're not Canadian, and while they legally have to accept our citizenship if we move there, there's no law forcing them to come to our restaurant."

"If we get really desperate, maybe I can get Crystal to talk Amy into making a species of snails that
"Well, a pretty big 'personal freedoms' group that's 'founded on libertarian principles'," he answered. "They've clustered mostly in the Boston area. It's actually surprising how many people they're getting. I would have thought they'd freak out a bit about the whole 'all seeing god Empresses' thing going on. But it looks like they really like Avalon's hands-off Imperial government structure or something. Hell if I know what they're thinking. Politics is just choosing between a giant douche and a turd sandwich, far as I'm concerned."

"We might be able to work with that," I agreed. I popped open my laptop to find out what a libertarian was. Specifically the ones on Avalon. Blah blah, USA corrupt, blah blah abuse of power, blah blah colonies will be abused and exploited. The list went on, but they had a couple of the videotaped interviews with Khepri and Gaea and the Avalon constitution on their website. Plus promises of a plan to claim all eastern North America. Kinda nutty, but you have to be crazy to leave your home world for another like this, so who was I to judge? Meanwhile, Tyrone kept talking.

"There's a puritanical religious freedom group that's also got a good chunk nearby, but I think I'd rather not," he responded. "A little too 'traditional', if you know what I mean."

_In other words, the openly gay black man wants to avoid living in the racist homophobic country._ I wasn't going to argue. "We'd probably be better off with the French," I agreed. "I don't want to be burned at the stake for the sorcery of cooking something without the use of a deep frier."

"And a lot of tiny clusters nearby that are too small to qualify as their own territories," he added. "They'll either form up into something together, or be absorbed by their neighbors in a year or two. No one really seems to want to move inland right now. If we're willing to go out a couple hundred more miles, Dragon has some mining cities that have the population, the money, and would probably be happy to see some home cooked food."

"Pass," I answered. "The mines won't last very long. Sure, it'd be good for a while, but once that dries up everyone will move out."

"So, New Boston looks like the winner," he responded.

"New Boston?" I asked incredulously.

"Hey, they're a society of political activists, you expected them to be creative?"

"Touché."

....
"What's wrong?" I asked Tyrone. He looked like he hadn't slept at all.

"We're asking for too much," he replied. "The New Boston city-state isn't willing to give us space for the restaurant in the city itself, and we sure as fuck can't buy the amount of land we need."

"Don't give up yet," I insisted. "We can go somewhere else, maybe? The mining towns if we have to. It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing." Fuck.

"Maybe," he sighed. "There's one option to keep us nearby, if not the city itself. You're not going to like it."

"What?" I asked.

"We'd have to get married," he looked at me like he was apologizing for killing my pet goldfish or something. "They're offering incentives to get young couples and families to move in. Even more if you're willing to adopt children. We have the first half of that down. It would mean, essentially, we'd have enough space that if we were willing to, we could turn our house into the restaurant. While still being close enough to the population centers to get actual traffic. If we get Mike and Jo to take up neighboring slots, that'll be the space we need to make it work."

"Okay, we'll do it," I agreed. "The marriage part, not the adoption. And you'd better not fool around with any more of my boyfriends."

"It was just that one time!"

....

I looked at our books. *Fuck, this was such a mistake.* The idea itself was sound, of course. But we made one crucial mistake. We opened a business that provided food, in a place where everyone already had enough food for free.

Supply and demand, with almost no demand at all. We had a few regular customers, enough to keep us afloat only because our supplies were, essentially, free. It's remarkable how much less you spend when you don't have to pay for most of your supplies, or to feed yourselves. But the electricity and gas for cooking was costly.

Crystal had given me the 'seeds' that let us grow almost everything Gaea designed thus far. That was a huge help, since one of Avalon's policies was that a given individual got the seed code for exactly one type of plant. The rest would have to sort itself through trade, or buying extra seed types.
Because of that, we could provide mixes that others couldn't and had enough food growing to provide for more than ourselves and an immediate family member or two. That was just barely enough to keep us afloat.

"Don't worry about it too much," Tyrone insisted. "This is the most difficult part. Restaurants are always high risk, especially early on. Once we start gaining a rep, and the city gets large enough that this area can't rely on the Yggdrasil alone to supply the population, then it'll get better. Right now, all we need to do is stay afloat, no more."

....

I stared at the clock. Two in the afternoon. Anywhere else, this would be the lull before the storm. Here, it was just the lull before more lull. Mike rushed in. "Guys! They're here!"

"They who?" I asked.

"They! Them! The Empress! A few others."

I shot up. *Holy fuck*! "Tyrone!" I shouted. "Get in here!"

"What?" He rushed in, looking at us.

"Remember that break we needed?" I smiled. "I think we got it."

==============

A/N- Random Avalon Citizen chapter. Requested and delivered. That'll be tree fiddy.

Also: two *South Park* references in one chapter!
"How's it going, Director Dunn?" I smiled sweetly as I walked into the meeting. I knew her answer before I finished asking the question, based solely on a combination of frustration and impotent anger directed only partially toward me. Mom must have raked her over the coals during their most recent clash. I wasn't there for it, and for legal bullshit no one could tell me what happened, but they couldn't hide their emotions. Mom didn't even try, pretty much radiating satisfaction.

She just looked at me. "Good morning, Miss Dallon," she replied.

"Shouldn't you be referring to me by my cape name?" I asked. "We are on the job, after all. And you wouldn't refer to your people by their civilian identities during an official meeting, would you?"

"She really should watch her salt intake, I decided as I examined her blood pressure. What is it about these PRT Directors and their inability to watch their diets? So glad I don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Very well, Victoria," the woman almost choked on the words. "Please, have a seat and we'll begin."

When I decided to use my actual name, it was more for convenience than anything. The fact that it seemed to piss off stuffy people? Best surprise birthday gift ever. I activated a couple of forcefield panels, the latest addition to my power armor, and sat down on them. While most of the team had full body shielding systems from the Khonsu tissue, I had a better design. Created by Dragon, based off Narwhal's powers, and using the EB reactor that our tinkers cooked up. If you had superhuman reflexes, it was actually a lot better than the Khonsu shields. They were invisible to the naked eye, so I probably looked like some kind of mime or something.

Just one more of the many, many ways I found to piss off the Director without actually doing anything wrong.

Dunn glared at me slightly. "We've recieved seven requests for healing, two of which meet the protocols for highest priority," she informed, watching me to see if I called bullshit on her this time. "Four of them are requesting the 'optimization' treatment as well."

"And the Case 53s?" I asked. This was always our sticking point. All of the least unfortunate, the ones like Sveta who could never live normal lives, were already restored. We'd moved on to the ones that were deformed, but functional. Dunn was frustrated with the 'lack of progress' because of time 'wasted' on them. She'd prefer we focus on the more powerful of the injured heroes. Working with the most useful and powerful, instead of the ones most in need.

"Nineteen? Alright, I can probably do all that in one day," I replied. That was true, unless some of the Case 53s were extreme examples. Some, especially the ones that were truly alien, were exhausting. Possibly taking an hour or more each. But we'd moved on from those extremes, and now seemed to take around fifteen minutes on average. "Do the priority cases have amputations or anything severe?"

"No," she answered. "One Protectorate hero who suffered extreme burns, mostly recovered. Probable pain killer addiction," *Okay, that will be easy to handle.* "The other has been paralyzed for two years, and recently had a trigger event with telekinetic powers. Based on your past performances, they should be simple."

"Sounds it," I agreed. "Tell the ones who want optimized that there's no promises I'll be able to get to them today." Those were always tough ones as well. More predictable than the Case 53s, at around fifty minutes each.

"Understood," she responded, sounding distinctly unhappy. "The recent court ruling also mandates I inform you that Mrs. Dallon is the de facto legal counsel and representative of the Case 53s and unaffiliated parahumans that you are healing from now on, from the moment they're placed on the waiting list to when you finish their regeneration. She'll be at the hospital, speaking with them while you're working on the priority cases. She may wish to speak to you about specific patients. That is between you and her to discuss on site."


....

"I wish you wouldn't antagonize her like that," Chevalier chided me as we traveled to the hospital, flying over Philadelphia's streets. It was only about three miles away from the HQ, faster to use the suits than to take a vehicle.

"We both know she deserves it," I countered. "The only reason she still has a job is because my powers aren't admissible in court."

"And because she never did anything illegal," he added. "Even if you could prove everything you claim, it only means she followed the letter of the agreement instead of the spirit. You really should drop it."

"Nah, it's far more fun watching her squirm," I replied.
"You're not making any friends with the PRT doing that," he pointed out.

"I'd rather not be friends with people like her," I dismissed. "Besides, everyone else loves me. I'm the one teaching the troops how to really use the M7s the way they deserve to be used. Philly's second only to Calvert's Elite in terms of drill success right now. And all these capes I'm patching up that sign on to the Protectorate, they love me. All those other Directors that end up enjoying the benefits of my work at least want to keep me happy. Of course, now a few of their capes are suing for coercive tactics, but you can thank your Director for that."

"There's no evidence of that," he replied. "You don't even know it's true with your power."

"Only because she never answered the question," I argued. "We both know she's guilty."

The spike of resignation, annoyance and disgust registered on my senses easily enough. But I'd spent enough time around Chevalier to know the feelings weren't directed toward me. He knew I was right. "Still, your efforts are better spent on building up, not tearing down. Let your mother and the Internal Affairs guys handle it. If she's guilty, they'll prove it and she'll be punished to the proper extent of the law. No need to be petty about it."

"You're underestimating me," I replied. "I'm keeping her off balance. The more she's focused on me, the more chances for her to make mistakes elsewhere. Everything else is just icing on the cake."

And now he was a little frustrated with me. "Please," he sighed. "At least give it a rest for a little while. She can't do anything to touch you, but it's starting to hurt discipline with the rest of team. I know you think the system's broken. But at least give a chance to work without you sabotaging it, okay?"

"Well, since it's you, and you're asking so nicely, I guess I can stop," I agreed. "Maybe you can help me come up with something else to do, instead? We can, say, discuss it over dinner tonight?"

A spike of annoyance and concern. "You know that can't happen, Victoria."

"Don't see why not," I turned over and flew while laying on my back, pushing a bit ahead of him so he could get a look at my figure. The advantages to my smaller, sleeker, almost form fitting costume.

"You're way too young," he argued. I had to admit, it was impressive how much he managed to not let me distract him. I knew he found me attractive, he just didn't let it affect him. Some women might have found that a little insulting. I thought it was hot.

"As far as I know, the only things I'm 'too young' for are buying booze and running for President," I countered. "I can do anything I want with anyone who wants to let me." I slowly parted my toes
while keeping my heels together, then tapped them together again.

"You know what I mean," he carefully avoided looking at me. "I'm almost twice your age."

"Clearly that doesn't bother me," I responded. "And I know it doesn't bother you as much as you pretend it does."

"It would be professionally inappropriate," he tried.

"Yeah, you've tried that one before," I reminded him. "I don't work in your chain of command."

"Your mother would find a way to get me sent to the Birdcage," he added.

"She'll come around to the idea," I countered. "Seriously, she managed to be okay with Amy getting engaged to the notorious supervillain that held her hostage and fed me to bees. I think she can handle me dating the hot guy that leads the Protectorate."

"Why are you even interested in me?" He asked. "There are plenty of boys your age to think about."

"We get along great, and I'm into the strong, smart, sensitive types," I responded. *That and the armor.* I didn't know what it was about men in armor that got me so worked up, but I'd always had a thing for it and all the heroes I knew that wore it.

Heck, even Armsmaster. For those brief few seconds between the first time I met him, and the first time he spoke to me. I'm sure if Mannequin hadn't killed him, he would have made some robot very happy some day. But there was no way in hell he was ever going to get a human girlfriend.

"It's not going to happen, Victoria," he asserted.

*Wanna bet?* I thought. I said nothing, instead turned slowly in the air until I was facing the 'normal' way for flying again. I'd let him wonder if he upset me by turning me down, for a bit. Really, I was just letting him get a look at me.

=============  

A/N- When Vicky wants something, she'll find ways to get it. Also: I hope a Vicky-Ingénue meeting can occur at some point in this story.
"This is really good," I said before taking another bite of the stir-fry I'd ordered. I recognized some of the artificial vegetables as ones that I had come up with while idly chatting with Amelia. I couldn't help but smile at that. "I'm so glad you talked me into coming here."

"Told you so," Lisa smiled. "And please stop thinking about your pillow talk with your girlfriend. I want to enjoy my meal."

"So how did you even find out about this place?" I asked, meeting her eyes as I dipped into the link for a brief mental equivalent to a hug with Amelia. We were never truly apart from each other. Meanwhile, I considered the benefits of cooked food. Maybe we should create some plants specifically with the intent for them to be cooked before eaten. We should also look into foods that need to be processed, at the moment anything made from grain had to be imported from Aleph.

"Well, Crystal asked for about a hundred and fifty different production seeds," Lisa answered.

"Huh, woulda thought she'd ask Amelia for something like that," I answered. The production seeds were one of the few things we kept pretty regulated. Everyone who came to Avalon was given one seed. When planted it would produce enough fruit to feed a single person. Of course 'one person' in this case was by the standard of an American oversized diet, so in reality they could probably support two people each. Plus the vaguely lettuce like flavor and texture of eating Yggdrasil directly. But it was one person, one seed, and each made one flavor of fruit.

This was an artificial method to generate a trade economy, but it was a useful one. No one liked to eat the same thing all the time. Five families could easily have twenty different types of seed between them, and would barter with each other however they preferred to get a mix of options. That, plus the low scale personal livestock farming that had already started, would be the basis on which future economies would be born.

"I probably talk to Crystal more than Amelia does," Lisa responded. "Mostly about her handling of the west coast team."

"How is that going, by the way?" I asked. I knew there weren't any problems, then I would have been told. I was kept pretty much constantly updated on Victoria's antics in Philly. Although Carol was the one making the real waves. But that didn't mean there wasn't anything interesting happening.

"Really well, for the most part," she responded. "Anima and Clotho are really putting a rogue friendly face on our organization out there. They recently talked a new healer into joining the team. He's pretty lackluster, though."
Healers were a rare luxury, I couldn't imagine how one would be considered lackluster.

"An aura that grants moderate regeneration to everyone within a hundred feet or so," she answered my unspoken question. "It's like years of natural healing done in minutes, without scarring. Not enough to regrow organs or repair nerve damage, but it can beat diseases that are otherwise incurable like HIV or cancer. Even seems to halt aging and stabilize dying individuals in the radius, if sometimes only temporarily."

"Still plenty of uses for that," I argued.

"In the private sector, absolutely. There it's great stuff," she partially agreed. "But for our needs, it's lackluster. Some of our Tinkers are looking forward to seeing if they can imitate, range boost, or emulate it with machines one way or another."

I flagged the waitress while wondering what that power was meant to do to achieve the conflict that the Passengers were trying to achieve. It was able to heal both allies and enemies at the same time, so maybe that was the point? Access to healers tended to make parahumans less cautious. If nothing short of death was a consequence, and in Pantheon's case even that was only inconvenient, then of course there'd be more willingness to get into combat.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" the girl asked after approaching. Once again I was struck by the age dissonance. This young woman was older than me by a few years, probably college age, and I couldn't help but think of her as, somehow, 'younger' than me.

"I'd like a refill," I told her. 'Joanne', according to the name tag. "And the check."

"Oh, no, we can't charge you," she responded. Oh god damn it, it's going to be like that.

"I'd really rather you did," I responded. "After all, we'll probably come back here a lot." Understatement, Amelia would love some of this. Our diets consisted almost entirely of 'that stuff growing on our walls' and 'takeout'. And after the loss of Brockton Bay, we didn't even have the takeout. There was a time I when I enjoyed cooking. "Actually, while we're on the subject, I'd love to talk to your chef. Maybe get some recipes."

"Uh... sure, I'll go back and ask," she agreed, rushing off and completely forgetting my refill.

"Welcome to the splendors of international fame," Lisa smirked at me. "And ruling a planet."

"Think they'll get used to us if we show up often enough?" I asked. "I mean, there were a few good places in Brockton Bay that didn't flip out when capes showed up. Hopefully it'll be like that."
"True, they were okay with capes," Lisa replied. "But if the President showed up? I think it'd be a different story."

I slouched a little, before forcing myself back into proper posture. Too many people around here watching, had to look good for the public. "Is it too late to go back to mostly anonymous supervillain?"

"Yep," she smiled. "Not even faking your own death will get you out of it, now."

I was tracking the waitress, as she came out with a handsome young man. He looked a little like Brian, and there was a time that might have bothered me. But that part of my life was over, whatever might have come of the two of us if things had been different, I don't think I'd have traded it for what I had right now.

"Good day, Empress, I'm Tyrone, co owner of this establishment. How can I help you?" And just like that, my mind shuffled him into 'kid' status as well. Eager to please, a little scared even. I found myself feeling bad, actually.

"I was just telling your waitress how much I loved the food," I informed him, and watched the relief show on his face.

"Thank you," Tyrone responded, nervous that I might switch over to a complaint at any moment. These people were just so blatant and obvious in their reactions that I almost felt bad for reading them. *Is this how Lisa views people?* I glanced over at my best friend. She nodded, smiling a little.

"I'd like to ask you about a few of the recipes," I told him. "I admit, we never really thought of what we could do with these foods. I was wondering where you even got the idea for all of this."

"Sure," he agreed, relaxing a little warming. Clearly he felt confident about his cooking, at least. "I've been a big fan of yours for a while. I... was in your, umm, territory when the Slaughterhouse Nine came."

Oh, my turn to feel awkward. *I don't even recognize him.* "I was just doing what I could to help."

"Well, you did help," he replied. "More than most people will ever realize. After you started Pantheon, Jan and I. Umm, she's my partner. We were in culinary arts together in college. We started getting ideas, and experimenting with different recipes. Crystal, umm, Eki, was kinda one of Jan's friends from highschool, so that helped a lot. And when you announced Avalon, we knew we had to sign up."
"I'm really glad you did," I smiled at the guy. He was cute in an overeager puppy sort of way. "This is delicious."

He blushed. It was hard to see on his dark skin, but he was blushing. "Do you really mean that?"

"Yes," Lisa interjected. "In fact, we were talking about it while we ate. That and the idea of cultural identity. How Avalon would develop into its own unique culture instead of being defined by the countries its citizens came from. I think what you're doing here is a step on that path. You may only be a bit of a niche market right now, but in fifty or a hundred years, I think places like this will be normal. A point of national pride, even. France has its wine, Texas has its barbeque, and we'll have the stuff you're creating here."

"You think so?" he asked. Lisa had an interesting way of offering praise, but it seemed to be working.

"Absolutely," she replied. "You probably should write down your recipes. I know I'd love to see a cookbook showing all the stuff you've come up with. Maybe even think up a few fruit you'd like to see that haven't been made yet?"

"Umm, actually, there is one," he suggested. "We could really use milk of some sort. It's a filler for a lot of baking, and there just isn't any alternatives for it around here. Not even something like coconut or soy milk."

"That's probably possible," I agreed. Why didn't we think of that ourselves? "I'll let Amelia know about it. Bring her by sometime for a meal and a meeting to discuss your suggestions. How's next Thursday sound?"

"We'll be here," he responded eagerly.

================================

A/N- Don't worry, I'll do something horrible eventually.
"Our intel from the PRT shows the Elite are getting pretty active in the area. They've pulled in three more parahumans from other cities. Mantellum's the scary one for us. Shaker-Trump. Nullifes pretty much any power near him or directed at him, including precogs. Genius Loci, considering how your power works... you're under orders to avoid him at all costs. It might kill you if you're in range of his power."

"Got it," his voice was a soft rumble through the building. His preferred state of being.

"Sveta, you too," I added. "His power might interact with yours in a way that makes you revert."

Her eyes widened. The girl had night terrors about returning to her form before Victoria restored her. "I promise I'll avoid him."

"Good," I nodded. "Anima, Clotho, Dubstep. The three of you have powers that simply won't work against him. But his power doesn't seem to influence tinker tech, so your armors should remain functional. Don't rely on it, we don't know how it'll interact with the EB reactors. If we're forced to fight him, my powers and weapons are probably our best option. Or contacting the PRT. We know he's not immune to containment foam. I've already put in requests for some for us. Dragon's working on at a containment foam dispenser in Echo."

"That'll be useful," Derek responded. In this group, he was the one with the least combat viability right now. Sonic manipulation and amplification. It made him one of our better Thinkers, actually, able to hear heartbeats from half a block away, but his blaster power took a lot of time to build up into something effective, and when it did it exploded with force enough to shatter concrete. He didn't have a nonlethal setting.

Echo would be his named armor, once it was completed. Capable of interacting with his power to create a mile wide echolocation, harness his power's effect as a supplemental power supply, and inhibit his explosions to make them more controllable. His layout would be somewhat of a balance between mine and Sabah's, capable of an array of close and long range attacks, plus some sensory abilities.

"Boost," I looked at our newest recruit. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get you in for power testing this week. Our Tinkers are interested in your power. If we're lucky, they might find ways to improve it and make you more effective."

"Sure, I could use a break from sunny warm California to go to the frozen hell of New England winter," he smirked. The guy wasn't my favorite member. A gym rat who used his healing powers more as functional steroids for him and his buddies rather than, say, healing the sick. He wasn't a bad person, near as I could tell. Just not someone I had a lot of respect for. Having him was useful, but I'd
be happy to see him placed somewhere else.

"It'll be on Avalon," I reminded him. "I think you'd like it there. The ground itself is health food."

"Yer shittin' me," he replied.

"Absolutely serious," I responded. "High iron, calcium and various other minerals. Approved by multiple biotinkers and two of the most powerful biothinkers on the planet. If they say it's healthy, I believe it."

"Baller," he responded. I had no idea what that meant, but I assumed it was a positive response. "Think I can bring some back for my buddies?"

"Don't see why not," I answered.

....

"If you want me to leave so Lily can join the team after she's done with the portals, I'll understand" Sabah sobbed. "I'm sure they can find something else for me to do. Or I can just go back and finish my degree."

I let her finish, then gave her a hug. Probably not the most professional way of handling things, but screw professionalism, she needed the comfort. "You don't have to worry about that. You are an integral part of this team. My team. I'm not trading you out just because Lily dumped you."

"Really," she looked at me like she was surprised by the answer. "But she's... she's so much better than I am..."

"Not from where I'm sitting, she's not," I responded. "Yeah, sure, she's the more outright deadly option, but that's only useful when you want to kill someone. Who was the last enemy we had where lethal force was an option? Endbringers don't count." *Plus Lily is an emotionally needy wreck, has a history of discipline problems, and Lisa has other things she plans to use our primary Endslayer for. If anything, I'm lucky they broke up so I didn't get stuck with the choice of both or neither, because I'm not sure which would suck more.*

Sabah, meanwhile, was chewing over the question I asked. "I don't know. The Fallen?"

"Exactly," I answered. "I didn't even lead a team during that mission, and I never want to. Someone else can do the killing, or giving those kinds of orders. I just don't have it in me to do that."
"She has nonlethal options, too," Sabah argued.

"As a ranged fighter? Yes," I agreed. "But nothing Anima can't do. Defensively? If you can't handle it, I'm more than willing to call Alexandria for help. And chances are Victoria will be done with her assignment soon, or at least it'll be reduced to a part time thing. After that, I'll have her back on the team. I'm not saying Lily wouldn't be useful." Though I'm certainly thinking it loudly. "But I'd rather have you. You're the one that stepped up to help me after Vicky got reassigned. You're the one that connected with independent heroes and rogues like Anima and Boost. I wouldn't trade you for anyone."

She smiled. "If you're sure."

"Go get into your armor and kick up the lie detection if you don't believe me," I responded.

"Thank you," she hugged me back. "I'm sorry, you probably think I'm being a drama queen."

"Not really," I replied. "But I grew up around Vicky and Amy. Compared to those two, there's not much that qualifies as drama. Now don't worry about your place on this team. It's here as long as you want it. And now that we have all of that out of the way, don't be afraid to talk to the team. They're your friends too, you know. You're allowed to come to any of us if you need it."

"I think that was part of the problem," Sabah sighed. "She didn't like how friendly I was with Beth."

Lily's the jealous type? "Can't say that surprises me," I agreed. "You two do have a lot in common." Which is something Sabah and Lily never had going for them. It didn't take Lisa to see that. "Just do me a favor and wait a while before starting up another office romance. It's really not good for team discipline."

She flinched a little.

"Sabah, please tell me you and Beth aren't..."

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, Beth and I are just friends. There's nothing going on between us. There never was. She's not attracted to women."

"Okay, that's a relief," I responded. My concern was more about Anima being even more emotionally needy than Lily. That would have been the same story all over again. And where it was easy for me to pick between Sabah and Lily from a team dynamic, or even a friendship dynamic for that matter, being forced to choose between Anima and Clotho would have been a fucking nightmare for both strategy and morale.
The fact of the matter was I needed the two of them more than I needed the rest of the team combined. Competing with the Elite and Alexandria for recruits was a pain, and Pantheon's rep only carried me so far. Sabah was our poster child for affiliated rogues. Moreso than Dinah was or Anima could be. Not that those two weren't good for the image, but they were too powerful to represent what we needed. Not a lot of people could empathize with 'Master seven, shaker, striker, mover, blaster, and stranger subcategories' or 'strongest precog on the planet'. They could look at Clotho and imagine that if we found her valuable, we would find them valuable as well.

....

"Hey, Lisa," I spoke as she answered the phone.

"I see it went well," she replied.

"Yeah, pretty much just like you said," I answered. "So you can promise me Lily won't be coming to Cali?"

"Not unless something massively drastic happens," she assured me. "Don't worry, you are doing a great job out there and I have no desire to rock the boat. I'd rather spend my time worrying about actual problems instead. Besides, Lily is going to have her work cut out for a while."

"Thanks," I replied.

"Oh, I found your friend, Janet," she added. "She told me to say hello, and that her restraunt is doing well thanks to you. Taylor's planning to take Amelia there sometime this week to chat about new food designs. I think we've found our new takeout place, at least until someone builds a pizza joint around here."

"I knew they could do it," I responded. I was glad for her, this had been her dream ever since highschool. Plus or minus her home being destroyed by Endbringers twice in one year, moving to a different dimension, and cooking plants that only exist thanks to biomanipulation powers. "Tell Taylor to order the sourmelon pie next time she gets the chance. There are no words for how good it is."

"I'll let her know," Lisa agreed.

"Oh, and we need to schedule a power test with Boost soon," I remembered. "And if it's possible, maybe get Echo finished sooner rather than later."
"I'll send both messages along to our tech division," she answered.

=====================================

A/N- Mantellum struck me as the sort that'd wind up with a group like the Elite.
"Dragon? You there?" I asked.

"Yes," the response came after a few moments. I'd already concluded that superhuman multitasking was part of Dragon's power list. Even with the AI tech I'd seen her use, no natural human could think as quickly as she did. Putting her in a class alongside myself and Taylor. Somewhere between the two of us in overall ability, from what I was able to estimate. As a Tinker, we didn't bother analyzing her powerset, there really wasn't much point.

"I might have found something," I responded. "A new anti-Endbringer weapon. Maybe even the golden gun for the golden god himself."

"You have my undivided attention," Dragon responded. I tapped a few buttons and gave her the initial theory. The overall information would take a bit longer, there was a lot of data to draw from. "A time breaker?" she responded.

"Effectively a disintegration gun," I replied. It distorted the flow of time in spectacularly destructive ways. Doing to the fourth dimension what Missy could do to the first three when she wanted to break something. "A bit of a splice between the device we captured from the CIU, the readings from Khonsu, and the stuff you gave me in regards to Clockblocker's power. We already know Clockblocker and Khonsu's powers work on Endbringers," So did the CIU weapon, to a certain extent. "Which means it's possible the weapon can hurt them as well. The only question is if it can kill the core."

"There's also the matter of its inherent instability," Dragon responded. She already read the complete schema? Over two hundred hours of accumulated data analyzed in just a little over a minute. She definitely has me beat for processing speed.

"That is a problem," I agreed. There was very little we could do to predict the area damaged when activated. It was equally likely to destroy a single atom as it was to destroy a city block. "I'm trying to find a way around that, but I've hit a dead end to where my Tinkering can take me. Maybe you and Leet can do better?"

"Maybe," Dragon responded. "It seems to me the biggest vulnerability is in the range. We can't equip it to a missile since once the generator deactivates, so does the effect. We'd need more time to do what needs done."

"A melee weapon would be ideal," I agreed. "Except sooner or later, the generator itself would explode, and the inherent randomness means we won't know until activating whether the weapon's a dud or not. My plan is to install them into Khepri's weaponry and your own AI combat drones. If Victoria's power can predict the device, we could provide her with one as well." Hers would be a
very effective combination, if it worked.

"They're good plans," Dragon agreed. "I'll see what I can do to improve effectiveness. This might be a method to kill the Endbringers that are functionally immune to Atropos' power."

"Their builders can't account for everything," I replied. "Or the things are going to be so turtled up that they're no longer capable of offensive attacks. Each time we kill one, the next generation is that much less effective." As long as we avoid the fight with Tohu and Bohu.

....

I looked at the man known as Boost. Tall, bulked up to the point where it was actually a little gross. My superhuman senses kicked in, letting me see the damage caused by steroid abuse and years of bulk building instead of actual well-rounded exercise. He'd also clearly lost some mass recently, his power at work regenerating him into a proper, healthy body type. The energy of his power washed over me as well, attempting to heal what little remained of my legitimately organic tissue and failing miserably.

"Like what you see, babe?" he asked, and flexed.

"Thinker power," I answered. "My sight is more effective than a lot of this equipment."

"Cool," he shrugged. "So, how about after the checkup we go out for a bite to eat? I hear good things about the walls. You could take me back to your place and show me what else is edible around here."

God damn it, he's one of those. Oh well, nothing I haven't dealt with before. "I doubt my boyfriend would appreciate that very much." And I know I wouldn't. I looked at the scanners. His power was working on living tissue samples we'd collected. Worked on human blood, worked on the lab mice. Didn't touch the Yggdrasil or plant material. Didn't have an effect on lizard or bird, either. "Healing appears to be limited to mammalian life," I informed the computer.

"Cool," he answered again, then looked over at Clarice. "How about you? Care to show me the sights?"

 Seriously? At least with me he has the excuse of saying I look over eighteen. But Clarice?

"Sorry, I have-" Clarice started.

"Actually," I interrupted. "Clarice has this game she plays at her highschool." This is your fair
warning to stop hitting on the underage girl and avoid the very painful beating that's about to come. "She won't go out with anyone unless they can take her ribbon away from her."

"But-" Clarice started.

"Yeah, I know your ribbon was lost in Brockton Bay," I stopped her again. "But I'm pretty sure a sparing match would be just as good. Besides, we need to test his power in action, and a few bruises are just the ticket."

"Sure, that sounds like fun," Boost agreed, smiling and looking at Clarice. "Don't worry, I'll go easy on you."

The next few minutes were the highlight of my day.

....

"Hey, Ems," Zach poked his head into the lab. "Guess what I just discovered."

I smiled at him. "Did you realize that Riley's genetic analysis tech works on nonhumans, and managed to hybrid yourself a puppy with a Japanese Squirrel? Because I did that two weeks ago. Still haven't gotten around to actually growing one. Cross species genetics get ugly."

"That's possible?" Zach asked. "Well, I thought I had something cool, but now all I can think about is taunting all the furverts by showing them just how grotesque their fetish actually is when you see what it really looks like."

"Says the guy who thinks the hottest thing about me is that I can transform?" I crossed my arms and took a displeased stance, complete with glare and tapping one foot on the ground. "Do you really think you have room to criticize?"

"Hey, all your transformed states are human," he defended. "That's just the fun of getting it on after a haircut or dye job, only you can do it more often. Besides, that's nowhere near the hottest thing about you."

"Oh?" I smiled, walking toward him. I put a bit of extra swing in my step. He could be a charmer when he wanted to, and I had to love him for ignoring how not human my anatomy really was. "Now I have to know what you think is hottest about me."

"Oh, sure, put me on the spot," he complained. But he was smiling back, and approached me quickly. We had the lab to ourselves, this late at night Trevor and Riley would be in bed. That left
only Rey, and he had his own lab focused on how to best exploit the Endbringer tissue. He caressed my cheek. "To start with, your lips." He kissed me softly, and I responded with a soft moan. If he knew my response was an act, then he pretended that away as well.

I barely felt it when Taylor punched me in the face hard enough to break my zygomatic and maxilla. I barely felt it when I was trapped in New Delhi, my skin boiling even when I was using my hybrid state to keep me, my armor, and Dennis alive.

I couldn't feel the gentle effort he put into his kisses and caresses, the way he softly bit my neck. All that was wasted on me. Part of the price I paid for my powers.

I had it better than many parahumans. Like, say, Lisa. It didn't disgust me, I still enjoyed the intimacy, and my rewired brain didn't experience even the basics of that desire in the first place. Not being able to want to was better than wanting to but being unable, at least from where I was sitting. So I pretended the appropriate responses, tapped into my power to analyze his physiological responses, and spent some quality time with my boyfriend.

For about three and a half minutes. Then the alarm sounded.

"REALLY?"

==========

A/N- Zach: "Okay, now it's fucking personal."
The alarm screeched its displeasure, and I shot up in bed, reaching over to shake Amelia awake. Two in the morning? God damn it. Amelia complained unhappily in her sleep, then realized what was going on, and was instantly as awake as me. RealizationHorrorAlert. Adrenaline is a wonderful thing. I rolled out of bed, and she did the same on her side.

"Do you know anything?" she asked.

I reached out with my senses, looking for information as I put on my armor. I found it with Victoria. Every Pantheon member's specialized armor was quantum linked to Avalon and functioned as a relay bug. A fact that was a closely guarded secret. In essence, it meant I was backup any time any of our teams needed help.

"Confirming Leviathan, Pacific ocean, likely California," Director Dunn told Chevalier and the rest of the gathered team. Victoria was already there with them. "Dragon's transport vessel is en route now."

"Understood," Chevalier replied. "Arclight, you take charge here while I'm gone."

"Yes, sir," the other man answered. The voice tech in the armor made it clear he wasn't happy about that command, although I didn't know why.

"I'm sending Janus after you," I informed Victoria.

"May as well cancel the transport," Vicky cut. "We have special pickup plans."

"Miss," the Director responded. "You're not the one in charge."

"Oh, I know," she answered. "But I just got instructions from the people who are. We'll have a teleporter here in..." she paused for a second, and I took the prompt for what it was.

"About three minutes," I answered.

"Five minutes," Vicky finished.

"North America, they think," I answered, grabbing my armor. What does it say about us that we keep million dollar plus pieces of combat armor in our bedroom? "West coast. Could possibly be Hawaii."
"Coast? That's specific," she asked as she morphed her suit over her body.

"We know who this one is," I answered. "Leviathan's making a showing."

"It's Leviathan. I want both of you to go to the Philadelphia site and meet with Victoria and Chevalier's team," I instructed Lily and Eric. "Then bring them all to Avalon's capitol."

"We really need to get around to naming things."

"Understood," Eric responded, already in his armor. Lily was still not dressed. Her armor was a lot less convenient than the rest of ours, thanks to the nanofilament that let her shield herself with her power.

"Just teleport us over now," she told him. "I'll get dressed during."

*Determinations Vindications.* "The last of the originals," Amelia responded. "Do you think we'll be able to kill him?"

"Vicky's going to be pissed that it won't be her that gets to deliver the final blow," I answered. Meanwhile, my zerg were lining up for their transit. The phalanx types were top priority, taking the forward facing position. I'd trained with Missy enough that she knew what that meant. I felt the warp of space as she wove her way across the planet, creating the path my monsters started traveling through even before Amelia and I were finally able to make it outside.

"Status report?" I asked.

"Command center's powering up," Emma responded. "Ten minutes."

"It'll have to stay here," Missy spoke. "I can barely get the zerg through."

*Confusion Concern.* "I thought it would be years before Avalon was populated enough to give you problems," Amelia asked.

"If we wanted to go to or from anywhere else, it would be," Missy responded. "But you're asking me to jump from our most populated area to our second most populated area. I had to detour near the south pole for this. It's almost like they planned it this way."

"Can't rule it out," Lisa cut in. "We know they managed to build the Simurgh. They might be using something like her to coordinate attacks."
"Just worry about the zerg, then," I commanded. "We'll rely on Janus to get us in position."

Meanwhile, I felt the perception shift as Atropos and Janus jumped from Bet to Avalon, and then a moment later over to our Philadelphia site to pick up Victoria and the others. I didn't bother eavesdropping on the conversation.

"Don't worry, I can provide a staging area," Dragon responded over our com systems. One of the few non-Pantheon members that we'd given that access to. "I have a number of Fafnir models in the region doing geological scans. They're versatile enough to accomplish most of what your platform can under ordinary circumstances. Leviathan is a known quantity, your more esoteric technology will be wasted on this."


Over the course of a few seconds, Philly's Protectorate team started appearing on our teleportation platform. Victoria and Lily immediately flew toward where Lisa was waiting, followed closely by Chevalier, and then the rest of his team.

"Same plan we already discussed?" Lily asked as they landed. Normal voices, not the com systems.

"Minor changes, but nothing that concerns your roles," Lisa answered.

Emma rushed up to Vicky. "Here's that sword I told you about," she held up the weapon. It shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow, a kaleidoscope unable to decide on a pattern. "The stasis forcefield is active for now. It's unbreakable in this state, and as sharp as any standard sword. If you need to you can give it Clockblocker's immovability or a cutting edge just slightly weaker than the nanorthorns. But those are huge energy drains."

"It's basically a lightsaber," Zach cut in.

"Okay, I see the options on my armor," Vicky agreed. She held the sword straight up. With a better angle, I could see how slender it was More like a fencing sword than the weapons Chevalier or Alexandria used.

"Activate the final setting and you have exactly twenty six seconds before it breaks," Emma continued. "During that time, it will be able to cut through anything, matter or energy, that isn't enforced by Atropos or Shaman's powers. We've tested it against Alexandria's power and the densest Endbringer tissue we've had the opportunity to study. Don't know if it'll cut through their core, but I'm pretty sure it will."

"Don't use it unless you absolutely fucking have to," Lisa demanded. "I know you want to get
payback for Gallant, Shielder and Manpower. But the new Endbringers are designed to be immune to methods that were key in killing their predecessors. If Atropos fails-

"I won't," Lily cut in, her voice determined.

"If Atropos fails," Lisa continued. "Then we might be better off letting Leviathan get away and trying with her power again in a year or so when he gets back for a rematch. You could be carrying the only thing that can kill the newest generation of Endbringers, since the Shaman-Rosary interaction was used on Wendigo. And we don't know how Leviathan's going to behave during this battle. We'll need to expect his rules to change."

"Fuck that," Vicky complained. "Ames will back me on this. That bastard needs to die."

"She's right," Chevalier argued, placing a hand on Vicky's shoulder. "We don't know how the Endmakers are going to react to two Endslayer combinations. If this is a third method, we need to keep it hidden as long as we possibly can."

Vicky deflated a little. "Fuck," she sighed. "Fine, we do it your way."

=============

A/N- Wee, stuff!

How Vicky's new sword works: It creates a time distortion along its edge. On one side, time is accelerated to approximately twice its normal speed for an area about half a molecule thick, all along the length of the blade. On the other side, time actually flows in reverse. Not by much, mind. Anything caught along the edge is divided by their own past and future.
"We have his destination," Dragon informed. "He appears to be targeting San Fransisco, and likely the surrounding area. We'll be unable to stop him from getting into the bay, and once that happens the entire region is at risk."

I ran the thought in my head, the same thoughts everyone else faced. "He's certainly picking a historic city for his grave," I boasted, with far more confidence than I could convince myself I felt. There weren't a lot of places on earth worse for fighting Leviathan. In fact, the only place I could think of was Venice. Leviathan wasn't going to make this fight easy for us.

Space warped as Missy did her thing. I couldn't see her influence directly, but it messed with that constant stream of data that showed me how to avoid injury and kill pretty much anything in front of me. Zerg started travelling through, setting themselves up however Taylor saw fit. Meanwhile, Eric was tapping people and shifting them into location using his power. Pity it didn't work on the zerg, or the Endbringers for that matter. We could drop Leviathan off on the moon and that would be the end of it.

"Worst case scenario?" Taylor asked.

"The attack could likely splinter the San Andreas fault," Dragon answered. "We might lose all of southwestern California, in addition to significant consequences for the whole Pacific region. I'm already issuing alerts to the leaders of several nations. This could easily be a disaster on the same scale as Kyushu."

I could see the emotions bounce through the others. They weren't too different from my own. I could imagine Taylor swearing up a storm under her breath. "Victoria," she spoke, her voice ice. "Restrictions are off. Future Endbringers be damned, there is no scenario where we can afford to give anything less than our best in this battle. Leviathan cannot be allowed to survive this battle, under any circumstances. I trust you don't have a problem with that."

"Oh fuck the hell yes," I smiled.

....

The Golden Gate Bridge looks different when swarmed with giant bug monsters. Taylor had the fliers take perch all along the bridge, resting until they were needed. Leviathan's signature downpour falling off of their uncaring forms. Several of the defenders had taken to hiding under the Gargants in their positions along the coastline, trying to stay out of the rain as much as they could.

Meanwhile, I was on the bridge, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Triumvirate and watching
the ocean. I wasn't sure how many of them could even see the ocean in these conditions. Certainly Alexandria couldn't. Probably not Legend, either. Who knew what Eidolon had going for him right now? I walked over to Sveta and Alexandria. The two of them appeared to be planning something. "So, you holding up okay?" I asked the girl.

Sveta looked at me. Other than a self repairing Yggrasil body suit that only functioned to give her a working shunt drive and some modesty, she was without armor. "Still scared," she admitted. "So many people are depending on us. I don't know how the two of you handle it."

"Just one of those things that comes with experience," I responded. "It gets easier with time." Alexandria gave me a glance that told me I wasn't fooling her. Of course, she wasn't fooling me, either. We were both faking it. "I'm sure you've heard I got one of the theoretical anti-Endbringer weapons."

"I saw the design being tested," Alexandria responded. "It's pretty intimidating. The goal is still to let Atropos use her power to get the kill. We need to delay the Endbringer long enough to make that a reality. You're the backup, in case that fails."

I know. God help me, I know. But it should be me to do it. That fucker stole half my friends and family from me, he trashed my city. I deserve to be the one that kills the bastard. "I understand."

She looked at me. She was harder for me to read than most, because her power kept her body in a state of near perfection. Her emotions, if indeed she even felt any, didn't impact her body significantly. That was even more true after the improvements I gave her. But I could tell she didn't believe me, expected me to break rank and take it into my own hands. She might not be wrong.

The swell started before I could say anything more, the initial tidal wave of the many that Leviathan would unleash this day. I lived through this once already, and I would do it again, but the sheer scale of his power was intimidating. Even Amy couldn't use her power like this. There was shimmering as forcefields came into place. Most from the zerg, some from local defenders and Protectorate and Guild heroes. At some point, San Francisco had picked up a tinker forcefield capable of covering the whole city. It wasn't going to stop Leviathan's power, but it was an extra layer of defense.

"He's coming through your way," Dragon informed us, and my HUD shifted to give me an idea of where to expect. I activated the lowest setting of my laser and fired it toward the Endbringer. "That's your laser guidance," I told the others. "Hit him with everything you've got."

Fighting Leviathan in the water was normally a bad idea. The usual strategy has always been to wait for him on land, where we had the advantage. That wasn't something we could afford to do here. Eidolon struck first, and parted the ocean like something out of the bible. The Golden Gate bridge spans three miles of ocean, and is one of the more iconic landmarks in the country. That ocean was forced back, leaving an open arena.
A moment later, Leviathan splashed through the wall of water and fell a ways before landing hard on the exposed seabed. He glanced back toward the safety of the ocean behind, but chose to bolt forward toward the bridge, and us. A part of me was glad for that. If he ran, there was nothing we could do to catch him and my chance at payback would be gone.

Atropos opened fire, a wide spread that left gouges in Leviathan and shredded the ground beneath him. He was spared the worst of it by sheer speed and erratic movement. Lily might have perfect aim, but she didn't have the power to foresee an enemy's evasion attempts like I did. Of course, against an Endbringer I didn't have that power, either.

Legend's fire came next, as a series of forcefields from Narwhal hemmed the monster in, but Leviathan's shocking speed allowed him to avoid getting struck by any of them, instead allowing himself to be scratched by dozens of other potshots from lesser capes and the Zerg.

"He has a Thinker power," I spoke to our command group. "Kinda like my combat precognition. Or some weird form of personal time manipulation. I'm not sure how, but there's no possible way he can avoid attacks like this without some way to see them before they happen."

"Makes sense," Lisa agreed.

The water started caving back in around the edges of battlefield. Whatever Eidolon had done was apparently temporary. Alexandria grabbed Atropos and dived down, pulling the girl faster than her flight system could ever go on its own. Not fast enough, however, as the Endbringer broke through the side, gripped the remnants of a ship anchor that had been down there for however long, and chucked it at the pair. Alexandria was forced to let go, and the anchor dissolved as it struck Atropos.

The plan clearly wasn't to kill anyone, simply buy a chance to escape as our Endslayer was going too fast to correct her flight course without Alexandria's guidance. She hit the ground and kept going, using her power to destroy the mud and stone so she wasn't killed by colliding with it.

Looks like I'll get my shot after all, I smiled. "Sveta, I need you to throw me down in front of the Endbringer," I demanded. To her credit, she didn't hesitate. Although she dislocated my shoulder in her haste. That's going to be annoying.

I hit the ground hard enough to shatter several bones in my feet and break one ankle, but I was standing and facing the fucker that ruined my family and my future. The armor's reinforcements still held, and I shifted to my combat mode. Amplifying my physical abilities at the cost of most of my mental ones. None of which worked on Endbringers to begin with.

I charged forward, the shimmering blade in front of me set to the nanothorn grade cutting potential. Wow, that really does eat up a lot of power. It's worse than the cloak and shunt modes combined.
In a vague mirror of my fight with Baal, and Taylor's legendary last stand against Leviathan in Brockton Bay, I stabbed the Endbringer in the crotch. Not that it mattered. I didn't expect to hit anything important. Endbringers were nothing more than machines, after all. But it was the central body mass that I could reach. His core had to be in here somewhere, I'd just have to keep cutting until I found it.

Leviathan's claw came down toward me, setting off all my danger senses. I clicked over to the super cutter mode and leapt upward, glad that I could only feel pain if I wanted to. I carved a long arc over my head, splitting through his torso, his shoulder, and then along the entire arm that was coming for me. The fucker collapsed around me. And then turned into water. I stood there unable to process it for a few seconds. A water double. I wasted my attack on a fucking water double. And if I'd just thought about it for a fucking minute, I would have known better. FUCK!

My weapon flickered, and alerts popped up on my HUD warning me that the sword was about to break. I tossed it away and it vanished with an explosion little different than a cherry bomb. If it was anything like the blade's effect, I would have lost my arm.

"Leviathan sighted in C-7, M-2, and R-8," Dragon's tech rattled off.

"Something must be wrong with the system," Dragon herself spoke.

I slapped the override system. "No," I replied. "Leviathan has a new trick. He's creating body doubles made from water. They're not the real Endbringer, but they're still tough. I'd class them as a five for brute and mover. And keep in mind that any of the doubles might actually be the real thing."

"Thank you," Dragon responded.

"Leviathan duplicates sighted, C-8, F-9, M-2, R-7," the system responded.

"It won't be any of them," Lisa added. "Wherever Leviathan's at, he's choosing to fight by proxy. If you spot one, it'll just be a clone, not the real thing. For the purposes of this battle, we're fighting a Master power set."

A/N- Wildbow said that if Leviathan felt like fighting for real, his combat strategy wouldn't be that different from Skitters. I'm taking that at face value.

Also, I'm trying narrating the fight scene from the ones on the ground this time. I liked using Taylor and Amelia for their ability to get greater awareness of the situation than most... but it could be fun doing it like this, too.
Another tsunami rose up, this one larger than the last. It collided hard against the shields, and I watched a number of the silver panels shatter like glass. My eyes saw through the dark and the rain without difficulty. It had taken me an embarrassing amount of time to realize humans needed light in order to see, while I was comfortable reading in absolute blackness. Another Leviathan surged up on shore, only to be met by one of Khepri's giant monsters. For a moment they looked about evenly matched, but then the Endbringer started pushing the monster back. Another monster slammed into its side, slamming it to the ground where it splashed into water again.

More than a match for one of those things, not a match for two. That was a good baseline for strength. I'd seen what those weapons could do against Wendigo, I knew how they compared to my own abilities. I grabbed a cable on the bridge and tugged, using my strength to slingshot myself into the city and then onto the roof of one of the taller buildings near the coast. I was one of the most mobile capes, on par with Alexandria even though I couldn't fly. But more importantly, I was in my element here.

I'd learned a lot in the last month. What Passengers were. What Scion was. What was done to me and why we had to fight so damn hard just to survive. I also knew that somewhere, some assholes decided that it they'd rather watch the world burn than try to help. They built these incredible creatures, and instead of using them to help prepare and fight Scion, they used them to murder people by the millions. They were the only people in the multiverse that I hated more than Cauldron for turning me into a freak.

I felt the ground shudder beneath me. In the time I'd been in LA, I'd learned what an earthquake felt like using senses that no human had. This was a tiny one, not even a one on the scale. A quick aftershock followed. No, another quake, stronger than the first. Still not something a normal person would notice. The tremor carried through the water as well. Or the water carried the tremor. This is how he destroyed Newfoundland and Kyushu. He's using the water to carry a frequency that destabilizes the ground. Forces an artificial earthquake.

More copies appeared. The monsters were able to react to them faster than sight had any ability to achieve. Especially since I didn't think they could see in this kind of storm. I felt the noise a couple seconds later. They were using echolocation.

Khepri has the clones handled, I decided. She doesn't need my help. The city itself needs my help. As if to punctuate my thoughts, another tremor struck. This one a one and a half or so. Enough to be felt by normal people, but only barely. It was much worse than the last, however. And the effect wasn't changing. The next one would be a lot worse. Another step up on the Richter scale. At this rate, the city wouldn't last more than half an hour.

No one else can do this, I thought grimly. I dived into the ocean.
"Sveta? What are you doing?" Victoria asked. She'd still be above, doing whatever it was she could do to help.

"Finding Leviathan," I answered. I was glad for the armor covering my face. I didn't need it to breathe down here. In fact, I didn't need to breathe at all. The bit of theorizing we could do on my body, the bodies of many Case 53s, were samples of alien species collected by the Entities in their travels. I couldn't begin to imagine the kind of nightmare world that would evolve Garotte. But I could survive deep space as well as anything this planet had to offer. Except maybe swimming in lava, and I could probably handle that as well.

"Are you insane?" Vicky exclaimed. "Sveta, you can't fight him. Not down there. He can't be beaten in the water."

I'm not going to watch another city die because I wasn't good enough. "Funny," I responded. "Neither can I."

"I'm relaying our best estimates of his coordinates to your armor's GPS," Dragon spoke next. "It's not precise, but it'll narrow down your search radius to approximately a half mile. You'll also note there's a predictive software being installed. That will at least give you some idea what tactics he'll try. It's imperfect, but it's better than nothing. I'm sorry we can't do more for you."

"Dragon's patching me through to your coms," Alexandria relayed. "I'll be right above you, along with a few others. When you find him, either bring him up or bring me down. We need to get him out of the water if we want to kill him."

"Right," I answered. At least I have some kind of backup. I lashed out with a hand, slamming my fingers into the rock and pulling myself forward. I felt the water pulse around me as I surged forward. Victoria may have reworked my brain, tricked my body's instincts into treating people as part of the environment, no more a threat than the floor or the walls. But those desires still remained beneath the surface. The source of my waking nightmares.

Now things were different. Now I was embracing that killer instinct. I could react at these supersonic speeds, I could see with perfect clarity, and I was ready to become a monster in order to hunt a monster. The earth shuddered again, this time approaching a four.

"I'm going silent," I told them as I lashed out and found another purchase to pull forward. I wasn't certain how my instincts knew where to grab things strong enough to support my strength and acceleration, but I did it without fail. Meanwhile, my free hand pulled my mask up, exposing my nose and mouth. I inhaled deeply, or as deeply as my body would let me since I lacked an esophagus and lungs. I was hunting by scent now. Salt water blending with fresh water. *Leviathan's been here recently.*

I kept going, running by scent and hearing and sight. Echolocation. *Strange, the animal life doesn't*
seem afraid. A little of me, but there's no response of instinctual fear to the Endbringer. I know he's around here somewhere, why are the animals unafraid? Is he hiding from them?

The earth shuddered again. Another quake, this one probably in the low six range, way higher than anything I ever experienced before for certain. They had to be seeing the damage, now. Not merely that caused by the quake itself, but the unnaturally constant and slowly increasing shudders. The memories of Kyushu and Newfoundland. It must be terrifying for them, those millions of innocent people who have no hope of defending themselves, facing this kind of nightmare. I had to help them.

I felt the movement first, twisting away as a claw came at me from nowhere. I dropped to the ground and kicked away. *How did it get that close?* I got a look at the Endbringer up close and personal. Leviathan surged again, and that predictive software Dragon told me about registered how he would move, warning me of the trap I was about to blunder into. I dived forward, instead. Garotte’s instincts taking charge. For once, with my encouragement and permission. My arm shot forward, wrapping around his throat and pulling me forward toward the rival in my territory.

The software alerted me again. His water echo still worked underwater, and was coming right for me. I rolled back, kicking the fake Leviathan with my right foot, clearing the path so I could kick his actual body with my left.

I twisted as the software alerted me to his follow up attack, but he was far stronger and faster than I was down here. He caught my right leg and slammed me hard into the ground. There was nothing dignified about how my body behaved when hit hard enough to do damage. I had to look like a girl shaped stress toy being crushed by an angry body builder. He was still holding my leg as he gripped my shoulder, punctured it with his claws, and tried to rip me in half. I screamed in agony. I should have counted myself lucky that I stretched further than he could reach, but the pain was incredible.

*I need help, please let them be where they promised.* I didn't have time to think, I just reacted. My one good arm punched out of the water, several hundred meters above. I couldn't aim, but I didn't need to. Alexandria caught my hand, and let herself be pulled down.

Leviathan reacted with superhuman speed, stomping down on my waist to keep me pinned against the ground so he could have a hand to fight the most durable of the Triumvirate. My lower half started rebuilding itself. Tendrils, again. A dozen of them went into building my somewhat human legs, but the damage Leviathan did to me forced them to revert to their natural state. I'd probably cry over that, later. Right now they were too convenient. I wrapped around Leviathan's legs and arms, pulling hard against him. I couldn't overwhelm the monster, but I could slow him down.

Alexandria pressed the advantage, impaling the Endbringer with a vicious looking barbed spear. She kneed him in the face with the spiked plating that Pantheon gave her, and a new weapon appeared in her hand out of nowhere. A bladed chain far too long to be practical even if such a weapon could ever be practical. She wrapped around his arm, catching a couple of my tentacles in the process. They were severed almost immediately, but kept attempting to strangle the Endbringer. I knew from experience that they could live for several hours, vainly attempting the task I'd given them before they were removed.
Alexandria started pulling upward even as I felt the water shift around us. A pillar of air was forcing itself down into the sea floor.

Eidolon, I realized. We need time for Eidolon. I wrapped around Alexandria's spear and pulled it into Leviathan, trying to force the weapon deeper into his body. Through, if at all possible. I let go of Alexandria and grabbed the other end of her chain. It cut into my flesh with alarming ease, reminding me that I was still vulnerable, even if very little could hurt me.

The Endbringer was legitimately struggling, now. He was strong enough to beat one of us. Maybe even both of us. But Eidolon was a different subject. The water shuddered around us as Leviathan called his next trick, trying to crush us with sheer pressure. As far as my body was concerned, it was nothing more destructive than a water balloon. But the ground below us cracked and splintered under the weight.

He then used that water pressure to retreat, hitting speeds beyond what I was capable of reacting to. And then stopping a second later with enough force to actually hurt me with the shockwave. Three of Pantheon's Endbringer killing monsters had appeared from nowhere, blocking Leviathan's retreat with their own bodies. They looked the way a car did after being hit by a train, but they stopped his retreat. More started to appear around us. And then we were out of the water. Legend, Eidolon, Victoria and Atropos as well.

I let go. My body was shattered and exhausted, but it did the job I needed to it to do. Alexandria threw me clear before falling back herself. Leviathan took the chance to run, only for another monster to manifest out of nowhere, blocking him. He turned again, going for an opening between a pair of them, and a third manifested in front of him.

Its tusks caught one arm, and the pair it tried to pass between turned and caught his sides. Three more followed, slamming into Leviathan from behind. They struggled for minutes before forcing the Endbringer to the ground. A stream of cleansing light struck the pile, and when it dimmed only Leviathan remained. Clearly battered, but still functional, the Endbringer climbed to its feet.

Silver forcefields manifested, overlapping the monster. Hundreds of them bathing the area in light while containing the Endbringer. It wouldn't last forever, but it was a reprieve. I tried to force myself to stand, but my body didn't respond. Then Atropos moved, diving into the effect. The shields didn't shatter like they had when trying to hold back the ocean. This time they simple dissipated like smoke where she passed. Moments later, black wingtips extended from the shielding, then dipped back in, then came out again. She rose out of the barricades, carrying a chunk of material roughly the size of a human head in her hands.

To say she crushed it would be wrong. There was no pressure, no struggle, no breaking. She simply brought her hands together, and everything between them ceased to be.
Leviathan was dead.

A/N- Sveta gets her crowning moment of badass here.

Sure, she got her ass kicked, but damn if she didn't look good in the process.
I took a deep breath. "You're sure about this?" I asked Lisa. She was fretting about my costume, making sure everything looked right. This was an old model of my costume, the one used, and damaged beyond repair, in New Delhi. Then refitted, with less nanoweave and more attention to emphasizing my feminine features and other cosmetics. A sort of dress armor. Although I had to admit it handled better than my combat gear, at the cost of having almost no actual features. It couldn't shunt, I couldn't channel my power for full body invulnerability, and the wings didn't have the ability to generate ammo.

"Don't worry, you'll do fine," Lisa insisted.

"It's a live interview," I reminded her. "If I fuck up, it's out there forever."

"Five second delay," she corrected. "Only to protect names if you slip up. Don't worry, Vickery hand picked this girl for your interviewer. Says she's a natural for this sort of thing, and I've looked at some of her work. She is, if anything, too soft for this. She is the perfect balance of pretty and approachable, and the only hard questions are the ones you've been prepared for. If you gave me a couple weeks I might have found better, but we need this to happen today, if possible. Just remember the right balance of humility and confidence, and it'll be perfect. You're an Endslayer three times over, you can handle a television appearance."

....

"It's great to finally meet you," my interviewer smiled. Lisa was right about the interviewer being approachably pretty. A little taller than me if I weren't in costume, some kind of mixed race that gave her a very light tan and chocolate brown hair and eyes. Very cute, not beautiful. The interview room itself was nothing unusual, a table and chairs done up what would be a cozy kitchen table look, if not for the cameras and crew pointed at us. I don't know who came up with this layout, but these days it was hard to imagine any other kind.

"Pleasure to be here, Miss Vaught," I responded. My armor's retrofit kept my mouth exposed, so they could see my smile, and the sleeker design made my body language easier to read. All at the cost of basically every feature the armor normally came with. "Sorry we couldn't do this sooner."

"Please, call me Erin," she said, smiling as she shook my hand. "I imagine things have been hectic for you, lately."

"Not as bad as it's been for a lot of others," I answered. The fact was it wasn't that bad at all for me, really. With another Endbringer destroyed, Pantheon was mostly in the 'planning' stage, and that wasn't my strength. Elle was still having trouble with her awareness, causing a delay for that as well. "Let's not forget that Leviathan caused tens of thousands of deaths, and billions of dollars in
"Of course," she nodded with an appropriate solemnity. "I was told your organization has been involved with a number of charities for aiding the victims of Endbringer attacks?"

"Yes, of course," I answered. "As you can imagine, Pantheon feels pretty strongly about this. We've been there, ourselves. Losing homes, loved ones, precious mementos of our families, even our city to those monsters. Even in that, we were luckier than most, we had somewhere to go and the resources to support ourselves. Millions of others don't have that. It wasn't just homes and memories for them, it was their livelihoods and their hopes for the future. A lot of that can never be restored, but new futures can be created from the ashes. That's what these charities represent, hope for the future."

Sure, that was rehearsed, but I believed every word of it.

Erin turned toward the camera. "I would like to remind our viewers that if you wish to donate time or resources, you can log on to FEMA dot gov, or Channel twelve news dot com for further information about charities in your region. Food, clothing, and of course money will all be greatly appreciated," She turned back toward me. "I know I'll be visiting when I get home tonight." Lisa was right, she is soft.

"Thank you, Erin," I smiled broadly.

"This isn't the only humanitarian work you've done," she continued. "You've earned something of a reputation as an advocate of the GLBT cause in eastern Europe. Including quite a bit of controversy."

"My parents tell me I was a strong willed child," I chuckled. "I don't think I ever grew out of it. When I see something I know is wrong, I can't help but want to step in and fix the problem."

"Even in countries where you can be arrested for expressing pro-gay sentiments," she added.

"Especially then," I emphasized. I tapped the gay pride sticker on the shoulder of my costume. My real armor had the icon built right into it, but again with the lack of time. "As everyone already knows, my power is one of those needed to open the dimensional gateways. They might hate me for what I am, but they still need me, an openly gay woman, to save them. And, yes, I want them to be aware of that fact."

"Which brings us back to the deaths of Leviathan, the Simurgh, and Wendigo," she spoke. "You've been instrumental in the destruction of three Endbringers, most recently the destruction of Leviathan last week."
"Like I said," I smiled. "I can't not step in to help when I see an opportunity."

"And you're good at it," she agreed. "In fact, we have never before seen video footage of the death of Leviathan to show here today."

She turned her head toward the screen behind us, as the scene started to show itself. Taken from Victoria's viewpoint, it showed the water being forced back. The footage was both blurry and obviously digital enhanced. We couldn't even see Leviathan until the forcefields started going up, illuminating the area in some kind of alien light. I didn't pay much attention to the scene, being far more concerned with my own memories.

Leviathan was pinned by the shields. Not too different than the end of the Wendigo fight. In one small way, I almost felt bad about this. In many, many more ways I felt awesome about it. I dived through the silver spheroid, and into the heart of Leviathan. Lisa's estimates of this Endbringer's physiology was that the tail contained his core, so I struck that first, using my larger pair of wings to melt the majority of it in the first swipe, and the rest of it with the second. The lower, smaller, pair of wings simple cut through the body segments.

In the few seconds I remained inside, I watched the Endbringer go still. No movement, no regeneration. It was dead. With careful effort, I carved a large chunk out of the corpse and pulled it out, then took off, breaking through the forcefields yet again. I disintegrated the chunk in full view of the Triumvirate, and more important Victoria and her suit's camera.

The 'heart' of Leviathan destroyed for all to see.

We weren't stupid enough to showboat like that with the real core, of course. Lisa made it clear that the Endbringers were programmed weapons, with a series of restrictions in place to keep them from trying too hard.

The harder we hit, the harder they fought back as restrictions were slowly lifted so that they could use more and more of their full power, and after a point we wouldn't be able to get close enough to finish the job. The first legitimately mortal wound against Leviathan needed to be the killing blow, or the loss of California would have been the least of our problems.

That was a closely guarded secret, known only to a very select few, that we'd never seen an Endbringer actually put real effort into a fight.

....
"That's quite the scene," Erin stated after the clip ended. *Less than two minutes,* I realized. *It felt a lot longer when it was happening.* "I don't know if I would have been that brave. You really are a hero."

"It's easy to be brave when you know you can't be touched," I answered, remembering the bits of rehearsal and how I wanted to express my thoughts. "The truth is, I was lucky. It's no secret that what powers one gets are a matter of chance. I won a lottery that gave me a power capable of actually hurting the Endbringers, and because of that I am the one killing them. That, literally, could have happened to anyone."

"I'm afraid I don't know a lot about how powers work," Erin admitted.

"More than that, this was a team effort, all of them were," I added, eager to not talk about the nature of powers overmuch. Nothing happy came from that path. "Gaea, Khepri and Minerva to build the team. Yum Kaax, Tir, Hecate, Dragon and other Tinkers to build this armor." I gave the command that let my wings flex out, and then go back to resting position. *I can't name Riley, she'll just have to accept 'others'.* "To harness and amplify my powers enough to actually get the job done."

Erin scooted back a little, her eyes wide as she finally recognized just how deadly the armor I wore could be. She overcame it quickly enough, but the minor amount of intimidation would only be a good thing. At least, according to Lisa.

"The other Endslayers, too," I added. "Clotho and Lachesis, and again the Tinkers that built the weapons we used against Simurgh. Shaman and Rosary, for paralyzing Wendigo long enough to finish the job. Sveta and Alexandria for fighting Leviathan to a standstill in the ocean until Eidolon could clear the path I needed. Plus Khepri and Gaea, and again their Tinker tech weapons." *I feel like I'm accepting an Oscar or something. Ugh.*

"And," I continued. "All those heroes that have been fighting these monsters for almost the last twenty years. Compared to all the work done by all of them? Like I said, I just got lucky enough to have the right power and be in the right place to make use of it."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're a really passionate speaker?" Erin joked.

I smiled, if a little sadly. *Sabah used to say that was her favorite thing about me.* "It's been mentioned before," I replied. "But, all the luck aside, I'm glad to get the power I did. Maybe I won't be part of the next Endslayer team, but it feels right that I was this time. That I got to be the one to kill Leviathan."

"Why's that?" Erin asked. She had her guesses, of course. She knew at least some of what was coming today.
I reached up to my neck and undid the clasps. The Tinkers didn't have time, or interest for that matter, to automate this for what was essentially a one time use only suit. A quick push and the mask folded upward. *By the time I go to bed, everyone on a hundred and twenty three worlds will know my face.*

"I have my reasons."

A/N- Lily's fun. Also, I need to start a database for very minor characters. You have no idea how long I took to dig Erin's name out of the archives.
"Hey," I smiled at Lily from my spot atop the teleport pad to for the capital of Avalon. *Which really needs a name one of these days.* "Did you hear, they're calling you he 'Avenger of Kyushu, now."

"I heard," she replied, sounding a lot less enthused than I would have expected for someone who just accomplished what she accomplished.

"I didn't expect you back so soon," I changed the subject. "One day for an interview and then back to Europe? What gives?"

"We're on an ugly deadline," she answered grimly. "Have to get as many portals finished as possible, because we can expect seven more Endbringers, maybe more. At least three more of which, I can't kill."

"Seven?" I asked. I couldn't wrap my mind around that. "More? Not just eight, but eight more."

"Lisa's guestimate, at least," Lily responded. "A total of Eleven. Tohu, Bohu, Khonsu, Barghest, another unknown that will probably in response to Behemoth's death. Six more for the deaths of Wendigo and Leviathan. And Lisa's guessing there might be one more to round out the numbers based on the rule of three that they follow. In other words, we should be expecting one a month until we can find another way to kill them."

"Do you think they can?" I asked. "I mean, they're designed so you can't kill them anymore, what's left?" *Eleven Endbringers?*

"Shaman and Rosary are still an option," she responded. "It worked once, and the Tinkers are toying with other methods. Something to do with a super nanothorn weapon. You know how Tinkers get when they're in the zone."

I really didn't, but the way so many others commented on it, I took it for granted anyway.

"Emma cobbled together something, and that's given Lisa ideas about time manipulation as an Endbringer killing tool," she continued. "Not sure I like that idea, honestly. We know they adapt new tricks based on the weapons used to kill them. Khonsu came from Behemoth's death, shielding and time manipulation, along with Bohu's terrain alterations, like what the Chinese weapon did. Barghest and Wendigo are probably from killing the Simurgh. One a space warper that's too fast to hit reliably, the other was decentralized. No weak spot to attack."

"Until one was found," I added, trying to sound hopeful. "The new Endbringers are weaker than the
"We haven't used a weapon on them that literally cuts through time itself," she countered. "I can't imagine an Endbringer with that power, but I'm envisioning Black Kaze, only a thousand times worse, killing everyone who showed up to the battle two days before the Endbringer warning system even registers an alert. Fuck, Tohu's already the Endbringer copy of Eidolon, why not Legend next?"

_Holy shit that's horrifying._ "You're not usually one to get upset like this. You were the one telling me we'd deal with the consequences as they came, before. It's one of my favorite things about you. You should be happy right now. You're an international hero. I watched your interview live on the television._ In fucking Lebanon._ "I've been asking around, you may have single handedly won the gay rights movement in that country. To the point that it's causing waves in neighboring countries. Everything you wanted and more."

"I know," she responded. "Believe me, I'm so glad for that. But we're approaching the point where we'll have to abandon Bet entirely. We can't even beat the Endbringers without exploiting flaws in their program. How are we going to fight Scion? What good is anything I do with that hanging over my head?"

"You're a hero, Lily," I put a hand on her shoulder. "In every meaning of the word. At least let yourself celebrate that, you deserve to feel good about that for a day or two, then worry about the future. Maybe some time with Sabah, I kn-." She tensed and I stopped speaking. _Oh fuck._

"We broke up," she told me, confirming my fear.

"When?" I asked, hesitantly. I ignored the pang of desire I felt toward her. I had a crush on Lily, on Atropos really, before I'd ever met her. Now that I knew her, she was very different than the fantasy I'd built. Not someone I could see myself with, if I was honest. Not that I expected her to be interested in me, either. But she was a great friend, supportive and passionate about all of her causes, both social and personal.

"A little less than two weeks ago," she answered. Now that I thought about it, that made sense. She'd been spending a lot of time talking with Lisa up before the Endbringer attack. I didn't think much of it, the pair of them had a lot to be concerned about, especially in the week or so before an expected attack.

"I bet if I tried, I could find someone to break her legs for breaking your heart," I offered jokingly.

"No," she responded, her voice commanding. "I was the one to break up with her. Neither of us were happy, but I ended it. I don't want you acting like she's the bad guy in this, please?"
"Okay," I agreed, trying to wrap my head around the idea that Lily would break up with anyone. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. I could see why she wouldn't bring it up around the others. Faultline was a mercenary in every sense of the word, going where the money led here. She cared about her people, but not much beyond that. She wasn't a fan of the other not-so-former villains on Faultline's team, either. They were in this for the money, she was in it for helping humanity as a whole. That wasn't a great recipe for friendships.

"I didn't want to talk about it," she sighed, looking out over the blue green expanse blocked by similarly colored buildings. "It felt like... if I didn't say it, then it wasn't real, y'know? Sounds childish when you say it out loud."

"I've heard worse superstitions," I responded. It was true, too. "Do you want to talk about it, now?"

"Not really," she answered. "Sabah has her freedom and I wish her luck in her career. She certainly cares about it more than she ever did me." Wow, that was bitter. "I have my fifteen minutes of fame, the adoration of millions, and the people who don't love me fear me. Which is weird as fuck to think about, by the way."

"I'll pretend I know the feeling," I answered.

"Point is," she continued. "Things may not be perfect, but it's better this way. Just... don't make trouble on my account, please."

"Okay," I deferred to her judgment on this one. And here I thought the pair of them were the cutest couple in ever. "Well, on the plus side, you are officially the most eligible bachelorette in the multiverse. Once word gets out, you'll have your pick of the litter. Or skip the picking part and take the whole litter. Start your own harem, see if anyone argues with you."

She chuckled a little. Good, that's a start.

"I don't think I'm ready to start dating again," she replied. "Besides, I don't even know anyone. Unless you're suggesting I try to steal Amelia away from Taylor. I climbed inside an Endbringer and it didn't scare me as much as that idea."

I cringed at that thought. "Not even Zach is suicidally insane enough to get between those two," I only half joked. Seriously, that would be the worst idea in the world. "What about that cute reporter girl? She seemed interested in you."

"Of course she was interested in me," Lily replied. "That's her job."
"I don't know, she did seem pretty star struck," I teased. "Besides, there's a time honored tradition of superheroes dating reporters. Maybe that's why she became a reporter, and you'd be fulfilling her childhood fantasies."

"Zach's not dead, you don't need to channel his ghost," Lily admonished.

"No, see, if I were Zach I'd be speculating on what she was doing while fantasizing," I pointed out. "But in all seriousness, if you want to talk I'm here for you. All you have to do is ask."

"I wouldn't want to make your girlfriend jealous," Lily responded.

"She won't be," I responded. I slipped my arm around her and pulled her into a one armed hug. It was true, Emily wasn't the type to get jealous, at least not in this kind of situation. She was actually far more possessive of Elle than she was of me. "Believe it or not, she actually likes you a lot."

"Really?" Lily asked. "She always seemed a little cold to me."

"She's kinda timid," I answered. Plus you go out of your way to not be friends with anyone on Faultline's crew. "And you're pretty intimidating when you want to be. Remember how we first met and you threatened to, and I quote, surgically remove my bones without leaving a scratch on my skin?"

"Well, you didn't make a great first impression," she responded.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I muttered. "I could have handled that situation better."

"Don't worry, you make up for it in the long run," she responded. "I guess I can try to be a little friendlier to Emily."

"I appreciate it," I gave a squeeze of support.

"Think if I start up that harem, she'd like to join?"

I was stunned.

"What?" Lily exclaimed. "She's a babe and you know it."
A/N- Lily has trouble deciding which coping mechanism she wants to use.
I hate hospitals, I thought quietly. I never liked them, but each year I come to hate them a little bit more. Hospitals, cemeteries and memorials, I'd seen far too many of them in my life, and I hated hospitals most of all. Memorials, you could go to and remember the good times. The successes, the sacrifices, and while it was never pleasant, there was at least closure. You could remember the fallen at their best.

Hospitals were where you saw them at their worst. Injured, dying, in pain. I couldn't imagine anything worse. In the unlikely event there's a benevolent force in this universe, let me die on my feet, not bedridden and surrounded by people watching me slip away.

I felt pressure on my back as someone draped an arm across my suit. I knew who before she even spoke.

"Y'know," Vicky's voice teased, her chin resting on my shoulder. "A lot of girls find the tall, dark and brooding look to be a major turn on."

"Y'know, some people would call what you're doing sexual harassment," I quipped back. I tried to sound displeased, and to a small degree I even was. Unfortunately the fact of the matter was I did enjoy the attention. More than I wanted to admit, which led to the other problem. Vicky knew that I liked it, and made it abundantly clear that she'd keep going until I changed my mind. Either by reciprocating her attention, or actually losing interest in her in the first place. Frankly, it was devolving into a contest of wills.

"Lucky me, you're not most people," she whispered back. "And lucky you."

She is way too good at this for her age. "Can you at least wait until there aren't cameras watching?" I asked.

"Sure," she agreed and dropped back down to the ground and started walking ahead. "Stop doing the brooding thing and you have yourself a deal."

"I wasn't brooding," I argued.

"You were totally brooding," she insisted, putting just a little more sway in her hips than was strictly necessary as she walked away. I tried, and failed, to not look. "Like the male lead in a teen drama. Only with less eye shadow. Now put your approachable friendly sensible leader face on, because I'm invoking my womanly right to be irrational for at least the next fifteen minutes." She paused for a moment. "Make one smart ass comment and I will break up with you."
"There are so many things wrong with that statement." I deadpanned.

"And I'll break your legs," she added.

"Still considering it," I retorted.

She smiled and winked at me, then opened the door to the hospital room.

"Vicky!" a girl's voice exclaimed from inside.

Victoria rushed in, and by the time I got to the door, she was hugging the patient. I crushed a natural instinct to be horrified by the sight. I'd gotten good at that, dealing with as many Case 53s as I had over the last month and a half. Sveta was hideous right now. Her right shoulder had tendrils exposed, and the arm was only partially formed into a humanlike shape, then a hand ending in tentacles for fingers.

One leg was reduced to large tentacles at the hip, the leg was human up until the knee, where they broke apart. Her face partially mutilated, reduced to a tendril mass across the right side. Her torso and left arm were the only things hinting at human in shape, and it looked more like a crayon that started to melt. I had seen worse over the years, but not many that were still alive, let alone awake and moving.

Dozens of Sveta's limbs were wrapped around Vicky, hugging her back. I glanced at the corner where Vicky's cousin was sitting, holding a book whose cover I couldn't read from this far away. She nodded toward me, as if to say this wasn't our place and we should just be quiet.

"Stupid, stupid girl," Vicky muttered, crying into Sveta's 'good' shoulder. "What were you thinking? Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I had to, there was no one else," Sveta cried back.

"They thought you were going to die," Vicky squeezed, and Sveta's body distorted in ways reminiscent of a bean bag. "That you already were dead. I told them that you were alive, my power let me know."

"I'm sorry I got hurt," Sveta spoke. "I just had to. If I didn't, Leviathan would have killed all those people. I couldn't let that happen. Please don't be mad at me."

"You don't have to worry about that," Vicky insisted. "The important thing is that you're okay. You
are okay, right? Are you in pain?"

"No," Sveta replied. "I'm just fine. And, hey, now I know what dreaming feels like."

"Told you that it's over rated," Vicky responded.

"It really is," Sveta agreed. I glanced at the clock. *She did say I would have to be the responsible one. Although, honestly, this is the first time I've ever seen Victoria act like this. It's actually kind of touching.*

Vicky's cousin had worked her way to the door, and gestured with a tilt of her head. I followed her into the hallway.

"First time she's ever acted like that before," I said after the door closed. Vicky had heightened hearing, but only to a limited degree, and only when she was focusing on it. If we were quiet, we could talk.

"Vicky's a weird one," Eki nodded. "She's... adopted Sveta, for lack of a better phrase. She's the one who recruited the girl and sent her off into the world of cataclysmic Endbringer battles and omnicidal eldritch abominations. As far as Vicky's concerned, everything that happens to Sveta is her responsibility. But don't tell her you figured it out. She'll deny it until she dies of old age."

I chuckled at that.

"So, umm, about the assault charges?" she asked hesitantly.

"The hospital's agreed to drop them," I informed. "Vicky will have to sign a couple NDAs, of course. Don't worry, her mother's already looked them over and given her approval. Everyone involved wants this to stay quiet." *Minus one person,* I added silently.

"Good," she sighed. "Now let's get Sveta fixed up so we can get out of this place. If I have to deal with one more nurse walking in here and treating Sveta like a horror movie monster, I'll need a lawyer of my own. It's fucking disgusting."

....

"So the spoiled brat gets a pass because the hospital chose to let her off?" Dunn complained, frowning at the paperwork. "Her mother needs to step back and let her daughter learn there are consequences for her actions."
"Mrs. Dallon had nothing to do with it," I informed her.

"Pardon?" Dunn looked at me. Vicky's right, she's not a pleasant woman.

"I was the one to talk to the hospital's President," I responded.

"Why would you do that?" she demanded. "And I better not find out that you did anything illegal or unprofessional."

"I simply explained to her that it was an irresponsible charge in the first place," I responded. "Yes, Victoria threatened a couple nurses and a doctor, but that was after they tried to declare Sveta legally dead. Clearly a misdiagnosis, given Sveta's current status as alive and well."

Director Dunn just continued to look pissed. I could imagine what was going through her head. It was an opportunity to discredit the young heroine who was making her job such a chore as of late. I almost didn't blame her, Vicky was one hell of a handful. Emphasis on the almost.

"I went on to explain that, if the case were to go to court, and it would, then the hospital would have to admit they were going to put a living patient in the morgue," I continued. "I then reminded him, and you too, you vindictive harpy. "That Sveta was one of the finest heroes the world's ever seen. Essential in saving a large part of California from being destroyed, by risking her life to fight Leviathan on his terms. Chances were pretty good the judge would throw out the charges as legally justified in the defense of another. If he didn't, then no jury would convict. The various hospital administrators agreed with my assessment."

"I see," Director Dunn responded. "You didn't use the prominence of your position as leverage?"

"Not at all," I answered. It was true, I didn't. I didn't need to. The charges really were stupid and the hospital really didn't want that kind of publicity. Mistreating a patient that was being recognized as one of the Endslayers was not something they wanted to be known for.

"And Sveta, you restored her to her humanoid form?" Dunn asked. "Cutting her through the waiting list of Case 53s and other heroes in need of restoration?"

"Endbringer Exemption Clause," I responded. "The Chevalier/Victoria power interaction is registered as a healer for the purposes of post Endbringer conflicts. It's why so many disabled but stable capes were cut in line ahead of the more functional Case 53s. Because their injuries were sustained in battle against Endbringers, they were given a higher priority on the waiting list. You were one of the advocates for that addition."
Of course, so was I. In fact, everyone agreed it was a good idea. Until you, right now.

"Yes, I recall," Dunn responded. "Status report on returning to the restoration of wounded and disfigured capes?"

"Ready to go after I get a good night's sleep," I responded. "It's been a stressful couple days, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Very well," she agreed. "I'll see to it that the paperwork is ready at oh seven hundred tomorrow. Dismissed."

"Thank you, Ma'am," I answered as I turned and left her office.

==============

A/N- Chevy gets a chapter. And a randomly rolled name.
"Over there," Missy gestured at a building near the shore that got hit harder than most. At least earthquakes and flooding were things the civilians in this area knew how to deal with. After the terror of the Endbringer's attack wore down, it became a matter of establishing supplies and aid. In many ways, this went down in history as the least damage Leviathan had ever managed to do. If you ignored the trillion dollars in property damage, at least. Only a handful of poorly constructed buildings even collapsed, and very few places were facing refugee crisis.

"What floor," I asked my girlfriend.

"What?" She paused for a second. "Oh, sorry. Seven. Maybe eight."

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked.

"Sorry, just tired," she answered. "I'll take a breather while you're up there."

I glanced at my HUD clock. It was three in the morning. Later, for us, since we were on east coast time. "Okay, I'll be back in a few minutes," I agreed, tugging on Macula's reins.

He took flight, then hovered where I needed him to. Some practical part of me found the flying horse thing to be wasteful. It would be be much more efficient with, say, a hover car. Another part of me was more than a little embarrassed. A man riding a flying horse, kinda made me feel silly. But Riley put effort and care into these creatures, and that meant a lot to me. Plus, silly or not, I got to be a knight on a flying horse. That was pretty cool.

I formed a sword and slashed the emergency exit door. It came open without any difficulty, and I stepped inside. "Anyone here?" I shouted. "I'm with Pantheon. We're here to get you to safety!"

My scanning tech led me to the men's bathroom. Not where I'd pick to hide under the circumstances, but whatever. "Fair warning, I'm coming in," I shouted into the bathroom. It was one of the ones that didn't have doors. Instead opting for a sort of hallway and inner wall setup for privacy.

The trio opted to hide in the stalls when I walked in. "Y'know, usually people are a little more eager to be rescued," I spoke. "I get that you're scared. I would be, too, in your shoes. But I'm here to help. This building isn't going to hold forever." As if to punctuate my point, there was another aftershock. They'd come so regularly, a dozen or two an hour, that I stopped noticing them.

One of the people in a stall let out a high pitched shriek.
"Dammit, Gary," a woman in another stall exclaimed.

"Oh, get over it Sheila, he already knows we're here," the person I now knew as a man named Gary who shrieked like Riley when we watched horror movies. I suspected she overplayed her reactions because it gave her an excuse to cuddle with me.

The third stall's door opened, and another man stepped out. He was in a Janitor's outfit. Made sense, it was around eight in the evening here when Leviathan struck. "Dumb plan to begin with," the janitor stage whispered. I read his name. Stanly. I blamed my upbringing for the surprise I felt in seeing an obviously hispanic man with the name of 'Stanly'.

I didn't say anything about his opinion of the plan. I also neglected to ask who was the bigger idiot. The idiot, or the idiots who listened to that idiot. It would have been unprofessional.

"As I said, sir, I'm here to get you out of the building. It's actually pretty decent out there, the roads are passable so we can get you to a hospital if you need it. Or even home. Busses and cabs are out in force." *Part of the Governor's emergency planning, apparently.*

"Well, at least that's good news," he responded. "Guess I need to look for a new job."

He isn't wrong. I watched the doors open up. A naturally tan man and woman in fairly nice, if currently bedraggled clothes. *Office workers staying here late, perhaps?* Something seemed a little off about them, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. *Maybe it's because they look a little younger than I expect of office workers.*

"The emergency cleanup crews will be in tomorrow and hard at work for the next few months," I informed the man. "I'm not sure about the details, but there are people who spend their entire careers moving from one Endbringer attack to the next doing repairs. So I have to believe the pay's decent."

"Sounds depressing as hell," the man concluded.

"Probably," I agreed. "Come on, I'll show you three the way out."

"Lead the way, my man," the janitor responded cheerfully.

I took us to where Macula was waiting by the emergency exit that no longer led anywhere but to a seven story drop. The people stopped and stared at him. "Like him?" I asked a bit self consciously. "My girlfriend made it for me." One of them, at least.
"You're not expecting us to ride on that thing?" the woman, Shiela, asked.

"It'd be faster," I responded. "But he doesn't like strangers much."

I stepped up to the edge of the fire escape, and focused on my power. Metal manifested from nowhere, forming a staircase to the ground. Because I didn't have to care about various construction issues, I simply made it a single long set of stairs.

"That's quite the trick," Stanly smiled. "Perfectly safe, right?"

"Almost as hard to break as the Endbringers, sir," I responded. "You're in absolutely no danger of it collapsing." To prove my point, I walked out on to the platform. I'd extended legs to keep it anchored to the ground, although that wasn't strictly necessary.

The man stepped out, cautiously at first. Then he jumped on it a couple times. "That's one hell of a trick, kid," he laughed, then looked back at the other two. "C'mon, it's probably safer than that building."

The pair followed, and they started down the stairs. I stood at the top. Holding something this complex together took a lot of concentration. I climbed on to Macula and let the metal vanish back into wherever it came from.

By the time I got back down, Missy was slumped on top of Calysta. Her horse folded its wings over her protectively, but otherwise didn't do much when I approached. It would have been more responsive if I wasn't a friend. Riley's constructs did have more or less horselike instincts in them, a distrust of strangers was part of that. I shook Missy's shoulder.

"Hey sleepy head, we're heading home now."

She didn't respond. "Missy?" Oh no. I shook her harder, but got no response to that, either. "Aceso?" I activated the com.

"What's wrong?" Riley asked immediately.

"Missy's unconscious," I told her. I was already laying her back, but going through the first aid training and medical memory set. Still, I felt more comfortable having Riley in charge. Even the best doctor was nothing compared to Riley's tinkering skills. Of more immediate concern, getting through Missy's armor wasn't something I could do easily. "I'm not sure what happened."

"Understood," Riley answered. She'd be patching into the armor's diagnostic systems. She spoke to
me, more for my benefit than anything. "Heart rate is normal, breathing's normal, no sign of recent contact with what might be a Master/Stranger effect." She paused for a second. "Oh, I think I found the problem. She's not in any danger, but you need to bring her back to Avalon base, okay? I'll get the equipment ready."

"Alright," I agreed. I glanced over at the trio I'd just rescued. "Umm... are you okay to be left here?"

"Nah, it's cool," the janitor responded. "My van's right over there. I'll drive home."

"Same," Sheila answered. "Well, car. We can look after ourselves."

"Okay, thanks. And sorry about this." I didn't wait for their responses, instead guiding Macula up, and leading Calysta along with. Shunt drives were built so that if someone was holding another set of armor when they shunted, both would go with. Or, in this case, a chain of four would come along. I shunted, which brought Macula, which took Calysta, which took Missy.

Our emergency base on Avalon wasn't much to look at. Really just a med lab grown in the pocket of land we owned in the territory. One of the ways zoning laws worked on the planet, there was always a space of around a quarter mile that was required to be left undeveloped and under Imperial control every twenty miles or so. This way, we always had somewhere as a staging platform for emergencies like this one. A good thing, too, in this case. Our California was easily the most populated place on Avalon right now, so there was a number of buildings surrounding a conspicuously empty field and a single large building.

If you discounted the dozens of zerg spread across the landscape, at least. Nearby home owners had gawked for a while, but that was hours ago and they were mostly back in bed. A long night for everyone.

We touched down on the roof, where Riley, Emma and Zach were already waiting. Judging by the cloud of bugs, it wasn't just them. Emma and Zach were already getting Missy off her horse by the time I got to her. Missy wasn't that large, but our armor systems added at least another couple hundred pounds of weight. More, depending on the suit in question.

I got under Missy and held her, bridal style. Three hundred pounds was quite a bit of weight to try and carry, but a bit of antigrav and she was light as a feather.

Luckily, we were on top of the medical segment of the building, and putting Missy into one of the pods was easy enough. Fortunately, they were designed to work with the armor system, so we didn't have to cut Missy out of her suit.

"I thought you said she was fine," I asked Riley.
"She is," Riley confirmed. "But that doesn't mean we don't want to be thorough. And she needs a good night's rest. The healing pods are great for cat naps. Eight hours of sleep in an hour or less, guaranteed."

"They are," Emma agreed. "I mean, for other people. I catch Riley and Trevor in them all the time, and Rey has a spare installed in his lab. I swear, if we could build a two-seater, then Taylor and Amelia would probably climb into one and never come out again. Not like they actually need to be present to use their powers."

"So what's wrong with Missy?" I asked.

"Oh, that's easy," Riley started.

=============

A/N- This chapter was totally foreshadowed. Nobody figured it out, though.
Fuck my head hurts. My vision was blurry. I can't move. And... and... I can't feel my power!

A sudden burst of cool air heralded the opening of the pod. "Did... did I die again?" I asked, on the off chance someone would hear. It didn't feel like this last time, but I didn't have a lot to compare it to. *Maybe the process didn't go right?*

"Nope," Emma answered, and her voice made my head hurt that much more. "But you're going to feel like you did for a while."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh, a few things," she responded. "But let's get the rest of the team in here. They'd like to have a word with you."

"My head hurts," I complained. *In fact, my everywhere hurts. My skin is hot and itchy, everything smells wrong. I'm pretty sure at some point my armor had to use its auto-clean features. Can't it just wait."

"Good," Emma responded, her voice hard. "And no, this gets dealt with it now."

I started to protest, or maybe just try to ask why Emma was so mad at me, I didn't have the chance.

"She's awake!" she shouted, and my brain felt like it was trying to claw its way out of my eye sockets to escape the pain.

Riley was the first one in, followed by Theo. Both of them looked upset. What I wasn't expecting was Taylor, Amelia and Lisa. None of them looked exactly happy, either. *Oh god, what's going on here?*

Emma smacked her lips. "So," she drew out the word for several seconds. "Did you know that you're not suppose to take the stim drugs while pregnant?"

*Pregnant?! "What?!"* Theo exclaimed.

Riley squeaked, but didn't say anything.
"No!" I shouted, jolting up. Immediately I was hit with a massive throbbing pain in my skull, and waves of nausea that probably only didn't result in me getting sick by virtue of there being nothing in my stomach to lose. I covered my hands over my face. "I'm not pregnant, I swear."

"You're sure about that?" Emma asked.

"Very!" I insisted. "I haven't done anything that could get anyone pregnant. So unless Riley cooked up some kind of weird drug!"

"Nope," Riley replied. "But that sounds-

Amelia interrupted her. "No."

"But it could solve our population problems in less than thirty years!" Riley insisted.

"Still no," Amelia responded. "I vetoed the airborn aphrodesiacs. I vetoed the subtle fertility drugs in the fruit. I vetoed Yggdrasil that makes birth control not work. What makes you think I wouldn't veto immaculate conception?"

"But this one works twice as fast as all the others combined!" Riley whined. "For less than half the effort!"

"That's not the point, Riley," Taylor sighed. "Yes, we want a population boom. But we don't want to do it by forcing people to have children they don't want. Or forcing them to want children that they don't want."

"Rule Three, I know," Riley pouted.

"Can we get back to the part about how pregnant I'm not supposed to be!" I exclaimed, perhaps a little less dignified than I would have liked. But seriously, there was no natural way I could be pregnant. Sure, with the way parahumans worked, it wasn't impossible, but I was freaking out over here while they were acting like that was only a secondary concern.

"Sure," Emma agreed. "To start with, I didn't say you were pregnant. I asked if you knew the warnings on the stim drugs included not using them if you're pregnant. Did you read those warnings?"

"Yes, of course," I answered. I'm not pregnant, that's good. Now why are they all... Oh, so that's
what happened. "I didn't have any choice!" I argued. "If I didn't, people could have died. We..." I looked at the faces of everyone gathered. "I fucked up, didn't I?"

"Scale of one to ten, where one is stealing the office stationary and ten is leaving Rey unsupervised with the samples we gathered from the Simurgh? This is somewhere around a seven and a half. Seriously, what were you thinking?"

"I... I'm not strong enough on my own," I sighed. "Avalon's got too many people now. I needed to use the stims just to get the zerg to the battlefield. But you said that the drugs were okay for the Endbringer battles."

"No, not okay," Taylor replied. "A backup if you're desperate. And you're only supposed to use them once, maybe twice if you have to. To buy yourself half an hour of boosted abilities. And then you're supposed to take a day or two off to rest afterward. Sleep, read, replace Zach's porn folder with pictures of grasshoppers. Do anything other than using your powers. What you're not supposed to do is take three more doses in as many hours. Missy, you're suppose to be one of the responsible ones. This is the sort of thing I'd expect to find Rey or Riley doing."

"Not me," Riley insisted. "I helped write the warnings and instructions. I'll never use that stuff if I can avoid it."

"But I needed to," I whimpered. "Without the stimulants, I can't help with the Endbringer battles. Or to save lives afterward. It's not like I'm abusing drugs and you need to stage an intervention. I only use them to help against Endbringers. I'm willing to pay the price for that afterward. I just went a little too far this time. It won't happen again."

"Missy," Emma spoke up softly. "Those stims are serious brain altering chemicals. There's a reason they're emergency only, instead of standard issue. You've done a lot of damage to how your powers work."

"That's why I can't feel my power, I realized with horror. "How long?" I asked.

"We had to put you on a drug that will block your powers for at least the next month," Riley's voice was actually timid. "I'm sorry, please don't hate me."

"Ouch. "A whole month?"

"At least that long," Taylor stressed. "And even after that, your powers will be weakened for several more weeks. It's possible they'll never fully recover."

"I already repaired most of the damage," Amelia spoke up. "Chances are high that you'll make a full
recovery in time."

"But the brain restoration tech!" I protested. *Don't cry. Don't you dare cry in front of everyone like this.*

"Useless," Emma cut the argument in half with a word. "These drugs overclock your powers, and the part of your brain that uses them. We can undo the trouble on your side but the Passenger's a different subject entirely. We can't fix that. Even if we killed you and activated your backup, the damage you've done will carry over to that version of you. It's part of the reason we won't allow clones of living parahumans, squick factor notwithstanding. The results would mean weakened powers for all the copies, and possible breakdown of the powers in general. To say nothing of the clones' sanity."

"But the Endbringers," I protested.

"Aren't your problem for at least the next three or four months," Taylor spoke, sounding both angry and sad. "We'll find ways to compensate. Put more emphasis on Dragon's suits. Other transport tech. Using the old purely organic shock troops. They're not as good, but they can be made on location and we have plenty of raw material. Maybe we can find a way to hire that Thanda cape to work with us for this. We can combine him and Eric pretty effectively. Between us, the Protectorate, and Cauldron's connections, we'll be able to figure something out."

They're already planning to replace me. The thought was like a punch in the gut. *I'm sorry, I didn't mean for this to happen,* I whimpered.

Theo hugged me. "It's okay," he insisted. "You'll be fine."

I hugged him back. *How am I suppose to live without my powers?*

-----------------

A/N- As far as I can tell, no one saw that one coming. But you can't say I didn't drop plenty of hints that Missy might be abusing the stims a bit.

And this marks the fifth Riley Rule presented in canon.

So far, none of my readers have compiled the list.
"So we're missing one of our best for the next two Endbringer battles at least," Taylor sighed as we went back to our meeting room. It was true. Missy had one of the few universally effective weapons against the Endbringers, plus one of the most defensively powerful suits.

Nothing short of Lily had been able to get through Singularity when it was powered. It might be one of the few setups that actually worked against Scion. Which was why we had to scare her. Even if the 'pregnancy' thing might have been a little heavy handed for my tastes.

Hopefully it'd also get Missy to think about putting herself on some kind of pill, too. She and Theo weren't doing anything like that yet, but it would happen eventually, and having her protected was just a good idea. Preferably have Emma do it. I didn't trust Riley to give her one that worked. My little sister had entered the 'babies are the best thing ever' phase, and we were all just praying she grew out of it soon.

"If we're lucky, it won't matter," Lisa responded. Oh, right, Endbringer planning. "With the last of originals destroyed, people are really starting to believe the idea that the others can be beaten for good. Villains that normally aren't interested in joining the fights are starting to take up the banner if only because they have to or lose face."

"Because they know there's an army of disposable shock troops there to eat the attacks," Taylor argued. "What happens when we don't have those available?"

"And? There still will be," Lisa replied. "Indies and heroes that normally mark the 'powers not applicable' box are asking Pantheon to give them the once over to see if there's some power combination they might be eligible for that lets them be the next Endslayers. People are actually excited about this. There's even an End the End movement online. It's becoming pretty popular."

"Sounds like something Zach would come up with," Taylor quipped.

"It should," Lisa replied. "He and Emma started it. I suspect Dragon helped. One of those benefits to not needing to sleep, ever, I guess."

"Huh, one of these days, Zach's going to run out of ways to surprise me," Taylor remarked.
"I hope not," I replied. "If he does, that means we've seen everything his mind can come up with. And I don't know if I can live with that thought. Now, how are we planning to handle the zerg transport?"

"I'll get in contact with the Thanda tonight," Lisa informed. "It'll cost us a few mil, and require giving out some high end power suits, but the Thanda capes are already committed to the cause of fighting the Endbringers. It won't take much convincing to buy their help on this."

"And putting us that much closer to a war with China," I added. ConcernAngerDisgust. We all knew the issues in India right now. China had moved into the 'unoccupied' northern corner of India, putting some of their own capes to use terraforming the land into something usable. Their claim that they were 'helping their neighbors' was believed by exactly no one, but it was appropriate lip service to let them get away with invading a territory that had an average of less than three people per hundred square miles. They didn't even want India, probably. Most of us were of the opinion they were more interested in having a 'forward base' that could let them snag a portal from the Middle East, when we built there.

"They won't dare start it until the Endbringers are removed," Lisa dismissed. "And we already have the resources to end that war before it begins."

I frowned. She's referring to Basilisk, probably. "You know I don't want to use that," I insisted.

"It's half the reason Mashu exists," Lisa responded.

"I'd rather go public with Bolla," Taylor countered.

"Because the Cold War is totally something we want to emulate," Lisa's sarcasm was palpable. "I get the appeal of the whole Mutually Assured Destruction thing. Especially when it's very much not mutual. Fuck, if we weren't on a time limit, I'd even agree that it's the best plan. But you don't build a house of cards and expect it to hold when the fucking hurricane hits."

"Instead we build weapons that make Nilbog and Sleeper look like rank amateurs?" I added.

"Nilbog and Sleeper are rank amateurs compared to the two of you," Lisa retorted. "This the path you chose, Amelia," she stressed my name, turning it into a borderline pejorative.AnnoyanceDefensiveSupport. At least I know Taylor's on my side.

"When China starts this war," Lisa continued. "And it is just a matter of 'when', it'll happen even if we do cave and give them a portal. Fuck, that might even embolden them and encourage them to be even more aggressive. We need to be able to end it in a single strike. Bolla could do it, but we both know Dragon will refuse to use it the way it needs to be used. And Basilisk is easily the least horrific
weapon we have at our disposal that still works. Helps that it's scary as balls without being especially destructive."

I sighed. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Sorry, but running off with Taylor to terraform your own desert paradise and live as hermits until the End of Days is no longer on the table," Lisa smirked at me. Oh, of course she'd find out about that.

"It was never an option," Taylor replied. RegretLonging. "We have our responsibilities."

"At least we got our payback on Piggot," I offered.

"Oh, right, I knew I've been forgetting something," Lisa said. "After a few discreet inquiries, I managed to get some info on what happened to the former Director. They moved her to a facility in Maine. Nowhere particularly interesting, just another jail. The fun part is she's been on suicide watch ever since our invasion of Ellisburg. They've been censoring her media so she doesn't find out about Avalon, but I can't expect that'll work forever."

AngerDisgustVindication. "Good," Taylor settled that conversation with a single word. I would have felt bad for the woman, but she napalmed a bunch of teenagers and murdered my sister. At least now I knew she was paying for it.

"Yup," Lisa agreed. "I'm still not completely sold on the idea that success is the best revenge. But it's up there. It is definitely up there. And now that we're all thinking happy thoughts, we move on to the piece de resistance. The meeting with the Emperor."

"Aren't we suppose to wait until after Lily's public unveiling before we do that?" I asked.

"If all goes well, that happens in three hours," Lisa responded. "Noon, east coast time. Vickery's currently overseeing the final prepwork, and trying very hard to hide the fact that his career is set for life thanks to us, and he knows it."

"You ever going to offer him a permanent job with us?" Taylor asked. "He's one of, like, three people on any planet that you seem to respect. I'm sure we need some kind of permanent press agent or embedded reporters or some such. May as well hire someone we know is competent."

"He'll say no," Lisa responded. "In fact, he'd even be insulted by the suggestion. Vickery's one of those guys that wants to earn his own way. Oh, and don't kid yourself. If we fuck up, he'll be in line to write a story tearing us down faster than you can say 'easy Pulitzer.'"
"So much for gratitude," Taylor muttered.

"That's just how he operates. Why I respect him, honestly," Lisa replied. "He's always been straight with me. If he sees a story, he'll go for it. He's not going to dick us over unless we do something that deserves it, but he's also not going to do us any special favors just because we're on friendly terms. The only reason he even agreed to this interview was to springboard Erin... umm, the woman doing the interview, into a career in talkshows and the like."

"I guess I can live with that," Taylor agreed. "Now, about the chat with the Emperor?"

"Alright, well, the first thing you have to remember is that the Imperial family has been ruling Japan in a more or less unbroken line, for well over two thousand years. Making it one of the longest lived governmental bodies in history. And I'm pretty sure every century or so they lube up another stick to shove up their own asses to join all the others."

*Oh god damn it, it's going to be one of those meetings.*

"And the fact of the matter is, unless something changes drastically soon, they will lose power before Twenty Twenty rolls around," Lisa continued. "It's been on that path since World War Two ended, but Kyushu really pushed the timeline forward. This is something they know, even if they're in a combination of denial and desperation. I've yet to talk to anyone other than advisors and servants. The two of you, and only the two of you, will be allowed to talk to the Emperor himself, and only over the viewscreens. Thanks to the risks of you using your powers to manipulate the Emperor."

"But we can't-" Taylor started.

"Yes you can," Lisa answered. "Amelia's power with your bugs to deliver a mind altering agent? Not that hard. As it stands, they'll have Thinkers and Tinkers pointed at the conversation, plus a five second delay, to make sure there's no attack through that medium. All while pretending very hard that they believe their Emperor immune to such attacks. Don't bother questioning it, because they won't."

"Guess you don't stay in power for that long without a dose of paranoia," I concluded. We could live with those restrictions. If anything, it was more convenient for us. I wasn't looking forward to a trip to Japan without Missy to make it easy on us.

"In addition, they're going to treat this a business transaction," Lisa continued. "From their perspective, Lily's functionally a piece of property, not a person. Or maybe it's that Lily's a person and they're gods. Whatever, point is, try not to get too pissed about this."

"Wait!" I objective. "We're going to marry her into that?"
"Oh, no, not at all," Lisa smirked. "We've got a much better idea."

A/N- Exposition chapter. They're kinda needed every so often to show things happen in the background.

Also: holy shit, it's been so long since Amelia had an Amelia chapter that I actually put her name in the chapter title!

I'mma leave it there, just so my readers can discover if they noticed or not.
"Wait, you told her she was pregnant?" I exclaimed. "Holy shit, Ems, how did you not get punched in the teeth?" Especially by Taylor and Amelia. I mean, I know Taylor says it's water under the bridge, but I can't believe she really means it. Not completely, and certainly not if Emma is going to start picking on everyone's favorite little girl that wants to be a grownup already.

"It was Lisa's idea," she responded.

"And suddenly everything makes sense," I concluded.

"I still feel pretty bad about it," she sighed. "Missy puts so much of her personal value on her powers. She'll have to go without them for months, just to undo the damage she's caused herself. Which she only did because she wanted to be useful."

Emma paused for a moment. "Uh, earth to Ems?" I prompted.

"Oh god, I just now realized why I felt so bad for her," Emma facepalmed.

"Pretty sure that's every parahuman, hun." I gave her a comforting hug. Over the months I'd gotten used to the fact that her skin would never really be more than lukewarm, but that didn't really make it the most pleasant experience in the world.

"I mean, look at us," I continued. "Let's leave Taylor and Amelia out since they're one beard shy of being actual gods. You Tinkers are the most obvious, throwing yourselves into your work and spawning whatever abominations come to mind this week. Riley, Trevor and Rey are the exact same way. Then you got the ultimate workaholics with Dragon and Halbeard."

"You keep calling him that and he's going to find a way to kill you for real," Emma warned.

"What? I'm just trying to help out his love life," I defended.

"How do you figure?" Emma scoffed.

"Every couple needs pet names for each other," I insisted. "It's a requirement, so they can be sickeningly cute with one another and horrify everyone who knows them. Those two are way too serious to come up with their own, so we'll have to do it for them."
"Every couple, huh?" Emma smirked. "So why don't we have any?"

"We have pet names," I smiled. "I'm 'you moron' and you're 'please don't hurt me'."

As predicted, she jabbed me in the rib. I grabbed my side and moaned in badly acted pain. "Oww, what did I just say about not hurting me!"

"You really are a moron," she laughed. I smiled wider. My favorite thing about her is definitely her laugh. "Speaking of which, I'm betting you haven't bothered to study your homework at all this weekend."

"But there was an Endbringer fight!" I protested. "I strained my brain muscles trying to fly in virtual pitch black darkness and fighting Leviathan clones left and right. I killed at least three of them. Plus a tacky looking statue outside of a used car lot. Truly my finest accomplishment to date. Even better than filling Hookwolf with acid."

"Well, you have six hours to cram before class, get your ass in gear."

"Yes, mistress," I whined, doing my best to pout as I turned and left. A quick slap on my ass and I hurried along. She was right, I really did need to hit the books at least a little before tomorrow started up. I didn't have superhuman intelligence, although I wasn't exactly stupid and my power probably gave me about five bonus IQ points. I also suspected Amelia did a little 'upgrading' when they figured out a way to heal me. I opted not to ask, and she was choosing not to tell.

....

"So, looks like we lost three more classmates over the weekend," I said in idle chitchat at lunch. Right now, it was just me and Theo. His girlfriends were sitting at their table, chatting with the few remaining girls. Our entire 'highschool' now had a grand total of thirty three students. Everyone else had been pulled off to either return to Bet, or their parents decided they liked Avalon enough to find a permanent home. In six months, this school would be gone. A thought I'd have liked better if words like 'private tutors' weren't being bandied about.

Theo was looking over at the girls, of course, he didn't pay attention at all. "Earth to the dude with the harem," I waved my hand in front of his face.

"Wha?" he jumped a little. "Sorry, just lost in thought."

"It's about Missy, of course," I concluded. As fun as it was to fuck with Theo, figuratively speaking, this was game face time. "Emma told me the basics. Powers down for a month or two, and I imagine she's pretty upset about it."
"She almost cried when we got to school," Theo responded. "We were two minutes late, and no one cared about it at all, but she was over there fighting to keep from tearing up. I... what do I say to her? I've only had my powers a few months, she's had them for almost half her life. Riley's the only one who really understands what it's like to have powers that long. And she's trying to help, but..."

"But it's Riley and she's going all 'Victoria' in trying to force Missy to be happy, when right now she just wants to be miserable?" I suggested. "So all that's going to happen is Missy getting more and more upset while Riley desperately tries to make her feel better until both of them manage to have second triggers, at which point Missy turns all of us into something out of a Picasso painting, and Riley puts us all together as a single horrific composite monster?"

"Where do you get these ideas?" Theo just looked at me like I grew a third head without taking the time to grow a second.

"Late late night monster movies are hilariously bad," I informed. "Point remains, though. Riley's brand of delusionally cheerful optimism isn't working, and I'm going to guess that your particular brand of quiet support isn't cutting it, either."

"Yeah, that," Theo responded. "I tried last night, I really did." Don't say it, Zach, do not say it. Comedy gold be damned.

"Hey, how about I give it a shot?" I offered.

"You?" he just looked at me.

"Yeah, I'm good at this sorta thing," I insisted. "Playing world's weirdest therapist is my calling in life."

"Sure, go for it," Theo shrugged. "If nothing else, maybe you'll make me and Riley look good in comparison."

"Awesome," I agreed. "And if I succeed, you three will have to support me in my bid for a royal title."

"Zach, I keep telling you there's no way in hell they're calling you that," Theo sighed. "No one's ever going to call anyone that. Not while they're sober, at any rate."

"That's okay, I have a whole list of other options to try out," I watched the clock for a minute. Wait for it, wait for it. Now! "So, do you think if I do a good job of cheering Missy up, she'll let me join
"Dude!" Theo exclaimed. He was then interrupted by the end of the lunch bell.

"Too late!" I declared as I got up. "You already agreed to let me try!" I bolted from the cafeteria. Sure, Theo and I had the same class this period anyway, but I was laughing the whole way there.

....

After class was a simple walk back. We tended to avoid being in large groups. Clarice and I tended to head back together, because we didn't have secret identities. Missy, Theo, and Trevor sometimes went together, and other times Trevor went home alone. He was rather paranoid about his secret identity being found out. I wasn't quite sure why at this point, but it wasn't something that seemed to make him unhappy, so I just let him have his quirk. Not like I was lacking in pet weirdness of my own.

"Hey, Theo, mind if I cut in?" I asked, approaching the pair of them from behind. "I'll swap you mine," I gestured at Clarice. Riley already knew I was going to take a stab at this, so it was a surprise to exactly Missy.

"Umm, sure," Theo agreed. "I'll see you back at home."

He started heading off, and inspiration struck me. "But you have to promise not to get her pregnant." Perfect!

"Meep!" Clarice squeaked. And on this day, we learn that Riley built her doll with the ability to blush.

"Too late, no backsies!" I declared. "You kids have fun."

I watched the pair of them head off a bit.

"Man, I must be a really sad sight if they're sending you," she chuckled bitterly. "Am I really that pathetic?"

"You'll never hear me calling you pathetic," I responded. "Mainly because I'd like my ass to remain unbeat."
"Not what Emma tells me," she quipped.

"Nice," I laughed. "Seriously, though, you are anything but pathetic."

"I am until my powers come back," she countered. "I can't do anything now. The next Endbringer the rest of you fight, I'll be sitting on the sidelines instead of out there helping and it's all my own fucking stupidity."

"You did what you had to do to save lives," I responded. I wasn't sure if that was entirely true, but I wasn't above lying to make someone feel better, so I could certainly say something I wasn't completely sure about. "It may not have been the right choice in the long run, but you did it for the right reasons."

"That's a dumb excuse and you know it," she retorted. "Now I'm useless."

"You're hardly useless," I argued. "Missy, you're the heart of this team."

She froze for a second. "What was that?"

"You are," I insisted. "Everyone has their role to play. Well, you and Amelia. But she's more like the heart of the movement itself, of Pantheon as a whole. You're the heart of this team we've created for ourselves inside. Half of us would be miserable if not for you. Riley would still be alone and miserable, but you're the one who stepped up to make that work. Your powers had nothing to do with any of that."

"Well, I did have to use them to take Clarice's ribbon," she responded.

"Whatever," I rolled my eyes. "You could have done that with the word 'please' and everyone knows it. Except maybe Theo. Because let's not kid ourselves, if you asked Riley to leave Theo for you, she wouldn't even hesitate. The only person that means more to her than you is Amelia, and I wouldn't want to risk money on that bet. You're the one who stands up for us when what passes for the 'parents' of this group are being dumb. The one that finds the solutions that make everyone happy, even when no one else thinks that's possible. Even if it means you have to sacrifice yourself to make it happen."

She hesitated. "Someone said something a lot like that to me. It was a lot of comfort, then. Thanks."

I put a hand on her shoulder. The girl would probably never reach half my current weight in her life. "Look, you went overboard and it cost you. I'm not saying don't give it your all, I'm just... when you do, remember there are a lot of others ready to help. We're a team, and when one of us is hurt, all of us suffer for it. Keep that in mind from now on. And get used to the idea that we're around to make
you feel better, too."

She smiled. "Thanks. So... if I'm the heart, what does that make you?"

I laughed. "Isn't it obvious? I'm the sex appeal."

==================================

A/N- Obviously, the most important part of this chapter is trying to guess Zach's desired title(s).
"This is the Mark Seven," I spoke loudly to the fresh group of troops before me. Although none of them were fresh by any normal standard. In fact they were the top hundred men and women that the PRT, police, and fire departments in Austin had to offer. These were already consumate professionals, and eager to prove themselves in an even bigger stage.

"You've certainly heard the rumors, seen video of them in action," I stated. If they were the type that wasn't paying attention to something that basic, they wouldn't be here. "Over the course of the month, you will be proficient in the use of this equipment. Merely proficient. The Advanced Armor Division has been training with these devices constantly for six months, and we are still learning to harness their full potential."

Three of the suits walked up behind me, piloted by three of Calvert's top field commanders. Then again, at this point every one of the fifty men and women on this team would be a field commander in any other circumstance. They often were, being sent out in groups of ten or so to lead operations across the country. The best of the best, and everyone knew it.

"First, you will be trained in the basic M7E. The 'E' stands for Emergency. It's the version that does not come equipped with advanced weapons," I informed them. "But don't let that fool you. These machines are fully capable of ripping a human being in half if you use them without the inhibitors. Even with inhibitors, they are stronger than any non parahuman on the planet. M7Es come with advanced medical, diagnostic, tracking and scanning technologies that could not be installed in the M7M and M7P. They are the one unit everyone here will see used in the field, and by the end of this training, everyone here will know exactly why the PRT is trained to nullify Thinker class capes first in any engagement, and why you protect your team's M7E. Is that understood?"

A few of the go getters in the group shouted. "Yes, Ma'am!"

I smiled behind my scarf. They know this song and dance. "The M7P, for Police," I gestured at the slightly larger model. "It is, functionally, the shock troop class. Equipped with some sensors, it can function as a Thinker in many situations. It is the fastest of the suits, capable of speeds of up to a hundred miles an hour. More durable than the Emergency units, and equipped with interchangeable electromagnetic or sonic blaster technology for stunning opponents and disabling electronics. In addition to being able to use standard police and PRT equipment, like vehicles, firearms and containment foam. If necessary, the PRT Director is capable of authorizing removal of inhibitors and activating lethal settings to the on board weaponry. Don't expect it to happen often."

That got their attention, at least for the cops and PRT troopers. 'Thinker' may be the most valuable job, but it wasn't exactly the most glamorous.

"And last, the M7M, Military," I gestured to the largest unit. "These have been referred to as the one man battle tank, and that's an excellent way to look at it. Slowest, toughest, and most destructive. It is
I wish we had these suits a year ago. The only parahumans in Brockton Bay that would have stood a chance against them were Purity and Lung, maybe Fenja and Menja. And even those would have been forced to retreat against more than one of them. I had to imagine even Lung’s regeneration would not respond well to suddenly being reduced to the temperature of liquid oxygen. And Purity wouldn't do well against the long range targeting tech. Hiding in the glare of the sun or in clouds didn't mean much against something that didn't need to see you to snipe you.

My pager beeped. "My apologies," I said after glancing at the message. "Commander James, take over here, the Director wishes to see me. Operate on the assumption I won't be back for a while."

"Yes, Ma'am," the M7E suit responded. The three of them had seen this done several times before, they didn't need my help. I left in a brisk walk, bordering on a march. One of the habits I'd picked up working at this job.

....

"Director Calvert," I acknowledged, walking into his temporary office in Austin. We hadn't been here a week yet, and everything was already positioned neatly in place. After the destruction of Brockton Bay, Calvert had landed on his feet by forming a traveling task force to handle major threats across the country. I accepted the job of going with him, since there really wasn't another place for me.

And, when there wasn't a major threat, we spent our time time stationed in a few weeks at a time training the local PRT and law enforcement in the use of the M7s. They weren't quite the same quality as the SM7s that were used on Ellisburg, but they were easily a match for most parahumans. Anything that could beat one of them instantly measured a six on the power rankings.

"Good morning, Miss Militia," he responded back. "May I ask you a few questions? Strictly off the record."

"Certainly, Sir," I responded, taking a seat. This doesn't bode well at all.

"What's your opinion of me?" He asked calmly. "And please, be honest. Consider it an order, if you must."

I paused, choosing my words. Calvert struck me as possibly the single most wooden man on the planet. Which was saying a great deal, given the years I'd spent working for Armsmaster. Unlike Colin, however, the Director knew how to work with people and the system. Where Armsmaster
was constantly saying the wrong thing, or saying the right thing the wrong way, Calvert was a skilled conversationalist. He had few friends, but fewer enemies and a great many allies. More than that, he actually valued my input, and conversations like this were a relative norm. Although not this subject matter.

Eventually, I picked a way to put that into words. "You're certainly very competent at your job, Sir," I responded.

He chuckled. It wasn't necessarily forced, or faked, but it was very reserved. "Yes, I suppose I am at that," he agreed. "But that's not quite what I meant. I suppose I should just say it, instead of being obtuse. They were discussing the need for replacement Protectorate division leaders. This conversation isn't a new one, of course, but with the loss of Huntress and Cardiac in San Francisco, it's become a pressing concern."

"I'm not sure I follow, Sir," I hesitated. Surely, he can't mean?

"Your name's been brought up as a strong candidate," he informed.

"I was under the impression my career was functionally over after the... incidents... in Brockton Bay," I responded. After everything I let Piggot get away with, and with the political pressure the PRT and Protectorate is under thanks to their current reliance on Pantheon.

"I admit, I'm not privy to all the details, but the Chief Director says that won't be an issue," the Director informed. "She said Minerva's words were to the effect of 'she's learned her lesson, and if she runs into another Director, she'll know to stand up to them'. From what I understand, her actual language was strongly laced with profanities, but that's the spirit of the message, at least."

Yeah, I could imagine. "That is surprising news," I managed to say, if only to prompt him to continue.

"Not necessarily," Director Calvert responded. "Pantheon, and now Avalon, has a history of strong and aggressive political maneuver. There has been some speculation that they might hope that they can gain some advantage by seeing you back to an oversight position. I couldn't discount that belief, that is something Pantheon would do. Although I assured them that your professionalism and loyalty are beyond exemplary. At the same time, I'm sure Minerva's aware of that as well."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Sir," I responded. I honestly meant it, too. Director Calvert was always appreciative of a job well done, but I'd never received such open praise from him before.

"We've discussed it at length, and even consulted some Thinkers on the subject," Calvert informed. "Including Alexandria and Echo Chamber." I blinked at that one. Echo Chamber's power was rarely tapped into. She wasn't a Thinker so much as she granted others around her temporary Thinker
abilities, at the cost of debilitating migraines after the fact. This is a big deal if they're using her.

"The overall consensus is that Pantheon anticipates that you're likely to oppose any decisions you believe objectionable from any future Directors you may work with," Director Calvert continued. "Part of their ongoing pressure for additional oversight to prevent my predecessor's actions from repeating themselves. Are they correct?"

I paused for a minute, thinking about it. The simple fact was that admitting this would likely make it impossible to find a Director that wanted to work with me, viewing me as a meddlesome outsider that could make their jobs significantly harder. They weren't necessarily wrong, depending on how they chose to do their jobs. "Yes, Sir," I admitted eventually. "I understand the difficulties of the job, but if forced to choose between orders and my conscience again, I'll choose my conscience."

"Very well," Calvert responded, sounding far less than pleased with my answer. "The Chief Director wishes me to inform you that the position is yours, if you wish to have it. You'll need to provide an answer by the end of the week."

"Sir?" I couldn't even come up with the words to say.

"This was something of an informal interview," he offered the closest thing he ever gave to a smile when not in front of the public. "You passed with flying colors, at least by the Chief Director's standards. I can't imagine Director Chase will be as pleased, but thanks to the rebuild of the Protectorate, you won't answer directly to him."

"I have until the end of the week to decide?" I repeated.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Although they'd greatly prefer your answer by the end of the working day. Eidolon's come out of retirement to serve as an emergency leader. If you don't accept, they'll transfer Rime to the position. She's more than adequate for the task, but not to the same level you would be. This is a fairly significant shuffle, and they'd prefer not to leave Eidolon there any longer than absolutely necessary."

"What are you opinions on the subject?" I asked, more out of politeness and respect than an actual desire to know. Calvert was a good boss, but hardly what one would call a friend. Still, I had to start thinking politics if I wanted this job. Right now, the man in front of me was second only to the Chief Director in terms of influence in the PRT. Sometimes his orders were a little strange, but they always met with success, and that was earning him a lot of attention. Upsetting him would not bode well for my suddenly revived career.

He smiled, this time seemingly genuine, and leaned back. "If we're being honest with one another, I'd prefer you didn't accept the position. You've been an excellent addition to my team, and losing you would make my job that much more difficult in the future."
I nodded. Well, that makes saying 'yes' harder.

"However, I am fully aware that your potential is being grossly underutilized," he continued. Or maybe not. "You're worth far more than merely a drill instructor, however talented you may be at that job. So from the perspective of the Protectorate as a whole, taking the job is the right play. Ultimately, it's your decision. But if you plan to stay because you're worried about how I'll handle it, then you're under direct orders to leave. I only want you here if you want to be here more. If you don't, then take the transfer."

And implicit promotion, I added silently. Sure, the pay wouldn't be that much better, and there'd be a lot more work. But I'd be in a position to actually lead a team again, instead of 'merely' being second in command of the PRT Advanced Armor Division. Or, Calvert's Elite as they were called by the PRT in general. At the same time, being second in command here was still a better position in terms of prestige than being a Director in most parts of the country would be. It wasn't as easy a decision as I might have originally thought.

"Thank you for the insight, Sir," I responded as I considered all the implications. "This is a serious decision, I need some time to think on it."

"I understand," Calvert nodded. "You're free to take some time. Take the rest of the day off if you feel that will help you make your decision more quickly. And my apologies for ending the conversation here. I have other business to attend to. You're dismissed."

"Thank you, Sir," I responded, standing and turning to leave. He was already picking up the phone before I got out the door.

==============

A/N- Just in case you were wondering what Miss Militia was up to. Or Coil, for that matter.

... Surely there was at least two people out there who wanted this chapter.
It's eleven at night here, I sighed inwardly. High noon Japan, and when they wanted to hold this meeting. "They're doing this on purpose," I stated. "They want us off our game by having us tired for this meeting."

"Probably," Amelia agreed, reaching over and brushing my hand. Instantly I felt like I'd just woken up from a good sleep. AcceptanceGlad. "Don't worry about me, I probably wouldn't crash for another hour even without the meeting."

"Thanks," I responded a bit belatedly. I looked down at my 'formal' armor. A few modifications had been made to our dress outfits. Mine being a deep metallic blue with gold trim. While Amelia was in a softer green and white costume design. Both were capable of passing as nice, if concealing, women's business suits. The fact that the armor was all one piece wasn't concealed at all. If anything, it was emphasized by the design. If we were going to be taken seriously, we'd have to look the part. And this equipment certainly looked serious.

It also hid what the few admittedly unnatural curves I now had. Definitely playing up the masculine role I adopted for my public persona somewhere along the line. Deep inside, the little girl that had dreamed of one day being a paragon of feminine beauty like Alexandria died a little. Well, at least I was no longer pedo bait like I was a year ago. Now it was just gay men.

I noted that Amelia's hand hadn't left mine. And one gay woman, I amended. Oh well, I could live with far worse fates.

"I have a direct link into your emotions and I still have trouble figuring you out, sometimes," she smirked at me.

"Just thinking about the weird path life's taken me," I responded, then I kissed her forehead. I was pretty sure my late teen growth spurt was over, so now I knew I'd always be a bit over half a head taller than my fiancee. "It's good, but it's definitely very, very weird."

"I know what you mean," she agreed. "Wouldn't trade it for the world." She nuzzled into me a little.

"It'd be a pretty lousy trade," I pointed out. "After all, you'd be giving up two worlds that you already own."

She gave my arm a light swat.

"One minute to showtime, ladies," Lisa's voice came over the com system. "So unless you want to
I stepped away from Amelia and let her give my outfit a final quick look. *SatisfactionDesire. Really, Ames, you have to think that now? SheepishAmused.*

She looked away, toward the viewscreen. I wasn't sure what kind of equipment they'd be looking through, but we had a beautiful system at least partially designed by Dragon, although it was really more Emma's work. *Hmm, I should probably remember to thank her for the effort more often.*

Our screen clicked on, showing what constituted the Emperor of Japan, a ten year old boy. He was dressed in a sharp suit, and I was glad for our 'public' armor design being fairly lacking in ostentatiousness, more akin to a military uniform than a superhero costume. Lisa and Sabah certainly made the right calls with that one.

Next to him stood the effective Emperor, the boy's uncle. Currently the Regent of Japan, until his nephew was old enough to be officially recognized, and one of only two valid male heirs to the throne, after a home grown terrorist/progressive supervillain group attempted to eliminate the royal family for good several years ago. They were partially successful in the attempt, killing several members of the royal family and others that could be considered valid heirs should the direct royal line be deceased. There were no doubt advisors watching, but this wasn't a negotiation. Nothing legal or binding could happen here, today.

Nothing legal or binding would achieve what we were here to achieve. Laws and treaties had their place, but right now we were more concerned with the symbolism and romanticism of this arrangement. That's what we needed to make use of. Everything else was secondary.

As we were, in theory, the guests at this meeting. And I was, in theory, the man in this partnership, I spoke first. "Thank you for seeing us, Emperor," I opened. "It is an honor to finally speak with you in person." *Even though you're a child and the Queen of England has far more power in Canada than you do in Japan. We probably have more power in Canada than you have in Japan.*

<It is good to meet you,> the translation tech did its job masterfully. Only by lip reading would you realize it wasn't what the boy actually said. <I appreciate your awareness of our interests at this time.>

"That's probably a translation error," Lisa whispered voice came into our earbuds. "They're using archaic Japanese. Trust me, they're not going to admit they're 'interested' in the way we think that word means. And don't worry, our tech's translating to what you say into modern Japanese. There won't be similar translation errors on their end."

<Especially in the wake of the death of Fish Demon,> the boy's uncle spoke. <Surely you must have many concerns right now to worry yourselves with.>
"Leviathan," Lisa volunteered, unhelpfully. "They're saying that we consider them valuable enough to go through this crap, and they're right of course. This is their negotiation tactic, so we're running Plan Three for now."

More helpful. So we are going with aloof and confident, almost bored. We can do that. We've certainly practiced it enough times to make it convincing.

"Most of our significant concerns are already being dealt with," I spoke.

"We trust our subordinates to handle the lesser details," Amelia agreed.

"There is little left for us save diplomacy and preparations for the next Endbringer conflict," I added. "There is little we can do to accelerate our Endbringer preparations beyond where they currently are."

<I see,> the child-Emperor spoke. <My advisors tell me you wish to speak of marrying one of your people into our royal family.>

"My apologies," Amelia apologized. She was, of course, to be the softer part of the conversation. "While that possibility was mentioned between our advisors and yours, I'm afraid things have changed. I trust you saw Atropos' public unmasking of her identity."

<We have,> the Emperor spoke. <It is indeed, as she said, portentous that one of our own was responsible for Leviathan's death.>

Translator must have worked out that kink, at least. "We've been told that she is being celebrated as a hero in your nation," Amelia added. "The Avenger of Kyushu, I believe the exact phrase was."

<You are correct,> the older man confirmed. Not that he needed to, we already knew the answer.

"She has captured the hearts and imaginations of your people," Amelia continued. "As well as those of most of the world. She's a household name throughout much of the world. That's why we believe you should grant her a royal title, and permission to start her own branch of the royal family, without the marriage. She would, in essence, have the status as a non inheriting son of the former Emperor."

<Preposterous!> the uncle exclaimed. <The very idea of it is absurd!>

"There is precedent for it," Amelia argued. "Other heroes of Japanese history have been granted similar titles."
<Not for centuries! Such a thing is more myth than history,> he insisted. <And never a woman.>

The boy just watched, obviously less emotionally attached to the idea. Although it would be him who approved the idea, when it was approved. And it would be, if we had anything to say in the matter.

"Emperor," I spoke up, directing the comment at the one who mattered. "Your throne is dying. Japan is dying. The royal family no longer has the support of its people, and everyone knows it. What we're offering you is an opportunity to salvage your nation."

<By surrendering it to foreigners,> the Regent argued.

"By revitalizing it with new ideas," Amelia argued. "By healing the rifts and allowing it to move into the future. Japan was suffering even before Leviathan's attack, and it never recovered after. This is your chance to fix that."

<We are a strong people, we can solve our own problems. One of those planets you have been giving out to the Europeans would accomplish a great deal,> the man responded. <Or are you denying us a portal for political gains?>

"Maybe Japan could rebuild itself," I started, ignoring the chance to point out that if we gave them a portal it means they didn't achieve anything on their own. "But there are enemies in your back yard. Were we to build a portal in your nation, you'd face invasion from China within the month. Even if we were to use our resources to protect you, millions could die in the conflict. Already eleven of the portals in Europe have faced similar assaults. Only three succeeded, and they were eventually reclaimed by their rightful owners. Would you see Japan face a war with the Yangban?"

<They're right, Uncle,> the boy spoke up. <We cannot win against China. Avalon offers an excellent opportunity to restore our nation.>

_Wow, that was a lot quicker than I expected._

<Your advisors also spoke of opening the gate to Avalon and giving Japan governance of its equivalent lands?> the Emperor asked.

"More," Amelia spoke. I did my part and slapped them with sense, now it was Amelia's turn to offer them a consolation. "Avalon's oceans are smaller than Bet's. You should have a couple hundred more square kilometers of land, conservatively estimated."
"In addition," I cut in. "Most of Avalon is unclaimed. With Japan's current population and some creativity, you could very easily claim a full quarter of our world's equivalent to China. Perhaps significantly more, with luck and time."

<We would have to accept your nation's laws in our colonies,> the Regent cut in, sounding less than pleased. <And with it, the risk that our colony would abandon its homeland in exchange for other loyalties.>

"You had to accept the United States' rule after the World War," I countered. "And even if you lose your colonies, you'll have one of the direct portals to Avalon, and all the trade opportunities that offers. Avalon's oceans cannot support life, Avalon's soil is not yet ready to support crops not born of the Yggdrasil. It is to your extreme economic and political advantage to accept our offer."

<What do you gain?> He demanded.

"People," I answered. No sense in hiding it. "As with all the colony worlds, we are in need of colonists. In addition, before Kyushu, Japan had a strong focus on education, art and science. All things that we wish for Avalon in the future."

<You don't need the royal family to get Japan's people,> the Emperor cut in. <They will flock to your American portal no matter what we say or do here today. We lack the power to stop them, it will be a repeat of the exodus of refugees after Kyushu.>

_SurprisedImpressed. That's a very good grasp of the situation. "You are very observant, Emperor," Amelia praised_

<To accept your offers, all of them, would allow us opportunity to profit from the event and protect our honor,> the boy continued. <Including, perhaps, reclaiming a good portion of the people we lost after Kyushu. In exchange, all you seem to be asking for is a title with no legitimate value. It is an excellent offer, and I am inclined to accept.>

<Nephew!> the Regent objected. _Do they really address each other like that, or is the translator still glitching out?

<I am still your Emperor, Uncle,> the boy cut him off, then looked back to us. <There must be one stipulation.>

_Dammit, isn't there always? FrustrationPersistence._

<The Avenger of Kyushu may have her title, but she shall never be allowed to live within the
he asserted. <This is the home that my ancestors bequeathed to their descendants. She is neither of royal blood, nor a royal consort, this will never be her home. Save if she chooses to marry a true member of the family in the future. That same rule shall extend to any future family she produces.>

SurpriseAgreement. Is that all? "I believe that's acceptable," I responded, carefully hiding my happiness at this development. Lily had been worried about them trying to take her freedoms and visibility. Reducing her to a sheltered symbol and doing little more than parading her about to look good and then sequestering her away again. But this was a specific decree that made that impossible. Literally the ideal outcome. "We will, of course, consult with Lily and our advisors to determine final arrangements."

<As must I,> the boy nodded. <There are trifles beneath all great things. However, I believe we are in agreement that in exchange for a portal to Avalon, your Endslayer will receive the title of Princess. Now if you'll excuse me, I have many matters to attend to.>

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," Amelia quoted.

The boy smiled. <Interesting quote,> he responded. <I think I like it.>

"It's from Shakespeare," she volunteered. "Henry the Fourth."

<I will remember that,> he agreed. <I shall instruct my advisors to expect your contact in three days, I expect that shall be long enough.>

"Yes, thank you," Amelia answered. "Goodbye."

The screen turned off.

ReliefSuccess. "Wow," Amelia smiled. "That went enormously better than I thought it would."

"I know!" I agreed. "That was almost... too... god damn it. Lisa, please tell me this sudden feeling of absolute dread is unwarranted."

"Depends on what you consider 'warranted'," Lisa spoke over the com.

==================
A/N- Wow. This chapter really ran away from me. Over 2300 words.

Also: when did YOU figure out there was something wrong in this chapter, dear reader?
So Japan's Boy Emperor is a parahuman," I sighed. "Well, makes an awful lot of sense when you think about it. I knew that kid was too smart. So where does that leave us in the long run?"

"Depends on things I don't know," Lisa replied. "If I could get a real look at him, in person, then I can use my powers to figure out more details. The most likely is he's some kind of Changer who killed and replaced the prince. Thinker or Stranger secondaries that let him, or maybe even her, maintain the ruse despite there being any number of possible ways for the plot to go wrong."

DisgustAnger. "In which case, we're faced with ousting the imposter, and losing what is nominally an ally," Taylor concluded. "And with it our clean, easy foothold with Japan. All of which is only assuming we're right and the officials believe us. I doubt the Regent would cooperate with us at all."

"He's in on the plot," Lisa responded. "Either as another parahuman, or more likely a purely normal ally. My guess is the assassination attempt succeeded better than anyone ever realized. Either the impostors were part of it, or took advantage of the chaos to get themselves into position. It's also possible other government leaders recruited them to play at being the royal family as part of some attempt to maintain morale with Japan's populace.

"Well, that's a little better," I sighed.

"And last, but certainly not least," Lisa continued. "There's the chance that he is the actual heir apparent, and he triggered with a skill or knowledge based Thinker power during the attack. Something like Victor or Uber. Maybe like me or Alexandria without the brute backup. Possibly even a precog of some type. Something that let him escape the assassins and is now informing his decisions. The Regent would, of course, be aware of this. It wouldn't be the first time a Thinker power has strongly influenced the mind of a parahuman. But there's too many unknowns."

"I think I like that one," I nodded. "What are the odds that's the actual truth?"

"Better than the Fairy Queen joining the triumvirate?" Lisa responded. "Seriously, I don't have the appropriate information to work with. All answers are equally valid until I can examine him in person. Which isn't likely to happen. So my power's of pretty much zero help. Maybe if I try some shenanigans with Dinah's power, but her answers start to get unreliable when we ask questions like 'if we use a power to do x, will y happen?'. Especially when it comes to power interactions, which this would be if he has Stranger powers or uses a Thinker power to resist mine. I suspect it's some part of the Taboo, but have no way of confirming that."

"So we have no way of knowing, and all methods of finding out are going to be conspicuous or unreliable," Taylor sighed.
"Maybe we can get a blood sample with a mosquito or something?" I suggested. "Run it through Riley's genetics tech and see if that gives us any clues."

"It's better than nothing," Lisa agreed. "But they'll probably have some way of trying to make that fail. No way of knowing what kind of parahuman defenses they have going for them. We still have to answer what we do if we do find proof he's a fraud."

*FrustrationDistasteResignation.* "We're going to do nothing, aren't we?" Taylor asked.

"It's the smartest plan," Lisa responded. "The kid, no matter who or what he is, is in a position that barely even qualifies him as a symbolic figurehead. He'd have more political power as an elected official. He'd have more political power as whatever Japan calls the mayor of a city."

"He may also be guilty of multiple murders and at least one or two major conspiracies. Plus treason," Taylor argued.

"Sort of the Coil scenario," Lisa responded. "Plus or minus the enslavement. The kid is in a position where he's capable of doing a lot of good. He's unnaturally smart, he's confident he has allies strong enough to get his plans through in other areas. And he's committed to achieving good things, if only for his own self interest. If it turns out the worst of our suspicions are correct, he's no worse than Accord. And blowing this secret leaves us in a much worse position when it comes to both Japan and China. Probably won't matter too much in the Scion scheme of things, but..."

"But at best it's a distraction that might slow down our preparations against the end of the world," I supplied.

"Exactly," Lisa agreed. "We should put him in the same general bubble as Cauldron and The Elite. Not people we like, but not making themselves part of the problem. So we can tolerate their presence. Because we have to."

"Don't have much choice, do we?" I asked. "If we did have the evidence we needed. If our mission was successful. If everything went perfect, removing him would not go well for our interests in Japan. We'd alienate a lot of the people we're trying hardest to recruit. There is nothing good that comes from this except removing one more villain."

"Pretty much," Lisa confirmed.

*Why are the right decisions and the good decisions never the same? SupportRegretComfort.* "Do we approach the fake Emperor with this knowledge?" I asked. "Or share it with Lily, since she'll be the one who meets the kid?"
"He already knows," Lisa responded. "Or knew I'd figure something out. Like I said, some kind of Thinker or Stranger. Possibly precog. It's why he gave such a convenient excuse to keep Lily away from the rest of the royalty, so we wouldn't fear her being compromised or threatened. I know, to you it looked like a standard enough chat, but there was a conversation within a conversation in the background. He's giving us everything we want, if we simply agree to let him have what he wants."

SuspicionConcern. "What does he want?" Taylor asked.

"A life of luxury with absolutely no need to do honest work a single day in his life," Lisa responded. "Or something along those lines, at least. He's currently wealthy, and people are at least willing to pretend he's powerful. And with his parahuman abilities, he can do a lot more with the position than is traditionally possible. He has what he wants, right now he just wants to make sure he keeps it. This strongly implied alliance with Pantheon gives him security. Especially from China. And that's what sold him, us being an implicit shield against China."

"Which was one of our implied bartering chips in the first place," I responded. "We came in with a really strong offer, asking only for a 'symbolic gesture with no legitimate power' and stuff we were going to get anyway. No surprise it was snapped up."

"He also sensed that we wouldn't improve on the offer," Lisa added. "It was this or turning us down and letting us wait until they changed their minds. Depending on how his power works, he's at least a four, and I'm assuming seven or better until I have more information."

"And the longer they delayed it, the more it'd look like they were forced into it," Taylor responded. "He had to see that, as well. That agreeing to this right away makes it look like it's meant to look, as high an honor as Japan can give, to the one that killed Leviathan."

"Speaking of," Lisa added. "I'll probably throw out a few ideas to Japan and see what sticks to the wall. A parade in Lily's honor is a given, no doubt. We'd likely have to agree to that one even if we didn't want it. Leviathan's death a national holiday, they likely won't even blink at that. Whatever Japan's equivalent to the Medal of Honor or Knighthood happens to be. Point is, she needs to have more title than just 'Princess'. And a couple military honors to go alongside that gay pride sticker in her costume would be an ideal outcome, here."

"We should probably come up with a medal system of our own, huh?" Taylor remarked. "I mean, we are Avalon's military, right? Shouldn't we have award ceremonies for the big stuff? Endbringer fights at the very least."

"Yeah," Lisa agreed. "I'll throw the idea past Accord, he'll love everything about it. So do one of you want to tell Lily the good news, or shall I?"

"I'll do it," I volunteered. "Haven't had a chance to talk to her in a while, anyway. But let's save it
until tomorrow. I'm tired."

"Can do," Lisa smiled. "I've got some last minute things to throw by Dragon, and I'll send a memo to Accord asking him for suggestions on a medals. It'll be lowest priority, but I imagine he'll get to it pretty quickly. Feel free to resume your quickie after I leave."

She bolted for the door. I could have stopped her with ease, but what would be the point?

"She spends too much time around Zach," Taylor muttered.

=================

A/N- And no one guessed at all.
"Hey, GL, morning status report?" Crystal asked. I liked Crystal, she treated me more like the reality of what I was than the others. Where they acted like I was a normal person they just couldn't see, she didn't. She just treated me like I was an extension of the environment. Or, more, the environment was an extension of me. It made me feel more respected that way.

"Nothing big," I responded. "Sabah brought a couple girls in last night."

"Two?" Crystal asked. "Well, that's a new one. They stayed out of the secure areas, I trust."

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Y'know, one of these lady friends of hers is going to plaster her identity all over the newspapers one of these days."

"I don't think she cares," Crystal responded. "But I'll talk to her about this behavior. I get the post breakup fling thing. Been there, done that, felt like a slut afterwards, never doing it again. But this is taking it a little further than it really needs to go. Actually, I'll probably consult Rapture about it, first. My shitty pop psych senses are tingling, and I think this needs a more delicate touch than Lisa's."

Her eyes didn't twitch around trying to find the invisible source of my voice, instead casually focussing on the report she had in hand. It had taken me four months to figure out how to speak to people again, how to force the air in my controlled territory to rub against itself in a semblance of a human voice. Over the course of a year, I'd gotten good enough at it that I could make people swear it came from an actual set of lungs, not a delicate process of mixing together artificial wind in an extremely complex fashion.

"Why do you treat me like that?" I asked.

"Like what?" Now she looked up.

"Like I'm on the phone or something, instead of in the room with you," I prompted. "It's weird, no one else does that."

"Umm, sorry," she responded. "I've spent a lot of time working with someone who has a power a lot like yours. Taylor's power, I know everyone thinks of it as her controlling swarms of bugs, but it's really quite a bit more than that. She doesn't command her swarm, she is the swarm. Her feelings are their feelings, her thoughts are their thoughts. It's just easier to think of her as already being everywhere, and that habit kinda extended to you."

"Except she has a range measured in city blocks, instead of just a small building," I muttered. "Even
without her fiancée extending her power across an entire planet. Those two kinda makes me feel inadequate."

"There's always someone stronger," Crystal agreed. "That's how I feel fighting alongside Legend and Eidolon. Legend's all my powers only way better. And Eidolon is, well, good luck competing with that."

*And then there's Scion,* I added in my head. "So you don't look for me because you're used to working with Taylor," I changed the subject back.

"Pretty much," she agreed. "That and I'm used to talking to her. She almost never looks at the person she's talking to. She doesn't need to, she has her power and can see better through it than through her eyes. It's creepy as hell, if we're being honest. I can try to break the habit if you like."

"Nah, it's cool," I responded. "Honestly, I think I kinda like it. Like what I am is normal, instead of being freaked out about it."

"Well, if there's one benefit to living with Amy, Taylor and," she hesitated a couple seconds. "The others. It's that eventually there's not much left in the world that can freak you out. As long as you stay respectful of our privacy, I'm good."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, chief," I muttered. Honestly, I'd played peeping tom a handful of times, especially in the first year or two I had my memories. Just because I wouldn't do it now didn't make me innocent.

....

*Wow, Boost was so completely right,* I decided. *This Hecate chick is a total babe.* Dubstep did his best to avoid looking at her too intently. The guy was chronically shy, probably the source of his Trigger, although he didn't tell and we didn't ask.

"Thanks for seeing us," I spoke. I had to imagine Boost tried to get in her pants the dumbest way imaginable. Because it was impossible to imagine he tried any other way. So I resolved myself to be extra polite today. "You really think you'll be able to enhance our powers?"

"Harnessing your power," the other girl, Aceso, corrected. "Enhancing powers is possible, but dangerous. Like any other drug, if you want to receive the high, you'll have to suffer the crash that comes after. What we're doing here is building equipment that will respond to your powers better than you can get just by improvising with what the environment gives you. Think of it as the difference between using PCP, and using a baseball bat."
I'd seen the occasional violent drug reaction, and I wasn't sure if a baseball bat would be enough to beat someone on that stuff. But the analogy made sense. "So you can harness our power, then?" I asked.

"Dubstep's power, with ease," Hecate answered. "He amplifies and manipulates sonic energy. At bare minimum, we can give him an armor similar to Radiant or Predator that exploits his power as a fuel source for various high end weapons. Hopefully his power follows more unique mechanics that we can use to do some really interesting stuff. Possibly even anti-Endbringer grade amplification."

"I've already named it Echo," Aceso informed cheerfully.

*There is something really strange about her.* I realized. I reached out with my power, touching her armor. I felt... I could get closer. The Manton Effect that kept me from direct contact with living things more advanced than a plant simply wasn't there. "You're a robot," I spoke, and immediately regretted it.

"Changeling," Aceso responded. "A lot like the M7s the PRT is starting to use. How could you tell?"

"No Manton Effect," I answered. At least she didn't seem upset that I figured it out.

"But that's impossible!" Hecate declared. "She has a Manton effect, because she was built using Endbringer... material... holy fuck, your power's like Chevalier's... you can directly effect Endbringers."

Aceso started giggling, and even clapped her hands together. "Oh, this is going to be so much fun!" She declared happy. "I've gotta call up Rey. He's going to love you so much that he'll want to marry you."

"Yeah, after making him dress up in a Simmie Suit," Hecate laughed.

"I... don't think I want to do that," I cut in. *The fuck is a Simmie Suit? All I know is I'm terrified and slightly disgusted right now.*

"Don't worry, we can do a lot better than that," Aceso dismissed. "Your powerset is much more valuable working with cloned material from Khonsu. How would you like the full Alexandria package plus shapeshifting plus forcefields plus a potential Endslayer combination?"

"Endslayer combination?" *Yeah, okay, that would be fucking badass as hell. "You can do that?"*
"It's theoretically possible," Hecate agreed. "Unlikely, but possible. You could use your armor to get physical contact with the Endbringer, and then take possession of its body. I have to imagine they're shielded against that some way, but maybe not. The new ones, especially, are specializing in defending against attackers like Atropos. In the process, they're sacrificing a lot of their offensive firepower and leaving themselves vulnerable in other areas. I bet if we use you in conjunction with Shaman and Rosary, we'd at least be able to subdue an Endbringer long enough to kill them some other way. Maybe use you to expose the core so it can be destroyed more easily."

"We're going to call it Fractal and it's going to be beautiful and I bet if I tried I can even get it to generate the Taboo effect and be immune to precogs," Aceso rambled on excitedly.

This is her idea of giving my power a baseball bat? Christ, what would the drug be like? "Is she always like that?" I quietly asked Hecate.

"It's a Tinker thing," she responded. "This is actually pretty mild, comparatively."

==============

A/N- GL gets a chapter. Also: Other Stuff.
Clarice stood watching as Genius Loci and Dubstep ran through their power tests in our isolation and scanning chambers. They had plenty of room and objects to work with, and instructions to just go nuts. We didn't always test in rooms like those, but for this pair, with their Shaker type powers, it was the best way to get a real feel for their abilities and how to harness them most efficiently.

“You almost blew your cover there,” Emma informed me as she stepped near me. She spoke in a crazy hybrid of Japanese, Spanish and Hindi. “And, yes, I think they can hear us from here.”

“Sorry,” I spoke softly. “I just got really excited.”

“You're just lucky they're West Coast and aren't going to put the connections together, and that neither of them caught on this was meant to be a secret, and they probably wouldn't know who you were if you gave them your real name,” she continued. “Oh, and that both of them were too busy checking out my rack to remember most of the conversation. Now call up Rey while I text him and tell him to act skeptical of your opinions on the subject.”

“Okay,” I agreed. She's right, I messed up bad. So stupid. I've gotten too comfortable with our position and it nearly cost me everything. My safety, my happy life that I don't deserve. And in the process I'd end up putting all my friends' hopes and dreams at risk.

"Are you okay?” Emma asked, looking at me strangely.

I almost asked her why, but then I realized it was because Clarice was starting to hyperventilate, or at least imitate the experience. Because I was starting to hyperventilate. "Umm, yes, I'm fine,” I responded, then starting to force myself to calm down. I've be the target of numerous heroes, nearly killed countless times, yet today is the first day I've ever been truly afraid for myself since I met Jack. Why?

I shook the thought off and focused. I have a job to do, I'll worry later.

I contacted Rey and went through the motions of the rest of the work day quietly. I had to admit, they did a good job passing me off as a low level assistant. I felt insulted by some of the implications that they were mostly just being nice to me because I was Amelia's little sister, but it was better than the alternative of them putting together exactly when I joined the team and what that implied. I spent the rest of the session in lost in the thought that I was on borrowed time before my secret came out, and all the things that I would lose.
I found Missy and Theo together on the roof of our main building. With the general lack of entertainment around here, and the replacement portal now over a hundred miles from our Capital and Missy's power now disabled, it left us with no convenient means to travel to Bet, except to shunt over, in full costume. And that would just place us in the devastated ruins of Brockton Bay. I knew some people that would have considered that a romantic date night. Missy and Theo weren't those people. Instead, they opted to have picnics and star gaze.

The were already looking at me when I came into sight. I wasn't using Bella's silent mode. The sound of her wings flapping was comforting, and they must have heard it. She touched down gently, near Calysta and Macula.

I hopped off, and rushed toward the pair of them.

"Riley?" Theo asked as I got close. "Is some- oof!" I slammed into him and held on as tight as I could. He put a hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I missed both of you so much!" I clung harder. Sensing that Missy'd gotten close, I grabbed her with my right arm and pulled her into the hug as well. At this point, I was actually a little taller than my best friend, and that would likely never change naturally.

"Riley, we saw each other six hours ago," Missy spoke up. Her arm had joined Theo's around my back. "What happened?"

"I messed up and almost let people find out who I am!" I sobbed. The both tensed.

"You didn't, though, right?" Missy asked, and I could hear the fear in her voice. She knows how bad I just screwed up. "They didn't find out?"

"Emma covered for me," I told them. "She thinks it worked. Something about her rack distracting them."

"Emma's been spending too much time around Zach," Missy commented. "But she's probably right. If they didn't notice it then, they probably won't figure it out later. They'll be too distracted by their shiny new toys to care. You are giving them shiny toys, right?"

"Uh huh," I nodded, my face still buried in Theo's chest. "Genius Loci might even have Endslayer potential with his armor."

"That's certainly a shiny toy," Missy agreed.
"Remember how much all of you Tinkers hate how little praise you get for your hard work?" Theo added. "Well, now you get to see the benefits of it."

"But it was so stupid," I muttered, turning my head to look at Missy. "I got careless and almost cost us everything. You'd have to give me up to protect Avalon and I don't want you to have to."

"Hush," Theo squeezed. "We're not going to give you up, not for anything."

*He gives the best hugs.* I pressed against him. "You're not?"

"Wouldn't help even if they did," Missy responded. "Think about it. You've been part of this team for almost a year, now. You deserve the title of Endslayer just as much as anyone, because without you there would be no Enslayers. And no one would ever dare come after you here. The Triumvirate won't do it because they work for Cauldron, and we can prove it. They wouldn't dare come after us, especially since we're on the same side to get rid of Scion. Giving you up won't solve anything."

"They'd have to get through me and Missy if they wanted to hurt you," Theo added.

"And Amelia, and Taylor, and Victoria," Missy continued. "There's a whole planet between us and anyone who wants to take you from us. And even if we didn't have all of that to protect us, we'd just run away somewhere. With everything going on, we could always wait out the drama for a year or two and then we can come back and no one would ever make the connection."

"You mean that?" I asked, smiling. "You're not mad at me for being stupid."

"I'm hardly one to talk about doing something stupid," Missy shrugged. "That's why I don't have my powers right now, and even after I get them back you'll never let me within a mile of that stim drug again. Don't lie, I figured it out."

"Yeah, probably," I admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she insisted. "Everyone makes mistakes and does something stupid that they regret. This is mine."

"Theo doesn't," I pointed out.

"Yes I do," he answered.
"Like what?" I asked, looking up at him. Missy didn't say anything, but I felt her tense slightly. *Are these things he's shared with Missy before? It shouldn't surprise me that she'd know more about him than I do.*

"So many things to do with my father," he admitted. "I should have stood up to him while he was alive. I could have revealed his identity to the public. I could, should, have poisoned him or slit his throat in his sleep. Potentially hundreds of people suffered for every day he was still alive."

"Oh, Theo," Missy muttered. "You can't blame yourself for that."

"Then Dream Girl," he added. "I had the chance to kill her. I knew what her powers were like. I let her live, and Zach paid the price for it. I know, it indirectly brought the three of us together. But now we have to wait and wonder if she'll ever come back. The way her power works, we may never know until it's too late."

"She'll never return," I told them. Lisa made me promise not to tell anyone. I didn't really care what Lisa thought.

"How do you know that?" Missy asked.

"She's dead," I answered. "I killed her, that's why she vanished."

"I'm sorry," Theo pulled me closer. "If I'd done my job, you never would have had to do that."

"It's nothing I haven't done before, many times over," I dismissed. I had something more important in mind. I couldn't even look them in the eyes as I asked. "How can you care about me, knowing all the horrible things I've done? I'm a monster."

"We don't see it that way," Missy responded. "You're sweet and kind and have done nothing but try to make us happy, even when you had to hurt yourself to do it. That's the definition of love right there. If we threw that in your face, we'd be the monsters."

"It's true," Theo responded. "We love you. That's what matters."

The words hit me hard enough that I thought my knees would buckle. Since this arrangement started, I'd heard Theo and Missy use the word with each other a few times, but neither of them said it to me, or vice versa. I looked up at him, and then over at Missy. I could barely see their faces for the tears in my eyes.
"I don't deserve this," I denied.

"That doesn't matter," Theo insisted. "You're pretty much stuck with it."

He kissed my forehead. That wasn't common, but it had happened a few times before. I loved every second of it as always.

I wasn't prepared for when Missy kissed my cheek. I turned my head toward her in surprise. She smiled softly, and then gave me a brief kiss on the lips. The same chaste sort of kiss she and Theo often shared, but my first kiss. I had imagined what it would be like, a few times.

Missy looked self conscious. "Sorry, I just... I won't do it again."

I leaned in and silenced her. She may have stolen my first kiss, but I gave her my second.

=============

A/N- I swear to all things unholy that this was NOT the chapter I planned on writing this morning. Sometimes my characters just tell me to fuck off while they do their own thing.
It's so boring around here, I sighed inwardly. Sure, I could hang out gaming with Zach. Or spend time with Lisa. But Zach was kinda weird. Funny at times, but 'always on' and not my kind of humor. As for Lisa? She was even more boring than doing nothing most of the time. Oh well, this is still better than watching my parents being so painfully awkward around me, and having to use my power every day to find out if someone was trying to kill me.

Besides, Avalon had the absolutely best food. And the school here was half parahumans, so no one pestered me about what it was like to have powers. I wouldn't mind being pestered more. There was a shifting below me as Typha noted my unhappiness. Her amazingly soft feathers ruffled around me, and a low vibration spread across my whole body as she purred. I smiled. I would die if I was ever forced to go back to a normal bed again in my life.

This dumb movie Zach told me I had to watch, on the other hand, was going to make me carve out my own eyes from sheer stupidity. The whole thing was narrated so, so badly. And something with a giant black slug monster that was so slow that its 'victims' had to force themselves to climb inside it to be 'eaten'. Note to self: offer a free question to whomever it is that can come up with the best revenge against him.

Maybe Trevor's not busy right now?

There was a knock on the door. I sat up and happily turned off the TV, resolving never to turn it on again until I deleted that movie from my hard drive. I hastily grabbed one of my books off the night stand and a bookmark to put about halfway in. "You may come in now," I spoke loudly at the door after a minute. I kept the book neatly in my lap.

The door opened, revealing Missy, and followed by Riley and Theo. They all looked a little worried, Riley looked almost like a puppy that had done something wrong. Oh, so they needed me for something.

"I hope we're not bothering you too much," Missy started.

"It's quite alright," I responded. Certainly beats what I was doing. "I presume you want to use one of my questions?" I didn't need to be a precog to see where this was going. I'd seen that look enough times before from people across the world. The look of someone who was afraid of the answer but more afraid of not knowing. This time it was actually a concern for me since these were people I lived with.

"Yeah," Theo agreed. "I'd like to know-"
"My idea, my question," Missy interrupted. *Her ques-? Oh, right, the freebies I offered at the christmas party. They still think I'm going to charge them if they ask for more than just the one? Well, that's probably still a good thing.*

"I've still a few in reserve," I confirmed. My power wasn't quite numerical like that, some questions drained more power than others. But unless they needed something huge and worldwide, I could afford a question or two and still be at full strength for Lisa in the morning. Ultimately that was always the primary concern, and every day we used more than half my power on what little I could do to see in Scion's wake.

"Well, a couple people may have realized Aceso is a Tinker," Missy informed me. "We're wondering the odds of it becoming public knowledge that she was Bonesaw. Let's just put a time limit on before Scion does his thing. I don't think anyone will be in a position to care after."

I dipped into my well of information intuitively. It was as natural as breathing, and I pulled the answer out almost instantly. "Seven point oh three nine percent that Riley's identity is discovered by the general public before the end of the world." I paused for a moment, this was odd. "But if it does happen, it doesn't seem to matter. Numbers don't change enough for it to be considered meaningful."

"How's that make sense?" Theo asked. "This would be a pretty big deal."

"That is not how my power works," I responded. It was true, after all. "It's really more Minerva's department for determining why a given outcome is likely under a given circumstance. My power merely tells me what the results should be. We could consult her, if you like. This is a significant enough number that she would appreciate if if she were able be prepared for the event ahead of time."

Missy glanced over at Riley. "It's probably a good idea."

"She'll figure it out anyway," Riley agreed. She walked over to Typha's head, kneeling down near the Gryphon and scratching her behind the ear. The purring intensified. Typha was more like a giant housecat than the jungle predator her form was modeled after. *Her way of coping, I guess.* It surprised me more than it should that the animal was so responsive to her attention. Normally Typha didn't like strangers. Of course, this girl was the one who created her, of course she wouldn't be a stranger to her.

I tapped out a short text asking for Lisa to call me in my room. A couple seconds later, the screen lit up. Lisa's eyes moved to the others in the room. "Ah, so they came to you first."

"You already know?" Theo asked.

"Your boyfriend snitched," Lisa smirked. "He has an incredibly stupid plan."
"It's brilliant!" A man's voice shouted from somewhere off screen.

"Sadly, it is," Lisa agreed. "Par for the course with Zach's plans."

"I'm going to release a bunch of conspiracy theories online proving that we're all members of the Slaughterhouse Nine!" He declared in the background. "Crystal's actually Burnscar. I'm Crawler. Theo, you get to be Shatterbird. Missy's really Cherish. Lisa's Jack Slash. Amelia used her powers to turn everyone's brains into bugs that Taylor can control and give us cosmetic surgery."

"Zach, that's idiotic," Theo retorted. "None of that even makes sense. Everyone knows who Crystal is, she and Lachesis have been heroes for years. Also, everyone knows how most of our powers work, at least in the basics. There's clearly no way in hell we could pretend to be them."

"That's what makes it brilliant!" Zach argued. "Everyone knows it's all stupid as hell, so they'll ignore the parts that actually make sense. By the time anyone starts trying to connect dots, no intelligent person would ever dare admit it. It's how the government covers up their real secret experiments by forging documents of really silly ones and giving them to crazy people. It's exactly stupid enough to work!"

"That... that..." Theo stuttered. "Dinah, I have to know. I'm burning my question on this, but is that going to work?"

"Ninety seven percent chance that if that plan is implemented, the significant majority of individuals will not believe it if Riley's identity is revealed," I answered. "I... guess that means it works."

"But that doesn't even make sense!" Theo argued. "I mean, maybe it'd be a smoke blind for a bit, but that's all."

"Maybe if there was usable evidence," Lisa responded. "But there's no possible way to prove Clarice is connected to Bonesaw. She has a history, constructed before the destruction of Brockton Bay, that we can show. She no longer even vaguely resembles her old self, except in gender. Thanks to the retroviral treatments she's been taking, she's now a genetically provable half sister to Amelia. Of course, everyone knows that such tech isn't exactly out of our reach, so I doubt they'd bother with that as evidence. If this were brought to trial, no jury on Bet could convict her. Except maybe China, because they're assholes."

"So it really doesn't matter?" Riley asked, looking up from her position using my pet for comfort.

"I wouldn't say that," Lisa responded. "It could cost us a lot of progress. We will not be going public with who you were. Conspiracy bullshit is fine. Then if anyone ever asks the question we can laugh
at it and ignore the person who asked without trouble. But we can't risk people actually believing it. You're Clarice, now."

"I'm Clarice, now," she agreed, smiling. "I like that."

"Good," Lisa responded.

"Hey, while we're all still here," Zach spoke up. "I'd like to remind you that this just proves how deserving I am of the title-"

"No, Zach, your title cannot be the Grand Web Poobah," Lisa interrupted. "Nor can it be Imperial Wizard or Super Kami Guru."

"That's w-w-wizard," Zach corrected. "You have to pronounce it right or it loses its effect, High Emissary."

"Actually, the correct pronunciation is 'never going to happen, Zach'," Lisa countered.

"Hey, you guys back me up," he insisted. "I've earned this and you know it."

"It's a bad plan," I responded. "Do you need the exact numbers?" That's for making me watch that horrible movie, jerk.

==================

A/N- My girlfriend promises snickerdoodles for anyone who figures out the movie being referenced.
"You don't intend to protect your homeland?" The middle aged African woman asked. She hadn't given me her name, simply asking me to call her 'doctor', and she asked me to lie about mine. She wasn't using my language, that much was obvious, but she had some kind of technology that allowed her to understand me easily. My broken English wasn't quite good enough to communicate naturally, so we relied on this.

"Romania is dying," I stated to the doctor. It was a fact. "Even if I were to gain a power like Eidolon or Atropos, I would not be able to protect it from the jackals at the door and the rot from within. Our leaders have chosen to focus all their resources on retreating from this world to behind the portal, with the hope of a better life. Our nation has chosen to abandon this world."

"But not you?"

"I have a debt of honor to repay," I responded. "Pantheon has proven the Endbringers can be destroyed. I need the power to make that happen. I will see the rest of them dead, or die trying. There can be no future where both of us still live."

"You understand there's no guarantee," she responded. "The kind of power needed to kill Endbringers has proven exceedingly rare, there is little chance you'll gain a power that can destroy them. Help others achieve the goal, perhaps, but not be the hand that does the deed. In addition, the formula itself is not without risks, and one of those risks is that nothing will happen."

"Or I get mutated into a horrible freak," I responded. "Or both. Those are the breaks." *If it doesn't work, I will be taking my own life by the end of the attempt.* I didn't bother stating that part out loud.

"We might have a method to improve your chances," the doctor added. "It's a new process, higher risk of mutation, but a much greater reward for the experience."

"And more expensive, I presume," I stated. The woman reminded me all too much of the filthy drug peddlers and con artists. Of politicians and the degenerate culture pushed on us by America and western Europe. The money didn't matter so much to me. It was stolen, first by Lup, and then by his employees and slaves after he was killed by Tohu and Bohu. The twelve million dollars I'd gotten away with weren't worth the hell I went through. What I was spending it on might be.

"After a fashion," she responded. "But it won't cost you additional money. Merely a service you must perform. We will provide you with some reading material. It will essentially be a technical manual, and you will be expected to memorize it and pass tests asking details about that information."
"Why would you want me to do that?" I asked. *Passing a test? Is this like some kind of parahuman driver's ed class?*

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," I admitted. *If it gives me better odds, I can live with their odd requests.*

"Afterward, there will be a series of tests medical tests," she continued. "And you will be given a pre treatment drug to take on a schedule to be assigned to you by the doctors who do your examination. These will be done by Tinkers, so don't expect to be able to comprehend the process. You merely have to cooperate with them and follow their instructions to the letter. The tests are for our scientific benefit, while the treatment will help optimize your body for the serum, where you will gain your powers."

I frowned. I didn't like the idea of unknown doctors doing unknown things. But, then, I was planning to purchase a test tube full of a mysterious liquid that was possibly going to give me super powers. *They can just as easily make that a poison and then dump my corpse in a ditch somewhere.* "I can agree to that," I finally accepted the request.

"And last," she continued. "You will be brought to a secret location, with others like yourself that intend to gain powers and are cooperating with this process. It has been hypothesized that powers gained while in the presence of other parahumans tend to be stronger and more effective, with fewer surprise side effects. This will be the first truly large scale testing of that process. It will be heavily monitored, of course, for our purposes."

"So you do this for the science?" I asked. "I imagine there is more to it."

"Considerably more," Doctor agreed. "But all of that is of our concern, not yours. All you need to know is there are wealthy and powerful individuals who are interested in the success of this project. Your participation benefits them as well as yourself, but it is voluntary and you will not be punished for refusing. However, so we are clear, there is a lot to lose if this becomes known to others. You swore to secrecy before we agreed to meet, and that extends to this special project. Whether you participate or not, you will never speak of this. We will silence you if you force us to."

The threat was unnecessary. I already knew my answer the moment she described it as giving better odds, I just wanted more information. "I'm willing to participate," I finally spoke the decision I'd made minutes ago. "The whole nine yards, sign me up."

"Understand you may have to wait longer than you otherwise would have," she added. "We must have a critical mass of volunteers for this special process before we perform it, as well as the necessary drugs that must be customized specifically to your genetics. And the same process must be done for all of the other participants. Good things are worth waiting for, yes?"
I nodded. *I can afford to be patient.*

....

"This is a brain scanning device," the man informed me, showing me to a chair, surrounded by a metal shell and several instruments I couldn't pretend to understand. It looked like some science fiction reimagining of medieval torture technology. "It will allow us to map your mind, to prevent memory loss if you happen to mutate the way others have."

"The monster capes," I confirmed, slowly climbing into the machine.

"Quite correct," he nodded. "Although they prefer not to be known as that. Call them Case 53s, if you would. It'll make your future career as a cape much more pleasant for everyone involved, including yourself."

"Okay," I agreed. So much to know. I still wasn't sure what half the stuff I read in that book actually meant. Descriptions of Trigger Visions, the nature of Power Interactions, a dozen other things that reminded me of the most boring of my highschool biology class. Even some strange video of floating lights dancing in a bizarre pattern. Being told that the source of powers was some kind of weird alien parasite. I wasn't sure I believes half of what was described in those hand written notes, but the Doctor assured me I didn't to believe or understand any of it, just that I needed to memorize it.

"While we are here, your information says that you speak partial English?"

"Very little," I admitted. I only answered that question as a yes at all because they said partial was acceptable.

"That's fine," he replied. "If anything, it helps. This technology can be used to copy information, upload or download knowledge like you might do to a computer program. If you like, we can give you knowledge to speak perfect English or several other languages. We would like to, essentially, purchase your ability to speak Romanian in exchange. It's one of a number we don't yet have."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't mean to be insensitive, but Romanian isn't exactly high on our priority list," he answered. "You won't lose any memories in the process. The tech doesn't have the ability to delete knowledge from your brain, merely duplicate."

Pity, I could use a good memory deletion or two. But a new language, just like that? "Okay," I agreed. "Can I get French as well? German or Arabic if you have them?"
"Absolutely, I can set you for all four of them. Plus Japanese. Trust me, there's a good chance you'll find that one useful," he agreed quickly enough that I almost felt cheated. "Now just lay back and silently read the screen. It'll speed the mapping process."

....

My cell phone beeped at me. Who calls at three in the morning? I looked at the phone. Somehow, the ID that normally showed the calling number instead read. 'It's time, ten minutes'.

I was instantly awake and ready in minutes. I didn't bother cleaning up more than a quick comb of my hair and use of the toilet. What I wasn't prepared for is a panel to be cut out of the small apartment my refugee support status was supplying. It wouldn't last, I'd be expected to either find a job where there were none, or join a colony where I'd be little more than a cow for breeding. I wasn't considered 'valuable' enough for anything more.

A gray cowled man handed me a blue cowl the moment I was through. "You will be expected to wear this. Many clients, as well as parahumans who wish to keep their involvement secret, will be at this meeting. Do nothing to compromise their privacy."

"I understand," I responded, slowly taking the costume and gritting my teeth as I put it over my head.

The drug they told me to take once a day for the last three weeks had left me sore and stiff all over. Every four days or so I'd think I was getting used to it, that I was recovering, and then the pain started all over again. I was warned about that side effect, warned that if I stopped before the treatment was complete, it would be impossible for it to ever work on me again. I endured the pain, like I endured many other things in my life. I earned this.

The room he lead me to was dark, and looked impossibly empty and large. There were many of us standing there. Most had started gathering together based on the colored cowl they wore, but no one spoke. We were all here for our own reasons, and all afraid of doing something that might get us remove now, mere moments before months of effort and pain were going to pay off. No one would dare risk doing something wrong now. Or maybe I was simply projecting.

I noted there were fewer blue cowls than any other color, merely ten of us. The greens had more, perhaps twenty. Then yellow, with probably thirty. Then orange and red with the most, more than I could quickly count. I guessed the colors meant something to those in control of the experiment, but I couldn't know.

Near the front was a series of what looked like recliner chairs made of foam rubber, with indents that you could lean into and not be seen from the sides.
Around the outsides of that collection of chairs sat over a dozen others, all wearing black cowls. They were already in machines similar to the one I sat in when they gave me my new languages. The exception being one child, watching the proceeding with interest. She was neither in a chair, nor wearing a cowl. Near her stood three specters in ghostly costumes. A number of others in gray cowls were near her, waiting on her nervously, in a way that bordered on groveling. I didn't know her significance, but she was clearly important for their purposes.

The woman I knew as Doctor came out from one of the entrances to the dark room. I got a glimpse of a sterile white hall beyond, before the passage closed shut. I couldn't tell the difference between it and the others I'd seen since beginning this thing. "Those wearing blue, come forward," she instructed.

I walked toward her, stopping where a number of gray cowled individuals waited. They didn't ask our names, simply pointed a device that resembled the scanner at a grocery store at us. I waited nervously as they handed each of us a vial, each with a series of letters and numbers printed on the side. Judging by the care they took in reading the lettering, they wanted to make absolutely certain they didn't mix up any vials.

More things I didn't understand, and didn't care about. I held it in my hand. The thing that would make my life worthwhile. "Please, sit in one of the chairs," the gray cowled person instructed. His or her voice was distorted by some device that made it impossible for me to guess anything about them. "And please, don't take the vial until you receive further instructions." I followed the instructions. I had no reason not to, after all.

"I recommend you shake the vial," the Doctor. "It's not essential, but will speed the process. Drink it all as quickly as you possibly can, and be prepared for it to taste extremely unpleasant. Failure to drink the entire vial could possibly result in powers that don't bond with you correctly. If that happens, you might receive dangerous and uncontrollable powers, and we could be forced to kill you to protect ourselves and everyone else in this room. You are still allowed to back out now, if you wish. If not, please take your given vials now."

She already knew none of us would back down, not after everything we'd already done to be here. I popped the cork and chugged the mess as quickly as possible. She was right, it tasted horrible. Like vomit and blood and dirt. While we waited, the green cowls were receiving their vials and finding places to sit. I quickly stopped caring, too busy biting down to keep from screaming at the pain.

=============

A/N- Clearly, Riley and Cauldron have been busy behind the scenes.
"Good afternoon," Alexandria nodded to me. *Neutral expression. Monitored. Convinced Doctor Mother to let her lead the conversation. Unnecessary. Wanted an opportunity to see me. Not business related, simply enjoys my company.*

*Got you,* I smiled, and her body language stiffened slightly. *You are so very gotten.* "Still technically morning for me," I answered. My casual approach to conversation was (in)famous, and would raise exactly no alarms to anyone trying to analyze me.

"Yet I've had time to examine the preliminary reports. Our Tinkers are still cataloguing everything, and comparing them to the notes we were provided. I'm afraid I can only give you initial impressions at this point. We'll need to have a followup conversation in, say, a week? Plus a few more days if the next Endbringer attacks earlier than expected."

"Understandable," she agreed. "We wouldn't want to risk flawed results by trying to rush the process."

*Embarrassed by the slip, worried I might be a stronger Thinker than she is, worried that I've picked up more embarrassing details.* I kept smiling. *She's not wrong, I certainly have figured out a few amusing little tidbits, and even an idea of some of the darker things she's done and is ashamed of doing.* I met her eyes, or where they would be behind her visor. *Don't worry, I still consider you a friend.* "Thank you for understanding," I spoke. There was a second meaning in the phrase for the pair of us.

She relaxed notably at that. To us, at least. I continued speaking. *We're seeing a statistically unusual number of both Breakers and Tinkers, as well as the expected variety of grab-bag capes. With a sample size of only a hundred and fifty nine, and the inherent unpredictability of the serums, we can hardly call it definitive. But there does appear to be at least some pattern. Whether a result of the experiment process, or a bias caused by the recruitment process, we can't be certain. My powers indicate that it's likely a combination of both. Tinker from the psych, breaker from the treatment."

"That's very good news, regardless," Alexandria agreed. "Tinkers are the most valuable capes in the long run. Breaker states tend to be popular amongst the standard customer base, for various reasons. We should have an easier time collecting volunteers for the next wave with these results."

"We're also seeing an average of one and a quarter greater rankings than predicted for the stable formulas. Or in the grab bag cases, multiple powers each averaging approximately what is normally predicted for them to get with merely one power. And there are far fewer mutations for the unstable," I added. *As was the case with Emma in both regards. Her mutations were far less severe than expected, the recipe she took should have pumped out a crystalline version of Mush. She was expecting a six ranked power, she got a total of five of them, plus several others in the two to three range, plus temporarily being an easy eight.*
"Even the worst case scenarios, the results have been extremely generous compared to your projections," I finished. "Our Tinkers believe it the equivalent of having a second Trigger event."

She nodded. That was the sort of thing they could lead with, and we all knew it. Versatile powersets were easier for them to sell than high level power sets. If only because the big numbers usually came with big risks. I tilted my head slightly, an apology for making this all about business. She tensed her right hand in what might be interpreted as a handshake or, extending the logic of it to feminine culture, a hug.

"Cause currently unknown, but it may prove valuable in future knowledge of how exactly Passengers function," I added hastily, breaking that line of interpretation for fear of doing something humiliating on monitor, like blush. Alexandria's mouth twitched slightly, the impression of a smile. She got to me and she knows it. "We're still trying to analyze the dimensional readings of the Passengers connecting to their hosts. We might be able to use that to track them to their home dimensions."

"Potentially game changing," Alexandria agreed. "Speaking of, one of our agents managed to record a Second Trigger on our instrument sets." Unhappy with that statement. No sense of guilt, but a sense of disgust. Second Triggers are always horrific. Was... inflicted? Offered? Done to someone who volunteered for the process. Likely as a means to improve what they saw as a lackluster ability.

"That's going to be useful," I stated. "I trust we'll be given the data when we provide our more in depth reports on the experiments."

"Of course," Alexandria agreed. "Wouldn't want to provide it too soon. I know how Tinkers can be." Hint of sadness. Sense of loneliness. Lost someone close. A friend that was a Tinker. Hero.

"Continuing the preliminary report... of the initial batch, only twenty one managed to breach the Taboo," I chose to turn the subject back to business and I could see her gratitude for giving her that much privacy. "Curiously, every case is one that no longer requires sleep as a natural part of their biology, and all are Thinkers or Tinkers of some variety. I assure you, our people are very interested in this phenomena as a whole. Pantheon is already taking the steps necessary to recruit all of them."

I looked at her. Knows Doctor Mother would be displeased with this. Cauldron interested in having anti-Taboo capacity of their own. I took a deeper breath than average by approximately ten percent, a signal of permission for her to negotiate. She paused slightly longer than she needed to, suggesting she would take a circuitous route. I breathed out a little faster than normal, letting her know to go for it.

"That might be risky for your organization," she suggested. Ah, that approach. Excellent choice. "Surely, with that many new Thinkers and Tinkers, all able to discuss the Taboo despite the supposed rarity of such, they'll likely begin to suspect your involvement in the process of creating
"You have a good point," I agreed. She honestly did, too. One I'd already prepared for, but still. "We're planning on using our contacts with Toybox and Dragon to absorb a number of them, with exception to a few of the more promising." I almost stumbled the last few words as my power hit me. Notably reacted to Dragon's name. Knows something significant about Dragon. Has special confidence regarding the Tinker. Dragon's been compromised. And now she knows I know.

"I see," she responded. Concerned about how much I'll be able to figure out. How I'll react, if I'll be angry. Knows I'll be angry. At her, not Dragon. Dragon's not responsible. Dragon doesn't even know about it. Compromised via parahuman means. Master/Stranger effect. Fuck, now I actually am pissed. Dragon's one of the few legitimately good people I've ever met. She deserves better. "That's a good plan. Still, there's a significant number of them. Perhaps we should consider absorbing a few as well? Distribute them amongst a few key Protectorate locations. Encourage cooperation."

Encourage Cooperation. Wants there to be a peacible resolution. Believes there can be. Doesn't believe they've done anything that even Amelia or Taylor would find objectionable. Have yet to leverage their control on Dragon. Recently acquired? Relatively recent acquisition at least. Hopes for acceptance.

"We could swing that," I agreed. "There are three we're most interested in. At the very least the power copying Tinker is essential for our anti-Endbringer and likely anti-Scion purposes." It's true, we need her. The ability to achieve actual, honest to goodness, copies of powers and install them into equipment was something every group would want. Granted, it came with enough limitations that she couldn't just win the game for us, but she was hugely valuable for a team built around power synergy.

I'm willing to discuss the issue with Dragon, but you know we can't compromise when it comes to her wellbeing. If I think you're going to hurt her, I will tell the others, and you will be our enemy. You know you need us too much to negotiate on this. Don't let that happen. That last part probably looked more like pleading than negotiation, but I didn't care enough to try to censor my thoughts. It wouldn't have worked on her anyway.

"We'll want the manufacturing Tinker," Alexandria responded. He was another big one. I almost cringed at the idea of losing him. We could have fully modernized Japan's colonial territories within a year with his specialty. "Through Dragon, you already have Masamune, who has equivalent or better abilities for anti-Scion purposes. We're hoping he can improve our serum production. We can use him better." Doesn't want to hurt Dragon. Sees her as essential against Scion. Also potentially dangerous, even greater than Pantheon. Alien, nonhuman, never human. She's an artificial lifeform. That's why Rapture's and I have such trouble reading her.

"Understandable," I agreed. "We can worry about building our world after we ensure survival." Be that as it may, Dragon's a friend and strong ally. The hold you have on her has to be surrendered. That is possible, right?
"We feel the one with solid hologram technology is best placed in the Protectorate," Alexandria continued. "The potential for improved training methods for capes, and large scale disposable minions and forcefield effects is valuable on a number of levels that they can make better use of than you can. If only because you have better versions of the majority already available to you. And he’s of little direct use to us."

Is possible. Simplistic, even. Has a key, metaphorical. Perhaps Dragon's source code? I didn't know enough about computers to know what the 'key' could be called, my power filled in the concept, but not the terminology. Could provide directly to Dragon. Is dangerous. Dragon unable to use. Taboo. Anyone who has it could use it to hurt her.

"You're right," I agreed. "Although I imagine Dragon might disagree. That tech could help her immensely." If you're right, then we can give it to people Dragon trusts. Emma's capable of reverse engineering Tinker Tech, and Defiant loves her more than anything. The pair of them could watch each other and prevent possible harm coming to her. Given a little time, we could even find ways to improve her. She can be the secret to fighting Scion.

"Dragon already works closely with the Protectorate," Alexandria responded. "She did as a Canadian citizen, she does even as an Avalon citizen, although she is admittedly less trusted. We can... find ways to convince the PRT that she can be trusted just as much as always. After all, Pantheon's been a significant boon to them. We can call some of the favors a number of our clients used as partial payment. Have them imply reluctance. Interest in, perhaps, joining Avalon to work with Dragon and possibly help with Endslayer technology. If we're subtle, it will look natural."

Agreeing to request. Asking for time to buy a subtle method to put the key in Pantheon's hands, or something with similar results. Also needs to convince her co-conspirators to participate in this plan. Is unsure how to do so, they rely on a Thinker that's stronger than her. "I suggest you consult Dinah on the issue," I offered. Is Cauldron's Thinker stronger than Dinah? Alexandria hesitated slightly. Unsure, possible that Dinah's stronger, hard to estimate.

The idea of another out there with a power equivalent to Dinah was sobering. The girl's power was absurd even at the level Pantheon operated on. "She's a consummate professional, and she can easily find out if I tried to use my various methods to spy on her business. Throw every lie detection you have at me, I swear that Dinah's support is too valuable for me to risk for anything."

"You're telling the truth," Alexandria spoke. Agreeing to idea, can convince Cauldron as a whole to harness Dinah. Will likely take it slow to see if anything comes back to me. Once secure in the idea, will move forward with more aggressive or incriminating questions, Dragon's key being one of them. Grateful that I'm willing to treat this patiently instead of immediate demands.

"She also offers significant discounts for the purposes of questions that can help improve our odds against Scion, whether to prevent or mitigate," I volunteered. "Advances of technology should qualify, I believe. After all, we have no way of knowing what will result in our ultimate success, but
we can rest assured that the more knowledge we have access to, the better our odds of finding that one key component. Speaking of which, how did our special guest enjoy the proceedings?"

"She found them, in her words, 'paltry, but adequate'," Alexandria responded. "We've been constantly assuring her that this was merely the first of many. That, coupled with the promise of recordings of all the anti-Taboo witnesses like yourself and Amelia, has mostly placated her. We're making certain to record every word she tells us, and will provide you a copy."

Is apologetic for the mess. Unhappy that I had to find out about it this way, instead of a more honest conversation. Wishes it didn't have to be like this, hates all the secrecy. Wishes that it was possible to have actual trust.

"I'll take what you can give," I told her. She knew what I meant.

================

A/N- I both love and hate Alexandria/Lisa chapters. They're a pain in the ass. Kinda like PHO chapters. Difference is, chapters like this are worth the effort.
I backflipped away as a surge of ice sprouted under my feet. With an idle thought, I wondered what it felt like for Taylor and Amelia, having chunks of their extended bodies ripped apart like that. Another burst shot up behind me, and I reluctantly hit the shields. A quick glance confirmed my armor was down to less than thirty percent of its maximum reserves. *I need to talk to Emma about more battery power in the suit, it just doesn't cut it in a four on one battle like this.*

A blade punched through the ice, straight toward me. I evaded only thanks to my danger sense, dropping toward the ground. Ancile was tough, but it wasn't the kind of tough needed to beat Caliburn. At full charge and shields, I could take a couple direct hits. This was nowhere near full charge or full shields. Another ice wall formed to my side. *They're trying to hem me in.*

I dived down. Yggdrasil was mostly soft plantlife. I set my shields to cutting, which cost me more of what precious power I had left, and the plant mass splashed around me. Then I looked up from my safe position below. Streamer, so named for his Sabah-esque telekinesis that he used to control and reinforce ribbons of cloth, was dumb enough to be on the ground. *Rookie mistake, he should know better.* I didn't even have to leave my safe place, simply tapping his foot from below and hitting him with a stun-taze. *Maybe if he had one of our armors, he'd be okay. Oh well, sucks to be him.*

That's when I realized the mistake. The ground around me started to freeze before he even began collapsing. I leapt out, burning yet more of Ancile's dwindling reserves. Another slash from Caliburn, this one too close and quick for me to dodge. I instead parried with Harpe. The immovable against the unstoppable, and in this case immovable won the contest. *Twenty five percent power remaining.* Another wall of ice started forming. *Doesn't she know she can't build them as fast as I can get out of the area? It's not even an effective de-*

*Oh fuck!* The ice exploded into destructive shrapnel as Richter blasted it full on, a wall too thick to avoid. *Are they insane? Streamer can't take that kind of punishment!* A quick glance let me know he didn't have to. I wasn't sure where he vanished to or how, but I was the only one left in the line of fire.

I evaded most and deflected some with Harpe and Ancile, but it took so much of my focus that I didn't even sense Caliburn until it passed through my ribs. A few chunks of ice hammered the point home, before the rest splintered into what was essentially sleet.

The sword vanished from its position inside me, and I dropped to the ground. I fell, landing on hands and knees. The splash of deep red on the blue green of the Yggdrasil made for freakin' awesome theatrics.

"Vicky!" Chevalier exclaimed, rushing up to me. I smiled. *Totes worked.* He knelt beside me and put his hands on my shoulders. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be avoid that and just take some hits from the ice. I didn't think I-"
"Y'know, Chevy," I teased, my voice low and sultry. "If you wanted to stick your sword inside me, you could have asked."

His worry vanished, replaced by a bit of annoyance. "She's fine, guys," he shouted to the others as he stood. He didn't take his hand off my shoulder as he helped me up with the other hand. Ever the gentleman, and one of my favorite things about him. Funny guys like Zach were nice to joke around with and all, but nothing got to me like being treated like a lady.

I leaned up against him a moment after I stood, I could blame it on the injury. Chevalier's annoyance was quickly eroded against relief that I was fine, and a light undercurrent of his attraction.

"You guys got me," I admitted, reluctantly removing myself from contact with the only hetero guy I apparently couldn't seduce. I looked at Rime, and once again wondered what the story was between her and Chevalier. The way they regarded each other was like they were siblings, but there was no genetic connection between them. That didn't rule out adoption, of course, but I never could figure out that link. If only because Rime did not like me very much.

"We were trying to overwhelm your danger sense," Chevalier informed me. "Keep hitting you with just enough force that you were forced on the defensive, and wear you down slowly. I guess it worked."

"What really got me was using Streamer as bait," I responded, as my helmet folded back so I could speak without the damn suit in the way. It had its perks, but my face was just too pretty to be covered when it didn't need to be. "That was just ruthless. Where'd he go, anyway?"

"His idea," Chevalier replied. "He slaved his shunt drive over to my controls. He'll be sleeping it off somehwere at the bottom of the Delaware. His armor can handle that much, even if it's just a base armor system."

"It's probably cheating," Richter admitted. He was further out than the others, but even the generic suits have really good hearing. "I mean, this was supposed to be a powers on powers fight, not an exploiting the equipment fight."

"Fuck that noise," I smiled. "You saw an advantage, you used that advantage, and you kicked my ass with it. If the positions were reversed, I'd have done the exact same thing and then laughed at you."

"Uh... why didn't you?" Chevalier asked. "You have the same shunt option, only better for the way your armor harnesses your powers."
"I wanted to win," I responded. "If I run, I lose by default. Maybe if we were playing for keeps, but-" the Endbringer alarm beeped. "Well, crapperjacks. Fun and games are over, let's fish Streamer out of the river and see if all our training pays off."

I knew it had for me, and Chevalier. Rime as well. She'd gotten amazingly good at putting together ice traps, and whatever she did to allow her ice to splinter so easily for Richter, instead of just soaking the blast, was a whole new trick I'd never seen before. She was definitely ready. She just looked at me as if to say 'you're not the one giving the orders' for a second, then turned and headed back to the geoanalogue for their PHQ.

"I'll just stay on this side for now," I offered, looking toward Chevalier. I tapped the side of my armor, where his sword had punched right through it. It was already healing, and had already cleaned off the blood, but I wasn't at a hundred percent by any stretch, and my costume certainly wasn't ready. The practice fight had gotten a bit more heated than it was supposed to. Probably my fault, constantly telling them not to worry about hurting me so much.

"Sorry about that," he frowned. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I shrugged, and then offered a coy smile. "Hey, I'm a big girl. I can take a good impalement, you just gotta give me a few minutes to catch my breath afterward."

He just shook his head and started jogging to catch up to Rime, giving me a good view of his back. Won't be that much longer now, I can smell it. Literally, my sense of smell was really good about figuring things like that out. Speaking of which. I looked over at Richter. "Hey, you need written permission to use that mental image."

"You're God's way of telling me I should have gone to college, aren't you?"

"It's never too late," I remarked back. "If you ask nice, I'll even be your wing chick. Cute girls like guys who are friends with other cute girls. At least until you're their boyfriend, then you won't be allowed to look at anything female and remotely mammalian."

"Good to know," he responded. "I'd better go now."

He's not bad, I decided. Hmm, I wonder if Crystal's thinking about getting back into the dating scene. Ever since the noodle incident with Triumph, she's been pretty dead set on becoming a crazy cat lady in her old age. Yeah, I bet they'd go great together.

....

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Janus announced. "Welcome to Paris. I wish we could be here under better
circumstances."

I fought a wave of nausea, not from Eric's power, but from the effects of the Thanda member that ripped reality apart bringing hundreds of Zerg with us. Next to me, Chevalier staggered, and several of the others that I knew had special senses, like Emma and that newbie tinker they picked up out of that weird mass trigger experiment they made me attend. I almost laughed when Lisa tumbled back and had to be caught by Rey. It was subtle, she recovered quickly. Likely only a handful even noticed at all.

Amongst that handful was Alexandria, whose dim emotional responses indicated a protective, almost motherly, reaction. A desire to be the one who was there to catch her. Oh god, I am going to tease them both mercilessly until we all die of old age. No. Better. I am going to tell Taylor and Amelia and Zach. That way I can spend all my efforts on Alexandria. That's what she gets for not letting me bust that jackass Director in Indiana.

I stayed where I was, and we let the groups divide themselves. Lily landed next to me, as did Sveta and Genius Loci. "Long time no see," I said to them. "That's a new look for you, GL. So much better than the Tin Man cosplay."

It really was, too. His 'body' for this was semi humanoid, made up of floating fragments of glowing silver. There were gaps in it that I could see through, dancing along, as if following a pattern- I shook my head. "So it works on you?" he asked. "Hecate and Yum Kaax told me it would have anti-precog abilities. I don't know how that works, but I guess that means they were right."

"Yeah, worked on me," I confirmed. "So you planning to be the next Endslayer?"

"That's the plan," he responded. "Why I'm up here with you pillars of badass."

The Triumvirate had landed nearby, next to Chevalier, while I was distracted by GL's equipment. Rosary and Shaman joined us as well after another minute. GL was right, we did have a special status. We stood in the front position, amongst the swarms of zerg and armor suits. We were the heavy hitters, the Endslayers, and others that could meet these monsters head on and walk away. If not necessarily intact, then at least still breathing. I looked down at Harpe.

"Strategy's straightforward," Alexandria instructed us. "The potential Endslayers hang back for the first couple minutes, let the heavy hitters and the disposable monsters lead the first wave. Minerva will give instructions as to when and how to utilize the Endslayers on the field. Our goals are to force the new Endbringer to reveal its abilities, and then delay it long enough to kill it. Is that understood?"

"I'll take front point," I volunteered. "My senses have... some... value in the frontline fight, and I have an Endslayer grade weapon immediately available if I get the chance."
"Take point, fine," Alexandria agreed. "But that weapon's supposed to be the last resort. Don't use it without permission."

"Gotcha, sis," I responded, smiling at her. *Amy's my sister, who's fiancée to Taylor, who's pretty much a sister to Lisa, who we both know you're pedo for.* My powers told me the exact moment she figured out what I meant.

She said nothing and turned back toward the point we anticipated the Endbringer appearing.

==================

A/N- Vicky chapters are fun.
"It's time," Chevalier spoke over the coms. "You know your jobs, take your positions and may God be with you."

*I wonder if he believes that stuff.* At least it wasn't one of those long winded speeches. Everyone here was either a top tier fighter that had done this before, or was going to hold back for specific instruction. I'd been to a handful of Endbringer fights before Pantheon, and in retrospect they were shameful. There was no discipline, there was no order, and there was no plan. Just a bunch of people thrown into a meat grinder and told to try not to die. It was nothing short of a miracle that anyone ever survived one.

Now we fought like an army. Disciplined, regimented, and following orders. Less than fifty capes were here. Of those, less than half would be out there fighting. The others were intel and planning, or sometimes merely emotional support. Entire teams had come here solely to watch those of us who could make a difference in this fight do so, and then be there for search and rescue or medical.

We shunted over within seconds of each other. On the front lines, Victoria, Alexandria, Sveta and Zach. The blasters, myself included, took to the air. I was alongside Legend, Eidolon, Crystal, a couple other members of Crystal's team I didn't know. I couldn't help but take a glance at Sabah. I still loved her, despite doing everything I could to come to terms with the idea that we just weren't healthy for each other. I hoped it wasn't just my imagination that she looked my way.

Further back were the others. Shaman and Rosary, that GL guy who was supposed to be another possible Endslayer. Chevalier stood in that group, coordinating the local capes who didn't have the benefit of our training and preparedness. Mostly he would just be telling them to fall back unless they were top tier capes, and sorting the blasters in with us. A dozen or so local capes ended up flying around with us.

The Endbringer materialized out of nowhere, and it easily ranked at the top of the 'hideous' meter. A tarantula-like thing that stood about ten feet tall, but its limbs extended out far further than that. It was hairless composed of a reddish brown material that even from here looked somehow sticky. As it scuttled along, it left behind pools of the red liquid oozing across the pavement. *Okay, if the Endbringers all rely on someone's symbolic mindset, what the fuck were they smoking when they came up with this atrocity?*

"I can sense this one," Vicky spoke over the Pantheon issued coms, instead of Dragon's offered armbands. "That's... blood. That thing is literally made out of human blood. Either it's got some really weird stranger power, or it's just really weird."

"Might be some kind of biokineti," Lisa responded. "Blasters only. Only let the Gargants get close."
"Disposable minions," Zach spoke over the com. "If they don't solve your problem, you aren't using enough of them."

Three gargants shunted over more or less on top of the blood monster, splashing into it. That's not a misnomer, they slammed into the thing and it exploded into a shower of gore that painted itself across the walls of the nearby buildings.

"Not dead!" Vicky informed as it started to pull itself together. "Maybe it's like Wendigo and decentralized?" She flew above the mess and started firing down. A torrent of superheated laser light. Legend put his support into the mix, and soon the other blasters had joined in, except for Sabah and I. We waited and watched. Our particular attacks were more reliant on having a good, solid, target to tear into. Decentralized stuff didn't work for us.

"We... killed it?" Vicky asked. "I'm not sensing any more blood. There's no way this is it. There has to be more."

"The Endbringer signature is still active," Dragon announced over the coms. "I am not detecting any active interference."

A moment later, another monster appeared. This one a large fishlike creature that manifested above the blasters that had moved to attack the blood spider. It exhaled a stream of energy that resembled the Frost Lance weapon down upon the defenders. Several shunted automatically, saved by the emergency protocols built into the armor.

I briefly looked away, but I couldn't block the memory of those that didn't have the suits. The home defenders who weren't ready, shattered into fragments of ice by the Endbringer's power. I opened fire, shredding the thing. It managed to engulf one of the more durable capes with one of its mouths, and I stopped shooting it, for fear of hitting the still living victim.

Alexandria charged in, grabbing the monster's side and pulling, enlarging one of the wounds I'd created. She fought her way inside the creature, likely trying to rescue the consumed cape.

On the ground, another monster appeared. This one strongly resembled a human skeleton made of liquid flame, and the pavement melted beneath its feet. One of the gargants collided with it and slammed it to the ground. The creature was hot enough to burn the gargant. Eidolon targeted that one, and the fires cooled to nothing. The Gargant was also destroyed in the attack.

Zach and his special suicide raptor flew past me and collided with something off to my side. A third monster that resembled a mythological harpy. He activated his suicide device, and the area blossomed with a low range nanothorn cloud. I was already flying back, but was too close. I channeled my power through my armor, granting myself immunity to damage.
"Detecting multiple dimensional rifts across the city," Dragon announced. "Theorizing the Endbringer itself is accessing the city from a separate dimension, and sending these monsters through to fight by proxy. Methods believed to be acquired from Pantheon combat strategy. Classifying them as Brute eight, with potential Striker, mover and blaster subclassifications."

_They outrank the zerg_, I realized. As bizarre as they were, made from materials that just shouldn't behave the way it did, these things were still stronger than the zerg that our Tinkers spent so much of their effort building. _And this one's following the tactic we've been following. If we can't find its actual body, there's nothing we can do to kill the fucker._

A massive crocodilian creature covered in hedgehog spines manifested below us. It fired several quills at us with speeds that easily broke the speed of sound. I dived downward, spreading Azrael's wings and shielding the sky from the thing's fire. I didn't know who above needed the protection, but it certainly wasn't me. I managed to land on the monster feet first, disintegrating it not unlike what I did to leviathan.

My suit alerted me to movement as a kind of deformed tree monster rushed toward me, heedless of the occasional blast of energy that struck it. I didn't move, simply reinforcing my armor with my power and hovering just above the corpse of the crocodile. It collided with me and destroyed itself.

"They're not smart," I spoke into the com. "These things aren't being directly guided by an outside intelligence. Endbringers are scary clever. but these monsters are just mindless berserkers We can beat them if we use our heads and work together."

As if to punctuate my point, Chevalier's blade lanced out, impaling the face of some bizarre giant ant-human hybrid. Despite its condition, it kept moving forward, trying to get to one of the wounded. I carefully aimed low and shot off the creature's legs. They fell, twitching, to the ground. And the bug creature slid back down the blade. A series of muscled shirtless men with piglike faces charged forward wielding axes and swords, and began chopping the thing to pieces while screaming like frat boys.

_What cape got that power? Looks pretty sweet._

"She's right," Lisa agreed. "New strategy. Everyone that's not confident they can fight a Brute Eight, fall back to the Gargants. Use them as shields and form defensive rings. The Endbringer creations will seek you out, just make sure to guard your flanks."

A series of missiles streamed overhead, Dragon's weapons removing a few of the monsters from the air. They fell in pieces, destroyed by whatever insanity the Tinker to End All Tinkers had devised this time.

_There's more to it, I thought. There has to be. Throwaway monsters and fighting us with these swarm tactics doesn't work. It's not destructive enough, it's not frightening enough. How is the_
Endbringer planning to do use these things to do the kind of real damage that they love? It has to have a way to really hurt us. Oh. Oh fuck.

===============

A/N- can you spot the references?
"Clotho, I need your help," Lily spoke through the com while rushing over to my position with my team.

I hesitated for a second. There were so many things I wanted to say, that I couldn't decide on any of them. It's a battlefield, Sabah, everything else can wait. If she needs help, it's as a team member. You swore to Crystal that the job comes before personal issues, time to prove it. "Okay," I agreed. She wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. "What are we doing?"

"I think I know what the Endbringer plans to do," she informed. "I've already told Lisa and she agreed that it's likely. I want to help, but I'm not fast enough to get there in time."

"I... okay, I can do that," I responded. I glanced over at Crystal.

"Go," she ordered. Of course she'd already be aware. Either told by Lisa, or by listening in on our coms. One of those advantages team leaders got was an override that let them access their team's com systems at any time.

I wrapped three of Tapestry's remaining ribbons around Lily, as information blinked onto my HUD. Oh. Oh fuck. I took off at top speed, an experience that wasn't fun for either of us. I was sure we would have some ugly bruises in the morning thanks to that. Tapestry had some incredible acceleration potential, capped off for the sole purpose of keeping me from accidentally knocking myself out with the G-forces.

I heard Lily grunt as she was pulled along by the ribbons that held her by both wings and around her waist. She'd be pulled in 'flying' position, it was less painful on the human body this way, my training instructions insisted. We found our spot after a couple minutes, underneath the park near the Eiffel Tower. I'd seen it before, when I toured Europe with Lily and Faultline's crew. It was far more romantic then than now.

The building was still standing, although a couple of others nearby weren't. A handful of zerg had already gotten here, and was guarding the grounds. And by the apparent damage done, they'd already been doing that.

Not to protect the landmarks, I was certain. I knew my bosses better than that. It was the Endbringer shelter beneath the park that needed defending. In every Endbringer conflict, that was a given. Khepri always placed her guards surrounding the shelters. Scenery be damned, the lives were her priority. She'd rip down the pyramids if it meant saving one more person.

I felt the ebb and flow of power as Lily carefully adjusted my ribbons with her power. There were
dozens of properties she could grant to the material she was touching, and Tapestry's ribbons were specifically designed to be especially compatible with that. Something of a happy coincidence that the 'nanofiber mesh' was both incredibly durable and responded very well to my power.

"Straight down," Lily instructed.

Relationship issues aside, we had a lot of practice working as a team, training to be as effective as possible together in situations just like this one. I trusted her completely as I dropped, my ribbons forming like a giant arrow beneath us. The earth below didn't stand a chance. Nor did the tinker reinforced superstructure that was the shelter itself. We punched through like we were walking through the wall of a bubble.

People shouted and backed away as we dropped into the center room. This shelter looked more like a subway terminal without the tracks, with a long series of concrete and steel reinforced rooms inside. Smart design, people could take shelter in pocket rooms and seal themselves off, rather than all be sitting ducks out in the open if anything got through the blast door.

<Don't be afraid,> Lily shouted in French. Was she using the translator, or did she get that language permanently installed? I was using the translator. <We're here to keep you safe. Just stay calm.>

They didn't seem too convinced, but at least the officials took our words at face value, continuing to usher people into rooms to keep them as safe as one could hope under the circumstances. "Are they really going to attack here?" I asked Lily.

"They keep saying the Endbringers are here to hurt us, fuck with our heads," Lily replied. "Adapting to the tactics used against them so whatever we used to kill their predecessors will never work again. This one's out of reach, untouchable in a way that resembles how Taylor and Amelia fight. We keep killing them, so naturally the new ones are meant to fight us. Can you imagine a better way to attack Taylor than to drop an Endbringer right into the center of the shelter?"

I paused for a second. "No, I really can't," I admitted. "You're sure?"

"If I wasn't, the giant spider made of human blood would have convinced me," Lily replied. "Surprised it wasn't holding a 'hey, Taylia, fuck you' sign. Then there was the flying one with ice blasts, which I'm guessing was Crystal. Not sure who the harpy represented, but somewhere in my heart I'll always pretend it was Lisa."

The way she said it made it all sound so obvious, and I felt a little ashamed I didn't think of it myself. "But there are a bunch of them out there, they can't all be weird insults to us, can they?"

"Maybe not," she admitted. "Maybe just the first few, maybe there can be multiple monsters for each of us. Maybe the only one that was there to send a personal message was the blood spider, and all the
rest are just random horrors. All I can tell you is that I saw how Taylor fought Leviathan, monsters appearing out of nowhere to flank the Endbringer at every opportunity, cutting off his retreat like a pack of wolves going after a deer. That's what we're watching. When they're ready to go for the throat, they'll come here. Symbolic reenactment of Leviathan's death."

*I forgot how confident she could be.* "It makes a sick sort of sense," I agreed. "But... is that enough?"

She looked at me. "I don't know," she admitted. "Let's hope so."

We got our answer too quickly, as our monster shunted over. It was a solid black centipede like creature, and lashed out with its jaws immediately, impaling one of the help personnel, and started charging people.

My ribbons reacted to my thoughts, before my conscious mind could realize what I was doing, slamming into the monster and trying to force it to the ground, pin it down for Lily to kill. It was viscous, not entirely solid. Made of tar, like its spider cousin was made of blood. A few of Lily's bolts struck the thing's face, doing little notable damage. It started oozing around my ribbons, and I started twisting them around to hold it back. Then it started trailing up the ribbons themselves. Lily grabbed my armor and again I felt the nature of my armor change to her power's whim.

The centipede dissolved where it touched my armor, completely erased from our reality. Lisa's best guess is that it was banished to whatever Nowhere we saw before Elle set a portal into a given reality.

The half destroyed creature collapsed to the ground, and then it started to spread out like a puddle. *The fuck?* Thousands of tiny place centipedes spread from the corpse of their mother, or however that worked, and began rushing toward the screams of the civilians.

Lily started taking shots with her armor, and each one was a kill. She dropped into the path, letting her armor itself destroy countless others, but she couldn't protect more than a fraction of the massive hallways and all the people in them.

I added what I could, bringing my ribbons down on them with enough force to crack the concrete. There was just too many of them. Too many to count, let alone kill with our mostly single target weapons. In desperation, I fired my TK gun into the mix, hoping that controlling the ground would be enough to combat their push forward. It was a disappointment, but not a surprise, that I failed. People fell screaming under the mass of insect sized Endbringer spawn.

I quickly turned off my translator. It was painful enough just hearing the screaming, I would have trouble enough sleeping without knowing the words they were saying. Everyone was dying and there wasn't a thing we could do for them.
An explosion rocked the shelter. *They must still be fighting up above. Right, this is a war between armies. One failure doesn't mean the battle is completely lost.* I hit the com.

"Some of them can break down into smaller monsters and will attack as a swarm," I informed. *We failed, the least we can do is warn others.* "Try to contain them behind forcefields before you kill them, if possible."

*It's the best I can do, let the others know that we failed, how we failed. Maybe that way they'll be able to do better.* The screaming was starting to die down as the centipedes ran out of victims. *How many people were in here? Thousands? Tens of thousands? I didn't know, but gathering everyone in one place just made this that much easier for the Endbringer.*

What I wasn't prepared for was when the dead started to stand. Black ichor leaked from their mouths, and the look of horror was still in their eyes. They were still screaming, even. One of them leapt at Lily, destroying himself utterly. Others piled forward, picking up the dismembered limbs and trying to attack her. Shoes and other bits of debris were thrown at me by the enraged, what, zombies? Is that what these were?

No, they weren't. Every bit of tech on this suit insisted they were still alive. Heartbeat, brain activity, the whole nine yards. They were puppets controlled by the centipedes, but they were still alive and conscious under that control.

They started rushing for the exit to the building, in a mindless stampede. Some would trip and be trampled by the others. No sense of coordination between them. One leapt toward me with enough speed that he actually caught my leg, despite my position about twenty feet above their heads. I kicked away, but the man, still screaming in horror, had grown claws sharp enough to cut into the armor. Alarms flashed throughout my suit, but I didn't need them. I felt the *pain.*

A shot from Lily puncture the man's skull, and he dropped, no longer attacking, but his claws were embedded in my leg so he didn't fall. I kept screaming, only held in the air by my suit's autopilot failsafes.

"I can feel it inside me!" I screamed. "It's climbing up inside my leg!"

Lily didn't even hesitate, her wing cleaving through my armor. The dead man, and my limb, fell to the floor below. It was amazing how little pain I felt at that. Alerts flashed in my HUD, telling me of damage I already knew about. I felt pressure around the wound, and a strange sensation as the medical functions took effect.

Lily caught me. "I'm sorry, I had no choice," she insisted. I sobbed against her. The loss of the limb wasn't that bad, really. It didn't hurt that much, and was something I knew could be fixed. But the look on the man's face as he tried to kill me. He was honestly sorry for what he was doing.
"Alert," Dragon's voice was shockingly calm over the coms. "Endbringer is displaying ability to infect and control humans. Infected display increased physical abilities and other mutations. This appears to be contagious from physical contact with the infected. Tactics have changed from defense to quarantine."

A/N- So, does this count as suitably horrible?
"They're breaking through the northeast barricades, R12," Lisa informed me over the com. The Endbringer spawn, it turned out, didn't attack the infected. Once fully mutated, they were as capable as Lung before he started ramping up in power. Not unbeatable, but hard to stop.

Victoria was there with me. Anima retreated to Avalon, but left her summons behind to do the fighting for her. I unleashed a torrent of sonic power down on the nearest Endspawn, breaking some kind of strange scorpion made of diamond into fragments. Then I rushed toward the barricade.

There was a series of explosions deeper in the city, clearing the area around the gate. "Earth Gaul separated from portal network," Trevor announced over the speakers. "Confirming no infected or spawn crossed the gate in time. The colony is safe."

Safe, and cut off from Bet. I had to wonder why the Endbringer didn't just drop one of its number in the other Earths. It had been throwing these monsters at us like the disposable minions that they were, when it could have effectively ended the colony program in a single day by releasing a single plague spawn in each of the colony worlds. By the time we even knew what was happening, every last colony world except maybe Avalon would be uninhabitable.

I caught sight of another. Apparently made of mud. Fire? I switched over to the microwave setting and fired a beam that would boil all the water out of a human body in under a second. It seemed to be working, as hardened dirt broke off and collapsed to the ground. How many of these fuckers will we have to kill before this is over?

"Head in the game, cuz," Vicky spoke from beside me. A stream of dozens of rays fired from her 'scattershot' weapon setting. She was the only one that could use such a weapon efficiently, relying on her combat senses to make sure each shot was a hit. Infected fell dead, or those few still alive died quickly after. She mowed them down like they were nothing.

"Vicky!" I exclaimed. "How could--"

"They're already dead," Vicky spoke, her voice pained. "There's no way to separate them from the parasites. The things have completely replaced their nervous systems from the brain stem down. What's left is nothing more than a puppet that feels pain. Take it from someone who can see everything that's happening inside their bodies in real time. Death is the only mercy left for them."

As if to punctuate her point, Chevalier's sword lanced forward, cutting through several. That looks uncomfortably like how Jack Slash fought.

I kept that insight to myself, instead bolting off toward another Endspawn. I can't kill people, no
matter how they're suffering. Walls of ice formed themselves near the damaged part of barricade. The wall we were building to trap most of the city of Paris and the surrounding area.

This wasn't even like the Simurgh quarantines. At least with those, we could tell ourselves there was hope. That they were compromised, but alive. The infected were implacable. They ran toward the nearest living thing and spread their disease. They only started moving outward after the city was entirely caught up in their power. We were fighting to prevent the spread, not to save the city.

One of the infected leapt toward me from the top of a building. I avoided her on reflex. After all, she didn't have a way to correct her trajectory in mid air. She twisted around in the air, attempting to claw at me as she fell to the street. She hit hard and stayed there motionless. They weren't much more durable than normal people. They were alive, they were dying.

Alexandra shot past, followed by a dragon that looked to be made out of mucous. "Don't let it touch you!" she shouted as she started a wide curve back toward me. "It should be vulnerable to cold."

I pushed away, switching to the ice weapon and reducing its core temperature to near absolute zero. It dropped and shattered against the roof of a building. Moments later, the building started to collapse inward as the thing's scattered bodyparts melted through it. Alexandria's arm was mutilated, and it looked to be spreading.

"Freeze my arm," she commanded, forcing the shoulder to work and extend the limb outward. Although the elbow didn't have much flesh left on it and thus her hand drooped down. Her voice left no room for disobedience. I pointed the weapon and tried to hit as far out as possible, the frozen air spread up to her shoulder. "That'll have to do for now. Alexandria to Atropos. Assistance needed, R9, high priority."

The largest of the spawn thus far manifested near the wall, an elephant thing with three trunks and bony spines across its body. This one actually looked like it was alive, instead of just made of random raw materials. It charged the wall. The zerg tried to block its path, throwing up shields and even a couple of the gargants, but it broke through them and collided hard enough to crack the wall in that area.

"Barricade down, P9," Dragon's automatic announcement declared. I rushed toward the monster, already swapping out to straight laser light. A steady stream of steel melting power started cutting into the thing's side. Even with the targeting AI, I was too far away for a precision move like cutting off its legs. A wall of mirror metal formed near the wall, protecting the worst of the damage. Theo, I recognized quickly.

Dozens of infected charged toward the opening. Theo can't cover that kind of area very long. At least he was smart enough to stay high in the air, using his suit to handle much of the effort in keeping him safe.
One of the Azazel suits shunted over, launching its nanothorn thrower across the area and disintegrating everything. Moments later, it was ripped apart from the inside by one of the Endspawn. They’d been doing that to every single one of Dragon’s armors that took a spot in the city. For whatever reason, they ignored the ones outside the city. Best guess was some kind of range limit for the Endbringer’s variant of shunting. My armor blipped an alert aura around Theo’s suit. *Yellow, with a black outline. Injured or otherwise nonresponsive, but stable. He probably overtaxed his power.*

I fired on the spawn climbing out of the Azazel shell, a nasty spiked octopus looking monster, I didn’t care. Enough electricity to power a city for a couple seconds hit it, and it exploded violently, sending shrapnel everywhere. Luckily, Theo wasn’t hit by any of it.

I flew over and touched him. *Commander override, automatic shunt engaged.* I let go and he vanished back to Avalon. Chances are, it would be Riley or the currently depowered Missy to take care of him.

I turned, taking position to defend the wall. Other alerts came across the com. At least four other areas were in danger of being breached, including the one I left Vicky and Chevalier protecting.

*I was alone here.*

A massive, skinless, cobra moved around one of the nearby piles of rubble with a speed that belonged to a mover, not a giant monster. That might be explained by the fact that it was using its rib bones to pull itself rapidly along like freakish centipede legs. On its back rode a dozen infected. *Does this mean they’re getting smarter?*

I fired at the monster’s head, a shot it avoided easily. A second and third didn't make much difference, and I was running out of power. I dropped the weapon and gave the now subvocal command for my sonic weapon. The only one with a wide area of effect. I fired, and the nearby surviving windows exploded at the pulse of sonic energy that at least slowed the cobra down.

It reached the wall and slammed its head hard against it. The hasty, power erected, stone cracked. It had already been damaged by the prior spawn, and wouldn't hold. I had to count myself lucky the nanothorns took time to dissolve, or the monster could have gone for the gap that had already formed. It repeated the process, smashing its bony face into the stone. *It's going to get through.*

"This is Eki, requesting immediate assistance. I can't hold this point on my own!" I shouted. I didn’t have a weapon I could fire at the thing’s head without risking destroying the wall if I missed, and as fast as it was I would probably miss.

It smashed its head into the wall one more time, and the stone caved, leaving a gap. The infected started scrambling up the thing’s neck, using its spine as a ladder. If they got out, everything was lost. I fought back the tears as I dialed the sonic weapon to maximum output.
Fuck you, Endmakers. Is this what you wanted to see? You sick sacks of shit. I took a deep breath, and through the tears I watched as I became a murderer.

====================

A/N- All aboard the mindfuck express!
"Commander James," I opened, giving the woman a cursory examination. She was one of the best, and driven to eliminate the 'one of' part. My second in command ever since Miss Militia left. She lacked her predecessor's empathy and ability to improvise, which held her back. In many ways, she reminded me of Emily. Pity, that, it meant she was a good commander, but a poor leader at best. She'd likely be promoted to Director status in five years or less. I resolved to treat her well during that time, and see to it that I learned her well enough to properly harness her once she got her promotion.

"Yes, Director?" She responded, training her focus on me.

"We're being called into action," I informed her. "All of my team, as well as every other soldier authorized to use the SM7 models. It seems the new Endbringer is a 'master' class power set."

"Like the Simurgh?"

"Closer to Nilbog," I answered. She tensed. She had performed less than admirably during that engagement, taking considerable damage to her equipment almost immediately. It wasn't, strictly speaking, her fault. It could have been any set of armor, it could have been any member of the team. Except myself, of course. Poor luck and being a half second too slow on the response were her only faults, and I wasn't certain of the latter. But she had a chip on her shoulder even before then, and I was not adverse to using it. "There will be a series of larger monsters, which we are leaving to the parahumans and Pantheon's weapons. We will contend with humanoid monsters, numbering in the hundreds of thousands."

"I understand," she responded, her jaw set hard. I split the timeline

"There's a teleporter collecting men and matériel from across the country," I informed her next. "We have five minutes to be at the ready. Prepare the men while I attend to some last minute concerns."

"Yes, sir."

//

"You'll be in command of my team, I'll handle organizing the other teams, get yourself equipped," I instructed.

"Yes, sir."
This was the timeline for me to keep, of course, but I needed the chance to study the resources I had at my disposal. Many of the team leaders I would be working with, I'd only met a few times. Operating the EB versions of the M7s was rare, requiring authorization from the President herself, which left me precious little time to develop a more personal relationship with those men and women who'd be leading these teams. I would reacquaint myself with my prior notes and Minerva's psych evals on each of them while speaking to them via this timeline.

....

This is the first time I've ever actually seen Avalon, I realized. I stepped out of their mass 'shunt' device, fighting my nausea. I was proud to note that, while a couple soldiers lost their stomachs, none of them were part of my team. The blue green ground removed the physical signs of their weakness quickly, in an act slightly reminiscent of Nilbog's 'recycling' of matter. The place was uniform, orderly. A few small homes existed nearby, within visual range on the mostly flat fields.

"Okay, this is going to take a minute," Janus informed us. One of the few Pantheon members old enough to legally buy alcohol. That mere children ruled their own world was absolutely no surprise, given their powers and ambitions. At least they were smart enough to defer to more experienced individuals like Dragon and Accord when it came to management of their nation. "Please take the time to organize yourselves."

I gave the orders I needed, separating my men into squad control of the other teams. I knew them and trusted them to do the job correctly. James was given primary command of my newer men, the ones not yet trained well enough to be leaders in their own right. Those I trusted best were put in as seconds for the various other squad leaders across the country. In the two minutes it took Janus and his Thanda friend to prepare, a thousand men had been organized and assigned a M7EB of one description or another. They were eager to go, to prove themselves.

It's easy to be brave when you know you can't be touched. Isn't that what that Atropos girl had said during her interview? I couldn't help but wonder how these men and women would hold up if they had to go into this fight with their lives actually on the line.

"We're ready," Janus announced.

"As are we," I confirmed. He took that as enough of a command, and the world shifted around us. Instead of an empty field surrounded by a few hovels made of plant, we were now surrounded by Dragon armors and a number of parahumans. I spotted the makeshift hospital to the side, full of gravely injured capes. Each one missing at least one limb. I recognized Chevalier amongst the wounded. Gaea and a handful of others were moving through, caring for them.

What kind of weapon was this Endbringer using?

"It has capabilities to infect and control organic tissue," Minerva informed, answering the question
before I had the chance to ask it. That imper-impatient, given the circumstances of the battle and our need to hurry it, it was a necessary shortcut. "The special M7 models should be immune, in much the same way Avalon's disposable troops are proving immune. Don't let that fool you, however. These things hit hard, they can destroy your equipment the old fashioned way."

"Understood," I nodded.

"We have two planned tactics at the moment," she continued. She wants me to use my power. It should be m- she knows what she's doing. I divided the path. It would be a while before that mattered, but there was no sense in not starting early. I could always collapse one of them later. "The first would be to deploy your men as cleanup. We know there won't be any new Endspawn in this fight."

"How can you know that?" Dragon asked via a nearby armored suit.

"Look at the number that we've counted thus far," Minerva responded.

"Six hundred and si- oh, I see what you mean," Dragon agreed.

"The problem is now there are no less than four hundred thousand infected in the city, possibly twice that, and we're running out of the resources needed to fight them," she continued. "Most of us are exhausted. This has been the longest Endbringer battle save for Khonsu, and it is starting to show. One option is to deploy your soldiers into the battlefield to run cleanup operations. Going door to door and killing everything."

*Given this is on a city wide scale it could take hours, even days, to accomplish.*

"The second," she continued. "Is to have your men reinforce the barriers, and deploy our last resort weapon. There's some significant risk to the plan."

<There is no risk,> a dark skinned woman in tattered clothes responded. <My shadow can handle this easily. They will all die with trivial ease, you shall see.>

"Yes, Moord Nag, I know," Minerva nodded. "But once we assault their strong points, we risk them making a coordinated break for it. All of them together. They've gotten smart enough to start coordinating. Using weapons. And their mutations are getting stronger as well."

<It does not matter,> Moord Nag spoke. <Let them hide, let them flee, let them fight. They will die all the same.>
Minerva rubbed her eyes. She's wea-ry. This has been a long battle, no one can be expected to remain at their best. I glanced over at the others. These are mere children. Children with power, granted, but children. How did I ever believe that commanding kids as they tried to play cops and robbers was a good idea? No, it was so much better now, commanding armies of grown men and women. <It's not her failing I fear, it's what she might do after she succeeds,> Tattletale spoke in... Finnish? This translation tech is remarkably thorough.

"We'll take the lead," I agreed.

<Glory obsessed fool,> Moord Nag accused. I ignored her.

//

"Let's see if she's as good as she believes she is," I suggested. "We'll reinforce the perimeter and deal with stragglers."

<At least, a voice of reason,> Moord Nag nodded. <Hurry your men.> She turned toward Lisa and held out a hand. <Give.> she commanded as a black shadow roiled around her, forming from nowhere. It wore the skull of some sort of large fish or shark.

....

I frowned. Damn it. The infected were deceptively dangerous. Faster than the suits, able to hide from their senses, and fighting with ambush tactics. No wonder Avalon's shock troops were so effective.

"They're in the sewers!" one of my men shouted. I watched his suit blip black. We're losing this.


I looked over at Minerva. She wanted to know how bad the other timeline was, if we'd be forced to keep this one. She didn't need to ask, she could see it on my face.

//

We had a different sort of problem in this line. Moord Nag stood in the middle of the city, a city coated in black death. Her shadow, fattened on power from the literal hundreds of thousands that she had slain, roiled across the streets. It hammered the wall hard enough to topped a section in one blow, then it sprayed out into the area just outside Paris. Thousands more lives were claimed in seconds.
"Perimeter breached M21," Dragon's tech announced. "Moord Nag's shadow is spreading rapidly toward Crétail."

================

A/N- Ah, when situations are desperate enough to feed half a million people to Moord Nag. Five thousand was enough for her to approach Alexandria's strength. What's a hundred times that worth?

Also: I've been wanting to do a good Coil interlude for a while, now. Sorry it took so long to find a good opportunity to make it happen.
"I was afraid of this," Lisa muttered as we watched the blackness that was everything we could see on Bet. Not everyone had the cross dimensional viewing tech, after all. "Dammit, I really hoped I would be wrong."

The inky darkness dissipated moments later.

"Dimensional anomaly designated as Endbringer Beelzebub is no longer registering on my scanners," Dragon reported. "It appears to be over."

"Atropos reporting," Lily spoke over the coms, sounding tired and miserable. "I... Moord Nag has been... are you planning to try to save her? Because it's going to take tinker tech to do it."

Lisa glanced at the others. Including a quick look at Alexandria, who was still missing her right arm. This is them imitating Taylia, again. Or were they? The glance didn't last much longer than a blink, and she'd looked at everyone. Was I being paranoid?

"We have to try," she replied. "What happened isn't her fault. Her power overwhelmed her ability to stay in control. We're sending someone over to perform emergency surgery. We can't risk bringing her to Avalon until we know for certain she wasn't infected. While we're on the subject, please make sure she stays unconscious."

We don't know that Beelzebub can infect Yggdrasil, but we don't know that it can't. "Do it," I spoke in the suit. Riley was still in her hideaway. Clarice shunted over almost immediately. We had plenty of healers here. Me, Cao, Sanction, Boost, and a handful of new Protectorate members that may or may not have been from our Mass Trigger experiment. For the time being, we were doing patch jobs. Actual healing would take significant time and effort. As rare as healers are, there were fewer still that could achieve something like regrowing limbs.

On the plus side, the new protocols we used for these battles made it so there were only dozens of potential wounded, instead of hundreds.

"I thought that the Endbringers were supposed to be getting weaker," Chevalier's voice was an accusation. "This doesn't feel like weaker to me. Even at our worst, we've never lost three cities in six months before."

Nice of him not to add China and India to the mix. Victoria watched him and us. She's worried, afraid there will be a fight. I looked over at Taylor, still unconscious. If I needed any more proof that the Endbringers hated us in particular, I got it today. The bug monsters that controlled the infected were insect enough that her powers could see their senses. Not enough for her to control, just to
watch. I didn't have much choice but to render her unconscious. It was kinder that way.

"They are weaker," Lisa insisted. Alexandria took her position, not quite between them, but in both of their lines of sight. That message was clear enough that I didn't need Thinker powers to puzzle it out. "But they're not holding back as much. It's like... who would you rather fight? Someone like Director Calvert's soldiers, here, but they want to take you alive. Or someone like me whe I have a gun and am going to use it."

"Right, your theory that the Endbringers are holding back," Chevalier responded. He sounded skeptical of the idea.

"It's not a theory, they are holding back so hard it hurts," Lisa responded. "Or they were, at least. Endbringers come with inhibitors. Programmed limits that they're not allowed to violate, or can only violate for short periods of time. Any one of the original three had the ability to end all life on Bet within a month or two. They don't because... well, that's part of the program they follow. And each time we hit them hard enough to hurt them, they lift inhibitors and fight harder. That's why we don't wound them and drive them off. They either leave when they want to, after they reach their designated kill counter for the day or whatever. Or we kill them in the first blow. But the newest Endbringers are coming with fewer inhibitions to start with. Fighting the way the first three only started fighting after years of heroes learning how to fight them in their easiest setting."

"So the new ones are weaker, but fighting harder," he summarized.

"See, sis," Vicky quipped. Sis? What is that about? "Why couldn't you have just said that?"

"The older ones were fighting harder, too, before the end. Behemoth and Leviathan used tactics never seen before. Even the Simurgh did, I assume she foresaw what we would do. It's elegant, in its own way," Lisa continued. "But it's ultimately all psychological warfare. You hurt us, we hurt you back harder. A way to beat us down, leave us demoralized. It's..." she hesitated for a second.

"It's bullying," she concluded. "That's what it really is at its core. Like a cruel child tormenting a small animal. Every time we build up, they are there to break us down again. Or maybe it's more subconscious than that, I don't know. But this new Endbringer, Beelzebub, is easily the least powerful of the new Endbringers. I'd expect Barghest to be the strongest, because he's the one that didn't have to escalate during the fight. All the others, we fought enough to force them to use tactics early that ordinarily would have waited for dozens of fights."

"This sounds like we should be advocating for not fighting the Endbringers," Chevalier responded. "Run, hide, and spread out so they kill as few people as possible with each attack, but avoid actually fighting them?"

"Isn't that what the colony worlds are for?" I cut in. It was true, wasn't it? Fuck, we can't even beat the god damn Endbringers unless we catch them by surprise. How are we supposed to be a match
for Scion, when the time comes? Is that the strategy we need? To give up on survival and hit Scion now, hope we can do the damage we need to win it before he realizes he needs to fight back?

"That's... not actually a bad thought," Lisa mused. "It won't work, not now, not after they've spent so many years fighting us. It's too late for it to make any difference now. If we could go back in time and convince the first group of heroes to just not engage Behemoth in battle?" She shrugged. "Well, we can speculate for the rest of our lives. Lives that promise to be very short if we don't find a way to improve beyond this, or abandon Bet entirely. I don't think the Endbringers will follow us to the other worlds. Their programming doesn't seem to understand the idea, or they'd have already targetted Aleph, Dalet, and the other advanced timeline worlds."

"You're saying it's hopeless?" he asked. "That there's no way to fight back?" He stood. It took a special kind of man to look imposing while missing an arm, but Chevalier pulled it off.

"I'm saying we keep trying," Lisa countered. "We know how Beelzebub functions, now. We've seen the worst that the new Endbringers can unleash. There are no more surprises, there are no more surprises for them to throw at us. We've seen the worst they can do, and we survived."

"Survive the loss of entire cities every few months?" Alexandria asked. "I wish I shared your optimism."

"Should be the last city lost," Lisa responded. "Or, at least, the last that's irrecoverable. Tohu and Bohu, now that we know their tactics, can be countered. Force it to choose capes other than Khepri and Atropos before we start our next attack. We may even be able to kill them the next time they manifest, they don't really have methods to protect them from our Endslayer combinations. Barghest, we already know Eidolon beats handedly. We just use that tactic and the worst we face is a few mil in property damage. We could just stand there and let it do its thing, then bring everyone back."

Eidolon, who had opted to quietly watch the exchange, nodded. I wondered what was going through his head.

"Khonsu's meant to be unkillable, and he probably actually is," Lisa continue. "But we don't need to kill him. Not right away at least. Thanda counters him pretty completely, with Khepri and our weapons as backup. Beelzebub is beatable with some time. By the next time we see it, we'll have studied the samples and worked out counter agents. There has to be a way. Maybe a new breed of weapons for the swarm. Do you think we could build, I dunno, shunt-bugs? Like beetles that swarm over everyone, fuse into a single life form, and then shunt to Avalon?"

That's... can that be done?

"It's possible," Dragon agreed. "The shunt drive really requires little more than a faraday cage to properly generate the field. The organic tech is the hard part, specifically allowing it to contain enough power to achieve the dimensional waveform. As long as there's a functional shunt drive
attached to any part of it, you could theoretically shunt an entire world at once, if you had enough energy to make it happen. There are limitations to work around. But with a year until the next time he shows, that should be achievable."

"And suddenly, Beelzebub's terror weapon is mostly useless," Lisa responded. "That's the thing about fear. It's only scary when you don't know how to fight back. When the target finds a way to mitigate the effects, you're left with nothing but a distraction. An annoyance. They might not be dead yet, but that's just a matter of time. The Endbringers have already lost the war. The next one or two Endbringers will be even weaker, in their own way. More blatant, more immediately frightening. And then, nothing. There's no scope left, the Endmakers didn't think to save their best for last. They have no tricks left."

I wasn't quite sure I believed her, but I had to hope. I looked over at Taylor. We can't take much more of this.
"We should start setting up for healing," I spoke after we'd been given a minute to chew over Lisa's speech. I had to wonder what that was about. But, it was Lisa, the only secrets she kept were her own. "There's not a lot of us that can work with dismemberments."

"I'll have my men set up for triage," Calvert offered. "With permission to assume Pantheon's healers will be involved in the process?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "We'll be doing our part." Vicky and I would be essential for this, of course. Not a lot of people who can heal on the level the injured here would need. I should probably tell him about exact capabilities and names so he-

He gestured at two of his field commanders, and they approached. "Plan for three parahumans capable of restoring any injuries including lost limbs and one that can mend major injuries, but not limb restoration. Plus two more capable of surgical treatment of minor injuries. See to it that the medical camp is arranged so all patients are within fifty feet of the parahuman known as Boost. He has an aura that stabilizes injuries and promotes healing. Place him in the middle of the camp."

"Which one's that, sir?" A hard, overly masculine looking woman asked. She reminded me an awful lot of the head nurse at this one hospital, only younger and even less happy at the world. She'll probably be promoted to a PRT Director in less than five years.

"Tall male," he responded. "The one not wearing a shirt."

"Understood, sir," she responded and walked off, the other commander went with.

"The rest of you, have your men continue the sweeps, but prepare to coordinate our withdrawal," he spoke to the other three commanders he had with him. "Pending verification that there is no further risk of infection, there is little left we can do here. Refugee relief work appears to be unfortunately irrelevant, in this case."

"There won't be any risk of infection," Lisa informed. "The Endbringer vanished, the parasites will be inert, now. I'll consult Dinah Alcott as well, ensure there's no danger the outbreak will continue. But the nature of the Endmakers lead me to believe this one isn't leaving that kind of nasty surprise. They did that already, with the Simurgh. They haven't repeated tactics yet, and I don't believe they will now."

"Very well," Calvert responded. I still felt bad about puppeteering the man. Granted, he deserved it by all accounts that Lisa and Taylor gave, but I still felt wrong, using our powers that way. Turning someone into a toy. It was all too similar to what I'd done to Victoria. His people saluted and turned
"I'll take my healing last," Alexandria spoke. "It's been shown that my injuries can wait however long is necessary. It causes me no discomfort or inconvenience, since I anticipate it will take some time to finish debriefing with Chevalier, Minerva, Dragon and Narwhal." Probably also wins you points with the crowd that see you putting yourself in the back of the line like that. "And may I just say I'm very impressed with how familiar your are with the various capes here."

"Thank you," he responded. "I make it my business to stay well informed."

....

Healing lost limbs is exhaustive and exhausting. Fortunately, there was a functionally infinite amount of raw material for me to work with, but there was only three of us with this capability, and each of us required an hour or longer per patient. We had to operate one person at a time because none of us had a blanket effect or fire and forget power. This is why I'm no longer a healer.

Next to me, Vicky struggled to stand. <Okay, you're done.> she informed one of the more powerful locals that had survived the battle. Huh, Vicky's not using the translator. When did she learn French? <Talk to Tir, he'll get you shunted over.> She gestured to where Trevor was waiting, talking with Emma, Rey, and Defiant. The four of them had locked onto that 'shunt bug' idea, and were trying to find out a way to make it possible. Dragon was too busy coordinating her suits in recovery efforts.

<Thank you,> he responded. He didn't sound grateful, however, walking over to where our command center still sat. Not that I blamed him. What did he have to be grateful for? Half a million people, plus or minus not enough to make much difference compared to half a million people, were dead.

Most of the groups had been sent home already. A sick fringe benefit to what happened in Paris, very little left to save. There were no refugees to speak of, most of the city was still legitimately inhabitable, just empty. Or at least a good chunk of it was empty. Not every square mile of Paris was inside the barriers they'd erected. Really, not even half of the city in total. It was wounded, but still alive, still recoverable.

"Would you like me to give you a recharge?" Sanction offered. She seemed strangely familiar, and I couldn't quite figure it out. Maybe someone I worked with as Panacea? "I can give you a quick boost while waiting for Aceso to check up on my work."

Sanction didn't have the benefit of a Thinker power. Since Riley, or specifically Clarice, was somewhere between myself and Vicky for overall understanding of the human body, she was making sure everything worked out properly.
"Won't help," Vicky replied. "I already have regeneration, and Boost's power is doing what it can. Adding a third might even make things worse. I just need time to recover my power naturally, that's all."

"There's only six more," I replied. "Consider it a challenge."

My power never made me tired, really. Not the way it wore out Vicky, or Lisa or Theo or Missy. I was like Taylor, and could run at maximum output for as long as I could stay awake. But she was right, the time and focus took its toll. I extended my senses to the pod where Taylor was sleeping. I probably should wake her, or at least send her home. I couldn't bring myself to do the latter, I needed her nearby. And the former... I barely managed to think clearly enough to cut off Taylia when Beelzebub pulled his dirty trick. I'd wake her up in private, later.

Chevalier put a hand, the only one he currently had, on Vicky's shoulder. "She's right, we can keep going. Just a little further."

He was one of the ones that had to wait, since Sanction and I couldn't actually restore him while he and Vicky were doing their interactions. Or, specifically, he'd be unable to keep the interaction going while being healed. With Boost keeping everyone stable, there was no risk that the injuries would get worse, so he'd have to be last in priority. That, and I suspected he felt he'd lose face if he went while Alexandria was still waiting. Probably more of chivalry thing than any honest social standing, I was sure.

"Yeah, two more, I can do that," she leaned into him a little as she rubbed her eyes with her hands. In a way it was eerily reminiscent of her and Dean. What surprised me was how I wasn't jealous. I was glad for her without reservation, instead of forcing myself to ignore my feelings and trying very hard not to hate someone for having my sister's affections.

I've moved on. And so has Vicky, apparently. The age gap was a little weird, but who was I to judge? He seemed like a good guy. At least he's not an empath with all the legitimate empathy of a brick wall. And now I know it wasn't only jealousy that made me think Dean was an idiot.

"One," I corrected. "I won't be able to heal Chevalier while he's maintaining your link, and only the pair of you can heal Alexandria. So you'll need to focus on her, now."

"Well, better interrupt Lisa's date, then," Vicky smiled. I glanced over to where the pair of them were still talking. Although whether or not what they were doing counted as talking or not, I wasn't sure. After their meeting with the others, the two of them mostly just stood there looking at each other while waiting for the rest of us to finish. She'd volunteered to be one of the last to get healed, after all. Because it gave her more time with Lisa. How did I not think that sooner?

I didn't dignify it with a response. That and I swore to myself that I'd never be like those nurses that
gossiped in front of their patients. I wasn't entirely sure any of our remaining patients spoke English, but no sense in finding out by getting 'Alexandria's affair with underage former supervillain exposed' on the headlines of every tabloid in the northern hemisphere. Although I couldn't help but smile at that thought.

*Actually, now that I think about it, they would make a really attractive couple. Lisa's fairly short and curvy features, contrasted against Alexandria's statuesque, even Amazonian, body type? Yeah, I could totally see that... oh god damn it no do not let that mental image get into your head. Mainly because it will take all of thirty seconds for both of them to figure out what I was thinking.*

I felt through the Yggdrasil to where Taylor was still in her temporary coma. Easy way to kill any errant embarrassing thought. I missed her, and the support she offered me. *I feel so alone when she's not with me.*

"I'll alert them," I told Vicky. A quick, easy pulse of thought caused the ground to shift under Alexandria and Lisa. *They have the superbrains power, they can figure out the message.* A couple seconds that I swear were reluctant later, she turned and floated over.

I couldn't help but be envious of how dignified she was, imposing even while missing an arm.

"You wished to speak with me?" she asked.

"Time for your tune up," Vicky responded, smiling broadly. "Y'know, if we keep meeting like this, I'm going to have to start charging. Don't worry, I'll give you the family discount. You've earned it."

A/N- Coil cheats.

Victoria still gets the best lines. Sometimes even subtly.

And I had to rewrite half this chapter because it didn't look good.
The Endmakers are running out of tricks? No. I'd learned a lot about Minerva, Lisa, over the last few months. She wasn't certain of any of what she just said, and she knew some of it was complete garbage. She stood just a little taller than normal. Her boots were already platformed, at least a little. She was convincing, but she couldn't make her body language lie enough to fool me. Although, to my amusement, she clearly beat Defiant's lie detector technology. Armsmaster's technology. Did they know the connection? Probably, they were willing to work with Bonesaw after all. Still, couldn't hurt to ask.

I gave a glance toward Defiant during the partial second that Lisa allowed herself to make eye contact with me specifically, then I looked toward Amelia and gave my head a tenth of a degree of tilt.

Lisa relaxed slightly, deliberately forcing her heartbeat to slow a little. No danger there. She wasn't curious, or surprised, so she knew who Defiant really was and didn't consider it a problem or a specific secret, past the parts that obviously needed to remain secret from the public.

"I suppose we should discuss how to handle the circumstances of the devastation of Paris," I spoke slowly. Around the group, the others nodded in agreement. This was really my scenario to lead. Patheon and Dragon knew my identity, had known ever since New Delhi, and likely before. I deliberately chose to look everyone in the eyes except Chevalier for this one. "We have to keep Moord Nag's involvement a secret. As Minerva said, this wasn't truly her fault. Will she be okay?"

Of course, that was a lie, it was very much her decision. She got a taste of Endbringer grade power, decided she liked it, and forgot that Pantheon had an Endslayer. She was suffering the consequences.

"In a lot of discomfort, but she'll live," Lisa responded. Meanwhile, a subtle shift of her hip, bringing her knees closer together. A signal of denial. Chevalier did not know I was the Chief Director, that was a relief.

"Lily's power bypasses all defenses, and annihilates everything it contacts if she wants it to," Minerva explained. "But it doesn't extend beyond that. Wounds inflicted by her weapons won't have any more trouble being healed than injury inflicted by anything else. Aceso's more than qualified to resuscitate her. From there, Gaea can handle the rest, she'll be good as new in a day or three."

Gaea tensed a little. She knew something, and wasn't happy about it. The girl had gone quiet, mousy even. Without the Khepri girl to back her up, she'd fallen back into the behavior I'd come to know from Panacea those few times I'd met her. Would Khepri default to her Skitter persona, were the situation reversed?

Lisa's reaction was slight, but involuntary. It was as good as flinching in pain to our senses. The
answer to my question was yes, something that they knew for a fact, and brought shame and guilt at the memory. I wished I was better at showing emotional support, the girl clearly needed it. There were deeper undercurrents as well. More than could be conveyed through our secret language. Something between the core group, important secrets. I'd have to actually ask. "Can your men keep the secret, Director?" Lisa didn't want me to ask those questions.

"They are well trained professionals," Calvert responded, unaware of our ongoing conversations. Theoretically, he outranked me here. Realistically, our theoretical ranks were meaningless, especially here on foreign soil. "They understand the need for discretion. What would you have us claim happened here instead?"

I watched Lisa with my peripherals, she shifted her right hand, evoking thoughts of a handshake or high five, a signal of thanks for my praising the man, earlier. I already knew who he was and what Pantheon had done to him, he was far more their puppet than Cauldron's, now. But Pantheon was using him for the same basic goal we had in mind anyway, so we were content with that situation.

Lisa blinked, with a momentary delay in opening her left eye. She was signaling there's a relationship between the Moord Nag and Calvert thought points. They're planning to do to Moord Nag what they did to Coil. I didn't disagree with that plan in the slightest.

"We can imply it's the Endbringer's farewell attack," Lisa answered. "We should have the shunt bugs by the next Beelzebub attack, which means we'll have an excuse why it wasn't used in future fights."

"That should work," I agreed, to both trains of conversation. "Chevalier?"

"It's not a perfect solution," the man responded. "Moord Nag was, is, a monster. She's killed thousands even before this. If not for the Endbringer truce, we should be using this opportunity to put her in the Birdcage and wash our hands of it. And that's why we can't tell him she was responsible for her actions here.

Victoria stood next to him, and it was easy for me to figure out their not-quite relationship. Just as she at least imagined she understood mine and Lisa's. It also was quite obvious that she knew the lies we were telling, about Moord Nag. About what was going to happen with her. I wonder, would she go against her team and her sister by letting Chevalier know the truth?

"Endbringers and Scion take priority," Vicky finally spoke. "Moord Nag is one of the few parahumans that stands a real chance to hurt them. We have to keep her."

"Dragon, you're certain the shunt bugs will work?" I asked.

"The hard part isn't building them, it's building enough of them to matter," the AI responded. We'd yet to manipulate her code in any way. We'd yet to have a need to. But Saint and Contessa were
enough to give us nearly unlimited access to her databanks, the general basics of her abilities. I let Lisa know that while Dragon was talking. "We'll need to adapt a purely organic variant, which we can then use Avalon's resources to mass produce."

"Our tinkers have proven capable enough to adapt purely organic antigravity technology," Lisa informed. She stood a little taller, spoke a bit more forcefully. "I trust them to handle this. Defiant, would you please assist in this project? Your specialty is exactly the kind of thing we need for this project." She still wants me to give them Richter's emergency control system.

"Certainly," he agreed. "Perhaps we could apply the same graviton field principles on an atomic scale, creating a chain to carry the wave that doesn't require such a large amount of supporting mass interaction."

I paid only polite attention as he slowly delved into tech speak. He was a Tinker, as smart as I was I didn't have the ability to follow where their minds went. There was nothing I could say that Lisa would want to hear on the issue. She was at least assured that we weren't abusing our access to Dragon, even if she wasn't happy that we had it at all.

She hadn't told anyone about her knowledge, either. In a way, we were both going behind our organizations' backs on this. I raised an eyebrow, ever so slightly. It would be invisible behind my helmet, the more streamlined one constructed of my own biological material, shielded by my own power, and built by Pantheon.

"Your people work quickly," I said to Director Calvert instead, as his second in command jogged back.

"Director," the woman saluted, and Calvert responded in kind. "Preparations are complete."

"Thank you, Commander James," he responded. Deliberately using her name, not so much to make it personal, but to reward her with name recognition in front of a number of powerful and influential people. It clearly made her happy. One of the ambitious types, apparently.

"Well, that's our cue," Victoria responded. She smiled cheerfully at me. "Come on, Sis, we have jobs to do. Try not to stay up past curfew, Minerva." Having got in her attempt at subtlety, she went off toward the improvised medical camp.

"Curfew?" Director Calvert asked. I had to admit I was curious, myself.

"We implemented a fairly strict lights out policy for our underage members," Lisa answered. "That was her idea of teasing me, since technically I fall under its umbrella. Clearly, however, I am an exception."
"Clearly," he agreed. I watched with a rather morbid fascination as the contempt he showed for Lisa was censored and replaced by a simple acceptance. There was a time when that would have horrified me. Now I wondered if Cauldron could harness such techniques for themselves. "If you will pardon me, I must attend to my men. Authorize the special draft recruits to return home."

"Let Janus and Tir know what you need them to do. Let them know I said to do anything reasonable to help." Lisa brushed the hair away from her cheek. Strong negation of that idea. She was right, too likely for it to be detected with people like Dragon, harnessing Rapture's technology. Still, it could have been convenient. And Amelia would be horrified at the concept of others using technology she helped Bonesaw to build. It would devastate our political alliance.

"Of course," I agreed. "We all have our responsibilities, especially after Endbringer conflicts. I expect we'll work together in the future, now that the M7 concept has been proven valid in the field."

"Indeed," he agreed marching off to his core group.

Meanwhile, Defiant hadn't managed to stop talking. He'd attracted Tir and Hecate into the conversation, and they were clearly in full Tinker fugue.

Dragon noticed me noticing them. "My apologies, Alexandria," she spoke. "I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, well, it's only to be expected," I responded. "Besides, this is a technology with the potential to save millions of lives. Don't let me waste your time on relatively inconsequential conversation when you could be improving it. I am aware none of you are in my command chain, but consider that an order."

"Thank you, ma'am," she responded. It was merely her being polite, of course. But she agreed with the request, I was sure. Richter's program made it pretty much impossible for her not to.

I watched them leave, then glanced at Lisa. She was almost wistful. I tilted my head, asking her what was wrong.

Her eyes went to the pod where Khepri was resting. She was worried about her friend. Or, more specifically, she wasn't worried. She knew things were going well, that while Taylor was hurt for now, she'd be fine in the long run, she had support to help her recover. What bothered Lisa is that it wasn't her that would make that recovery happen.

I opened my hand. Letting go.
She smiled sadly, and then broke our pattern by using words. "I tried to help her," she admitted. "But I'm not what she needed. Amelia is. And now that they have each other, I find myself wondering. We're still friends, but she doesn't need me, not really."

"You don't need her either," I responded. "You still trust and care about each other."

"Yeah," she sighed. She's lonely.

"It happens," I responded. "People change, grow. It's impossible not to. Some grow apart, others grow together, and other simply grow nearby. And those roles change often. Victoria considers you and Khepri to be effectively siblings. Much to her amusement and my annoyance. 'That's not a small thing. You could have a similar relationship as she and Gaea... nevermind.'"

"It's fine," she replied. "I get what you mean."

She got what I meant about Victoria as well. Victoria was a Thinker, but not the kind of Thinker that Lisa and I were. Like Rapture was. Like Accord and Contessa might be if they thought to use their powers to their fullest. Victoria saw things from a normal person's mental lens. Maybe that would change in time. Unlikely, and certainly not any time soon, but maybe.

"I doubt they'll abandon you," I continued. "You'll always be a part of her life. Just, not the centerpoint. That's how life goes, with family."

She shrugged. Given what little I could divine of her family, how they were responsible for her brother's suicide, at least in her eyes. How they were responsible for her Trigger Event. She likely didn't believe in family. Then again, I didn't either. My family loved me, but they failed me nonetheless. I hadn't spoken to them in years.

"You'll find someone else to grow together with," I consoled.

She looked at me with a smug grin she rarely actually pointed at me. Costa-Brown on a regular basis, but not me. "Is that so?" The question was loaded with meanings, and entirely rhetorical. She knew the statement was an implied offer.

"Statistically, it can't not happen eventually," I replied. A logical, safe answer. Meanwhile I relaxed my body language, an invitation. Before it could have been interpreted as accidental, a slip of the tongue even for people who think like we think. Now it was quite clear it wasn't.

"You're right," she agreed. She didn't put hope into it, she put certainty. It already has.
A/N- This is MY personal favorite part about the Endbringers. They cause dominoes to tumble into new configurations that wouldn't otherwise happen.
Chevalier flexed his new hand. "Feels strange," he stated. "Like, I don't know, like I fell asleep on it. Or like I have two left hands now."

"That will wear off as you get used to it," I stated. I did my best with it, since Vicky liked him so much, but I still had to pretty much reverse and copy his left to make his right, and that came with some minor side effects. "I'd have to rewire your brain to let you instantly adapt to the new limb. And I don't do that." Vicky didn't have to add those disclaimers, neither did Sanction. Their version of healing by gifting regeneration worked very differently than my own power.

"Well, it still beats the alternative," he agreed, getting to his feet. "Wow, that felt different, too. I feel like a kid again."

That's because you pretty much are. I'd repaired numerous old scars, like an injury to his Achilles tendon that hadn't quite healed properly sometime in his early teens. Burns that he must have gotten taken care of by a less talented healer a few years back, and the starting of cellular decay caused by radiation exposure that was about a year and a half old. I'd bet money it was Behemoth related. Repairing that alone probably improved his lifespan by twenty years or so. Plus another twenty or so by adjusting his internal chemistry and cellular age, not unlike what I did for Rey.

"Aren't you glad I talked you into agreeing to the full package deal?" Vicky asked, smiling broadly. She was standing there in a pose obviously meant to impress, her hands clasped behind her back, her back arched slightly, and her left leg forward a bit, fully extended. Like she started stretching and stopped. She still doesn't compare to Taylor.

"It's not quite as good as what you and Vicky can do," I dismissed, amused by how he was torn between staring at my sister, and figuring out his body's new responses. "But I did my best. By the way, I corrected your genetic tendency toward heart illness while I was working."

"No wonder we have such a high injury rate in the capes we give augmentations to," he mused as he hopped up and down a bit. Testing his new strength. It wasn't that impressive a jump, but then he was wearing about sixty pounds of battle armor right now, minus whatever belonged on the arm. And he was jumping without using its mechanisms to compensate for the extra weight. "I can tell this is going to take some getting used to."

"Don't worry," Vicky smiled, staring at the toned, medium brown limb like she was going to pull it off of him and eat it. "I'll help you test drive the upgraded equipment." She paused for a half second, just long enough to let ideas happen. "But it'll have to wait a couple days, I'm too tired to spar against someone with a Brute rating, after all the healing we've done today." I doubt any of us actually believed that she was talking about training.
"The practice is a good idea," I agreed. *Happy belated eighteenth birthday, Sis. Hope you didn't mind waiting a few months for your present.* "You're classing around a Brute two or three right now, plus Mover and Thinker one ratings, for improved reactions and accuracy. You'd have a good chance of getting gold in every Olympic event, if you were allowed to compete. On top of all your other powers. There's a reason they gave me a 'trump' rating, after all."

"Thank you for putting in the extra effort," He responded while stretching, flexing and twisting his new arm. "You do excellent work." *I really do, don't I?*

"Expect to feel uncoordinated, overly emotional and impulsive for the next couple weeks," I added. "It will take that long for you get used to your new hormone levels and physical abilities. Think of it like a second puberty, but without all the acne and angst. Don't worry, it won't last very long, but try not to make any major emotional decisions until it wears off."

"Uh, yeah, I'll keep that in mind," he agreed, glancing over at Victoria uncomfortably. "I wasn't really the type that made a lot of rash decisions as a teen. But thanks for the word of caution."

Vicky gave me the look of a small child that just watched me take away the puppy she wanted. *Sorry, but it's for your own good. You'd be functionally taking advantage of someone while they're drunk.* Or, worse, he'd end up sleeping with her and half the females on his team by the end of next week.*I'd hate to clean up that mess.*

"It'll probably be a couple days before we get your replacement armor ready," I informed him, happy to change the subject away from his body. I called some mass off my armor and coated his arm with it, fusing it into the living portion of his suit and forming the earliest version of our armor, the one I could still make on my own. "This'll at least give you a temporary patch for now. They're so caught up in the shunt-bug idea that I'm not sure if they'll have time to get proper armor repairs done."

*There's so much extra stuff packed into this armor these days. My power was only helpful for growing the framework of the suits. The living layer was still needed, integrating into the Endbringer tissue and maintaining the organic antigravity and electromagnetic technology. Handling the shunt drives. All kinds of things, actually. Ensuring that not even Dragon could build the system, not without a copy of the seed lifeform that grew into the armor layer. But it also ensured that I didn't have the ability to fix them where they were broken. Or, in this case, dismembered."

"Alright, well, we'd better get going," Vicky agreed, tuning into my desire to be done with this, to get back to Taylor. "We've been running poor Eric ragged today. Any more and he'll be making double overtime."

She pulled Chevalier off toward where Eric was waiting, chatting with Zach about whatever it was they found interesting. She was right, the only people left now were the ones living on Avalon. Crystal's team had gone, taking Alexandria with them. Vicky was about to leave. The Protectorate and PRT members were long since gone. The tinkers were still there, talking eagerly about their plans and waiting for us to take them to their labs.
I went to the pod we put Taylor in, and simply bonded it to my armor and stood. The Dryad, even without antigrav and other augmentations, could lift a minivan without much difficulty. One deceptively heavy girl in a pod, wasn't a problem. I wasn't that light, either. Even at my slightly below average height, I weighed over a couple hundred pounds. Side effect of a bioengineered superathlete body.

*Don't worry, Taylor, I'll get you home soon.* I knew she'd understand that we had projects to worry about first.

"We'll have to abandon the command center here for the night," Lisa said as I approached her.

"Set it on autopilot," Trevor spoke up. "I put that feature in. It'll head to our capital city, or the geoanalogue of Brockton Bay no matter what dimension it's currently in. It's really not well defended, and it's pretty slow. But it'll arrive in a day or so."

"I'll assign a couple Azazels to protect it on the journey," Dragon offered. "Avalon territory code gives military craft right of access to certain flight paths. I can set the system to follow them appropriately, with your permission."

"Of course," I agreed immediately. "Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome," she responded. I turned to walk over to Janus, trusting her to handle things. Dragon was half the reason Avalon was working so well. An entire planetary governing system built by the most powerful Tinker on the planet, with help from some of the most powerful Thinkers. It was unlikely we'd have air traffic any time soon, but Dragon had built rules for the future air traffic right into our starting code of laws and regulations.

Not the constitutional ones, of course. The whole point of a constitution was to make a general outline that was very hard to change. The whole point of regulations was to set specific guidelines so everyone knew what to expect and wouldn't get into pointless accidents. In this case, the possibility of putting a passenger aircraft in the path of a supersonic tinkertech weapon system. No one wanted that.

"Thank you for waiting on us," I said to Eric as I got to him and Zach. "Sorry it took so long."

"Hey, Endbringer bullshit," he shrugged. "We knew what we were getting into when we signed up. Want me to send you home right away?"

"Yes, please," I agreed. The others could take care of themselves, I just wanted to leave now. Go home, see Taylor.
"Wait for Clarice," Riley instructed. I almost forgot she was still in here with me. "I'll be out of range if we teleport back."

"Hold on a sec," I interrupted him as he reached for me, instead looking back at where Riley's doll had jumped off toward us, moving at speeds that would make you think it was life or death. Her combat changeling was absurdly powerful now, one of the fringe benefits of being her personal workplace for everything she came up with. It was somewhere around model 20, now, and that showed in its speed and power.

She landed gently next to me and spoke. "Okay, time to go."

"Do you think I'll be able to see Missy, even though it's past curfew?" Riley asked, as Eric reached over and put his hand on my armor.

_Missy's probably devastated about not being able to be a part of this one, _I thought as the world changed around us. _Of course Riley would be concerned._

"That's kind of an understatement," I responded, looking up at the dark sky of Avalon. Every star was so bright it was almost like you could reach up and touch them, the advantage of our thinner, pollution free atmosphere.

I'd started guiding the Dryad toward what was essentially our launching bay, where we kept all the suits above the labs where they were designed and tested. The more I thought about it, the more I realized our capital buildings were an incredibly high end military research facility. At least we'd finally managed to make our actual living area just a living area, instead of having superweapons in the basement. Now they were just waiting next door.

"Please, I'm really worried about her," Riley begged. "I don't want her to be alone."

_She really does love Missy._ That only made sense. Missy was her best friend, her first act of legitimate kindness, possibly the first person who was ever legitimately kind to her for no reason at all. I knew I couldn't claim that. I legitimately cared about the girl, now, but it certainly didn't start that way.

It was Missy who forgave her and defended her when no one else would or could. I couldn't help but see the parallels between those two, and myself with Taylor. The only way they could get closer is if they found a way to create an empathic link through their powers. Although if that were possible, I imagine Riley would have done it already.

It made me feel pretty good that Riley even felt the need to ask, instead of doing what Zach and
Emma did and trying to avoid getting caught.

"If Missy's still awake," I agreed, guiding the suit into the building and landing. There was no doubt she would be, considering the circumstances. "And don't let anyone else find out I let you break the rules. I know Zach and Emma do it all the time, but I don't want to encourage that sort of thing."

Especially as we move forward and pick up more people. None of the Mass Triggers that we were hoping to recruit were underaged, but a lot of them were still pretty young. The 'dorm' layout, curfew included, was likely to be the norm even for the adults, most likely.

"Thank you!" Riley exclaimed, activating her release button and dropping down to the ground. She bolted off toward the elevator.

I couldn't help but smile, as I set the healing pod down and awakened Taylor.

"Wha-" she asked ever so eloquently as she sat up. "My head hurts."

"It's going to for a little while," I apologized. "I had to knock you out. Sorry."

"Did you use another fire extinguisher?" she asked.

"What do you remember?" I asked, smiling.

"Not a lot," she admitted. "I think... Endbringer attack?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. "This one was a Master class, spawning monsters like... us. Maybe more like Nilbog. Things got ugly when we found out you could see through the monsters it was making."

"Is that why I can't remember?" she asked, groggily.

"No, I did that on purpose," I answered. "I was lucky enough to even think clearly enough to put you under. After... I disrupted the way the sleep cycle's suppose to work. Think of it like a hangover, complete with blackout. Only without the need for alcohol poisoning to get you there. Let's get you to bed, I'll explain more in the morning." That wasn't completely accurate, but it was close enough.

"Okay," she agreed. She'd need the natural sleep that I prevented her from getting before. I didn't know exactly what she experienced through Beelzebub's creatures, but I had my suspicions. What I felt through our link was almost enough to make me physically ill. Couple that with what Riley had been saying about the way the parasites linked themselves into the nervous systems... she could
easily have been experiencing every sensation and every thought of every victim. With any luck, she would never remember any part of it.

===================

A/N- Yeah, I know. Pretty much nothing actually happened in this chapter. Still, I happen to like it.
Ch 321- Missy

I brutalized Zach's punching bag. It cracked with the force of my blows, the bone armor under the padding layer crunched and then rebuilt itself. Kicks, punches, elbows, I ran through the entire defense routine trained into me by the Protectorate, testing how it worked against the world class expert training that we managed to add to our uploadable skill banks. Surprisingly, the CQC we got from the wards training was good, in a general sense. It lacked the sheer brutality of military combat techniques, but from a defensive standpoint it was honestly excellent.

I'd never been one to be the workout fiend. It was funny, really. Of all the Wards, only Sophia really took the physical training seriously. The rest of us did what we were required, sure, but none of us really cared for it. Dennis and Chris especially hated it. Carlos and Jason had powers that let them not need to train to have perfect bodies. Even Dean wasn't really a fan, although being who he was he pretended he thought it mattered. I don't think any of us believed he meant it.

Working out was always Sophia's thing. Said that relying on your powers alone made you weak. Right now I was strong enough and capable enough that I could give an adult man with special forces training a run for their money in a straight fight. I wasn't superhuman, but I was as close as you could get without crossing the line. Classifiable as a Brute three. I'd tear Sophia to pieces and not even break a sweat doing it. I have never felt more helpless in my life.

I didn't even have the benefit of watching the fight. After the debacle that was Tohu and Bohu, they put a moratorium on televising the Endbringer conflicts, as a matter of national morale. Oh, they didn't use that as the rationale. Something about respecting the victims of the disaster by not filming it or some such.

Whatever, it was officially a United Nations policy to forbid taping of the fights anymore, with a nearly unanimous signing because a lot of countries were afraid the Protectorate and Avalon might not show up if they refused and got attacked. The why of it meant very little right now. I'd have to listen to stupid reporters speculate on the outcome of the battle, despite them not even knowing what the Endbringer's name even was.

Meanwhile, almost everyone I had left was out there fighting, risking their lives to help protect others, and I was stuck here wondering what would happen next. Would they come away with another slain Endbringer? It wasn't like it was unheard of. Wendigo died in her first battle, after all. Were there people who would live if I were there to help? If the Endbringer escapes, could I have made the difference that would have won the fight? Would some of them die in the battle? Would I have to mourn the loss of more people that I loved?

No, seriously. Do I mourn? If it happened, our equipment means they'll be back in just a few days, plus about a thousand fringe benefits. All for the ever so attractive cost of losing a week of memories and a few really unpleasant weeks as your body teaches itself how to digest solid food again. Even now I hadn't regained my American teenager tolerance for greasy fast food. I couldn't force myself to eat the stuff anymore. Which was a blessing in disguise. Not much of a disguise, either.
Taylor’s been restored twice. Amelia once. Theo and I as well, which was the source of my new unfair physical abilities. *So, do I mourn the dead, or just miss them as I wait around a while for them to come back?* It was a hard question to answer, maybe an impossible one. I suspected I could ask a hundred people that question, and get at least eighty different answers.

*And when did I become two of the things I hated most? One, Sophia, being angry and full of pent up frustration and an obsession with hating weakness. Two, the terrified girlfriend waiting at home while her boyfriend went off to war.* And girlfriend, in my case. Which was still weird as hell. Letting Theo and Riley see each other with my knowledge and even blessing was one thing. Strange, but it at least made sense. Actually classing Riley as my girlfriend as well? Zach would have something to say about that, probably with comments like 'best of both worlds' that would result in me punching him.

But, well... was that something I wanted? I’d never had to ask myself that question before, I’d never thought of other girls as attractive, and then I kissed Riley on impulse and it felt nice. Right, somehow.

I found myself interested in Dean before I even figured out what physical attraction was. I loved him, and in a way I probably always would. I also loved Theo and Riley in their own unique ways. *Maybe that’s just how I work? I fall first, and desire second?* It seemed to fit, but I didn't exactly have a lot of experience.

I needed to ask someone about that, if only to help me sort it all out. My own mother was so not an option. For someone who’s been in as many relationships as she has, she didn’t know shit about them.

There was always Zach. I mean, he was pretty helpful after I lost my powers, after all. I could probably at least trust him not to tell anyone about it if I asked. Maybe Trevor was a better choice, with him actually being gay and all. Zach’s solution would probably be something along the lines of telling me there’s plenty of material on the internet and I should do some independent studying. Which would result in me punching him again.

I unleashed another volley of blows against the bag. Charge in, left palm strike center, right palm strike above, knee in, fall, break the combo. Repeat the combo, add a close elbow strike. Each blow caused light cracking of the bag’s armor. It was, at least according to Riley, durable enough that if it crunched, that meant you were hitting with enough force to break an average adult male’s rib bones. I was satisfied to note that every strike I delivered crunched.

I could ask Lisa, but that would require actually going to Lisa for help. Whose solution to Zach’s emotional state after Dream Girl was to functionally prostitute Emma for him. Granted, they wound up together in the long run, but only after Vicky actually set the stage to make it work. Well, while we were on that subject, maybe I could ask Vicky for her thoughts?
Hmmph. Wouldn't that be something? After spending the better part of a year hating her for how she jerked Dean around with break up and make up drama bullshit, to go to her for relationship advice. Fuck, I really must be desperate about this.

Desperate and alone.

They're still out there making a difference, and I'm still in here punching a stupid bag. *Fuck!* I thrust out as hard as I could. The shell of the bag, which was pretty damn tough, caved to the strike. It hurt like hell, but I buried my hand in the soft 'flesh' of the bag. It felt an awful lot like the inside of a baked potato that cooled down to about room temperature. I tugged, and with a squishing sound, my hand was released. It would mend itself in time.

*Hopefully so would my wrist, because damn that hurt.*

Is this the path Sophia went down? Did she feel like this, having a problem she was unable to solve, one that she brought on herself? There are certainly plenty of ways to pick out a Trigger Event, aren't there? Now would be an awesome time to have a second Trigger and be able to go in blazing with a whole new power.

Of course, Sophia had no friends and no support. If Emma was to be believed, she didn't want any. She didn't want to admit for a second that she was weak enough to need others to help her. But isn't that what got me into this fucking mess in the first place? I didn't want to admit I wasn't good enough, so I used that damn stim drug even knowing how dangerous it was. I didn't think there'd be any consequences, despite the warnings. *Which of course bit me in the ass.*

*And now I'm here beating on something that can't fight back.*

*Guess we're not as different as I thought we were, Sophia.*

Fuck that. There's at least one important difference between us. I actually want to be a human being, not some psychotic bitch whose only chance of not dying alone is someone deciding to hurry the occasion along.

Maybe I could ask Taylor or Amelia. Not about Sophia. I was content with not turning out anything like her. And the two of them were probably not useful sources even if I did want to know more about the psycho. But about relationship advice. Taylor was clearly putting love above attraction, since she was actually straight. That was probably the closest I was going to get to my situation right now.

*Wait, how did I even know she was straight? It's not like anyone around here talks about stuff like this.* Except Zach, and by his logic Taylor's gay because Amelia's such a pimp that she's seduced
every last female member of the team. Including me and possibly Dinah.

Oh, right, I remember now. It was back during the 'watch Heartbreaker be publically humiliated' party. Pity it wasn't a public execution. Emma showed up, blah blah drama, blah blah Lily hated her and so did I. Blah blah, turns out she wasn't a bigot, just a psychopath. And later it turned out that she wasn't psycho, either. Just batshit fucking crazy.

Taylor admits she's not gay. Amelia says she's okay with that and their relationship is their own business after... right, Rapture knew it ahead of time because that's how her power works.

That’s it! I can talk to Rapture! Her power is perfect for this sort of thing, and she didn’t have any problem with Taylor and Amelia’s relationship. Or Lily and Sabah’s, for that matter.

I wonder if she knew they’d break up? Whatever, she was open minded enough and could help me figure out all of this. Then again, homosexuality and polygamy were quite a bit different, so maybe she wouldn’t. But it cost me nothing to ask, right? I should call her ri...

Oh, right. Endbringer battle. She’ll be there, worrying about that.

Fuck everything.

Maybe Dinah wants to play a card game?

================

A/N- Missy's kinda not having fun right now.
"You can come in," Dinah spoke right before I knocked on her office door.

I palmed the door and it opened. "Did you use your powers to know I'd be coming?"

"It would have been pretty easy to predict," she answered, looking up at me. The way her office was aligned, she could look right at me from her perfectly sized chair. "But I have easier methods. There's a motion detection system installed in the wall, complete with a fairly standard hidden camera. It allows me to know who is approaching through the hallway."

Typha looked up at me from where she was curled up in the corner. She uttered a sound somewhere between a bird cooing, and a cat's mew, then put her head back down in her paws and returned to sleep. Calysta was the same way, all Riley's creatures were. Riley once told me why, something to do with them needing to conserve energy and heal more than normal lifeforms did. I trusted the Tinker to know her creations.

"Ah, that makes sense," I agreed, looking back toward Dinah. "So... uh, does Amelia or Taylor or Lisa know you have the hallway monitored?"

"Is it weird that I think she's absolutely adorable in that little girl sized business suit and want to hug her forever? No! Bad Missy! You can have one girlfriend. No more."

"Lisa probably does," she responded. "I feel that with their powers, it would be absurd for them to ask me not to monitor a single public passageway leading to my office. Given just how much information they have access to."

"You have a point," I agreed. "So, umm, what do you do for fun?"

"Pardon?" the girl asked.

"Well, I mean, we normally don't spend a lot of time together," I explained. "Usually my time is taken up by school, or training, or spending time with Theo and Riley. And you're always around Lisa trying to sort out the apocalypse. Which is totally more important than my curiosity. So, I was wondering, what do you do when you've used up your power for the day. You know, for fun. Unless you're going to try to convince me that you enjoy Lisa's company."

"Lisa is a perfectly respectful and likable individual," Dinah responded, although she couldn't keep a
straight face more than halfway through the sentence. It was the first time I'd seen her smile since the Christmas party. And that was a sort of nervous smile, not one of actual amusement.

"You're better off trying to sell me you liked to go to your ocean beach house on Avalon for scuba diving and tanning," I responded. The part that made that funny was that no one wanted oceanside property on Avalon. The water was laden with heavy isotopes of the 'if you swim here, your hair will fall out. And then later so will all your skin' variety. Between Dragon and the Yggdrasil, the expectation was that the ocean might be fully consumed, scrubbed and replaced somewhere around the year 2100. "Seriously, though, I'm curious what the most powerful precog on the planet does for fun."

"I read a great deal," she responded passively. "Preferably classical literature."

"Really?" I smiled.

"I find it relaxing," she explained, as if she felt the need to justify herself. "My power is... fairly indiscriminate, and I see a lot of things I really wish I didn't." Oh, wow, that sounds awful. And if there was ever a chance I might ask Dinah about my relationship, it was gone forever now. "In addition, I can't accidentally activate my power by wondering what happens next in a book in a series that's been completed. Making it one of the few things things I can safely enjoy speculating upon."

"That's it? Not new books or movies?" I asked.

"Even with old movies or books written a decade or two ago, there's always the risk a sequel comes out even a decade from now and my power will respond to that. I'm only safe with works where the creator is already dead. For whatever reason, my precognition applies directly to the maker of a work."

"Wow, that's kinda shitty." I concluded. And weird, but I didn't want to upset her by saying that. "Actually, you should talk to Theo. He's a big fan of literature and theater. I think he could come up with a lot of really good suggestions for you to try. So's Riley, but she's more into the intellectual side of it. Trying to figure out hidden meanings and stuff. You can come along next time a really good play is scheduled in Boston, maybe."

"I would prefer not to impose," she responded.

"Oh, don't worry about that," I insisted.

"I am also not interested in joining your harem," she added.
"What?!" I exclaimed. "I swear, I wasn't thinking anything like that at all!"

She started giggling, and then accidentally snorted when she tried to force herself to stop.

"You've been spending time around Zach, haven't you?" I asked, but I had to laugh as well. She really got me with that one.

"A little," she admitted once she could breathe. "You should have seen your face."

With the ice broken, we started discussing literature. Safe topic for Dinah, and thanks to Theo's love of theater, I could actually hold a conversation on the subject. For the next half hour, we discussed various works of fiction in the world. It didn't quite allow me to forget the war going on that I couldn't be a part of. It didn't let me forget the complexity of my relationship with Riley and Theo. But at least it let me have a few moments where there was something else I could think about for a little while.

....

Dinah's phone rang, interrupting a conversation we were having about how Shakespear was clearly mocking romance when he wrote Romeo and Juliet. She answered it immediately, of course. She was the only one of us that still actually had a cell phone. "Dinah Alcott speaking... You know my powers don't work on them... Well, okay, that might work, what's it do?"

_How does she get service in another dimension?_ I briefly wondered. Then I reminded myself that Dragon had a base roughly the size of Rhode Island built into our version of the Appalachian mountains. The mysteries of interdimensional cell towers were probably well within her grasp.

"... That is quite disturbing..." Dinah responded. "Let us see... chances of the Beelzebub infection jumping to another lifeform is zero, chances of finding a new infected is zero. Chance of locating undestroyed spawn, zero. At least for the next few months. It gets vague after that, for the obvious reasons... Farewell."

"What was that about?" I asked. I'd had no news about the battle in hours.

"They are done," she responded. "It seems this Endbringer releases monsters while hiding in another dimension."

"That seems eerily familiar," I muttered.

"Indeed," Dinah agreed. "In addition, it appears at least some of those creations release infectious
agents that merge into other organic life and take control of its neurology to add to the battle."

I blinked. "Please tell me you mean dogs and birds and stuff, right?"

"Them as well," she responded. "Every living thing larger than a rodent, and even the larger species of those."

"In a city the size of Paris... how many died?" I asked. "Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to make you use your power!"

"It's okay, you didn't," she answered. "I cannot provide numbers for things that have already happened. In addition, my abilities don't work directly on the Endbringers or Scion. I have to find ways around them."

Oh, right, duh. You were just talking about her being able to read old books without accidentally learning the plot. "I see," I responded. "Man, it'd be useful if the alien parasite god wasn't pretty much immune to all powers."

"I do believe that's why he made our powers work the way they do, to avoid that possibility," Dinah pointed out.

"So, why do you think the Endbringers are immune as well?" I asked.

"Lisa believes they're the result of a power interaction," Dinah responded. "Much as I cannot use my powers on you while you're using Singularity, and my predictions of Taylor and Amelia rapidly drift off course thanks to the Taylor-Amelia interaction."

"Uh, in what way?" I asked.

"Every version of the future I foresee ends on the certainty that Pantheon disbands within six months to a year." Wow, that is pretty off course. "The exact details change, although you, Theo and Riley always go with Amelia. Most of the other Thinkers and Tinkers on the team go with Taylor and Lisa. I've taken to phrasing my questions with 'assuming Pantheon remains together' in the privacy of my mind, simply to mitigate the discrepancies. Lisa assures me that my model's wrong irregardless, due to the nature of the Endbringers. That Taylor and Amelia, even without their anti-precog interactions, wouldn't let personal drama get in the way of stopping the Endbringers."

I wonder if Lisa believes that, or is just trying to make things sound better. The idea that Taylia was that powerful was disturbing. "That's good to know," I responded. As if I didn't have enough things to worry about, already.
"I would appreciate if you didn't speak of this to the others," she asked. "Telling you doesn't hurt the numbers, but Riley finding out could. And I cannot be certain my predictions are accurate. As I said, it's incredibly hard to work through Taylia's influence. All I can say for certain is, the longer Pantheon remains together, the better the odds are in aggregate."

"Aggregate?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "There is still the matter of five incredibly powerful factions that will be involved in the end. Details are fuzzy, although based on other information I am convinced that Pantheon, or Avalon certainly, is one of those factions. The others... are complex. I'm not completely certain that it will be the same five factions during the final battles. I think that, depending on how things play out, the factions themselves seem to change."

"So we'll still be here," I responded. "With or without Taylia?"

"Correct," she nodded. "Although the form Pantheon takes at that time is... complex. As I have said before, there are too many anti-precog effects. Taylor and Amelia, the monsters created using Endbringer tissue. The Taboo research. It all adds up to a great many blind spots for me."

"That has to be frustrating," I sympathized. Like how people blocked my power, I imagined.

"It is," Dinah agreed. "In any case, the longer Pantheon stays functional, the stronger at least three of the other factions get. I think a lot of it has to do with the Mass Trigger experiments they did, but I can't see Trigger Events, either. Maybe the fourth as well. It's weird, I'm not sure that one even exists right now. One more block in my power."

"Well, at least it's a relief in one respect," I offered.

"Oh?"

"It means when the time comes, we won't be fighting alone," I told her.

=============

A/N- My browser's spellcheck thinks the "Rhode" part of Rhode Island is a typo.
I was waiting at the pad when Theo returned. I may not have my powers, but Calysta didn't need me to have my powers in order for her to fly. What I wasn't expecting was that he would return alone.

"What happened to everyone else?" I asked.

"The Tinkers and Thinkers are staying behind, doing their usual planning," he started. *Okay, that makes sense.* It also removed pretty much the vast majority of our team in that one swipe. Almost all the people living here were our Thinkers and Tinkers. "There are also a lot of injured. Beelzebub was a messy fight."

"What happened?" I asked. *Please don't let there be something that I could have done to make the difference.*

"It was a summoner type Endbringer," he told me. "Can we go inside? I'm tired and I need a shower. Sorry."

"Oh, sure, no problem," I stuttered. It hurt a little that he wasn't more excited to see me, but he sounded exhausted. Not just physically. He sounded hollow, like the light echo he created when speaking while he had his power up around him. I was tired, too. "I could use a shower, too."

"Thanks for understanding," he responded.

We took off toward the living area building, letting Calysta and Macula do the work. What happened? I wanted to ask, but I couldn't. My fault I couldn't be there to help, so I'd stay silent, now. I could accept that, as penance for my mistake.

We took our showers, separately of course. My hand and wrist ached, now that it had time to stiffen up after my workout session. I probably broke my hand on that damn punching bag. I'd need to ask Riley to look at it later. Just one more way others had to pick up the slack and cover for my stupid mistakes.

I was done before Theo, and waiting by his door when he opened it. He'd changed to street clothes, and I hadn't worn anything except the street clothes today. There was no real impetus for me to protect my identity on Avalon, I had no life outside Pantheon anymore. Brockton Bay was gone, and Lisa had somehow convinced my mother that it was fine for me to live here full time, like Dinah and a few others were doing. I suspected bribery was involved, but never did get the courage up to ask. I'd rather let myself remain ignorant on the subject. I had enough things to angst about without finding out Mom sold me for spare cigarette money.
The only thing that would be worse would be finding out Lisa used something less obvious.

"Sorry for being rude earlier," he said the moment he opened the door.

"You weren't rude," I responded. He was adorable when he was trying to apologize. "It was a rough day."

Endbringers always are, that's a universal truth. Sure, Pantheon gave as good as we got in those battles, but for every victory we made against them, they extracted their price in return. The difference was, at least Pantheon did have victories against them. No one else could honestly claim they'd even gotten close.

"Thanks for understanding," he smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He pulled me into a hug. He smelled pretty neutral, after the bath. Clearly using the generic shampoo material grown from the Yggdrasil. I allowed myself the luxury of buying quality bath soaps. Nothing against Amelia, but she did not understand the value of a good shampoo. Neither did Theo, but he was a guy so that was to be expected.

"I'd be a pretty bad girlfriend, or human being for that matter, if I couldn't accept that you might be tired after fighting a city killing abomination," I dismissed his praise.

"Doesn't mean I can't appreciate it," he responded, leaning back a little to look me in the eyes. "One of those things I love about you."

"So that's what you love?" I smiled, feeling warm inside. It wasn't just that he said it, it was that I believed him. "You mean it's not the part where I kissed your other girlfriend in front of you?"

"You've been spending too much time around Zach," he didn't laugh, but at least he smiled for real.

"Your fault," I countered, stepping around him and entering his room. Dorms or no, each of us had pretty nice places to stay here. Plenty of space, almost all of it downstairs.

What one saw from above looked like five or six buildings, each only about two stories tall. If you could look at it from a room diagram, it was a massive underground complex that all interconnected like prairie dog tunnels. I plopped down on one of the Yggdrasil couches and stretched out. "Now, tell me everything."

"Shouldn't I be the one on the couch?" he asked, standing in front of me.
"Sure," I agreed, sitting up.

He sat down next to me, and I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down. "What?"

"You took my comfy sleeping spot," I pointed out. "Now I have to use you as a replacement." I climbed on top of him, and put my head on his chest. "Those are the rules."

"I'm pretty sure that rule is only meant for cats," he argued. He didn't put up too much resistance, instead stroking my hair with one of his hands. The other was caught under us. One of those unfortunate problems with having an arm on both sides, there weren't many ways to cuddle without at least one limb getting in the way.

"Too late, already napping," I quipped, closing my eyes. "So, do you want to talk about it? The Endbringer, I mean."

"No," he responded, I felt him shudder as he tried to take a breath. Oh. "But I should. It was horrible. I had to kill people. A lot of them."

"The infection?" I asked, recalling what Dinah told me.

"They were still alive, Missy," he shook as he breathed out. "I know they were under control of the Endbringer. I know they couldn't be saved, that they were in pain and being used as puppets. Or at least that's what everyone else insists. But I can't force myself to believe it. They were still human beings. When they screamed, it was in fear and pain. They were victims, Missy, not monsters. I tried to make it quick. Painless as I could. But..."

He sobbed, and I felt my body jolt from the spasm. I've never seen him cry before. He was always so stoic about things like that. I looked up at him, brushed his cheek and felt wetness.

"If they said there was nothing that could be done, I believe it," I insisted.

"Some of them were children," I felt his face shift as he clenched his eyes shut. "I don't just mean teenagers. I mean children. Five and six year olds, too young to even comprehend what was happening to them. All they understood about it was the fear and pain and me killing them. How am I supposed to live with that?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I should have been there. To share some of the burden. Instead Theo had to go through that, while I had a workout and talked to Dinah about Shakespeare. I fucked up and wasn't able to help, then. I needed to help, now. "It's not your fault. It's the fucking Endmakers."
"I've never killed before," he spoke quietly. "I didn't want to. But if they got out, they could have spread their infection to millions of others. And I thought about what Dream Girl did and how I could have prevented everything she did by stopping her for real, and I didn't and I hated myself. This time I did and I hate myself even more. This isn't what being a hero is supposed to be about."

"No, it's not," I agreed. "But the deck is stacked against heroes. The source of our powers is the enemy to all of us. Monsters using us as weapons tests. It's not your fault, or mine, or those people who were used by that Endbringer. In the end, it's all Scion's fault. And we know it doesn't care about the suffering we're going through. We're just food that's getting played with first."

"That doesn't absolve us of responsibility," he responded.

"I know," I sighed, I stroked his cheek gently. His skin was rough since he hadn't shaved for a couple days. "But maybe it can help put things into perspective. Let you think more about what would have happened if you didn't do anything. How many more would have died?"

"I don't know if I can," he replied. "Thinking of people like that. This many dead so that many more can live. I just... I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I start treating people like that."

I squeezed him. "I know," I closed my own eyes. "You care about people too much for that. It's part of why I love you. I'm willing to bet if Riley was here, she'd agree fully. You're a good man."

He was quiet for a while. "Thanks, that means a lot."

=====================

A/N- Dammit, Missy, stop hogging all the limelight!
"Hey, Missy," Theo caressed my shoulder.

"Muh?" **Brilliant, Missy, truly the best dialogue ever.**

"I think it's time for you to go back to your room," he sounded apologetic. "We're already a half hour past curfew."

"That rule's stupid," I complained, nuzzling my face against his chest. "Besides, Zach and Emma break it all the time."

"Zach and Emma aren't the people you want to consider role models," he countered. "Besides, they get exceptions based on the whole 'don't sleep' thing. As long as they stay in the main public areas or the labs... they're allowed to be out. We do need sleep and we're in private quarters. That's a no go."

"Still a stupid rule," I pouted. "We're responsible enough to fight to save the world from monsters and alien parasite gods, but we're not responsible enough to be in each others' bedrooms past nine?"

"It's a good rule," he responded. "Mistakes get made, you know. I mean, our parents might not mind too much. But that's because mine would see it as some kind of weird parahuman superchild in the making. And yours..."

*My mother practically made a career off of child support and alimony, she'd be tickled pink if I did the same with a multimillionaire.* "But we're not going to do anything like that," I argued. "Not until we're older and married and everything."

"I know that, and you know that, but they don't know that," he responded. "They could probably ask Dinah and be certain about it. But if they did that, they'd have to do it for pretty much every possible combination of boys and girls living in this building. And then they'd have to do it again every time we added someone new. Using the world's most powerful precog as some sort of ad-hoc chastity belt seems... like an incredible waste of resources."

"Also profoundly creepy," I muttered. The idea of Dinah answering questions would have been disturbing even before finding out about the side effects of her power, how she couldn't help but get visual images from the questions she asked. Making her look for *those* kinds of images on purpose was not cool.

"So we'll talk in the morning," he insisted.
"Dammit!" "Okay," I sighed, sitting up. "We'll talk in the morning."

....

It was almost midnight when my door opened automatically and Riley stepped in, looking nervous. "Riley? What's wrong?" I asked, getting up off the chair in my living room area. I wasn't really tired enough to try to go to bed. I wasn't tired when I took that nap with Theo, and there was still so much on my mind. Staying up watching dumb movies was better than laying in bed staring at the ceiling.

"I just wanted to see if you were okay," she spoke softly, walking in and slowly approaching me. I was used to a lot of things from Riley, but her acting shy was a new one. "I know how much it has to hurt to not get to help."

Oh. She's worried about me? Of course she would be. "What about the curfew?" I asked.

"Big Sis gave me permission to break it," she answered. That's Riley, alright, asking for permission to break the rules. "She just told me not to get caught. So I came to see you and make sure you're okay."

"That's okay, I think I'm over it," I responded. "It sucks, but I can cope." I carefully avoided rubbing my hand. My wrist had swollen to the point where I was convinced I'd need to ask Amelia to patch it up in the morning.

"You're hurt," she spoke immediately. "Dammit!"

"Yeah, I just banged up my wrist a little," I insisted. "I'll be fine."

By now she'd managed to inch her way within arm's reach of me. We were the same height now, despite my year and a half or so age advantage on her. Her hand went out and touched my elbow, guiding my arm up. I didn't resist, there wasn't much point in even trying. She rested my injured hand in her palm, pressing gently in various spots. I tried to avoid making sounds of discomfort as she poked and prodded.

"This is pretty bad, considering you have an augmented physiology," she spoke eventually. "Several fractured bones and some serious swelling. Even minor nerve damage in the wrist. What did you do?"

"I got a little overzealous in my workout routine, punched a bag too hard," I responded. "Don't worry, I'll talk to Amelia tomorrow and it'll be good as new."
"Okay, if you insist," she looked at me, but didn't let go of my hands. "Why were you pushing yourself so hard? Is it because you couldn't go to the fight with us?"

"N-" I hesitated. I didn't want to lie to her, it wouldn't feel right. To say nothing of her lie detection abilities. "It was. But that's not a problem now."

"You're sure?" Riley asked, sounding conflicted in wanting to believe me, and wanting to make sure I was okay.

"I talked to Theo after he got back," I informed her. "He was really upset about it, about what he saw and had to do when fighting Beelzebub's monsters."

_Is that a bad thing to tell her? That I was there to comfort him when she wasn't?_ This whole thing was really confusing sometimes and I had no way of knowing what I was supposed to do. I didn't know if telling her that might upset her.

"Good," she responded. She was still toying with my wrist, and had pinched my arm near the elbow. I felt the pain immediately start to fade. "I was worried about him, too. Is he okay? He was really upset."

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "He was pretty upset by everything. This one got to him worse than the others. What about you, are you okay?"

She smiled, a little sadly. "I'm fine. You just take care of Theo, okay?"

"Uh, Riley, you're scaring me," I looked at her, wondering what she meant by those words. "You're not planning to do anything... bad... are you?"

"No," she responded, still looking like she was going to cry. "But I can't help him. I don't know how."

"And I do?" I asked. "I don't know how to make him feel better about killing that Endbringer's victims. He already knows they couldn't have been saved, but killing them hurt him. I've never done anything like that."

"I have," she responded, looking away. "I've done it so many times that I can't even remember when I lost count."

"That's what this is about?" I asked quietly. I wrapped my arms around her. It was so easy to forget
what she'd done in the past. Who she was. She didn't hug me back. "Were you reminded of what Jack made you do?"

"I saw the way Theo looked," she whispered. "He was disgusted. He hated what he had to do. How can I expect him to love me when I've done so much worse."

"You'd never do anything like that now," I insisted.

"But I would," she responded. "I have. When I killed Dream Girl, it was the same way. I made her walk out into the ocean to drown, and she felt every second of it. And just today I used the same tech on Moord Nag, controlling her."

I thought back on that one. Moord Nag normally wasn't someone I'd hear about- as terrifying as she was, there was a list a mile long of monsters just like her, or the Slaughterhouse Nine, or the Blasphemies throughout the world. Incredibly powerful warlords that, if I had my way, we'd hunt down one after another after another until they were all dead. I knew Taylor and Amelia wanted to as well, but bullshit politics kept us from doing that. I only knew who Moord Nag was because I saw her during the last couple Endbringer battles and did some research.

"Moord Nag's a despot and a psychopath," I responded, squeezing Riley. "Whatever you did to her can't possibly be worse than the stuff she's done. She's single handedly killed tens of thousands."

"Hundreds of thousands, now," Riley answered. "Lisa used her to clear the whole city in the end, killing everyone still inside. All the infected in one strike. Turns out her power is even capable of killing the M7s and zerg if they're exposed for more than about twenty seconds."

_Holy fuck._ "Doesn't her power get stronger the more people she kills?" I asked. "She was crazy powerful with only a few thousand of the artificial food source that Amelia put together for her. If it's a straight upgrade, she might be able to solo Endbringers after hundreds of thousands."

"Also crazy crazy," Riley added. "The power boost messed with her head. There's no way to grant a power increase without causing damage to the brain, one way or another. It's one of those rules Passengers have."

And I ignored that when using that drug, I added. I didn't blame Riley for telling me, I didn't think she was doing it as an accusation or even reminder. She was a Tinker, and Tinkers loved to talk tech. "So she's insane, now?"

"Temporarily," Riley answered. "But it wears off over time. Her power uses up the energy she absorbs, and the more she's containing the faster it'll go. At low power levels, the first thousand or so, it's pretty weak. Only using up one or two a day."
"At her current power stage, she's consuming exponentially more energy," Riley continued explaining. "She'll burn through a hundred thousand lives worth of power by this time tomorrow. Another hundred by next week. Almost all of it will be gone in a month. After two she'll be back to her standard power."

"So upgrading her to Endslayer status would require killing the entire city we're trying to defend to give her the power she needs?" _Well, that would have been convenient to have, but it's not worth the costs._

"I'm planning to draft up a system for Amelia tomorrow," Riley informed. "We can assign a patch of land in our Africa to Moord Nag, now that she's under our influence. We can give her access during emergencies, so she can use her upgraded power during Endbringer battles, and against _him._"

"That... will help a lot," I admitted. "It's a really good idea."

"You don't hate me for messing with her brain?" She asked hesitantly. "Or because I wasn't disgusted by the Endbringer like everyone else?"

"Of course not," I responded, pulling back a little so I could look at her. I rested my forehead on hers and looked into her now dark brown eyes. _Wow, those are pretty, I'll need to ask her about her cosmetics choices later, in a less intense situation._ "We've talked about this. I love you, we both do."_Surprise, surprise, I mean that._ And not merely as a close friend, either. Although we were certainly that, as well. I did love her, just like I loved Theo.

The relationship was obviously a little different than with Theo. He was the one who protected me and made me feel strong and safe. With Riley, the role was reversed. I was the one who protected her, she was the one I wanted to make strong and safe.

I noted the way she twisted her arm to keep the pressure of her fingers steady on my hurt wrist. _Okay, maybe that works both ways, at least a little._

A/N- Show me a rule that says Bonesaw can't know bullshit acupuncture techniques.

Also: I may have to change the name of the story at the rate this is going.
"C'mon, cuz, he's perfect for you," Vicky insisted. "Smart, good looking, and the stick is only about halfway up his ass. So much better than Rory. Plus he's got the whole blaster-shaker thing, so the two of you have that in common. So think about all the fun you can have arguing with each other over which whether your future children got their powers from him or you."

I sighed. "Vicky, I don't-"

"Plus he already knows me," she interrupted. "Which means there's no chance of you getting into a massive blow up fight because he wouldn't stop ogling your younger, funner, and better looking cousin at the Christmas party."

"This is about that time you caught Dean flirting with me, isn't it?" I muttered.

"He wasn't flirting with you," she argued. "He was just being nice. He explained it to me later."

"Yeah, he explained it to you later," I continued. "After you broke up with him, literally threw him out of the house, and then spent the next three months moping about because he was dating that one girl. Whatever happened to her, anyway?"

"I think she transfered to Immaculata. Who cares?" Vicky sulked. "She was a bimbo anyway."

"I dunno, she seemed nice enough to me," I responded. It was nice to have Vicky on the ropes for once. With her boosted mental abilities and various extra senses, it was hard to get the upper hand against her in anything. And right now, I had that upper hand. "Sure, she was a little high strung, perhaps. But I'm pretty sure that was Dean's type. Remember back before you got your powers and he dated Amy for a couple wee-" Her smile vanished instantly, and I knew that I'd said something very, very wrong. "Oh, I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry about it, not your fault," she responded, shrugging dismissively. "Can't do anything to change the past."

And you've moved on to Chevalier, if you can call finding a new guy who's pretty much exactly like your old boyfriend 'moving on'.

"Okay," I agreed. "I retain the right to feel bad."

"You sound like Mom," she rolled her eyes. "Hey, speaking of moms, what's Aunt Sarah been up
to? She seemed pretty dead set against staying on Avalon, last time I talked to her. Something about
preferring to earn her own way."

"Oh, uh, she's moved to Boston," I informed. "Kinda doing the 'liaison' thing like you and I are. Working as part of their Protectorate, but doing it with a hand me down Radiant. Apparently she's now the de facto second in command for their Protectorate, and the functional head of their Wards." I tactfully neglected to mention that Taylor's father got a job in Boston as well. The longer it took Vicky to find out about that, the less annoying she'd be.

"Makes sense," Vicky responded. "Aunt Sarah's a badass, and she can use your suit even better than you can."

I tried to be mad, but it was true. Mom had the stronger shields, and my armor was built around harnessing its shielding. She was better able to use my armor than I was. "Yeah, you're right. Plus the Wards there love her. Clock sends his regards, by the way."

"That's where they sent him?" Vicky laughed. "Oh, man, he must be driving her up the wall with his pranks. Oh, I just thought of something! Do you remember the 'Photon Mom Sandwich'?"

"Yes, Vicky, I remember," I muttered.

"Roast beef with ketchup," she continued.


"It took me six weeks to get the joke!" She finished. "Speaking of which, one of us still has to beat the living piss out of him for that."

"Actually, from what Mom's been saying, he's turned over a new leaf lately," I informed her. "No more dumb pranks, none of the childish antics, and he's doing a very good job on the team. While rocking the whole quiet moody thing. Apparently he's like a less douchy Armsmaster. Half the girls and one of the guys on the team are blatantly flirting with him. Thus far, no one's won the prize."

"Really, your mom said all of that?"

"I may have paraphrased a little," I shrugged. "Okay, I may have paraphrased a lot. But seriously, turns out he shaped up nicely. Who woulda guessed?"

"Dean always said he had it in him," Vicky smiled sadly. "Pretty sure he didn't believe a word of it, but he did say it. Of course he also liked to say that Sophia was just misunderstood, and if everyone
was patient with her, she'd open up to the team."

And he thought Amy would get over her 'little crush' on him. "For an empath, that boy just did not understand people," I sighed.

"He meant well," Vicky sighed. "Which is more than I can say for most people. And that brings us back to the guy I'm trying to hook you up with. Trust me, he's perfect for you. I know how much you like the artsy types, and he was a musician before he got powers."

"Vicky, are you trying to hook me up with some guy who's in a band?" I sighed. "Because I got over that years ago."

"Actually, he works on the other side of the screen," she responded. "You know those people that write the music that all those famous singers like to pretend are theirs, but everyone with the IQ of a dead fruit bat already knows better? He's one of those."

Huh. "That doesn't sound so bad, actually," I admitted. "So he has sonic powers? Like Dubs?"

"Not directly," Vicky shrugged. "It's more like destructive telekinesis. Kinda like Clotho's power, but without any fine control, like when she uses that tinker weapon of hers. He can make sound with it, but he can't actually control sound. Also flying, forcefields, and no Manton Limit. So should I call up Eric and let him know to have you shipped over here for a few hours? Or him shipped over there? Either works for me."

"Still not interested," I responded.

"Well, if he's not your type, there's always Rime," Vicky suggested. "She's Chevalier's second in command, so-"

"Vicky, how many times do I have to explain that I'm not gay?"

"That's not what I heard," Vicky smirked. "Ames told me all about how you tried to steal her girlfriend."

"I'm hanging up now," I sighed.

"She even looks a little like Taylor," Vicky continued, heedless of my words. "With the whole supermodel skinny thing going on."
"Goodbye, Victoria," I turned off the phone. Why is it that the Dallon side of the family is completely fucking insane? I stood up and left my office.

"You okay?" GL asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "Just got done talking to Vicky. She was trying to cheer me up. She just sucks at it."

"Ah, Hurricane Victoria," I could imagine him nodding his head sagely, if only he had one. "She who Sveta worships as a god and may or may not be willing to go gay for. She who has more followers on her blog than most religions have at all. She who dumped actual shark bait on Shark."

I chuckled at that memory. The guy was a pompous windbag of a villain. Reminded me an awful lot of Kaiser. "She has her moments," I admitted.

"Hey, if you need someone to listen, you probably shouldn't go to the woman who never even listens to herself," he responded. The air rumbling with what I learned approximated GL's version of laughter. "I'm always willing to offer a metaphorical shoulder to cry on if you need it. May need to shop around a bit longer if you want something a bit more literal."

"Thanks," I smiled at the random nowhere. "I might take you up on that, some day. I've just been... after Paris."

"That was ugly," he agreed, his voice softening, as it did when he was busy focusing on his thoughts or emotions, instead of concentrating on using his power to speak. "It got to all of us."

"I need to talk with the others, don't I?" I asked. GL had, at some point, become my de facto second in command. "I just... I can't force myself to care anymore. It's like I want to fail, just so I don't have to keep fighting these battles we can't win."

"Minerva said:"

"Minerva's a lying bitch," I interrupted. "Trust me, I know her better than most. She says whatever's convenient for her and her goals. If it also happens to be true, that's barely a concern for her."

"So you don't think we're reaching the equilibrium?" he asked. "She's not wrong about the Endbringers getting weaker, and those of us fighting them getting stronger. New Endslayer combinations, new weapons that work against the monsters."

"It doesn't matter," I responded. "I used to be nothing. I didn't have to fight them because my powers
didn't matter. The average housefly is more of a threat to Alexandria than I was to the Endbringers. Now I'm fighting alongside the Triumvirate and pulling my own weight. I just... before, if I messed up, it meant so little. Now one mistake, one moment of hesitation, and people die. Possibly thousands of them. Just because I was less than perfect just one time. I can't... I don't know how to live with that. Some days, I regret ever joining Pantheon."

"Wish I had answers for you," he responded. I felt a shifting as his power influenced my clothes, as best he could make it at least. A half attempt at a hug. "One of those things about responsibility, I guess. But I promise you none of us regret your choices. You've been a good leader and a great friend. None of us would be anywhere near as well off as we are now, without you. Don't worry about us, okay? We'll be here to help you any way you need."

"I just want it to be over," I sighed. "One way or the other."

================

A/N - Sorry, Missy. There *are* other characters in this story.
I knocked on the door to Sabah's flat. This was the good part of town, at least in part thanks to our efforts. Although if I was being honest with myself, Alexandria deserved most of the credit. She was a one woman army, and pretty much all organized crime had been dealt with. Or, at least, the kind involving drugs and gangs and stuff inside the city and the nearby area. There was always petty bullshit, and people trying to fly under the radar. And there was always the Elite, but they tended to avoid the kind of crimes that drew that sort of attention. At least anywhere near LA.

After a couple minutes, the door opened, revealing a slender young Asian woman. She'd clearly just got done taking a bath, her hair was still wet. *Really, Sabah, you were dismembered last night and you still found time to bring someone home with you? What the hell?*

"Umm, hello?" The girl asked.

"Sorry," I smiled awkwardly. What do I even say to her? "I'm Beth, I was here to check up on Sabah."

"Oh, uh..." she glanced back into the room. "She's getting dressed."

*Of course she is.* "Let her know Beth's here, okay?" I asked.

"Uh, okay, sure," she agreed, then she looked back into the room again and shouted. "Someone by the name of Beth!"

"Oh!" I heard Sabah yell. "She's a friend, you can let her in."

"Umm, come in," she smiled cautiously, stepping back. "I think I remember hearing about you. *Sabah talks about me to her... uh... friends?* "I'm Lily."

*Lily? Oh!" Sorry! I didn't recognize you!" I smiled for real this time. "I'm Beth. Anima. I was just coming over to see how Sabah was doing after Beelzebub, I didn't think there'd be anyone with her already. I've been a big fan of yours for a while. I just didn't... you look so different in person!"

She relaxed a little, at least. "I get that a lot, actually," she responded. "The armor's actually designed to highlight certain features and play tricks on the eyes. Makes me look about five years older, about a foot taller, and more like a dignified head of state than a nineteen year old girl."

"It does a really, really good job of it," I agreed, marveling at the difference. She was actually
younger than me, and shorter. Even knowing this was the same girl as I saw on camera, taking off her mask for the whole world to see, I had trouble seeing the resemblance.

"Thanks," I heard Sabah respond, stepping out of her room. She was dressed nicely, as usual. "I worked pretty hard on that." She stopped for a second. "Minerva helped," she admitted. "A little bit."

"Are you okay?" I asked, looking at her leg. "I mean, that was... your entire leg was gone."

"A little stiff, a little sore," she responded. "It's not as bad as it was last night. Lily helped me with some stretches." She blushed.

Oh that's... I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. Lily and Sabah were both all smiles, so I was glad for them, but this was a little awkward for me. Then again, I had gotten used to awkward. The only way a power could be more embarrassing than mine would literally involve use of bodily functions as the power's main mechanism. "I should probably start an exercise routine," I admitted instead, acting like I missed the point entirely. "It's just, my power really doesn't depend on my physical abilities, and with the armor I never have a need for other reasons."

"It's a good idea," Lily agreed with me. "I can't begin to tell you how glad I am that I never stopped my workout routine even after getting the armor. It's one of those things you don't really think you need. Until, suddenly, you need it and wish you had more."

"I can imagine," I agreed. "So, umm, how long are you staying? Are you planning to join the west coast team?" If you do, does that mean Sabah's going to be spending all her time with you and I'll be a third wheel? I was painfully aware that I already was a third wheel right now, and they probably wanted me gone so they could... do whatever it was they were planning to do.

"I can't, unfortunately," Lily admitted, looking for all intents like a lost puppy. "I mean... the portals still haven't been completed. Then there's the coronation ceremony. Well, not coronation, but whatever it's called."

Sabah deflated visibly. "You mean you're still going through with the marriage?"

Marriage? There was more here than I knew, so I kept silent for now.

"No, we got to skip the whole marriage part of it," Lily responded. "They're pretty much just making me a princess, nothing else."

There was a time when I would have wept in jealousy at that news, I thought. Now I was just glad it wasn't me.
"Really?" Sabah asked. "No strings attached at all?"

"Well, the part where it's very clearly in name only is supposed to be a string," she responded. "There's absolutely nothing coming with with the title, like at all. They're not even going to give me a place to stay. I get the title, I get a fancy parade, and then the royal family does its best to pretend I don't exist at all. Until the anniversary of Leviathan's death comes along. Then I get another fancy parade. I have no idea how they pulled it off, but that's the deal."

"That sounds perfect," Sabah responded. "Congratulations... Princess Lily." She giggled at little at the silliness. I died a little inside, if only because I was used to phases like that being said with absolute seriousness.

"It's everything we wanted without all the parts that sucked ass," Lily agreed. "Well, I might still need a PR coach or something to make sure I don't say things like 'sucked ass' in public. So, y'know, can't win them all."

"That might not go over well," Sabah nodded.

"So, how long are you planning on staying?" I asked.

"Another day or so," she responded. "We have to reevaluate the portal plan, because some countries are afraid the Endbringers will attack other portals and we'd be forced to collapse those, too."

"That's actually not an unreasonable fear," I mused. I may not be a traditional Thinker, but I'm not stupid, I can follow a tactical conversation. "I mean, the last three Endbringer battles happened in areas that threatened portals. Paris, Brockton Bay, and while Avalon's other portal wasn't in San Fran, it would have been caught in the destruction if the tectonic plates gave way. I can see why they'd be worried."

"I guess, but it's a real pain in the ass," she agreed.

"It's probably more than that," I continued. "Pantheon showed it had the ability to break portals during the last fight. Cutting countries off from their colonies like that is a pretty devastating weapon if you use it intelligently. And I imagine a lot of countries are wondering what else you can do with the portals. If they can be shut off, can they be moved? Set to a different world? Can you simply move a gateway from its rightful country to Avalon and invade?"

"We'd never do something like that," Lily responded, defensively. Ooops, guess I could have phrased that better.
"I know," I agreed. "Hell, you don't even need to do that. If the Empresses wanted to conquer a world, they could do it a hundred different ways. The Yggdrasil, turned into an invasive species. Those giant bug monsters. The threat of sending you or Victoria in would probably be enough to make most nations surrender on its own."

"You really think so?" Lily asked. "I mean, I've gotten used to the idea of me being a political icon. I use that all the time to push social equality in some of the countries I've been to. And I know I scare villains. But you're talking about me as if I'm like a nuclear weapon."

"In a way, you really kinda are," I continued. I was warmed up to this conversation, now. "A lot of Pantheon's heavy hitters are. Maybe that's why you don't feel like you're that special, because compared to the people you work for you're top tier, but not alone at that level. Pantheon has so many ways to win a war that nukes look almost benign in comparison. You're scary as hell, too, Sabah."

"You really think so?" Sabah asked. "I mean, the armor makes me pretty strong, but not that strong."

"Yeah, I really do," I responded. "Khepri doesn't even need the biomonsters, she could destroy a country in minutes just using regular bugs. Vicky's rep is insane, and Sveta's close. Avalon's been a country for only a few months and it's already considered a military super power, with the strongest Cape forces that aren't Scion. Pantheon controls almost all of the Endslayers, and they do control the most famous and powerful of them. You're led by the most dangerous S-class threat ever imagined. You have at least three of the top five Tinkers on the planet. If there was a war between Avalon and Bet, right now? I'm not sure Bet could win. No wonder other countries are afraid of accepting your gifts, when you've shown you can take them away so easily."

"Wow, when you put it like that," Lily muttered.

"Yeah," Sabah agreed. She reached over and grabbed Lily's hand. "That's pretty scary to think about."

"Hey, if you think it's scary for you, how do you think it feels for everyone else?" I asked.

==================

A/N- I am soooo surprised no one called this ahead of time. I was afraid I made it too obvious.
"Hey, if you think it's scary for you," Beth asserted. "How do you think it feels for everyone else?"

_She made a really good point. How did we look, to the outside? I was a no-name, dodging recruitment attempts from the Protectorate and villain groups by sheer virtue of not being worth the effort of recruiting. Now I'm one of the most famous heavy hitters on the continent. Possibly even the whole world. A freakin' Endslayer._ I looked over at Lily, who had gone silent as well.

"And now I've made it awkward," Beth sighed.

"No! I mean, well, yes, but not for the reason you think," Lily responded. I recognized she was starting to ramble a little. "I've just been sorta going with the flow in this whole thing. We have Thinkers for considering the consequences and everything. For me it's just been about fighting the good fight. All the good fights, I guess. I'm really good at the 'causes' thing, just not so much at the 'consequences' part."

Beth smiled and shrugged. "I'm the opposite, I guess," she admitted. "I can't help but think about consequences, how things could turn out. I've always been that way, thinking about everything and worrying about how things might turn out. I'm surprised I didn't get a Thinker power. That's where they come from, right? Triggers where you worry about things get Thinker type abilities" Woulda made things so much easier for me, too."

"Take it from me, Thinker powers aren't all they're cracked up to be," Lily responded. "Thinker powers don't make you smart, and they don't solve a thing for anyone. I mean, I technically have a Thinker sub rank, but I don't really think of myself as a Thinker, I just have superhuman aim. Real Thinkers, like Minerva or Alexandria... let's just say their powers fuck with their heads. They sometimes do really stupid things. It's... I think the problem is they rely too heavily on their powers as a crutch, and it makes other things harder for them. Like knowing how to not be complete assholes. It's a rare Thinker who can do that. Besides, parahuman smart doesn't mean honestly smart. I think that's part of the problem with Thinkers. They got their powers because they're not smart enough. And powers don't change that, they just give you a crutch. You are just naturally smart, so that's not what you needed."

"Uh... thanks," Beth smiled. "Do you really think I'm smart?"

"You figured out in a few minutes what I hadn't managed to consider in months," Lily responded. "Either you're really smart, or I'm really, really stupid. And I'm pretty sure I'm at least a little above average intelligence."

"You seem smart to me," Beth responded. "I think you're just too close to the issue. It's not like this is something people ever expect to think about."
"Except heads of state and military advisors," I added. "That's kind of their job. Maybe that's why you're so good at it? You're used to commanding your summons. You've had lots of practice with thinking about troops and stuff like that. All I ever had to worry about was assembling stuffed animals, and I could never do more than one. And now that I have this armor, I don't even do that."

"Sorta the same for me," Lily responded. "My powers are straightforward in their own way. All the thinking involved in my power is taken care of by the power itself. Worry about missing? Perfect aim. Not sure if the enemy's armored? Armor doesn't matter. There's no thought other than trusting the power to do what it does. You're more like Taylor and Amelia. Their powers are either useless or world shattering, depending on how they harness them."

"I hate my powers," she responded. I already knew that. "I honestly wish I never got them. They only made things worse."

Lily paused, glancing at me as if to say She's your friend, you know how to handle this better than I do.

"I know," I spoke up. "But I don't know why. I mean, sure it's one of the powers that's hard to control, with your summons acting whichever way suits their personalities, but you really do seem to hate your powers. Like they've hurt you. Most of us... we may not like what we had to go through to get our abilities, but we're still glad to have them. Even when I thought I had one of the dumbest and weakest abilities, I only wished I had better powers. I never wished I didn't have them. at all."

"I have Social Anxiety Disorder," she responded, looking at us. Her eyes watered a little.

"Like, umm, you're shy?" Lily asked.

"Different version of the same thing," Beth replied. "You know those people who act up, draw attention to themselves and just generally try to hard to get others to like them? Yeah, that's me."

"You don't strike me that way," Lily responded.

"I've been in therapy for years to try to get over it," she answered. "The meds help. It also helps that you're girls. I... it's a lot worse with guys, especially ones I think are cute. I'm not into women, so that makes it easier to spend time around them."

Well, that explains why a very attractive twenty year old heterosexual woman who flirts with every male she meets is somehow such a virgin that her first kiss was with me, another woman, I thought. I've known her for months and she didn't tell me about this. She tells Lily right after they meet.
"But even at my best, I'm terrified, wondering what people think of me," she continued her confession. "Does he think I'm pretty? Does she think I'm rude? Do they wish I'd just leave so they can get back to spending what little time they can together before they have to go back to work? Will my friends talk about me behind my back? Will they forget about me when I'm no longer there? I ask these questions all the time. It's part of how I got my powers in the first place. An army of servants at my command that are perfectly loyal and love me without question. Everything I wanted, and absolutely nothing I needed."

"That... that's something..." Lily responded. "Fuck, and here I thought you had such an awesome power. If it makes you feel better, I won't talk about you behind your back. And, well, I'm certainly picking up a lot of food for thought."

"Thanks," Beth responded, smiling nervously. "I keep telling myself that, and for a while I can believe it. And then something happens and it's back to the same old story. I think that's why I love acting so much. I'm good at it, and I don't have to worry about what people think about me, since they're really thinking about the character I'm pretending to be. It makes things so much easier."

"Umm... you said you're on medication?" I asked.

"Yeah," she looked at me suspiciously. "You think I'm crazy now, don't you?"

"No!" I insisted. "It's not that, it's just... I think that we have the tech to treat that pretty easily."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's a really good idea," Lily agreed. "I mean, they have the ability to upload entire languages in, like, ten minutes. I have all the skills of an expert surgeon and general medical practitioner, mastery of half a dozen forms of martial arts, and the violin, and I even picked up the skill to drive a tank, just for the fun of it."

"A tank, really?" I asked, looking at her.

"Hey, do not dis the tank," she warned me. "And that's not even getting into the whole 'download your mind into a new body' thing, the 'injectable cure for all genetic disorders' thing, the 'add about ten I.Q. points and photographic memory' thing, the 'artificially evolve a billion years of genetic evolutionary history into an artificial life form overnight' thing. Or whatever other complete and total bullshit our Tinkers have dreamt up this week. I mean, I'm not an expert on this sort of thing, but they sure as hell are. There's only one problem I know about."
"Which is?" Beth asked.

"Well, it doesn't really work if the power itself is causing the problem," Lily responded. "Some powers, especially Thinker powers, fuck with how the brain works. Those can't be cured without erasing the powers themselves, for reasons I'm not too sure about. I work with a parahuman that has problems like that, and no I won't say who. But you're talking about something that you had a problem with before getting powers, and that medication works on."

I already knew that she meant Elle. The girl was a sweetheart when she was having a good day. And completely nonresponsive on a bad one.

"That sounds too easy," Beth responded.

"Sometimes easy's a good thing," Lily responded. "I mean, what's the worst that can happen?"

==================================

A/N- I love that phrase.
"The abominations were not shaped by any man, or men, High Priest," I informed, sipping from the slowly cooling beverage. "The Administrator, Artisan and Negotiator are wrong in their belief on this issue."

In the time I had spent in my mountain demesne, I had forgotten the pleasures of well made drink. The ghouls calling themselves Cauldron were resourceful, and had many worlds of fine food and drink to ply my tongue with. Thus far, the bribe had failed to truly motivate me, I would carry out my promise of granting them knowledge, as was my contract for them providing their artificial Faerie Circles for my entertainment. That did not, however, mean I went unappreciative of their efforts. Let them believe their token gestures influenced my actions, if they wished.

As I enjoyed my drink, I watched his Faerie. She was breathtaking, as grand as any I had ever seen outside the Grand Dance itself. Even the Faerie Circles did not meet this one's glamour. That it took the form of a beautiful silver colored woman, bound in chains, I chose not to tell the King of the Stillborn. Her flesh shimmered with images and ideas, possibilities incarnate. She was dead and alive. Captive and free. Obscene and pure. Profane and sacred.

"There are many clues to suggest otherwise," the man responded carefully. I was no fool, and aware that under his hood was artifice crafted by the fae-blessed. I was being recorded, they were using their talents to track my words and extract all the wisdom that might possibly come from them. Good, it was fitting in my role as the Faerie Queen that my lessers worship at my feet and supplicate for whatever wisdom I deigned fit to give them.

"Indeed there are," I agreed. "That does not make it any less false."

"Are they Agents... err, sorry, your faeries?"

"I am aware of your terminology." I spoke, and a thousand other voices expressed their annoyance by sighing in my stead. "You are entitled to your methods. No, the abominations are not of the faerie. Or rather, they are of the faerie much as the artificers' tools are."

"Artificers?" He asked, pausing for a moment to receive what information his conspirators were providing. "You mean Tinkers?"

"If that is what you wish to call them," I agreed, regarding him. His faerie had changed, the images coalescing as he sampled his abilities. Seeking to understand the knowledge I was gifting them with. Seeking the power that the High Priest felt was needed to stay safe, should I choose to betray him. He need not have bothered, I was enjoying the company, the drink, and the view.
"So they are constructs, like Tinkertech, but without human involvement?"

"No," I answered. "The abominations answer to one of the gifted, but they were not made by them," I corrected.

"The Entities, then?" he suggested.

"They are part of the cycle," I responded. "All parts of the cycle come from the Faerie."

"But Scion killed one of them," he pointed out next. "If he made them, why's he destroying them, now?"

"The King of the Faeries follows His own path," I answered. "It is not my place to question His will."

"His will means the destruction of everything," the man argued. "You say you're not afraid to die, but this is a scale of countless trillions of worlds. Your death, the deaths of everyone you've ever cared about."

"The Faeries continue on," I responded. "This is nothing the Serpent does not already know. Did not already tell you. She taught you of the Cycle, what parts she was blessed to know. She used you on her Path of Corruption, after all."

"Serpent?" The High Priest asked.

"The Betrayer," I responded. "The bearer of false gifts. She who stole the poisoned fruit and gave it to man. She who wields the rebel Faerie and used it to slay the true Queen. Pick your favorite story, she is all of them and worse."

"Contessa, you mean," he responded. "Is... is that why you killed her? Because she killed Heiress?"

"Heiress?" I asked. "An interesting name. Who chose to name the Stillborn Queen thus?"

"I believe it's one of the terms Pantheon coined," he answered. "But please, let's stay on topic. Did you kill Contessa for killing the dead Entity?"

"Not dead, merely stillborn," I corrected. "And I did not murder the Serpent. I reclaimed her, to keep her where she can do no more to poison the cycle."
"Will you do the same, when the time comes for the rest of us to fight Scion, to kill him?" He asked. I could imagine the thoughts in his head, imagining he might need to fight me. Imagining that he might even, perchance, have a chance of success in that flight of fancy. Just as he believed he could challenge the True King of the Faeries. I found his antics amusing, at least.

"I will not need to, High Priest," I spoke. "The True King cannot be defeated by us. He and His consorts sit atop His throne, untouched and untouchable. Above the royal court even as we are above mere ungifted humans. To imagine we can slay Him is to imagine an army of mere toddlers could defeat us. I allow your rebellion, because He allows your rebellion. And He allows your rebellion because it amuses Him, and is part of His will and the Cycle. The Faeries cannot be slain."

"Contessa... the one you call a Serpent... she killed Heiress, did she not?"

"Of course not," I scoffed. "She poisoned Heiress, stole her gifts and rendered her stillborn. Then sought to unravel the Dance of the Faeries in her jealousy and fear. The Queen is merely dreaming, now. Awaiting the moment of her Rebirth and the continuation of the Cycle. And no, High Priest, it is not possible for you to stop that. The events have been set in motion, and they are not to be stopped by any agency. Not even the True King Himself could halt the process at this juncture."

"Is that what you took Contessa for?" He demanded, whispering his anger. "That you could cause this to happen?"

"It would be poetic irony, would it not?" I smiled. "There is, after all, such a fine line between the gift of Poison, and the gift of Medicine. However, now that I have properly chastised the Betrayer of her crimes, I find there is little that I need do to accomplish the goal I sought. As such, I am content to adhere to our prior agreements. You and the Pantheon have done well in learning of the Cycle as you have. I shall continue providing my advice, if you continue to provide shows as you have promised. I do believe the claim was for the next one to be twofold the last?"

"I... would have to check, that is not my department," the High Priest fidgeted uncomfortably. "Tell me, why would we trust you not to kill the rest of us? Or Pantheon's, for that matter? What is stopping you from attempting to reclaim my Faerie? Or any of the others?"

"Why, nothing could stop me," I answered. "Save for my word, given freely as I have done here. I am not a murderer for murder's sake, High Priest. I am the Faerie Queen, and what I kill needs to die to serve my purposes, and the purpose of the Cycle. Now that the Betrayer is contained, there is little else for me to do save wait for the end, when we cease our games, cast off our mortal forms, and return to the Grand Dance amongst the stars."

"I see," he muttered unhappily. The Betrayer whispered in my ear, even as I bid her hand me another cup of spiced mead. I had to admit, if begrudgingly, that the recipe was delicious. The Faerie was, as promised, an expert at all things and a caterer to every desire.
That was what made the Serpent so dangerous, so poisonously appealing. If she were allowed, she would betray me as well. Even if merely as I grew to rely upon her power and lose myself in the power to always know the most convenient path through all obstacles. But, no, I would not allow myself that. To play my role in the Cycle was one thing, but the King and Queen did not orchestrate the entire play for a reason. They created the framework, and allowed the actors to improvise upon the stage for their amusement and pleasure. I would defer to their wisdom. The Serpent was a beautiful pet to own, but it would remain locked safely behind glass.

Save for when I desire the perfect drink.

"You have my offer, High Priest," I responded. "It remains unchanged from before. I will be understanding, if disappointed, should you reject my generosity. There will be no retribution if you wish to abandon the plan. If anything, I see how the loss of the Serpent bothers you so. I shall be more generous in my dealings with your organization in the future. You may enjoy one additional hour of my company per week, distributed however you wish, should you continue to meet my price."

"I... will talk to the others," he responded, still unhappily. "We'll have our answer to you by tomorrow's meeting."

"Thank you," I responded sincerely. "Now I really must return to my duties under the mountain. As entertaining as our conversations are, I have obligations to attend to, and lesser serpents to chastise."

"Yes, I understand," he agreed. "Doormaker? Passage to the Faerie Queen's residence."


"As do I, Faerie Queen," he nodded.

I smiled the moment I was sure no one could see me. Perhaps it was the mead talking, but I really did look forward to our next meeting.

================

A/N- As far as April Fool's jokes go? I think my favorite part of this one is going to be where I don't tell you whether or not this is an April Fool's joke and it'll be potentially dozens of chapters before it's confirmed or denied.

Transcendent Bluff THAT, bitches!
.... Also, I may have been planning this chapter for the last two weeks....
I stepped into the shower and blasted the water at the hottest it would go. Took a lot to hurt me, a lot more than a piddly ass apartment water heater could pull off, so I just enjoyed the steam while I lathered myself. Had to rinse the smell of ozone and blood off before going to work. Construction workers understood that staying clean wasn't exactly in the job description, but that would have raised unnecessary questions. Plus my supervisor was also my other supervisor. He'd be pretty fucking pissed if he thought I was dragging evidence around.

"Here's your mask," a woman's voice spoke casually, tossing a cloth cowl over the shower curtain.

"Gah!" I exclaimed. "Who the fuck!"

"Pants, too," she responded, and a pair of jeans sailed over.

I caught them, and hit that metal bit that switched from bath to shower. "Who the fuck are you?" I pulled my mask on right away. Wonder what it said about me that I found that the higher priority than my pants.

"I'm Victoria," she responded. "Y'know, local celebrity, beach babe without a beach, and all around beacon of awesomeness? I thought you'd remember me from the last time I kicked your ass."

"You can't be in here!" I shouted. "There are rules!" Meanwhile, I was struggling to get my soggy jeans on.

"Those rules are stupid," she dismissed. "Besides, you invited me."

"Bullshit!" I exclaimed. "Get the fuck out of my bathroom!"

"Did you, or did you not, as of April Thirtieth, when I last caught you, announce to the Channel Nine and Channel Eleven news crews that if it weren't for my battle armor you would kick my teeth out? Any time, any place? And then you went on to claim that after you were done putting me in my place you would, and I quote, 'show that bitch how a real man treats an uppity whore'?" She spoke in a deadpan voice the whole time. "Not the friendliest offer I've ever had, but somehow still far less
I smiled. *Okay, that I can work with.* I focused my power toward where her voice was coming from. The curtain exploded and burst into flames as I pumped enough electricity out to turn a normal person into charcoal. Didn't expect it would kill her, but it should fucking hurt. I started charging up my body, bulking it for what promised to be a long fight. She was faster than me, but I knew I was tougher. If I kept it to closed spaces, I could win this.

She burst through the smoke and dust, landing feet first against my face, and my head slammed hard against the linoleum, shattering it. *No way in fuck am I getting that security deposit back.* I grabbed her legs and threw her to the ground, where she landed on the edge of the tub with a very satisfying clang. The tub cracked and splintered. *Damn cheap fiberglass ain't worth shit.*

She caught me with a kick in the jaw, causing me to lose my grip. Then she rolled back and onto her feet. She was panting, damaged. Smoke rose from her clothing and hair. *I knew I got her with that blast.* Glints of light appeared through her wounds, then vanished along with the injuries.

"Very nice," she smiled wildly. "But I know you can hit harder than that."

"Is that why you're not coming at me harder?" I growled. I wasn't complaining about the advantage she was giving me. My muscles warped and gained density while my forcefield reacted with my bioelectricity to give me even more strength and durability.

"Yup, I know how you work, Eel," she responded, leaning back against the all that my electricity and her body had broken. She casually patted out a small fire. "Used to have a sparing partner with powers similar to yours. But more TK, less zappy. His name was Browbeat. I still talk to him every once in a while, but he never did get his powers back after being restored. Pity, but he says he's happier without them. Me? I couldn't live without mine."

"Well, guess I can't argue with that," I chuckled. *Not the weirdest fight I've ever had, but close.* I felt the last set of altered musculature pop into place. Finally, full str-. She was right there, punching her hands through my shield and grabbing my head. A moment later, her knee was in my gut. Then she headbutted my face hard enough to break my nose despite my reinforcements. I stumbled back and
landed in the wrecked tub. "How the fuck?"

"Electricity versus electricity," she answered, sparks dancing along her fingertips. "All I did was use my power to redirect yours. Oh, wait, no one knows I can do that. Please promise to blab to the press. If someone comes up with a way to counter my powers, maybe I'll even get an interesting fight."

I grabbed the shower rod and swung it at her, hoping to distract her, but she ignored it entirely, instead blocking my punch. I'm still stronger than her. I barreled forward, slamming her hard into the back wall. The shoddy construction gave before our bodies or momentum did, and we tumbled combination kitchen/living room. But I was on top. I punched down at her face, only for her to twist out of the way. The downstairs neighbors got a brand new skylight.

She elbowed me in the side of the head. Not having a lot of options, I bit her arm. My teeth warped into something sharp and wolflike. I had her, twisted to her side and pinned. I was going to win!

And then I slammed into the ceiling. By the time I even realized what happened, a glowing foot appeared through the haze of dust from the cheap ceiling tiles collapsing all around me, and I was kicked back into the bathroom.

She stood there, a glowing white silhouette of a girl. Her clothing disintegrated, but there wasn't anything interesting for the eye to enjoy. "You're not the only one with a transformed state. I sacrifice almost all my sensory powers. I get even more strength, speed and durability. Now get up and hit me, already!"

I lunged upward, connecting hard with her stomach. And by hard, I meant for me. Joints and bones gave way under the colliding force, and my hand broke. Then she backhanded me. I only traveled a couple feet before crashing into the toilet, shattering it. My concentration broken as badly as pretty much everything in my bathroom, I started to power down. Couple more hits like that and she could kill me.

"That was so unsatisfying," she muttered. "Maybe I should have waited longer to use my warform. Tell you what, how about next time I give you five minutes."

"Next time!?" I just lay there trying to pull my head together, water from the back of the toilet pouring all over me. Fucking concussions are the worst.

....

"So, as I see it," Chevalier sighed, looking at me. "And as the media sees it, by the way. You invited her to come find you, to say nothing of threatening sexual assault. You really don't have a leg to stand on."
"Then send me back to prison," I muttered. I was back to full strength, but they had those damn tinker-cuffs on me. Any attempt to draw on my powers would result in them hitting me with a dose of drugs. And not even the kinds of drugs that were fun, just shit that made me feel like I was going to throw up, pass out, and then throw up some more. "I'm man enough to know when I got my ass handed to me. We'll see how long my pals take to break me out."

"Uh... about that," his voice sounded more embarrassed than smug, but it still sounded smug. "Vicky's kinda on the warpath. After she knocked you out, she may have put the pictures of it online. You might want to look at this."

He handed me a picture that was obviously printed from a shitty copying machine. It was me, very much unconscious, laying in a shattered toilet. A minor burst of electricity, too slight to alert the cuffs, and the paper burst into flames. "That unbelievable bitch."

"She has her moments," he responded. "Either way, pictures like this are all over the internet, along with challenges to your buddies. I'll spare you the details until you're fully recovered from your injuries. Suffice it to say, I don't think anyone's going to help you out this time."

Fuck. Fuck!

"Now, thus far your crimes have been relatively minor," he continued. "The worst is threatening civilians with a parahuman ability, but you've managed to avoid ever carrying out that threat, so you're not birdcage bound. Yet. But you're close. One more mistake, including the mistake of breaking out, and you get to spend the rest of your life around lunatics like Glaistig Uaine, Lustrum and Acid Bath. Let's be honest, you won't survive, not around psychos like them. You don't have the instincts for it, and they're not going to give you a chance to learn them."

"You have another suggestion?" I asked. I knew the hard sell when I saw it.

"We can provide you a new identity," he offered. "Let's be honest, you'll probably never want to be known by your old moniker again, anyway. Not after you see the news stories being run right now."

"Doesn't seem like that great a deal," I muttered. "Fuck, the fact that you're offering anything at all means I'm valuable to you. I can do my dime if I have to, I'm a big guy, and I have powers. No one's gonna fuck with me in a normal prison. Ten year vacation courtesy of Uncle Sam, then I'm back out and can move and get a job and all that shit. So why would I want to go through all the trouble of working for you, instead of that? I ain't what we'd call eager to go fight the fuckin' Endbringers or such shit."

"According to Vicky, you have a secondary power that makes you immune to her combat precognition," he responded. "Put together with your other powers, this makes you the only person
she's ever met that she can fight for real. Take the job. It's a paycheck, and fresh air, and you get to have regular rematches against her. Maybe one of these days, you'll even figure out how to win."

_Huh._ "Well, when you put it that way..." I paused for a second. "Go fuck yourself."

====================

A/N- Some people are easier to convince than others.
"Go fuck yourself," Eel spat at me. I spared a glance at the large birdlike creature next to him, electricity dancing from its eyes. With Victoria's help, as well as some insights from Minerva and a couple other Thinkers, I'd started learning how to understand the apparitions. They were a sort of mental translation of what my power was seeing about their powers. A hallucination, but one with a pattern. One caused because my human brain couldn't comprehend the actual concepts being shown, and simply gave me an approximation. Of the source of powers, the Passengers, and how they interacted with their hosts.

Good. "Well, that is unfortunate," I sighed, feigning disappointment. "I'll let the officers to know to put you in a cell overnight. We'll hand you over to Feds whenever they feel like picking you up."

His Passenger shifted, as if preparing to attack. Puffing itself up and spreading its plumage. Lightning jumped between feathers. I'd been learning to read their responses, the subtle ways they responded and what that meant. In a way, it made me an effective empath, as long as I was smart about it. A way to read someone's subconscious, as long as they were a parahuman. This one was angry, longing to prove itself and redeem its prior humiliation. He'd accept an offer, if not immediately.

Director Dunn would probably be slightly annoyed, if only because a sell by me meant she could skip the trouble of sending more talented recruiters to talk to him. She was very much a by the books type, a military woman. She wanted this asshole in a cell just as badly as I did, whatever her orders might be on the subject of recruitment. In her world, the Protectorate would be a disciplined and well oiled machine full of professionals, patriots, soldiers and nothing else. There was no room in Director Dunn's Protectorate for criminals like Eel. Or, for that matter, troublesome outsiders like Victoria and her mother.

As for myself, well, I accepted the reality that we didn't really have the option of being picky right now. And I tried to ignore the part of me that was jealous that he managed to force Victoria to use her war form. Even when we managed to win against her in our sparing matches, she rarely entered her transformed state. And certainly none of us managed to force her into it during a solo match. I was far more willing to acknowledge that the way he talked to or about her pissed me off. Because I could allow myself to hate any man who would talk about any woman that way.

"What? I don't get my lawyer?" He asked.

"For what?" I asked. "You only get a lawyer for the purposes of trials and appeals. You've already been found guilty of over a dozen crimes and given a sentence. You don't get a trial, you just go back to jail. Maybe some pencil pusher will charge you with something new for your breakout, but that has literally nothing to do with me, and frankly I don't think you're worth the extra cost to the taxpayers. I'm just going to go congratulate Victoria for a job well done, and then do something important with the rest of my day."
"You suck at this bargaining shit, man," he responded.

"Bargaining implies that you have something I want," I dismissed as I opened the door and stepped out. Eel's Passenger squawking its silent rage at my dismissal. Director Dunn was watching from the other side, along with a couple of the PRT officers that handled closing negotiations.

"Interesting recruitment tactic, Chevalier," Dunn spoke, her face stern. Not disapproving, just stern.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I responded. "I anticipated an attack to his self esteem would be the best method at this time. It will take some time, likely a few days, but it is a strong first step. I don't anticipate he'll be able to stew for long before cracking."

"I'm sure my people will be able to exploit this psychological weakness," she mused. "We certainly didn't expect him to cave immediately, regardless. Good work. And while we're on the subject, please let Victoria know that the bounty is ready for her to pick up. I plan to watch the next phase of the interrogation."

"I'll be certain to," I agreed as I left the room. As I told Eel, he didn't concern me. Either he went to prison, and that was great. Or, much more likely, some other department in some other part of the country had to deal with him. Sometimes the former criminal recruits actually proved worth the headache. Eel's powers were a good combination of strong and generic, so I was sure someone would be happy enough to take him.

"Hey, Mike," Bonnie waved. She always called me by my middle name. Everyone did. "So what's the sitch?"

"Oh, nothing unusual," I responded. "I'm supposed to let Vicky know she has another confirmed bounty waiting around. I don't think she's collected on the pair from yesterday, either." *Ever since we ran out of immediate cases to heal, Vicky's had a lot of nervous energy.*

"Mrs. Dallon was in for them earlier," Bonnie responded. "She asked about you, by the way."

I suppressed the urge to cringe. "What about?"

"Oh, the usual," Bonnie walked with me as we went toward my office. "Victoria's been spending a lot of time at the PRT building. Is she being overworked? Is she lying about even being at work? Are we adhering to the contract? Nothing new."

"That's to be expected," I responded. "Although Mrs. Dallon has very little to work with in that regard. Feel free to remind her that Victoria is an adult, and an independent contractor for the Protectorate. We've been adhering to both the letter and spirit of that contract."
"I don't think it's the legal issues that she's worried about," Bonnie laughed. "But let's save that until we get to your office. Trust me, you'll be happier the fewer people actually hear this one."

"That bad, huh?" The question was entirely rhetorical. It was Carol Dallon, of course it was bad. We walked in silence for the minute or so until we got to my office. I opened the door and invited her to walk in first. "So where is Vicky, anyway?"

"Out hunting for more targets, something about only having a day or two window before they catch on to what she's doing," Bonnie responded. She waited until walked in and closed the door before she continued. "Your pet bombshell is proving to be quite the useful irritation."

"Can't argue with that," I agreed, taking a seat behind my desk. "Wish I had more problems like her in my life."

"Oh, I bet you do," Bonnie teased. "So, anyway, back to her mother, who's equally irritating and far less useful."

I considered asking Bonnie not to insult Vicky's mother like that. Then promptly decided that the woman would likely find that comment to be a compliment. Vicky was here for a few reasons. Mrs. Dallon was here for exactly one. To make sure our handling of the healing interaction was done without any exploitation. Either of the individuals being healed, or of the healers. Specifically, her daughter. Perhaps she'd represent me if I requested it, but I certainly wasn't in the forefront of her mind here.

"Her exact words," Bonnie continued. "Were something along the lines of 'tell your boss that if he's sleeping with my teenage daughter in order to manipulate her into solving his crime problem for him, I will personally see to it that he goes to the Birdcage'."

"Can't say I didn't see it coming," I sighed. I opted to ignore the parts where the threat was obviously impossible to carry out, seeing as I was not sleeping with her daughter and it wouldn't be illegal, let alone Birdcage worthy, if I was.

"Yeah, well you could have warned me," she quipped. "Which leads me to believe that if you're sleeping with her for other reasons, it's cool. But I wasn't brave enough to get confirmation on that. Speaking of, are you still?"

"Under the influence of Gaea's power and all the hormonal imbalance that causes?" I finished. "Let's just say I'm glad my costume is fully face concealing. If it wasn't for her warning, I probably would have done something... unfortunate... by now."
It was true, this was far worse than I remembered it being when I was sixteen. *Then again, when I was sixteen I didn't have an absurdly beautiful young woman with empathic powers around doing her level best to grab my attention every way she could imagine.*

And sixteen year old me had other problems. My parents' injuries, the loss of my brother. My induction into the Wards. Trying to understand the my phantom-sight, something I had only now, about two decades later, started to get answers for. Romance was certainly not on my list of priorities, at the time. *And yet, somehow, Hannah and I figured it out. At least for a while.*

"I think you should go for it," Rime finally volunteered.

"What?" *But she hates Vicky. Well, maybe not hate, but certainly doesn't like her in the slightest.* "What made you change your mind?"

"Would you believe it if I said she's grown on me?" she asked. "No? Okay, didn't think so. So how about we look at it smart instead of looking at it emotional? We already know you both want to, so that's a non issue. Now let's start talking politics."

"I'm pretty sure I don't like where this is going," I met her eyes.

"Neither do I," she admitted. "But it's going there. Everyone already assumes the two of you are together. Denying it is just going to make them think you're lying. Unfair, but true. Then there's the whole Pantheon connection. You can't deny that would be useful."

"And suddenly I know I don't like it," I responded. "I'm not-"

"No, you're not," she interrupted. "I'm just saying it's useful. What's more useful is... well, look what she's doing to this city. She's a one woman army who doesn't sleep and can track targets from half a mile away through walls. She's doing in Philadelphia what Alexandria did to Los Angeles. Crime's becoming unprofitable around here, and that means the professional criminals are finding new places to target. There's already talk of transferring out most of our team simply because they're no longer needed. They almost gave me the promotion in San Fran, and they certainly will offer me another city soon. When they do, I plan to take it."

My stomach jumped a little. Rime had been my second in command for years, I wasn't sure how I'd function without her help. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"I am," she insisted. "Well, unless they plan to send me to Alaska or something. There's not a lot left for me to do here. Crime's down, supervillains are down, celebrity superheroine is hogging all the photo ops. I can make a lot more difference than I am right now, but only if I do it somewhere else. The only thing that's keeping me right now is, well, you."
"Me?" I asked. What's she saying?

"You saved me during the worst point in my life," she responded. "Gave me a home. I know, you had your reasons. So did your parents. That I was, in a way, a replacement for... him." She looked down, having gone quiet.

"You aren't a replacement," I insisted.

"It's okay," she replied. "I'm okay with it. I'm even happy for it. There are no words for how much better my life is for having you to take me in, to protect me. That's part of why I agreed to join the Wards and Protectorate in the first place. To take care of you the way you took care of me. You don't need me to do that, anymore, and I'm ready to move on and have my own career outside of your shadow. Sort of. I guess you'll still be my boss, if indirectly. And you'll always be my brother and protector. But making my own way for a change would be nice. And I'd feel better knowing you had a woman around to keep you grounded."

"And you think Victoria's going to keep me grounded?" I asked.

"Well, yeah," she smirked. "One of you will have to be the level headed one, and it sure as hell isn't gonna be her."

A/N- Wanted to write this from Rime's (AKA- Random Name Rolled as Bonnie) perspective, but couldn't find a voice for her in my head. Which is a pity, I think the scene would have been MUCH richer for it... maybe some day I'll revisit the character and have a proper vision for her...
Eleven new recruits. I smiled my best smile and walked up toward my group of them. All four of the Tinker parahumans that had broken the Taboo, plus two more natural Triggers to make things look a little less suspicious.

Lisa had the Thinker group, and would be giving them a similar breakdown. This is it, this is Pantheon stepping away from its prior role as a superhero team and then later a superhero alliance, and stepping into its new, presumably permanent, role as the military leadership of an entire planet.

Or, well, two planets and likely to climb in the future. But I wasn't the one keeping score on that.

"Greetings, ladies and gentlemen," I spoke. I'd taken my 'biotinker' mode, granting me Thinker understanding of these people in front of me. Their moods, their emotions, where their eyes were tracking. Coupled with talents developed in high school and my enhanced mental abilities, I would have this crowd eating out of my hands.

"Let's start with introducing your bosses," I stated. "I'm Emma. Or, Hecate, if you prefer using my cape identity. Frankly, I prefer that we don't, but leave it as your decision. I am Pantheon's Secretary of Research and Development. For your purposes, only the Empresses and Minerva outrank me. My specialty is, functionally, integrating other Tinker technology. I can understand and work with almost any other Tinker's designs, and adjust the technology of two different Tinkers to work together. Or assist one Tinker in understanding another's work."

I gave them a second to think on that. It's why I was in charge here. Whatever they were doing in their own departments, working with other Tinkers similar to their own specialty, I was the piece of the puzzle that allowed them to all fit together. And the more Tinkers we had in the group, the more effective my power made me. I was equal to the sum of R&D's parts.

"The other departments are as follows," I spoke after a moment. "Our powers research division is headed by Clarice." I gestured at Riley, who smiled and waved, but didn't say anything. We had too much to cover in too short a time, already. I could see the level of disappointment and concern in some of our recruits, given that they averaged about a decade of age over the girl. Time to let them know she's in charge for a reason.

"She is a cybernetics specialist, and to a lesser degree a power manipulation Tinker. She's responsible for the biotech armor that gave the Endslayers the ability to kill a total of three Endbringers thus far. She created the basis of the resurrection technology, and is responsible for the majority of the work done on the remote control androids." There, they can chew on that. Any one of those accomplishments would make her top tier on the world stage. No one would underestimate Riley in this group.
"Our biotechnology division, responsible for most of our success with the anti-Endbringer monsters, is headed by Yum Kaash," I continued, gesturing at Rey. "He's a biodevelopment and artificial lifeform specialist, and responsible for most of the work done on the monsters you've seen in the Endbringer videos, as well as our foremost expert in research on the Endbringer tissue samples we've collected. Expect Clarice and I to be heavily involved in that division as well. With the exception of powers research, it is our highest priority project."

"Our conventional technology division is managed by Tir," I informed. He's one of the ones that doesn't want his identity revealed. Trevor rose his hand up, indicating who he was. "He specializes in movement and travel technology." Sorry, Trevor, you kinda got the short end here. "His department will have the widest variety of tasks, ranging from exotic power sources to advanced electronics to robotics to weapons systems. Expect to see me there a lot, finding ways to integrate your technology. His department also works closely with Dragon fairly often."

Most of them knew who Dragon was, already. The rest would learn fast. "Dragon is is busy managing the development of Avalon's industrial base, and a number of our other projects. Consider her of equal rank to myself. She has provided a massive database of tinker technology she has developed or acquired over the years. All groups will benefit from it. You will all have free access to the majority of it. Note that there are restricted sections, you will need a department head or above to grant access that information. I advise you have a good reason before asking."

I watched their emotions as they considered the implications. 'Dragon's massive database'. If Zach were here, he'd probably snigger and make a dirty comment. He wouldn't be completely wrong, either. The emotional surge off these new Tinkers could easily be mistaken for erotic.

"I've already read your files, but I'll let you introduce yourselves," I continued, having determined their emotions were starting to taper down from that prior rush. "As much or as little as you like, but a name and Tinker focus are things the rest of your team will need to know."

"Anton," a slimmer boy with black hair and blue eyes spoke up first. Came from Russia. The youngest of the group, age fifteen. Also either the most confident, or he had a secondary effect that allowed him to ignore his emotions, one way or another. There was no shortage of sources for that feature. I wasn't sure how someone so young pulled the resources together for Cauldron to sell them a vial, let alone induct him into the Mass Trigger experiment, but that wasn't really a concern. "I think my specialty is in the behavior of extradimensional interaction. I... uh... may have dismantled the shunt drive you gave me. Sorry about that."

"We have more," I responded. I gave him my prize winning smile, which he was curiously disinterested in. Well, ain't that interesting? "I'll want to see what you made out of it, later."Especially since the stuff is half organic tech, which makes you far more versatile than you realize. "You'll be working in Tir's department, for the most part." For at least a couple reasons. "More advanced and effective shunt drives or dimensional portal technology is considered one of our high priority goals right now, so expect that to be your main assignment for the time being."
"I'm Elena," a woman spoke. A couple years older than me. Romanian, and vaguely mousy with medium brown hair, eyes and a light tanned skin color. Reminds me a lot of Madison. "My specialty is in analyzing and manipulating powers. Not, like, permanently or anything. But I can build equipment that will enhance or weaken or slightly alter how the power expresses itself. Maybe even temporarily disable them if given the resources to work with."

There were murmurs at that. Power manipulator and outside the Taboo. She is probably our superstar recruit and now everyone knows it. "You'll be assigned to our powers research division, obviously." Riley will have her mainly on power interactions, they're possibly our best hope to fight Scion.

"I'm Symbiosis," a mid twenties male spoke up. He was one of the natural triggers, and done in part to make us look less suspicious. Also a former Australian villain by the name of Nest. "I'm a biotinker, my specialty is symbiotic lifeforms. Think of it like organic cybernetics." The other part was because he was honestly useful. Especially if we could find a way to to merge Elena’s power tech with his. Also, what was it with biomanipulators almost always being villains?

"Symbiosis, you'll be working with Yum Kaash," I informed. "Your first assignment will be based on improving the anti-Endbringer monsters."

"Cool," he agreed.

"I'm Monica," one of the other women volunteered. She was older, almost mid thirties, and one of the ones that got an unstable formula with mutations. Specifically, the same thing I purchased. She was almost solid white, including her hair and eyes. Far more human beneath the skin than I was. But visually, neither of us could pass for normal. "My specialty is energy transfer and electronics." Double specialty, I noted. No surprise she'd be similar to me considering she used the same formula in a similar way.

"You'll be assigned to the conventional tech department," I responded. It was the easiest one to work with, after all. Only a very narrow field would be able to handle wetworks or power manipulation. "I suspect Dragon will have some specific ideas for what to have you focus on."

Only two left, I noted. And the two who were theoretically least in this group, the ones who didn't want to state their specialties.

"Amanda," the teen girl volunteered reluctantly. The other natural trigger. "I create, umm, tracking and stealth technology. I don't think I can build anything good enough to fight Endbringers or anything." I felt kind of bad for the girl, and I was sure some of the others did as well. In almost any other group, she'd be a top tier parahuman, with a highly versatile powerset that others would envy. Here, on this team, she was average at best.
"I can think of other uses," I responded. "Honestly, having someone who might be able to set up anti-Stranger or anti-Thinker technology in our more delicate operations would be incredibly valuable. Our first priority is definitely to see if you can beat remote viewing Thinker powers. You'll be in Tir's group, primarily. But we'll likely assign you to projects in Clarice's department regularly, depending on the extent of your skills." Blocks against that Doormaker parahuman maker would be absurdly valuable. The more I thought about Cauldron, the less I trusted them.

"I'm George," a college age guy spoke up, the last of the people on the list and the least confident. He reminded me a lot of Taylor, after... everything I did to her. Even looked a little like her, or maybe he looked more like her dad. Beanpole figure, hunched down. Although he had sandy blonde hair. "I... think my specialty is water. Boats, submarines, fluid dynamics. It's... umm... pretty lame compared to the rest of you."

"Don't be so sure about that," I responded, switching over to my hybrid state for a minute. The extra processing power was needed to prove my point. "Aquatic tech should include pressure drives, maybe even fusion generators. Advanced fluid dynamics could likely apply to our biotech, maybe you could augment their artificial nervous and circulatory systems. To say nothing of potential medical technology applications for rapid drug delivery. Even if all you ever achieve is a cure for cholesterol, you could easily save millions of lives. You'll work with Tir's group, but I'll have you in Yum's at least once a week to work with the biotech."

"I hadn't even thought about any of that," he blinked.

I reverted to normal, and the layer of frost started to break off. "It's what I do," I responded. "It's what Pantheon does. Finding ways to harness every potential advantage, making all of us greater than the sum of our parts."

Oh yeah, I smiled. Eating out of my hand.

===============

A/N- Emma really is the logical choice for managing a wide spread of Tinkers. Possibly even better for it than Dragon.
I watched as the various new recruits met their official bosses. In some ways, being put in charge of the Tinker group was the opposite of a promotion for me. Not a demotion... a, umm, downmotion? The hell do you call a promotion that's more punishment than reward? It made more of my job management, and less of it Tinkering. If I was being honest, that was probably for the best. I had met my limits as a Tinker, there was little left for me to achieve on my own. That's all I'll ever be, isn't it? The one who profits from the hard work of others, instead of on my own accomplishments? Fuck, I really am perfect for management.

Riley, no I need to start thinking of her as 'Clarice' in my head, gravitated toward Rey. Which put Symbiosis and Elena together as well. Those two teams had a lot of overlap, enough to be considered a single operation. The divisions were created specifically because of how valuable the two projects were. And, in a way, to keep Symbiosis away from Clarice as much as possible. Biomanipulators were rare, biotinkers rarer still. The odds were very high that he had enough knowledge to connect the needed dots and associate Clarice with Bonesaw. It wouldn't be as much a disaster now as it may have been before, but it was better to not deal with it at all.

Trevor, meanwhile, was dealing with Anton, Monica, Amanda and George. His department also functionally included Dragon and all Dragon's recruits. Which meant Defiant, Leet, and Masamune. I could see both teams slipping into 'fugue' modes.

They already got their general orientation, including the lights out rules, and the exemptions for those who didn't need sleep or were adults and allowed to set their own pace, to a certain degree, at least.

One of the things to know about Tinkers is that there was no nine to five for us. We worked when we felt the need to work. Which usually came to around ten to fifteen hours a day if you let us. Depending on the Tinker in question. And since Pantheon didn't do that utterly asinine bullshit the Protectorate did in sending Tinkers out on patrolling for supervillains, we were dedicated entirely to our jobs. Which meant we'd see exponentially more productivity from ours.

As if patrolling was ever a good idea. Seriously, what moron ever thought of that? Sending people like Victoria... or Sophia... out on patrol, that made sense. But there were so damn few parahumans who could create, rather than destroy. And sending them out to die in fights against fuckers like Hookwolf or Lung... or the Siberian? Sure, the Passengers contributed to the phenomena, but Tinkers were perfectly content with not being in the direct line of fire most of the time.

For that matter, why did the Entities even create Tinker type parahumans in the first place? Where did 'put advanced weapons in the hands of the host species' fit into their evolutionary model? Seemed like an intentional design flaw, if you asked me.

Lost in my thoughts, I left the others behind. Rey, Clarice and Trevor had it well under their control. I went straight for our head office, where Taylor and Amelia were handling the stuff they generally
"Hey, Tay," I started as I walked in. Taylor was already looking up at the entrance. We were amongst friends, we could afford to be informal. Our equivalent to the Oval Office was a triangle, with a sort of curved desk layout for Taylor and Amelia, so they could sit back to back while at work, whenever they actually did any office work. Really, this room was designed to hold meetings more than it was designed to be a private office, looking more like a college lecture hall than anything else I could think of.

"Done so soon, Ems?" She smiled as she asked the question. She already knew the answer, of course. Full awareness of all of us if we were in our suits, and we were definitely in our suits for this show.

"Yeah, I didn't have much to do anyway," I responded. It was more for Amelia's benefit than Taylor's. She didn't have the limited omniscience of her fiancée. "R-Clarice and Trevor can handle the rest of it. We know I'm at my best when I have something in front of me to work with." Oh, right, I still need to see what Anton put together in the couple hours he's been here.

"I wouldn't say that's true," Taylor responded. "I mean, look at Caliburn and Harpe. One's just shy of an Endslayer weapon, and the other very well might be Endslayer quality, we're just afraid to test it in case the next one adapts."

"Those aren't honestly my work," I admitted. "They're Dragon's technology, and Clarice's understanding of powers. Technology sourced from a dozen other things that Dragon collected. Maybe I put them together, but ultimately it's still just me using someone else's work better than they did."

"I don't know enough about what it's like to be a Tinker to say," Taylor responded. "But I guess we're a lot alike. My powers are pretty crap all by themselves. I have people like Amelia and you to give me the edge I need. Without you, all I have are bugs."

True, in a way I was a better Tinker than Dragon- on a very small scale and only after she'd done the legwork- but I had reached my peak, advanced Dragon's technology as far as I possibly could with the abilities I had. Dragon still hadn't. I'd have to take my pride in knowing that she would not be as advanced as she was, without my help. There was nothing left that I could teach her, and I had a feeling she was far from reaching her apex.

Amelia's eyelids fluttered for a second. I should mention something about that. "Umm... you guys have really got to learn to work on your poker faces when dipping into your link," I spoke up. "It's pretty obvious to those who know what to look for. And if your allies are figuring it out..."

"Then enemies, especially enemy Thinkers, might as well," Taylor concluded. "Yeah, thanks, I promise we'll keep that in mind."
"It shouldn't matter too much," I offered. "I mean, usually when you're in public together, you're wearing your armor systems."

"No, you're right," Amelia responded reluctantly. "If nothing else, we need to keep it in mind, so we can break the habit."

I might have sighed in relief. Amelia was more standoffish with me than Taylor, for a number of reasons. Some of which I deserved, like what I did to Taylor. Others I'd probably object to more if it weren't for the ones that I deserved, like my developing suspicion that Amelia was jealous of me. Maybe not quite in a romantic rivals sort of way, but something.

It had been a long road for Taylor and I to return to something like friends, able to speak freely like this. Amelia could end that progress with a single thought, if she chose to.

"So, how is the other group doing?" I asked, hoping to change subjects. "I didn't get a chance to review the Thinkers."

"Umm, pretty well." Taylor anwered. She moved her arm, and I knew she'd grabbed Amelia's hand under the desk. No, she's resting her hand on Amelia's thigh. Close enough. "We've got a new Precog. The ability to detect whether a given action will either get closer or further away from a set goal. Sort of like playing Hot and Cold."

"I remember that game," I smiled. Taylor would remember it, too. It was a game her mother used to play with us. Knowing how her mom thought, it was probably some kind of critical thinking training program. "So, what level are we talking, power wise?"

"He's nowhere near Dinah's level," Taylor responded. "Not even a match for Coil, generally. But he can use his power more than six or seven times a day. He'll help us conserve Dinah's questions. Lisa says she can use him to functionally triple Dinah's effectiveness. Or he approximately double Accord's, if we assign him to help in that department. He's versatile enough to use for a lot of things."

"That's actually better than we were hoping for," I responded. It was true. With people like Dinah and Lisa on this team, it was easy to forget that most Thinkers weren't on that level the same way most Brutes weren't on Alexandria's. "Is he past the Taboo?"

"The same way Lisa is," Taylor informed. "He can't see Scion or Endbringers, but he doesn't have the memory blocks. He doesn't even have a workaround like 'saving more people from dying during the next Endbringer battle' as a goal like we can sort of use Dinah for."
"No surprise," I sighed. "We can beat the human side of the Taboo, but not the Passenger side. The Passengers have never worked with humans before, it makes sense they can make mistakes on that side. But they've been following their cycle for millions of years, they've probably figured out all the possible errors that could grant powers that break through on their own."

"We still only have one method," Amelia whispered. I knew what she meant, so did Taylor.

The final solution, kept so secret that Lisa and Clarice were the only other people that knew it was possible. We knew what happened to Noelle's power. We had the only known hard copy of a parahuman before and after triggering. We had records of Second and Third triggers as well. If we absolutely had to, we could artificially induce the process. But the price was astronomical... there was no way to know how the power would respond, other than going way beyond the levels that the Passengers normally allow. What we did know is that it would inevitably kill the brain of the subject. And given the weird way Passengers interacted with hosts, the only remotely safe way to resurrect a host would be how we handled Noelle.

"We'll find another way," Taylor insisted. "Trying to create a power with absolutely no limitations is Cauldron's holy grail, not ours. We don't even know that it would work. If we get a truly uninhibited power, that's great. But how many unlimited powers does Scion have? For now, we focus on power interactions and Tinkertech. Finding a way to breach into the dimension containing Scion's real body, that's the best hope for us. We don't need an unlimited power to do that."

We hope, I added silently. So did they, based on their biosigns. Even Taylia had its limits for mood correction.

"So, maybe you two should come down to the lab, tomorrow," I offered. "Two in the afternoon. I have something to show you."

"And you're not going to share what it is," Taylor quipped.

"What would be the fun in that?" I asked. "Also, you're not allowed to cheat and ask Lisa. Or anyone else."

===================

A/N- Woulda had this last night, but I was tired and opted to sleep and reread in the morning. Good god am I glad I didn't publish the mess last night. Ugh.
"Now feel free to socialize in the main areas and get accustomed to the dorms," I stated. "As you already know, Pantheon doesn't encourage the concept of secret identities, but we don't have rules against it, either. Respect the decision of the others, whichever way they choose to operate. You have a few hours to get to know each other. Who knows, you might even meet some of the other set of new recruits."

There were some chuckles at that. The odds of us actually meeting the Tinker recruits was basically zero, and most of these new Thinkers were smart enough to know that the others were just plopped down in a room full of other Tinkers and some of the most advanced resources they'd ever laid eyes upon. We'd be amazed if any of them came out of the labs all week.

"And I would ask you to remember that most of the senior members of this team are younger than you," I continued. Because they're natural triggers and you're not, we all know that needs to stay a secret as well. "We will likely establish an age division as well as the gender one in the near future. More likely than not, all adults will be provided their own private residences offsite, for them to use as they see fit. This depends upon a number of factors, not all of which can be known yet."

"Understood," William and Jerome spoke together. They shared the code name Gemini. Cauldron's little experiment within the experiment. Identical twins, identical formulas, just to see how things came out. Turns out, pretty much identical. They were busy flirting with Seeker, the only female cape I'd gotten in this mix. She seemed to be enjoying the attention, so I turned and left them to their devices.

Her power was either really good, or mostly useless, depending on what you needed. She could select a single object or person and be able to follow a direct path to locate said object. Only problem, it needed to be something she already knew. Car keys, yes. Escaped prisoner whose photo we could show her, yes. Perpetrator of an unsolved crime, no. And if she looked for something too general, she'd just be led to the nearest version of that thing. Which meant tracking keys didn't really work unless she knew those specific keys.

If she didn't have such a painful case of hero worship for us, I'd have gotten rid of her in our trade-shuffle with Cauldron. As it stood, she did have some use. I could see giving her a Changeling and sending her off with Victoria, and Eric. Or better, wait for Missy to recover her powers. Wipe out a few of the nastier remaining known villains, drum up some good PR in the face of all these less than stellar Endbringer conflicts. But for the most part, she'd be more valuable in from a nonpowered perspective. Someone energetic and enthusiastic to encourage the mostly insular girls on the team.

I paused before walking in to talk to the Empresses. The light, constant bleed of my postcog let me know Emma was already in there. Done with her orientation, wants to bask in minor success, hoping for attention and approval from Taylor. Some days, Emma made it really hard for me to remember how much I hated her, through all the pity. But Emma brought her lot in life on herself. Nobody forced her to be a psychotic bitch.
I opted to not go in. *Let Emma have her moment of attention, I can talk to Taylor later. I'll take care of other business.*

I ducked into my office and set it to lockdown. Then I made my phone call. Rebecca answered it almost immediately, although she didn't activate the video communications. *Is outside, dealing with hero related issues.*

"Did I get you at a bad time?" I asked, my voice relatively calm.

"Not at all," she replied. *Voice hollow, using subvocalizing and her suit to transmit message without speaking. "Dealing with a minor hostage crisis." Legitimately unconcerned, aware that hostages aren't in real risk unless someone does something absurdly stupid. Doesn't consider herself in charge of operation. Far more interested in speaking to me than dealing with this.*

"Funny, I would have expected to hear about it," I replied, putting a little more honest emotion in my voice than normal, instead of my usual calculated tones. With her being limited to nonvisual clues, we had to be a little more open in our conversations. Eki's been called in already, doesn't think she needs to call and confirm. Gaining confidence as a leader. Planning to use GL to disable their weapons. I smiled at that. Not needing to constantly hold Crystal's hand would be a welcome change of pace.

There was a sudden pop of sound over the phone. Using her flight, high speed. I waited patiently for a while, thumbing casually through reports until she had time. I started typing up an opinion on Breather's powerset. *Possible precog or time manipulator. Can speed his own perception of time, gaining about five minutes perceived time for thought in a second or so to the rest of us, lacks ability to move at superhuman speeds. Lacks other powers to exploit during accelerated period. Design education plan with skill upload tech. Consider putting in requisition for Vicky/Chevalier upgrade for improved abilities. Also have custom Changeling model built for him to use in the field.*

"Sorry for the distraction," she spoke, still through subvocalizing. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as hearing her actual voice, or the body language conversations we often had. But it was by no means unpleasant. "I've got at least a few minutes to talk, now."

"I understand," I responded. I finished my report and flagged a moderate priority request for him to get full testing from our Tinkers. *"We live eventful lives. Speaking of, I meant to talk to you about maybe visiting sometime soon?"*

"Is that so?" *Amused by implication, teasing.*

"It's work related," I responded.
'A pity,' she quipped back. Feigning disappointment to cover legitimate disappointment.

"It may take a couple hours that, unfortunately, will be rather boring," I stated. "We need to test Gemini's power to imitate other Thinkers. We currently have them assigned to our economics department."

"I'm afraid I'm uncertain how useful my power would be for them," Alexandria responded. "I grant you, it's flattering that you feel my Thinker powers alone are so valuable, but what are you hoping to accomplish?"

"Well, we already know they can scan a Thinker power each, and blend weaker versions of those powers with each other," I responded. Pity it didn't work on Tinker or Precog abilities, then we'd be really in the money. "We have them running Accord's power alongside mine, and I think that will be their default setting. We're going to see if maybe they can get some permanent improvements to their abilities by borrowing your power, and likely Uber's alongside it. He can temporarily know skills. It's pretty limited."

"You're hoping that my perfect memory and accelerated learning and perception rates will translate to permanent retention of skills, especially ones too unique to have for your memory tech," she stated. Emphasis on memory tech in statement, confidence, too high a confidence and pride for reference to Gemini. Oh, so it worked. Excellent.

"Speaking of memory tech, was your resident terrifying little girl placated by our latest project?" I asked, despite already knowing the answer. We still wanted to keep just how thorough our communications could be a secret. There was reading subtext, and then there was the ability to plot incredibly complex details using nothing more than the flutter of the eyes or the positioning of a finger based upon millimeters. "Did having the duplicate active alongside the original cause any significant side effects?"

"Impossible to say for certain," Alexandria responded back. "There was no time for the pair of them to really stress their abilities. We are, however, quite confident in our belief that the power will go mainly unused. She refers to it as a 'poisonous fruit'. Remarkably biblical imagery all considered."

"She's insane," I responded. "She's borrowing mental images from every source possible that she understands. Besides, the telling of the fall is an old one, older perhaps than her usual metaphors of choice. I doubt she'd consider it in any way dissonant from her usual. Still, it's an interesting line of thought to follow."

"I'll be certain to relay your opinions to my friends," she responded. "We'll have the most recent set of recordings ready for you soon, by the way. Concerned over that fact. Afraid I'll be upset by something in the tapes. Correction, something not in the tapes. Tapes will be edited. Will lack data that she fears might be critical, given that no one can predict what information will or will not be critical to my powers. Wondering if we should break the rules by smuggling full copy. Worried about
risk of their precog realizing information was stolen.

Willing to take that chance.

Wow, that... that's actually huge.

"Tell them I appreciate it," I agreed. I don't want her to take the risk. I'll take the censored tapes for now. "While we're on the topic, there is the matter of our agreed payment for a copy of that tech. We provided it in good faith, after all."

"Indeed," Alexandria agreed. Is startled by the lack of concern over censored tapes. Mentally reevaluating assumptions about my abilities. Has concluded I can compensate for edits somehow. Knows it's not part of my normal- oh, well there goes that secret. Fuck me running. "I'll see to it that it's provided shortly."

Concerned that I didn't share the secret sooner. Sorry. "Thank you," I responded. "We'll discuss the rest of it in person, plus the matter of Gemini and the recordings. Kill all the birds with one stone." I'm sorry, but I really need to go prepare for this. "The Empresses will need to be informed." Please don't be too upset with me.

"Thursday would be best," she responded. Eager to discuss, worried, curious to know what secret power actually is. "I may be able to swing Wednesday. If not, we'll need to wait until next week."

"Thursday is acceptable," I agreed.

====================

A/N- Possibly my new favorite chapter ever. Of all time.
"Oh, wow, it is so cool to finally really meet you!" Beth gushed. She was shorter than me, but then most women were. Average height, I couldn't help but note she was prettier than me. *Amusement* *Curiosity*. "Your power is just so amazing, I wish mine was like yours."

"I never really though of controlling bugs as all that good," I responded awkwardly. *Being praised by normal people, I can handle. Being praised by top tier parahumans is something else entirely.* And Anima was top tier, by any ordinary standard. "I'm just lucky to have others that can make me stronger." I slipped my arm around Amelia's waist. *Pleased* *Love*. Really, really lucky.

"Like I keep saying," Lily stated, distracting Beth from me. "It's all luck, who gets what kind of power. Sure, there's patterns you can use to predict things, but those patterns aren't something you can control." *Unless you get one of Cauldron's vials.* "It's all about what you do with what you have. And in Taylor's case, what she did was hook up with the world's most powerful biomancer to build giant bug monsters."

Beth had gone quiet. "I made myself look stupid again, didn't I?"

*Concern* *Pity*. *She couldn't be any more different from me.*

Lily put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "No, not at all," she insisted. "Everything's fine, it's just the anxiety talking."

*Concern* *Suspicion*. *Amelia's right, are they? Fuck, how am I supposed to handle that? If they're not, then bringing it up is just humiliating. If they are, then... fuck... this could get complicated in a very bad way, very quickly.* Somehow I didn't imagine this would work out as well as Theo, Missy and Riley managed to. Lily was absolutely critical to our operations, but Sabah was a good person and didn't deserve being cheated on.

"You're sure?" she asked, looking to me for an answer.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," I responded, smiling and feeling incredibly awkward about it. Still, I dealt with Bitch, and was even getting through to her when... *had it really been so long ago?* *Concern* *Support* *Love.*

"Don't worry, we have everything set up to fix that. Ten or fifteen minutes and you'll be fine forever," Emma interjected. "Well, sorta. You'll still get the same natural awkwardness as all normal people do. I mean, I suppose we could fix that as well, but trust me when I say you don't want that."
"It's really that easy?" Beth asked, her words a blend of doubt and hope.

"It's really that easy," Emma confirmed. "Keep in mind this is only for normal neurochemical issues. The stuff associated with Parahuman powers is beyond our ability to undo, without removing them completely. And even then there's no promises."

Beth looked disappointed at Emma's warning. "My therapist said that, at best, I could control the problem with therapy and medication. The idea of a cure was never even even considered. How come this isn't being sold for everyone with problems like this? There are millions who could be helped."

"Well, a few reasons," Emma responded. "First, well, law hasn't caught up to parahuman technology. It would be a decade before USA medical technology laws gave us approval, even if we met all their requirements today. Using this stuff would be illegal almost anywhere on Bet. Lucky us, we don't live on Bet, so we can do pretty much whatever we please."

"But we do have tech review and patent laws on Avalon," Amelia was quick to point out. "They're managed by Dragon. This machine wouldn't pass the requirements to be publicly available here, either. It's too dangerous to put in the hands of anyone other than a select few Tinkers."

"What do you mean?" Beth asked warily.

"You've tried four different medications before you found the one that worked on you," Emma stated. "I can tell because of trace effects in your body, and basic logic. Your biology wouldn't be corrected properly by the most obvious drugs, so they'd work their way down the list until they found one that actually did what it was meant to do. That's three failures because the doctor couldn't know what to use. And that second one, especially, probably just made things worse."

Beth nodded, obviously in awe that Emma could even know all that. Frankly, I was more than a little impressed, too. I knew Emma's Thinker powers were good, but I hadn't realized they were that good. Meanwhile, Emma had moved over to the computer connected to the machine and was doing... whatever it was she needed to do. I didn't understand enough about this equipment to even understand how much I didn't understand. And she's worried about somehow being low level compared to other Tinkers?

"This tech is pretty much exactly the same, only worse because it's permanent," Emma continued. "I can't just point it at you and press the 'cure everything' button. That doesn't exist, and we've yet to find the Tinker that would make it possible. Try to cure the wrong problem, and you could cause permanent damage to the brain. As of right now, a total of three people on any world could use this machine correctly, and there's only one that can fix the damage if something does go wrong."

"We're still working on other, safer, versions of the technology," I added. "But for now, it's pretty limited. More a side effect of the resurrection and skill implanting tech than it is a new piece of
equipment in its own right."

"That reminds me," Lily spoke up. "You should get a backup done, in case something does go wrong. Not now! This is totally safe!" She added hastily. "But later... well, you never know when some asshole with a sniper rifle will come along and ruin everything. And then there's the Endbringer fights."

"Y-yeah, you're probably right," Beth frowned. "That's morbid as hell to think about."


"Alright, let's get you in the chair," Emma spoke up. "While we're here, is there anything you've always wanted to do, but never had a chance to learn? Because we've got a long list of upgrades you might like. The medical care and personal combat upgrades aren't mandatory, but they're highly recommended. They can save the lives of you or your friends. Or just random strangers on the street. After that, well, we can add two or three other skills. Pretty much instant Doctorate, or whatever the equivalent is. Of course, after that we need to wait about six months to a year before we can give you a second set of upgrades, so choose wisely. If we put too much stress on the brain too quickly, things can get messy. Especially for parahumans."

"Yeah, Lily told me about that," Beth responded. "I've always wanted to be able to sing."

"Ooh, good choice," Emma agreed. "That's Clarice's favorite. That's mainly a right brain set, so how about we throw a left brain in? Say, a course in computer engineering and logic. Comes with a lot of other benefits in math, too. And we can plug music theory mathematics right alongside them."

"I suck at math," Beth admitted, climbing into the chair and laying back.

"You don't have to," Emma countered. "That's kind of the point. You're getting ten or so years worth of training in minutes. It can make you good at pretty much anything. So you may as well go for something useful that you're bad at."

"Okay, that sounds really cool," she agreed.

"Alright, so just close your eyes and when you wake up, everything will be good as new," Emma instructed. She hit a button, and Beth slumped, going from tense to unconscious immediately. Emma started setting up the rest of the encasing needed to do the scanning. I'd been through it, already, so I understood at least that much. A few minutes later, and she stepped away from the unconscious girl.

"Alright, everyone out of the room," she instructed. "Delicate instruments, I need to make adjustments in real time, usual warnings and the like."
As we followed Emma's instructions to leave the lab, I discretely circled around to Lily. Amelia already knew what was up, and the area outside the lab shifted, creating a small facsimile of a waiting room. Her ability to just craft rooms with a thought was astounding. The seats were well designed, and more than that they were articulated, looking very much like actual chairs instead of some kind of bean bag seat. Granted, even the bean bags were amazingly comfortable, but it was easier to take yourself seriously when you sat in a real chair. She even created a two seater for us.

"So, where's Sabah?" I asked. It was the most obvious question I could come up with to start the conversation. I went over to where Amelia was sitting, right across from the chair that Lily chose for herself.

"The West Coast has been pretty unstable lately," Lily responded. "After effects of Leviathan's attack. They can't afford to lose both her and Anima. And since we needed Eric to play chauffeur anyway, I volunteered."

I nodded my understanding. It was one of my greatest frustrations that only some of our team could provide assistance. Avalon meant most of us couldn't operate on Bet any longer, except during Endbringer attacks, or if a given nation was willing to ask us to assist. And certainly the USA wouldn't, for fear of making the whole nation look weak in the eyes of the international community. Apparently, there could be no greater sin to America than to admit they needed help. It also kept Lily from getting involved, thanks to the politics with Japan. In a way, we were fortunate simply to have recognition as dignitaries and be allowed to cross the borders freely.

"Sabah's really made a name for herself," I agreed, going that route instead. She really had, one of those things about being an Endslayer meant everyone wanted to know everything about her. Her real claim to fame, however, was how she became an Endslayer. Her power looked so weak to those who tracked that sort of thing. Even if the future Endbringer kills showed that Lily was the keystone power for Endslayer combinations, there was no denying that the battle armor placed Sabah at near Alexandria levels. And that sparked a lot of imagination and discussion.

Lily looked at me and her eyes narrowed. "So, what's this really about?"

"Nothing. just-"

"Please," Lily smirked. "Taylor. Don't get me wrong, you can do the whole motivational speaking thing with the best of them, but you really suck at the whole subtly fishing for information. I'm surprised Amelia didn't flood this room with truth gas first."

*ShockedAdmonished.* I looked over to Amelia. "I... uh... it might have crossed my mind," she admitted sheepishly.
"Okay, fine, you win," I conceded. "We're kinda worried that maybe, well, you and Beth seem awfully close. Are you? Did you and Sabah break up again?"

"What? No!" Lily exclaimed. "We're just friends. Beth's nice, but I'm happy with Sabah. Plus Beth's straight, and not all of us have the benefit of whatever it is the two of you are doing with your powers."

ConcernProtective. "Okay, sorry, I was just worried that this might cause a mess."

"Yeah, no worries, I get where you're coming from," she shrugged. "You've gotta worry about your people, and worry about your image, and worry about a bunch of other bullshit. It'd really suck if everything took a hit just because one of your employees couldn't keep it in her pants. Metaphorically speaking."

"You're a lot more than just an employee," Amelia insisted. "We're a team. And I'd like us all to be friends, if possible. I understand if you don't want to, what with Ri-Clarice... that's a lot of baggage, I know."

She looked down, away from us, lost in thought for a minute. "Yeah, it really is," she finally decided. "I get why you did it in the first place, because she understood the Passengers. Fuck, she even named them, and you needed that knowledge. And after... I can't imagine that anyone in the history of the world has ever tried harder to earn a second chance than she has. I can't be friends with her, but you were right to save her. I'm willing to continue pretending she's just another Tinker I never really talk to, kinda like Defiant and Tir."

GratitudePride. I smiled. "Thank you, that's probably for the best."

"So, umm, how are things between you and Sabah?" Amelia asked. "If I'm not prying or anything."

"They're fine," Lily answered, although she didn't sound convincing. We just waited. "Well, they're pretty good. We don't see each other as much as I'd like, and... I dunno... we're feeling our way, I guess. If it works out, great. If not, well, I promise we'll keep our drama off the public stage and away from our jobs. We have enough things to worry about that actually matter. Lives to save."

"That's a really mature way of handling it," I responded. "Thanks for that." AgreementRelief.

"Yeah, I may be taking a few lessons from some experts in image consulting, leadership, and PR Bullshit 101," she responded. "When I get acknowledged by the Japanese royalty, well... rumors are already spreading about that. A couple of the more popular hero teams left in Japan are trying to unofficially recruit me, discretely so far. Promises to be a real political mess, and I want to be ready
for it. I just wish I thought to get a politics upgrade when I had the chance. Because I might be looking at functionally leading the entirety of Japan's superheroes by the end of this."

"Yeah, we're sorta waiting until we can get that plugged in ourselves," Amelia admitted.

I chewed over the idea of that. Japan wasn't really a significant power, especially when it came to Parahumans, but they had a fair amount. Maybe a couple thousand in total. Unify the heroes, provide the equipment and political pressure to break the villains... appeal to the rogues. *Yeah, this could be huge. Hopefully we could do it more cleanly than we managed to with the Protectorate.* "I'll ask Lisa to run things by her girlfriend, maybe Cauldron has some influence that'll smooth things out."

"You really need to hide your evil overlord scheming face better," Amelia teased, prodding my shoulder. "You don't have the mustache to make the look."

"You could fix that," Lily pointed out.

"Please don't," I responded, doing my best to pout for Amelia. "I only recently got to find out what it feels like to actually look like a girl, and I've come to like it. Pretty sure my fiancée does, too. And she's smart and sweet and thinks I'm beautiful, and I don't want to ruin that for her."

"Hmmm..." Amelia smiled mischievously and leaned in close. "Okay, fiine, no epic 'stache for you. But only because your fiancée sounds awesome."

"She is," I agreed, leaning my forehead against hers and looking into her eyes. Her left was slightly darker than her right, and her smile was slightly lopsided. Just a couple of the many random details about her features that I'd memorized over the last few months. "I'll be sure to tell her you think so."

"Aren't they just adorable?" Emma asked. *ShockEmbarrassment.* Amelia and I jumped away from each other to look toward where the door to the lab had opened. "Sorry, Lily, didn't mean to interrupt your show, but Beth is about to wake up and she'll probably want a familiar face there with her."

"Uh, yeah, thanks," Lily agreed, standing and walking toward the entrance to the labs. "It was starting to get a little warm in here, anyway. They really are cute together."

*EmbarrassedPleasedProud.* Amelia grabbed my hand and squeezed slightly.

"Zach's got a bunch of clips," Emma stated. "I can have him send them to your email if you'd like. But you should get going now."

"Yes, please, thank you," she responded eagerly.
"We're still in the room!" I exclaimed.

"So was I," Lily countered as hurried into the lab.

_ApprehensionWorry_. "Is there really video of us, umm, like that?" Amelia asked.

"Oh, yeah, of course," Emma replied. "We're collecting them so we can humiliate you at your wedding reception. But that's not important right now. Right now, I want you to look at that." She gestured into the lab. Beth was sitting on the bed, talking to Lily.

_ConsfusionCuriousity_. "Umm, what part?" Amelia asked.

"Just look at them," Emma insisted. "See how happy they are right now? Beth's had a lifetime of struggle, and now it's gone just like that. To us, sure, it wasn't that big a deal. But for her, it's a miracle. There's so many problems to worry about. Like the Endbringers, and the slow collapse of society in Europe, and the fact that half of the USA is teetering on the edge of anarchy, and all the bullshit with the CUI. And how we haven't found a way to fight Scion."

She paused for a second, then continued. "And it's easy to look at all that and lose hope, to forget what makes all of it worth fighting for. But we've done so much in less than a year. Achieved miracles the likes of which most people never believed could be possible. If you can do so much in so little time, how much more do you imagine you'll accomplish in a decade?"

_AweHopePride_. Amelia spoke first. "Wow..."

"Yeah, wow," I agreed as Amelia stepped over and leaned against me. "Thanks. For reminding us why we're doing this."

She shrugged, looking back in at the two girls who were talking excitedly, outside our hearing range. "I've started to realize that it's the little things that make the biggest difference in the end."

====================

A/N- See, there was a REASON Emma invited the bosses along.
"That's it?" Siphon asked, her voice sounding more than a little surprised. The small blond looked at me like she was afraid I didn't do anything at all. "I thought it would take longer. I was warned that it might take two or three hours, not fifteen minutes."

"The people who evaluate injuries are trained to assume the worst case scenario," Chevalier informed her. "In the case of Cerebral Palsy, there's a significant gap between best and worst cases."

"Yeah, worst case for CP is a genetic disorder, and those are really, really hard for me to work on," I confirmed. "But you only had what amounts to minor nerve damage, plus somewhat atrophied muscles. Nothing all that difficult for what I do. Oh, and while I was in there I gave you a basic augmentation package and adjusted your metabolism to compensate. It'll wind back down, but I highly recommend you just about double the amount of food you eat for, well, at least the next month. You just got something like sixty pounds of muscle added to your frame."

"I- thank you," she responded, standing up out of her wheelchair. "It's been almost a decade since I could walk without using my powers."

"I'd say 'pay it forward'," I shrugged. "But you're already a hero. So just keep up the good w-"

She interrupted me with a hug, and started crying on my shoulder. I simply patted her back while looking over her shoulder at Chevalier. He just shrugged and smiled. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Thus far, Sveta was the most memorable. Nothing quite like having your spine and ribs broken to make something stick out in your mind. And if it wasn't me to remind her of just how deadly strong she was, it would have probably been someone far less durable.

Chevalier gave her a minute, then cleared his throat. "Umm, I know you were planning to be here a while, but I think you have friends waiting. And you should probably hit the gym and get used to how things work, now?"

"Oh, uh, sure," Siphon agreed, finally letting me extract myself from her grip. She looked at me for a second, and then rushed for the door, her emotions conflicted. "Thanks again, for everything."

"I'd say any time, but the goal is to avoid repeat customers," I joked, watching her leave the room. Then I looked over at Chevalier. "Thanks for the save, I was starting to worry that she was about to cop a feel."

I watched his emotions spike just a little, before he settled into doubt and suspicion. "You said that just to mess with me."
"Well, yeah," I confirmed, somewhere between a confession and bragging. "But it's true. Like I said, nerve damage. I'm the first human being she's ever been able to actually experience touching. I have to imagine she could get pretty lonely, physically alone for all those years. Throw in the usual gratitude, and... yeah. You should put that down in the notes for her post-regen therapy."

The therapy was originally only for the Case 53s, who needed time to adjust to being human. But after one of the heroes we healed got himself killed during a base jumping accident, and a few other similar accidents, it had become mandatory for everyone whose healing was truly life altering. Which, of course, was most of them.

"If you're sure," he replied, but he was already typing the notes. He trusted me not to make stuff like that up. Then his emotions started to spike showing apprehension. Fight or flight response. "So, what are your plans this weekend?"

"Nothing, really," my answer was far more casual than I felt. Is this it, is he finally going to make a fucking move? "I've got a family gathering planned for Sunday. But tomorrow's free and clear. So's tonight, for that matter. Turns out, there aren't any known supervillains left in Philly for me to beat the piss out of. I probably could have rationed my fun out a little better, huh?" Hopefully he'd pick up on the words 'tonight' and 'fun'.

"Incidentally, Tendril is threatening to sue the Protectorate for excessive force," Chevalier mentioned. Not what I wanted to talk about!

I shrugged. "He's a sex offender with regeneration," I stated dismissively. And he's only alive right now because I would have been caught. "And I am totes a media darling. Who do you think the jury's going to side with? Also, as my mother insists I say at least three times a day, I don't work for the Protectorate, the PRT, or any government agency domestic or foreign. So tell Dunn that your asses are perfectly safe."

"Not you," he replied. "One of the arresting officers opened fire on him when we were moving him to a holding cell. Six times. With a shotgun. Says he was resisting and... you may need to testify about how fast he can regenerate his limbs, because she claims it was a matter of self defense."

"Oh," I frowned. "Well that's... You should probably tell Dunn that she's not going to like my answer. The damage I did, and the Tinker-drugs I used on him? I'm surprised he was even conscious."

"I was afraid of that," he sighed. "But that's just speculation, they're still investigating. Everything I'm telling you right now is hearsay and nothing more."

"But it's not like I'm completely certain about this," I added, getting the message loud and clear. "I'm willing to admit that maybe the drugs didn't work as well as they were supposed to. Regen is hard to predict, and maybe he had secondary powers that helped him recover faster than he should have. If
you can get a blood sample to our labs, I imagine Emma could give absolute, concrete proof. But I'm not sure how the law works for that sort of thing."

As I said that, I internally screamed 'no' and hoped Chevalier got the message. Our tranqs were based upon Newter's power, and thus pretty much absolute. They could drop a fully powered Lung with less than a raindrop worth of material. Nothing short of a power resisting Trump or a nonhuman Case 53 would have recovered in the couple hours between when I disabled him and when he should have been locked away. I could go up on the stand and say I wasn't sure, that maybe he has a power we didn't anticipate. Emma would have to run tests and then admit there was no way in hell he wasn't in a coma at the time.

"Understood," he responded. "I'm sure the Director will appreciate your... candor on this issue."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I can't imagine a trained officer would do something like that without good reason. Have you considered Master/Stranger influence? Anything from Mind Control to creating illusions... there's a lot of explanations."

"We're investigating that possibility as well," he responded. "There's also the chance that you were under the influence, maybe causing you to underestimate how durable Tendril was?"

"You have a point," I shrugged. Not even a little bit of a risk. When my power tells me I've done enough damage to put them down, it means they'll stay down. "Thanks for the warning that I may have overestimated my abilities and equipment. I'll certainly keep that in mind in the future. I'll consult with my lawyer about everything you just said, especially the legal issues. Should give me something to do for about half an hour after I get home."

"Maybe." I could tell he was smiling under the armor, relieved at the fact that I was willing to play ball about this instead, and working up the nerve to continue with what he really wanted to say. I decided he was kinda adorable when he was awkward. But I still definitely preferred when he took charge. "So, I know an excellent restaurant and was wondering if you'd like to get something to eat, and talk about things not work related. Just the two of us."

YES! Took long enough! "Sure, that could be fun," I smiled. "Wait, are you asking me out on a date to butter me up?"

His emotions spiked worry and a desire to clear up a misunderstanding, before he caught on a half second later. "You're teasing me again," he sighed. Of course he knew he didn't need to explain his intentions, not to me.

"Yeah, a little. I much prefer baby oil." Damn it's fun watching his emotions. "So, what should I wear?"
"Something casual and classy," he answered, eager to change the subject. He was still thinking about it, and he knew that I knew he was thinking about it. That's part of what made it fun. "It's a nice place, but you won't find fish eggs and goose liver on the menu, so don't go overboard. It also has private dining areas so we can actually talk and not worry about the whole secret identity. Or, not so secret in your case."

He's a bit worried, doesn't want to mention it... ah! "I'll meet you there. Look for the absurdly hot Asian girl in the dark blue blouse."

There was a flood of relief and disappointment both. *Guess the whole public identity thing is going to get in my way with Chevalier just as much as it did with Dean. Or a little less, since now I can shapeshift.* In a way, it was really sweet that he would have risked his identity getting revealed by being seen with me rather than simply ask me to make a temporary change of appearance for him.

"Meet you around, say, seven?" I offered. "That way you have a chance to talk to Dunn and I can pretty myself up. You have no idea how much work it takes to do my makeup in a way that looks good for two different races."

"That would be fine," he agreed. "I'll, uh, see you then."

*Aw, he's so cute when he's nervous!* "Sure, I'll let you handle the rest of the paperwork," I smiled. "Sorry it's always you that gets stuck with that."

"I knew what I was getting into when I took the job," he replied.

I turned around and then bit my bottom lip to avoid squealing. Then I regained composure and walked quickly out of the room. I noted that Siphon was still out there, surrounded by the rest of her teammates. She smiled nervously at me. *Nope, no attraction, she was just caught up in a moment and now feels really weird about the whole affair. She'll be happier if I pretend I didn't notice a thing. So will that guy who was too busy looking at her to even give me more than a passing glance. Good for them.* I waved casually and kept going.

==============

A/N- Yay Vicky!

Also: plan to copy/paste over the information to the names and timeline soon, so exciting news!
"Hey, Mom!" I shouted as I walked in, still fully costumed. "Guess who's finally got that date!"

"Please tell me I'm you're just messing with me," Mom looked in from the kitchen. I simply smiled broadly at her. Sorry about how totally not sorry I am."Vicky, he's closer to my age than he is to yours."

"Mom, we've been over this like a thousand times, already," I rolled my eyes. "He's smart, he's successful, he's hot as hell, and he treats me well. Or he'd better if he knows what's good for him."

"You should find a boy closer to your age," she insisted. "It's not like you're hurting for acceptable suitors. Half the internet wants to marry you."

"Mom, there is no such thing as an 'acceptable suitor' on the internet," I countered. "And age is just a number, especially when you've got Amy around. I bet if I asked nicely, she could make me fifty. Or five. Ooh! An even better idea! She can make you my age and I'll introduce you to all those so-called 'acceptable suitors' and you can cougar it up like it's going out of style."

"Don't be crass, Victoria," she chided.

Good thing I know she'd never call that bluff. I have no idea how I woulda talked my way out of that. I surpressed a shudder at the thought.

"Fiiiine, but I'm still going on that date," I insisted. "Would you mind driving me?"

"You mean you want me to drive you?" She asked incredulously. "To a date with a guy that I don't want you dating?"

"Ya-huh," I confirmed, still smiling. Some days, I wish I still had my aura. Made stuff like this so much easier. "I have a super cute outfit and I'd like it to be clean and perfect. If I wear my armor, it'll get all wrinkled and bunched up. Or maybe even eaten my the costume. And if I try to get a cab? Mom, the cabs around here have more fungus based biomass and human genetic material in them than my armor does. I know because my power tells me these things."

"Nothing I can do is going to stop you, is that it?" She sighed.

"Not unless you get Clockblocker's power," I sang happily.
"What time do you need to be there?" She relented.

"Thanks, Mom!" I exclaimed happily, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "You're the best! We can leave at six thirty and be there with some time to spare. Oh, right, and I have some legalese bullshit to talk with you about on the ride. It doesn't even have anything directly to do with me this time!"

....

"Thanks again for the ride, Mom," I smiled as we pulled in to the parking lot. I was looking into my makeup mirror, adjusting my features to be just perfect. I didn't need the makeup, my powers made those kinds of adjustments trivial. What I did need was to look at my new face and make sure it didn't look freakish. "Don't worry, you won't need to pick me up later."

"Vicky!" She exclaimed. "You can't seriously be planning that on the first date."

"Relax," I rolled my eyes at her reaction. If I told her about that when I asked for the ride, she'd have said no. "First, I'm an adult, I can do whatever I like. Second, that is not what I meant. I've got my armor on standby over on Avalon. After the date, I can shunt it over, suit up, and go looking for some drug dealers or something to smack around. Y'know, what I typically do with my nights now that I don't sleep anymore."

"You did that on purpose," she sighed.

"Probably," I hopped out of the car and took off to the restaurant.

....

I hadn't seen Chevalier out of costume often, or ever now that I thought about it. Sure, my powers meant I could functionally see through the costume anyway, but nothing quite beat looking at things through my actual eyes. And right now, my eyes approved. Light brown complexion, dark hair and eyes. I briefly considered a wolf whistle, but he was right, this was a nice restaurant and I didn't want to draw that kind of attention.

"So nice to finally meet you, Michael," I smiled and wrapped my arm around his. I wanted to get as much as possible out of all of my senses. "I'm glad you finally listened to reason."

"Pleasure's all mine," he looked down at me, meeting my eyes with his. Even with my natural height and in heels, he had a couple inches on me. He did a remarkable job of not letting his eyes drift to the low neckline of my dress. "Sorry it took so long to come around."
"Good things are worth waiting for," I leaned my head against his shoulder.

He led us to a private booth that I assumed he picked out before I got here, since he didn't need a waitress or anyone to guide me there. We waited until our meal was served before we really started talking.

With a thought my features shifted, returning to my natural beauty. I happily noted that he found me much more attractive like this. "Y'know, we could just have the date on Avalon, and no one would ask any questions," I pointed out. "It's a world without paparazzi and tabloids. No one would even know they're supposed to ask questions."

"Perhaps on another day," he responded. "Probably would be more convenient."

"Hmm, that's awful presumptuous of you, just assuming I'll agree to a second date," I teased.

"I was actually operating on the assumption that you wouldn't give me much of a choice in the matter," he quipped back. He didn't sound all that upset about the idea. "No matter how much I try to avoid it, there will be a second date. And third. And so forth."

I pushed my tongue into my cheek and pretended to look lost in thought for a couple seconds. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"So, I know I've asked this before, but why me?"

"Do we have to have this conversation?" I sighed. Dammit. I leaned forward, trying to distract him a little. "It's pretty much the one way to ruin this evening. And I know how much you don't want that."

"Has to be done," he insisted, again keeping his eyes on mine. This time I was less happy about it. "You've been pushing for this since pretty much the moment we started working together, and you still haven't explained why."

"It can't be because you're hot and nice?" I asked. "Isn't that how this sorta thing usually works?"

He looked at me for a minute, his emotions awash with concern. I turned off my emotion senses for a moment. He was reading almost fatherly, and that was something I really didn't want to think about right now. Or ever if I could possibly help it. "I guess we could call it that," he admitted. "But I don't buy it. I've talked to your mother. I know about Gallant. Dean."

God damn it, god damn everything. An active shapeshift later and I no longer had tear ducts. They
were a distraction I didn't need right now. "So, just how much do you think you know about him?" I tried to demand, to sound angry, but the words came out in a whisper.

"Not enough," he responded. "You were on again, off again for about two years. Starting right after you got powers that included the ability to influence emotions of people looking at you. Then he died in Leviathan's attack on Brockton Bay."

"He never should have been out there," I added, telling the part of the tale I needed him to know. "He didn't have any powers that would make an Endbringer blink. A blaster whose blasts only hurt as hard as a normal person's punch, and altered their emotions to make them not want to fight anymore. That's less than nothing against Leviathan."

I looked up at him and allowed the tears to come. Dean deserved that much, at least. That I cry for him. "How did they ever justify sending that power out there in battle against a fucking Endbringer? How the fuck does that make any sense at all? I... I don't even know if the Endbringer killed him directly, or if he was caught in one of the tidal waves. I... never had the guts to ask that question to anyone who'd know."

"He wanted to make a difference," Michael offered. "I've seen a lot of people make that decision over the years. A lot of us have. Choosing to take the risk, not because they believed they would be the critical piece to the puzzle, but because staying back and doing nothing was not acceptable. I've also met others who made the opposite choice and regretted it. There are no easy answers, there's just doing the right thing and hoping it matters."

"He probably would have said something like that, if I had a chance to ask him," I sighed.

"Is that what this is to you?" Mike asked. "I mean, he and I went with pretty similar themes. Am I supposed to be a replacement?"

I looked up at him. "No!" I insisted. "Yeah, there are similarities, but I'm allowed to have a type."

"You are," he responded. "But that, plus your habit of avoiding serious questions. Of actually talking about things. I'm allowed to be worried about you, right?" He reached over and rested his hand on my forearm.

"Yeah, I guess you are," I couldn't help but smile as I put my hand over his.

"Part of that means being honest with me," Michael insisted. "The teasing's one thing, I can live with that. Would appreciate if you did less of it at the office, however. But no more evading questions and pretending things are alright when you know they're not. I don't mean to put pressure on you, but..." He trailed off
"I'd rather just move on," I objected. "Being honest is one thing, but there's no point in wallowing in the past and being miserable." My mother's been doing that since before I was even born, and it hasn't done her any favors.

"Pretending it never happened isn't going to help, either," he countered.

I shrugged, and he squeezed my arm gently. Far more carefully than he needed to, considering that he could probably throw all his strength into it without causing me any discomfort. I wasn't as strong or as tough as I used to be with my old powers, but I was still up there. "Yeah, you're right," I finally admitted.

"Good," he smiled. "Don't worry, we don't have to cover all the heavy stuff in one night. As long as the door's open."

"Thanks," I smiled back. "I... I think Dean would have been glad. That I have someone who will look after me."

Michael reached across with his other hand and cupped the side of my face, leaning forward while guiding me subtly toward him. I knew what was coming next, I had been looking forward to it for months. He did not disappoint.

===========

A/N- Y'know... as adorkable as this couple is, I still don't think they're on par with Danny/Sarah.
He took his time with the kiss, running his tongue softly along mine. There was no rush as he ran his fingers through my hair or bit softly on my bottom lip. I'd experience lust before, a fair few times. I'd even had the fortune of experiencing love. What Michael was doing to me was something new. It was seduction, and he was very good at it. When he pulled away, I was aching for more.

I looked at him, begging him with my eyes to continue.

He handed me his keys and offered a smile that made my heart, and panties, melt. "Would you mind warming up my car while I take care of the check?"

"You're not nearly as charming as you think you are," I narrowed my eyes.

"You can back out if you want," he offered with utmost confidence. We both knew that wasn't going to happen.

I grabbed the keys and left. By the time he was got to the car, it was warmed up, and so was I. He opened the door and slid in, then looked over at me. I smiled dreamily at him as I let him enjoy the scent of my arousal filling the car.

"I decided to get an early start, hope you don't mind." I moved my purse so he could see where I had hitched up my dress, exposing the blue silk underwear I had selected to go with the rest of the gown. They were slipped over to the side, and two of my fingers were idly rubbing the lips. He just stared for a moment. I never bothered shaving my slit, the hairless look was for closet pedophiles. Still, my naturally thin and light hair didn't conceal much.

"Umm, no, that's fine," he agreed as he started the car.

I didn't tease him, or myself, much during the trip. Just enough to keep the heat on for the fifteen or twenty minute drive, and to guarantee my aroma dominated the small space in the car. It'll smell like me for at least a day or two. Damn that made me hot.

He parked in front of his apartment and we were out in record time. I jumped him before we even got to the door, wrapping my legs around his hips and kissing him passionately, grinding my wet panties against the hard bulge in his pants. He had one hand gripping my ass and the other entering the code to get him in the door. By the time he carried me up the three stories to his door, we were both panting and it wasn't from the exercise. The moment after we got into the room, he turned us
around and slammed me hard up against the door.

I finally allowed myself the luxury to moan out loud as he grabbed my dress and slipped it off my shoulders, exposing my chest. I met his eyes for a second as I gripped my D sized cups and squeezed my tits together. "Like them?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he growled.

"Good," I smiled. Then I pulled the bra apart, exposing a pair of breasts that could only be as large and as perky as they were thanks to my powers. My nipples stood out like brown pencil erasers from their recent experience with the bra's destruction. The sound and feel of fabric giving way the most unbelievably sensual thing I had ever experienced, and part of why Dean was always buying me new clothes. If I knew where to get another copy of my dress, I'd have shredded it, too.

His mouth was on my left nipple immediately. I gasped and gripped his head. "Oh fuck!" I groaned. He sucked harder, rolling the nipple between his tongue and teeth. I allowed my durability to lower enough that I actually felt the slight pain mixed in with the pleasure, and it was incredible. Meanwhile, his hands had worked their way below, one holding my ass while the other rubbed my pussy through my panties.

"Rip them off," I demanded, tugging his hair. He looked up at me, his mouth not leaving my breast. He dug his fingers through the waistline and pulled. He was strong, even if he didn't have my superhuman strength. The fabric stretched painfully against my clit before it started to tear. I shuddered and cried out as I experienced the first of what I was hoping was a lot of orgasms tonight.

"I think I just discovered a new fetish," he commented, then kissed me passionately before I could respond. Meanwhile, he ran his fingers along my lips, avoiding both my clit and the hole in his teasing. "So, does that work in reverse? Because I'm not terribly attached to this shirt."

I ran my hands down his back and to his sides, finding my grips below his arms and pulling outward. I'd had a lot of practice at this, and with the right twisting, both the back and front was rent in a single tug, exposing the best abs I had ever seen in person. And I used to spar with Aegis and Browbeat. "You tell me," I replied.

He answered with another kiss as his hands worked down below. I gasped as one of his fingers slipped into my ass. I wasn't completely sure if that was an accident, but he didn't take it out and I didn't want him to. I pushed down against the finger, demanding more of it inside me as I moaned into his mouth. I dug my fingernails into his shoulders as a second finger penetrated my back door. I thrust back against his hand as he kept finger fucking me.

"Oh god, I'm going to cum!" I informed my lover. He lifted me up a bit higher, and suckled on my right tit as I started cumming to his fingers. After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, I caught my breath. "Fuck, that's never happened to me before."
"Which part?" He asked from his place at my breast.

"Anal," I admitted. "I wish someone had told me it could feel like that."

"Glad you liked it," he responded.

"Well, now that that's out of the way, I need you to fuck me for real," I demanded.

"My condoms are in the bedroom," he stated.

"No need," I insisted. "The only way I could be any more protected is if I was made of Endbringer tissue. Now get that cock inside me yesterday."

He didn't argue. I felt his head rubbed against my slit just long enough to find the passage, and then he thrust up hard into my very ready pussy. I screamed as he punched through my hymen and sent me into yet another shuddering climax. The pain only made the pleasure that much better.

"Oh, shit," he muttered. "I'm sorry, if I'd known, I would have been more careful ab-

I covered his mouth with the same hand that I'd used to finger myself earlier. "Michael, I'm not a virgin. Just a side effect of... well, healing powers aren't always selective about these sorts of things."

"If you're sure," he replied, looking concerned for my wellbeing. I felt very loved at that moment, and it was even more wonderful than the cock filling my insides.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I grunted. *Fuck that thing's a monster. I wonder if Amy gave him a few special enhancements when she healed him. *"We'll do gentle later, I promise. But right now I need you to fuck me like you're trying to break my hips. Because if you don't, I promise I'll break yours."

He grabbed my hips and slammed hard into me, pressing me up against the door. I felt his cock hit something in the back, and I saw stars. It felt like I was getting punched in the stomach. I fucking loved it.

"Keep. Uh. Going!" I demanded, as I pulled my legs against his back. I made sure to keep the super strength off as I squeezed against him. Including clenching my pussy around his shaft. I was rewarded with a very satisfying moan escaping his lips.
He dipped his head down and went back to sucking on my breast, rolling my hard nipple in his mouth again.

"You really, mmmm, like my tits don't you?" I asked.

Michael looked up at me. "They're perfect," he growled at me, squeezing them together and sucking both nipples at once.

"Damn," I groaned. "If I didn't, ugh, know better. I'd swear you were trying to milk me." I gasped as I felt his cock pulse inside me. "Ah! Is that something you're into? Do you want to suck the milk out of my tits?"

He answered by pushing a couple of his fingers into my ass again, well lubricated from the juices running out of my pussy. "Oh shit! That's it! Fuck both my holes!"

I gripped his hair and pulled him away, to kiss him as I came. He slammed into my pussy and ass mercilessly as I rode my orgasm.

"Oh god, oh god, I need to feel you cum. Do it, fill my cunt!" I was rocked with my second climax in quick succession as he kept fucking me like a champion. He groaned and met me with another passion filled kiss, moaning into my mouth as his cock swelled inside me. I came again as the hot stream of cum flooded my insides.

He held me there like that, just kissing me as we calmed down from our session. Eventually, his shaft softened enough to slip out of me, and I felt the wetness of our combined fluids run down my inner thigh. I shuddered from the delicious feeling.

"Wow," I sighed gazing into his eyes. "That was incredible." I kissed him again, this time a soft, quick kiss.

"Yeah," he agreed breathlessly. "Wow."

I giggled. "So, milking, huh?" I teased.

"So, destroying clothing, huh?" He teased right back.

"So, sticking fingers in a teenage girl's ass without warning them first," I added. To emphasize my point, I clenched my sphincter, squeezing his fingers.
He shrugged. "Okay, you got me."

"Mmmm, maybe," I agreed. "But the night's still young, I think I can top that one."

"You're the one with super strength," he replied, brushing some stray hair out of my face before kissing me. "I couldn't stop you, even if I wanted to."

"Good point," I agreed, then I started kissing down his chest, kneeling in front of him. I ran my tongue along his shaft, tasting the mix of my juices and his cum, plus the faint metallic flavor of blood from my no longer restored maidenhead. I wrapped my lips around his head and slowly drew him into my mouth, then swallowed as I pushed forward, bringing him into my throat. He groaned and gripped my hair. I considered letting him do me this way, but rejected the idea, pulling away.

I looked up at Michael and smiled. "Remember what I said about gentle?"

"Yeah, I remember," he confirmed.

"Well, it'll have to wait for another night," I informed him, standing and kissing him hard. Sharing our combined flavors. I shuddered in pleasure again when he swallowed his part of the mix. Oh yeah, this is going to be one hell of a night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is why this story has an M rating
"Is it too late to find an excuse to back out of this?" I admittedly whined to Taylor. At least I was allowed to wear my costume for this, instead of normal clothes. But I was very much not looking forward to a family get together like this.

AgreementSympathyAnnoyance. "Not unless another Endbringer pops up," Taylor responded. "It's been a while since I've been able to see my dad, though, and I'm really looking forward to that. Even if, well..." NostalgiaRegretLoss. She trailed off, but I knew what she meant. I still found my aunt dating her dad to be weird. It was worse for her, no matter what she claimed about being glad he had someone.

"Aunt Sarah's a good person," I said softly as I stepped over and wrapped my arms around her from behind. "She's always treated me well." Sometimes she was the only one who bothered. Laying my head against her long hair, I couldn't help but be reminded of all those expensive shampoos and stuff in our shower that I tease her about. Couldn't complain about the results, however. Her hands clasped over mine. WarmthSafeLove

"I know," Taylor sighed. "I just... there's so little left of Mom to remember. Her pictures, her belongings, even her grave. All of that is gone forever. And there was a time I believed Dad would never stop grieving. Now... it's like she's being forgotten. I know it's not true, and I'm being stupid, and I should be glad for what time I did have with her..."

"Feelings aren't so easy to work out," I agreed. "I'm sorta the poster child for that."

"Thanks for being there for me," she responded, entangling her fingers in mine. She relaxed as her emotions smoothed with mine. "Well, I think I'm ready."

"Yeah, me too," I agreed. I was ready half an hour ago. Why does everyone think Taylor's the guy in this relationship? I'm not one who spends an hour combing her hair. At least she never pesters me about whether or not she looks good, we have our bond to take care of that.

....

We weren't quite the first people to make it to the restaurant, that honor belonged to Danny, Mark and Aunt Sarah, all of whom lived in actual Boston. I could feel Taylor trying very hard not to think about the part where Danny and Aunt Sarah probably met up before coming here. We landed more or less right in front of them.

We'd given Taylor's dad the most bare minimum suit that could possibly have been made. It didn't even have the Shunt Drive, simply the system needed to piggyback alongside another suit. A security
measure to protect him from would be thieves. Anyone that thought they stood a chance in hell of actually coming for us or our tech would have Thinkers on their side, and those Thinkers would be able to simply reject the idea of going after him for lack of anything worth stealing.

"Hey, Kiddos," Danny spoke up. He was wonderfully unwilling to even tease us about the whole 'Empress' thing. We were his daughter and her fiancée, and I was so glad for that normalcy, even if I so rarely got to enjoy it. Taylor jumped forward and hugged him. "Missed you, too."

Mark approached me and gave me a hug, which I returned somewhat less wholeheartedly than Taylor did her father. ConcernSupportAcceptance. "We're waiting out here because the restaurant's kinda full at the moment. Seems like somewhere along the line this place got popular."

I frowned. DisappointmentAnnoyance. Well, crap, that wasn't what we wanted.

People had started noticing us as well, including a few people that had started coming out of the restaurant. So much for peace, quiet, and being left alone for a nice meal with the family. On the plus side, this was better than before. When I was Panacea people stopped and stared and then tried to ask questions or get autographs or talk to me as if we were friends. Now everyone seemed to have frozen at the staring part.

"Oh, girls, don't be like that," Mark gave me a tighter squeeze. "I'm sure they'll let you in. Fringe benefit of owning the planet and all."

"Mark, I don't think that's the problem," Aunt Sarah cut in, and I was so grateful for it. "They're not the types that like using fame to their advantage. You remember back when New Wave was a big deal? We were always the same way."

"Yeah, I guess," he admitted. "It is weird having people do things for you for no reason but that they know who you are."

"Speak for yourselves," I recognized Vicky's voice immediately. Moments later, her arms were around both me and Mark. "The best part of being famous is all the free stuff, and the guaranteed invites to all the important parties."

"Victoria," Carol chided. "I know I didn't raise you to be like that."

"I blame the school system," she retorted. "And hip-hop."

Carol just sighed and shook her head. We watched her go over to talk to Aunt Sarah. She gave Taylor's father a brief, unhappy glance that I'm sure no one here missed except Mark and Danny himself. AnnoyanceFrustration. Yeah, I'm not a big fan, either.
"So, sis, what's the plan?" Vicky asked, pulling me away from Mark, much to my relief. Taylor spared a glance my way, and I knew she wanted to spy in on the conversation. I didn't figure Vicky would mind, and probably already knew Taylor would, so I didn't try to dissuade her.

"We can probably just, y'know, have our get together somewhere else?" I suggested. "There's plenty of places I can set up. It's not too far away from our teleport pad, so we wouldn't be messing with anyone else's stuff."

"You are adorably dumb, sometimes," she rolled her eyes at me. IrritationDefensive.

"Look at the building and tell me what you see."

I looked. "Umm, a bunch of people staring at us?" I acted like I was trying, but I knew I wasn't going to figure out what she meant, so I said something deliberately dumb to hopefully speed the process along.

"Ugh," Vicky complained. "You're hopeless sometimes. Look, if they have more people than they have room, the easiest way to fix the problem is give them more room! You have absolute control over the whole surface of the planet, use it for something fun. Like building them an add-on for high profile guests that want to entertain their families to a nice dinner? Hint hint, nudge nudge, admit your sister is the most brilliant mind on this or any other planet."

"I will only admit that you're slightly less obnoxious than Lisa," I replied. AmusedAgreement.

"Oh, and while we're not being overheard by the 'rents... guess who finally got that date!" Vicky whispered.

"Really?" I smiled. SurpriseWorry. I frowned. Oh shit, that could be bad. "Vicky, I don't know if that's such a good idea, remember the warning I gave?"

"You mean about how he's pretty much biologically a teenager?" Vicky responded. "Yeah, we talked about that, and a lot of other things. Turns out it was Rime, his second in command, that encouraged him to go for it. There wasn't any impulsive hormonal bullshit going on. Well, not then, at least. That came later."

Oh. Oh! ShockProtectiveTerritorial. I glanced over at Taylor, who was doing her best to look interested in whatever Mark and Danny were talking about. She met my eyes, and I could see the worry on her face. I offered her what reassurances I could, but yeah, my emotions definitely peaked a few of the less pleasant options. Just because I no longer thought of Vicky... like that... didn't mean I didn't have memories of it. It made this a lot more uncomfortable than it might have been if we had a healthier background.
"Oh, I guess that probably isn't something you wanted to hear about," Vicky muttered. *Oh, great, now she knows and it's even more awkward. Why couldn't she be one of the stupid empaths like Dean?*

"It's just a little weird," I admitted. "But it's not like he's the first boyfriend you've ever told me about. I honestly am happy for you."

I was, and I knew her power would confirm that. Vicky could use someone sane in her life that cared about her and she actually listened to. The first two were hard enough to come by, but that last one was damn near impossible. I tried very hard not to sully the happy news by thinking of the political advantages this opened up for us as well. *I've been spending too much time around Lisa.*

"Thanks," she smiled. "You have no idea how much that means to me. Don't tell Mom, but if you didn't approve, I'd probably have broken up with him."

That... wow. Unless she learned how to beat my power with hers, she is telling the truth about that. "I take it Carol's not a fan?"

Her emotions peaked a mix of regret and defiance. The emotion reading was exponentially less clear that it was with Taylor, but that didn't mean I couldn't read her with my powers. "I sometimes forget how little the two of you talk," she finally spoke up. "No, she wants me with a guy my age. I won't bore you with the details, you know how she gets when she's decided something's not to her standards of propriety... and fuck, how about we just change the subject before I completely trash any chance of you enjoying this evening?"

*Ah, she picked up that, too.* Taylor offered me her support and confidence. "No, I'm fine," I responded to Vicky, letting my emotions focus on the presence of my partner, general and best friend instead. "Water under the bridge. So, is that drama why you didn't bring him along to this?"

"That and it's not like we're engaged or anything," she retorted. "Sure, he's great and I really like him, but we're not exactly at that place where I can invite him to private family gatherings, y'know. Things are weird enough already."

"Tell me about it," I muttered.

"Speaking of, what about the mushroom princess?" Vicky asked. "I mean, I know it's not quite the same deal, but..."

"All the new Tinkers," I answered. "The only reason she even sees Missy, or sleeps, is because of the curfew rules." *And a bunch of other things.* Riley had a lot of reasons to avoid coming with us. *Vicky doesn't know what Riley did to Mark.* "When she found out she wouldn't be able to bring
Missy and Theo along, she decided she'd rather just spend her day with them."

"Yeah, I get it," Vicky responded. I was saved from speculating just how much she did or didn’t get, and what she might figure out if we kept talking about it, when she looked up over my head. "About time you got here."

==================

A/N- Do these girls EVER actually talk about anything if they can avoid it?

... No, of course not. What would be the fun in that?
"Thanks again for the ride, Eric," I said after he popped into view on our staging platform. It's still so freakin' weird that he's using the same name as my brother. Seconds later half a dozen others manifested. My armor hid my expression of surprise, not that it mattered since Lisa was there in the mess.

The others included two men and two women in very stylish dresses and suits. *The Ambassadors*, I recognized after a second. Plus a pair of men doing the half black and half white split down the middle suits as costumes. One had the black on the left, the other had white. No doubt at all that they were coordinating with each other on that one. Then there was a large man in a pretty generic gray jumpsuit and mask. I didn't know any of them, probably some of the new recruits. Pantheon was growing by leaps and bounds, lately. Trying to keep up with everything would require Thinker powers.

"Oh, it's not a problem," Eric replied. "A week is plenty of notice."

"Yeah, we'll be able to quit doing that to you soon enough," Lisa replied. "We have some of our best Tinkers working on teleport drives that'll let us move between places without needing to force you out of your girlfriend's bed at three in the morning."

Eric sighed. "Know what? I don't even care. If voyeurism is how you get your rocks off, peep all you like."

"Zach told you to say that, about two and a half weeks ago," Lisa claimed cheerfully.

"So, what's this about, Lisa?" I asked, still looking at all the new people.

"Oh, we're just killing a bunch of birds with one stone," she answered with a smug grin. "I had Accord draw up a plan to help stabilize the region, and I'll be discussing its implementation with the local PRT and Protectorate leaders. Brought some people along to run some raids on the more troublesome locations. And we've got a couple possible power interactions to test. Not really the fancy ones that need the labs, but still pretty important. So while you're off having a family vacation day, you can rest well knowing the city isn't going to burn down. Probably. I mean, it is still LA."

"Oh," I replied dumbly. "Well, I put GL in charge for the time being. Boost is doing a hospital run, it's a great PR and he's volunteering for them whenever possible now that he's discovered nurses flirt back. And Sveta's in San Fran helping check the undersea damage. It's looking like they're going to have to demolish the whole Golden Gate Bridge."

"Eh, they'll build a new one, call it Victory Monument Bridge or something and that'll be the end of
that," Lisa dismissed. "This is more about infrastructure design and whatever else. Oh, and apparently Accord bullshitted up a way to solve Cali's drought problems. All it requires is us convincing politicians to do the job they were hired to do. So, expect that approximately never. Now hurry up before you're late to your family gathering."

Oh, right. I glanced over at Eric. "Sorry about that," I said sheepishly.

"Is cool," he dismissed as he tapped my arm, sending me to the opposite side of the country in a period of time too small to be calculated using conventional technology. How are we supposed to kill a thing whose species does stuff like this on a fucking interplanetary scale? I crushed those thoughts, we'd try our damnedest, and hope for the best. The alternative was unacceptable. Instead I looked at the gathering of my family, the people who meant the most to me. My reason to fight.

Vicky spotted me first. "About time you got here."

"Yeah, well, some of us have real jobs to worry about," I teased back. "So, why aren't you inside already."

"Oh, that?" Vicky tilted her head toward Amy. "My brilliant sister here didn't think to make reservations. And now she'll have to go through the effort of growing us a new room to eat in."

_Reservations?_ I looked at the building for the first time. _Wow, that's a lot of people. Guess they're doing pretty well for themselves._ "I'm friends with the owners, I'll go in and talk to them. You guys wait here, okay?"

"Sure, leave us out in the cold and rain," Vicky fake pouted. "We're like the definition of free advertising right now."

"Vicky, it isn't cold or rainy," Amy argued. "In fact, neither of those things ever even happen on Avalon. And if they did, you wouldn't even notice.

I just ignored them and walked into the building. Siblings have to bicker, it's the law... god I miss Eric... The greeter was some kid I didn't recognize, but the nametag identified him as Dan.

"Hey," I said with a smile. "I'm friends with Janet and Tyrone. I'll just see myself in."

"Uh... yeah, sure," he stammered. Man, they do not train their newbies to handle this sorta thing, do they? At least they had a good layout that let me walk into the back without any difficulties. It wasn't quite that crowded. But there definitely wasn't room for a family of eight in here. Especially not when those eight were going to draw every last eye in the building until they left.
One of the waitresses looked like she wanted to stop me when I opened the door to the kitchen area. She didn't actually say anything, but she probably would have if I'd given her a few more seconds to think about it.

The kitchen itself wasn't exactly huge, but it was very modern. There were actual flames, which meant they were cooking with gas. Not a lot of places on Avalon had that yet. Then again, most places didn't even have electricity. Bioluminescent buildings took care of lighting, clean water, and waste disposal, and most colonies were still working hard to achieve industry of any sort. Modernization would be a long time in coming for every colony world, even if Avalon had an unfair head start.

"Crystal!" Janet exclaimed the moment she saw me, which didn't take long. She rushed over and hugged me. "It's been way too long."

"Work's been a hassle," I responded, squeezing her back after making sure the safeties were on and I wouldn't accidentally kill her. "Speaking of which, you guys seem to be doing really well for yourselves."

"Ugh," she sighed, stepping back. "You know, I never realized this was going to be so much work. Training the new cooks is the worst part. Do you think we can talk to your cousin about maybe color coding the fruit better? I can't begin to tell you how many times we've had to throw out something because someone messed up the ingredients. Although Ty usually keeps it around to taste test later. Sometimes we get something usable out of it."

"Why not ask her, yourself?" I suggested. "She's right outside. We were going to stop in for a meal, but you're kinda full at the moment."

She looked like she was about to cry. "We keep having to turn people away. Ever since you moved your capital and portal, this has become the most expensive part of the city. We're trying to figure out how to make it work, but short of tearing down the building and adding a second and third story to this one, there's not a whole lot we can do except move somewhere cheaper or save up enough to buy the rest of the block. And that's not happening any time soon."

"Funny you should mention that," I replied. "We were just talking having Amy grow you a bit more room. Say a couple private dining areas so I can have a nice meal with my family without needing to worry about passports."

"She can do that?" Janet asked. "Wait, what am I saying? Of course she can do that! She grew a freakin base out of that crater Leviathan left behind!"

"Yeah, take a couple minutes to figure out where you want it."
"Umm, the east facing of the building," she replied. "The house next door is mine and Ty's. You can pretty much just use the entire thing. Ooh! And maybe an open air cafe type thing on the roof! It's getting warmer, I bet that'll be really popular!"

"Can do," I agreed. *Amy loves using her powers for things like that.* "I'll go let her know. You just let your customers know to get out of the way and enjoy the show."

"Actually, they're probably not going to be too impressed about that one," Janet remarked. "I mean, the whole watching a building grow out of the ground thing was cool as hell the first fifty or so times, but now it's kinda become one of those things that is just part of living on Avalon."

"I guess that makes sense," I sighed. Well, Amy never did like gawkers, so it's probably better this way. "Like all the quakes in Cali, eventually you just stop noticing them. Hey, if you manage to get a bit of a lull while we're here, you and Ty should totally come by and chat. I'll introduce you to the Empresses and you can meet my annoying younger cousin."

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Are you kidding?" I laughed. "After about twenty minutes of each others' company, everyone in that room is going to be praying for a distraction."

=============

A/N- Crystal's the smart one.
"Y'know what's the most bullshit thing about your power, Ames?" Vicky commented from behind her menu. "It's not that you can kill every last thing on this planet in approximately two and a half heartbeats."

*Concern*Annoyance*Defensive*. Taylor was saved the need to speak up when Carol did first. "Victoria, could you please not talk like that at the table?"

"Sorry," Vicky responded. "But I do have a point to get to here. I can usually sense how powers can be a threat to me." *Concern*Interest*. "Crystal and Aunt Sarah, my powers tell me to avoid being in your line of sight, because you're blasters. Mom, Dad, I know instinctively that you have breaker powers because my power tells me to expect not to fight you like you are now. Taylor... well, you don't register as much of a threat," *Annoyance*Reluctant*Acceptance*. "Unless those zerg are nearby. Then you're suddenly scary beyond all reason. Amy, all my power tells me is that if you touch me, I lose. Even though I'm consciously aware you have a lot of other options."

"That's actually pretty good to know," Taylor spoke up. "A tool we might be able to take advantage of in the future. Or a possible weakness of our Thinkers that we need to compensate for. Does your power have the same blind spot with, say, a Tinker surrounded by parts that can be converted to a weapon, but aren't quite to that stage, yet? What about a gun that's unloaded?"

"I... actually don't know," Vicky admitted. "It's never come up before. Normal firearms aren't a threat to me to begin with."

"We should probably test that," Taylor responded. "We have a bunch of new Tinkers and Thinkers, we should probably have everyone go through the testing process at least one more time, just to see what new details we might have missed the first time."

*Confused*Defensive*. Taylor just noticed Carol, Mark and Aunt Sarah watching us with knowing smiles. "What?"

"Oh, nothing." Mark chuckled. "We old folks are just caught up with nostalgia. Sarah and Carol would sometimes spend all night talking about plans and what to do next. More than once, they went to bed so late that they were too tired in the morning to do any of the stuff they talked about. So they'd make the men take care of it, no matter how nonsensical they were. Sometimes we'd have to spend half an hour decoding scribbles written on the backs of napkins."

"Oh, we weren't that bad, Mark," Aunt Sarah admonished. "We were just young and full of ideas. You had your share of bad ones, too. Remember how you used to draw arrows and circles with letters on them and call that a battle plan?"
"Time honored approach, perfected over thousands of years of military engagements, and now harnessed to its highest potential by the NFL," he sounded almost as smug as Lisa. "I'm sure Danny would be able to read our old notes and know what I was talking about, right man?"

"I'm more of a baseball guy, myself," Taylor's dad admitted. "Great American pastime and all that."

"I can respect that," Mark agreed cheerfully, which brought back memories of him changing channels because 'baseball's almost as boring as golf'. "Speaking of pastimes, are you girls ever going to pick out any official sports for Avalon?"

I glanced over at Taylor, but she didn't look to have any better answer than I did. "Umm, we really hadn't put any thought into that," I admitted. "We're kinda hoping that sort of thing will take care of itself on the local level."

"Not everything has to be ordained by the highest office," Taylor agreed. "Besides, we're decades away from having the base needed to support professional sports teams. Right now, we're focusing our resources on development and infrastructure. Then we're going to put the vast majority of our resources into education. We want to lead the multiverse in terms of scientific and artistic accomplishments," DisgustHurtAnger. "And frankly, in my experience, too much emphasis on sports accomplishes the exact opposite of that."

One of her tormentors was the track star at her school, I recalled. Danny looked concerned, but as usual didn't really know what to say to approach the issue. I reached over and gripped Taylor's hand, holding it as she calmed.

Danny looked at me gratefully. I could almost feel bad about the idea that Danny felt more like a father to me than my biological or legal parents did. Danny actually accepted me and treated me with respect. Which was a whole lot more than Mark and Carol could claim. And he wasn't a murderous crime lord, which put him well above Marquis. Instead, I simply shared that glance with Danny, reassuring him that I would care for his daughter when he couldn't.

"That's a good point," Carol spoke up. "I can't begin to express how much disappointment I have in school systems for diverting so much money and effort into sports instead of educating their children. I see the merits in physical exercise, but not at the cost of scholastic performance."

"But that's a two way sword," Mark responded. "Not every child can be the valedictorian. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's part of the definition. Teamwork, and shared success are important parts of development for a child."

"I'm not saying they're not," Carol argued back. "I didn't let Vicky slack on her grades just because she was in volleyball. I pushed her to keep her grades up, just like I did with Amy even though she didn't do sports."
I couldn't argue that point. Carol definitely pushed me on my schoolwork. But Carol actually made the effort to help Vicky with hers. And when she got A's, she was praised for her efforts, rewarded for them. At best, I was told 'good work' and then forgotten. Now it was Taylor's turn to squeeze my hand and offer me reassurances. Why did I ever think this family gathering was a good idea?

"Maybe you should think about emphasizing a skill based sport instead of a physical one?" Aunt Sarah spoke up. "There are plenty of options out there."

"I vote for Pegasus racing," Vicky chimed in. "I mean, the way Avalon works, I'm willing to bet that everyone's going to want a flying horse eventually just for travel. They're fast enough to beat out most cars if you give them a chance to pick up speed, and I know they new ones are even able to successfully breed. And it's so uniquely Avalon that when you get around to having intolerably snooty people, they can be totally elitist about the whole thing and look down on all the less privileged worlds who don't learn to ride flying horses when they're ten."

"Yeah," Crystal hurriedly agreed. "And the added benefit of teaching children responsibility by having them care for the animals when they're young. Especially since Avalon doesn't have its own native life to begin with."

 SurpriseAgreement. "That actually sounds really cool," Taylor admitted. "We may have to throw in some safety features, but they're already safer to ride than real horses. At least according to our team members who've had experience with both."

"Of course, then we face the risk of people with more money being able to acquire the more desirable versions," Crystal added. "It's a pretty big industry. Really good racehorses are worth millions, and once we start down the path of breeding the animals, that can become thing."

"I can fix that easily enough," I volunteered. "Using the same seeding tech as we do for the zerg and M7s. We just have to distribute seed codes that anyone's allowed to use. Plug the things into the proper device and modify their genetics on the spot."

"We should probably consider that anyway," Taylor responded. "The latest version of Macula just clocked in at almost three hundred miles an hour and his gravity field is strong enough to hurt someone who's not trained for it. We'll have to distribute obsolete versions of the animals for civilians to use."

"Plus the risk of accidentally running into a flock of seagulls," I added, while looking straight at Vicky. She glowered and stuck her tongue out at me.

"Maybe specific licenses and training courses to use better versions?" Crystal suggested. "There's always someone who will want access to the superspeed versions. But, yeah, putting the best stuff
outside the reach of civilians is a really good way to keep things a bit more reasonable."

"More than just horses, though," I added. "Dinah's gryphon is definitely a very different kind of animal than the pegasi, both in terms of performance and personality. We could probably draw up a list of other mythological animals. Miniature dragons, for example. Do sphynxes fly?"

"How about those Mexican goat killers... the chupa-whatevers?" Vicky suggested.

"Pretty sure those are just diseased dogs or coyotes or something," Crystal responded. "But that does sound like a good idea."

"Might cut into our oil industry profits," Taylor responded. "We're looking into that as a way to keep us solvent as a nation in the long run."

"Well, I can guarantee that none of the artificial animals will be able to survive without the Yggdrasil," I suggested. "They're dependent on it to provide food they can store and process correctly. Same thing we did with our modified bugs as a failsafe to prevent them from becoming an invasive species. No one can object to us leaving in that feature, right? And then we'll just make most of our profits selling to other countries. Aleph, Dalet, and Vav are all facing a fuel crisis. Once we start opening up communications and trade with those worlds, we're set for the foreseeable future.

"To say nothing of the profitability of other designs," Crystal added. "Your entire planet is a living industrial base just waiting to be harvested."

"We're leaving that mostly to civilian development," Taylor added. "We're trying to build a government that can pay for itself instead of drawing on taxation or owning all the civilian businesses."

"You'll still have plenty of room for selling fuel on Avalon," Danny spoke up. "It seems to me these animals probably won't be capable of hauling freight or operating as industrial or construction equipment. That's a pretty significant base."

"Well, we could," I admitted. "Antigravity makes actual weight fairly trivial. But no, we have no plans of building anything like that for the market."

"Wait just a second," Vicky interrupted. "Did we just casually discuss ruling the world by creating dozens of mythological animals, manipulating trillion dollar industries on four different worlds, and inventing a new sport, all within, like, ten to fifteen minutes?"

*SurpriseAwe. "Uh, yeah, I guess we did," Taylor responded.*
"Bitchin'."

"Victoria!"
"Honestly, Boston's been wonderful. They'd probably move me out if they could, but I plan to stay for the foreseeable future," Sarah stated. I tried not to flinch. The reasons she stayed could be summed up as that's where Dad found work.

ConcernSupportAcceptanceRequest. That would be Amelia trying to convince me to be okay with their relationship, which was clearly getting more serious as time moved forward. I wanted to be okay with that, I really did. But at the same time I kinda didn't.

Sarah took a bite of her food. "Oh, wow, this tastes amazing. Kind of like a sweet potato, but with a tangy kick to it. I don't know how to describe it, but it's really good."

"Yeah, I'd never have guessed this was a vegetarian meal," Mark agreed between bites. "Man, I wish real salmon tasted this good. So I've been thinking of asking for a transfer, myself. Don't get me wrong, the vacation's been great, but I'm starting to get bored. Crystal, what's your opinion on things along the West Coast?"

"Well, Miss Militia just took over in San Fran," Crystal replied. "If you can handle a no nonsense boss, she could really use the help. I think it's starting to upset her that Alexandria or one of my people have to drop in twice a week to deal with something or another."

"Why not New York or Pittsburgh?" Vicky suggested. "They're still understaffed. Or... well, keep this to this room alone, but there's talk of me moving to Baltimore. Only for a little while, until the crime rate starts to drop. A few of the villains I chased out of Philly moved there. You get that transfer and we'll go smack villains around together until maybe they get the message and stop being criminals. It'll be fun."

"That sounds great," Mark agreed. "I don't think Armstrong will mind. They've been pushing him to get rid of a few of his people since things are running so smoothly. He's been refusing on grounds that it would disrupt the team composition. But I'm a newbie, so he won't lose any sleep over losing me to keep some of his favorites. Maybe I'll even help the ol' egghead out by setting up a few transfer conditions he'll like. Can't hurt to have a Director that owes me a favor or two down the line, right?"

"Probably not," Sarah agreed. "Hmm, maybe I'll make a discreet inquiry next time I talk to him."

"Couldn't hurt," He looked over at Sarah. "Really, he should count himself lucky that you don't officially work for the Protectorate, so they can't transfer you. His Wards program is currently the envy of the whole region thanks to you. You've always had a way with kids."
AnnoyanceLossRegret. I clenched Amelia's hand. I wasn't sure what brought that feeling on, but I was here for her nonetheless.

"It's really not like I have to do much," Sarah responded, looking a little abashed. "Fact of the matter is, Weld and Clockblocker do most of the work. They have that team running like a well oiled machine. Or as much as you can hope for in a team full of restless hormonal teenagers."

"Speaking of well oiled," Vicky added with a knowing smirk. "There's rumors all over PHO that the two of them are dating."

SurpriseSuspicionAnnoyance. It took me a humiliating couple seconds to figure out what Amelia was thinking. She's right. There was at least an eighty percent chance that it was Zach who started those rumors. We'd need to talk to that boy about his online pranks sometime soon.

"Honestly, Vicky, you already know that's just a stupid rumor," Sarah reprimanded her niece. "You tried using your healing ability on Weld, so you even know why. And Clock's got his heart set on 'the one that got away', who I'm fairly certain is a girl."

"Yeah, seriously, cuz," Crystal added. "What did poor Clock ever do to you? Y'know, except for that time he slipped glue into Gallant's armor. Or that time he spent a month using unbelievably stupid pickup lines on you. Or that time when he spent the next month using equally stupid pickup lines on Dean. Or when he photoshopped that picture to make it look like you were checking out Shadow Stalker's ass. Clearly he is as innocent as a baby and you're just being needlessly vindictive."

Huh, maybe Zach wasn't responsible for that one.

"Okay, Crystal," Sarah chuckled. "I think you've made your point. But in all seriousness, he's done a lot of growing up this year. Try not to judge him too harshly on his behavior, when he's trying so hard now."

"I'm just glad things are stable enough that people can focus on transfers, politics and rumors" Mark added. "There was a time there after New Delhi that we were afraid the whole country was going to collapse into supervillain fueled anarchy. Can't speak for the rest of the country, but the East Coast is more stable now than it's been any time in the last decade. And it looks like it's going to stay that way with the colony world generating jobs. Nice and peaceful."

"That's an understatement," Dad added. "Maybe I'm just biased, being used to the mess that was Brockton Bay, but I never would have imagined a city the size of Boston could be cleaned up so easily. I get that a lot of it is because there are actual jobs in Boston, especially with the new colony portal in the city. I'm actually having trouble finding enough people to keep up with the demand."
"The rest is mainly because of Accord and Butcher," Sarah informed. "They created a weird sort of stability that kept other supervillains from bothering the city. When Butcher was destroyed, and the other major player changed sides, that left the city with a clean slate, an people like it that way. The first villain who tries to step in will be the only villain in the city facing down all of the heroes at once. Someone like Lung might be able to get away with it, but there aren't a lot of people with that kind of power."

"And if anyone like that does show up, Pantheon's right next door to make them regret it," Mark added. PrideEmbarrassment. "No one wants to start a fight with Endslayers and Immortal Empresses."

"That's just a bluff, though," Carol reminded. "One that won't last. Eventually people are going to come to the realization that Amy and Taylor can't actually intervene with anything on Bet, outside of the Endbringer conflicts."

"That's why the rest of us, the ones who haven't taken citizenship on Avalon, have to be so vigilant," Crystal chimed in. "Let everyone believe that the reason our heavy hitters stay out of the fight is because they're not needed, or too busy dealing with more important issues like preparing for the next Endbringer. It's a fragile kind of peace, but it still peace. Certainly better than what we had before."

"Not that fragile," Vicky insisted. "Anyone wants to break the peace, and I'll break them into pieces. Then post photos of them online as a warning to anyone else stupid enough to try and start shit."

"So, firecracker, how have things been for you?" Mark asked. I was admittedly a bit relieved to have the conversation turn away from Avalon for once. We lived it constantly, every day, and while I loved what we were achieving, it would be nice to take a break from it once in a while.

"Oh, you know me, Dad," Vicky smiled. "Forever lucky in life and love."

"Love, huh?" Mark regarded his daughter. "So, when do I meet this new boy in your life?"

"You already have," Carol informed, sounding less than pleased. "Your daughter is dating the current head of the Protectorate. Who, as I'm sure you're quite aware, is both twenty years her senior and functionally your commanding officer."

Carol's passive aggressive bitchiness took the wind out of Mark's sails admirably, and he frowned. DistasteSchadenfreudeGuilt. "Well, I can't say I was expecting that. How long have you two been seeing each other? Is it serious?"

"Oh, nothing serious, we've only been dating since two days ago," Vicky responded cheerfully. "But I have a good feeling about things." Does nothing ever phase her? Then again, she lived with Carol
even longer than Amelia did, she's probably really good at shrugging off anything that her mother can throw at her.

In a way, it made Vicky part of the group with the rest of us. Carol hated that Amelia and I were dating, she hated that Dad and Sarah were dating, she hated that Mark had 'left her' for the Protectorate, and that Crystal had left New Wave for Pantheon. Really, I'd feel bad for her if she wasn't such an unbelievable bitch about everything.

"You never struck me as the type to go for older men," Mark spoke up diplomatically after a minute. He clearly wasn't thrilled about this turn of events, either.

"I'm honestly not," Vicky responded. "Things just sorta happened, y'know?"

"After she stalked him for three months," Crystal chimed in.

"I did not stalk him," Vicky argued at her cousin. "And even if you could misconstrue my actions as stalking, it would only have been for about two and a half months. You're just jealous because you're the only person at this table who's single." I caught it as Mark and Carol glanced at each other nervously for a half second.

"What the hell was that?" Victoria asked. Evidently she noticed, too, with one of her various senses. It's not like she was lacking for options.

Carol sighed. "We didn't want to say anything, not until it was finalized."

"We're legally separated," Mark stated.

======================

A/N- Man. This is a FUN dinner. And by "fun" I mean "there's a reason I don't go to my family reunions."
"We're legally separated. Or we will be as soon as the paperwork's finished," Mark qualified. "All our legal documents and records were in Brockton Bay, and that's slowing things down. You have no idea how hard it is to get a divorce done when your birth and marriage certificates no longer exist."

Huh, it's about time that happened. I was expecting it months ago. If I was being honest, part of me hoped for it years ago. Taylor massaged my hand with her thumb anyway, a show of comfort that I didn't really need, and she knew that. She seemed to feel like she was supposed to do something to support me, and I was more than willing to accept her efforts. We have each other, no matter what else may come.

"You can't be serious!" Vicky exclaimed. I almost cringed. Of course Vicky would react like this. To her, the Dallon home was normal and happy. Around her, it actually was.

"We are very serious," Carol responded, meeting her daughter's eyes. They stared each other down. A challenge that neither of them was going to let the other win. "Things have changed. Your father and I have changed." It's my fault Mark's so different, now. ConcernSupportDefensive. "You and Amy have grown up, and old enough to make your own decisions on how you live your lives, as you have gone out of your way to let me know lately."

Vicky deflated some at that last comment. Maybe they had a fight recently?

"There's no grandchildren to worry about," Carol continued. "No custody battles, any property we might have argued over was lost in Brockton Bay, and since then we've been rebuilding our lives separately from each other. Frankly, there will never be a better opportunity to do this."

"Maybe you could go to a marriage counselor or something?" Vicky suggested. "Aunt Sarah? Ames? Back me up on this."

Oh fuck, she wants me to argue that Carol and Mark should stay together? How am I supposed to do that when I think it's one of the worst ideas she's ever come up with? I froze up, clenching Taylor's hand harder as she reminded me she was still there to defend me.

"Vicky, be reasonable." Aunt Sarah was the one that came to the rescue. "There's no way this could come as a surprise to you. Your parents haven't lived in the same house for almost a year now."

"You knew?" Vicky accused.
"We talked about it some," Sarah admitted. "I told them to hold off for a while, give it some time."

"We've given it enough time," Carol added, and Mark nodded in agreement. A divorce is the first thing they've agreed upon since I healed him. "We would have done it sooner, but there's been so much uncertainty. New Delhi, the new Endbringers, Pantheon, your resurrection... the fear that it might cause some scandal that could hurt the whole Avalon project."

Carol wasn't entirely wrong. My parents getting divorced would be a tabloid headline. Not a big deal in the US, like, at all. But North America wasn't where we were drawing most of our colonists from. Now we had enough people from enough parts of the world that we could rely on existing colonists to convince their own friends and families to make the move. Plus our foothold in Japan was supplying more than half of our total population right now. To call us 'established' would be a bit much, but something like this would be mostly meaningless now. They really were concerned for me when they delayed this long. Or, more likely, it was Aunt Sarah that thought of it.

"After Brockton Bay... well, we started making it official," Mark continued. "As far as divorces go, it's going to be as clean and quiet as possible. Like Carol said, we don't have custody to fight over, or any joint property. With any luck, by the time the press even notices we're divorced, it'll be old news."

"So, that's it then?" Vicky slumped into her chair, looking more vulnerable than I ever imagined she could. I actually felt sorry for her. "You didn't even think that maybe your children would like to find out before it happened?"

"There wasn't ever really a good time for that, either," Carol responded. "Everything's just been so hectic lately. We wanted to tell you together. Today was the first chance we had for that, and we wanted to save it for after the meal."

"No sense in letting good food go to waste, right?" Mark smiled, tapping his fork against his plate. "And this is really good food." He took another bite of his meal, clearly intent on letting this conversation drop in favor of returning to the meal.

"Dammit," Vicky sighed. "Yeah, I guess I saw it coming. Maybe I was hoping if the two of you spent a little more time around each other, then maybe you'd realize you were happy together... and I think I'd have been happier if I didn't say that out loud. Emotion reading sucks, by the way."

"Sorry, firecracker," Mark offered a lopsided grin. "Our minds are made up."

"I wonder if this is what Minerva feels like all the time. No wonder she's such an insufferable bitch."

"Victoria, I know you're upset, but you shouldn't badmouth your teammates like that," Carol chided.
"It's alright, Aunt Carol," Crystal spoke up. "She's not wrong. If anything, she's being generous." *AnnoyanceDefensive*. "Sorry, Taylor, but it's true and you know it. Minerva knows it, too, and in fact brags about it."

*ReluctantAcceptance*. "I know," Taylor admitted.

"Actually, when she finds out about this, she's probably going to be secretly thrilled," I added in. "At least for the first five seconds. Then she'll be openly thrilled and using words like 'I told you so' and 'welcome to the club, here's your complimentary aspirin' are going to be used."

*ShockRecognition*. "Wait. She said that to you, too?" Taylor asked. "When was that?"

"Right after I created our magic tree fort," I informed her. "What about you?"

"When I tried to track people using skin mites," Taylor answered. "Turns out, there's a reason my power doesn't track things with an average of three brain cells each. That's on the list of things I will never try again."

"Well, at least that'll make me feel better," Vicky responded. "Now when she makes her smartass comment, I'll be able to tell her to come up with something more original. Imagine, using the same one liners over again."

"Yeah, but now you're prepared for it, and she'll know it, so she'll use something else," Crystal corrected. "I'll probably accidentally give her a clue when I get back to LA and let her know she can go home."

*ConfusionSurprise*. "Wait," Taylor spoke up. "Why's she in LA?"

"Oh, I dunno," Crystal shrugged. "Something about testing a new power combo and dropping off some plans that'll help the locals work out how to get things back to the standard disaster instead of the extra special disaster it's currently at."

"Aww, Lisa went to visit her girlfriend," Vicky responded.

*AnnoyanceBoredom*. "Vicky, this gag's kinda gotten old," Taylor responded. "Minerva and Alexandria are not dating. They're only friends, and even that seems to be centered around their jobs." Taylor hesitated for a second. *ConcernSecrecy*. "Alexandria's been a lot of help to us."

"What's with you lately, cuz?" Crystal asked. "Trying to hook me up with one of your friends from
work. Then there's Clock and Weld. Alexandria and Minerva. Next you're going to suggest, I dunno, Lung and Legend or Eidolon and Glaistig Uaine. There's such a thing as spending too much time online."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Vicky sighed. "But they're closer friends than they're letting on to the outside. You don't fabricate an excuse to travel to the other side of the continent and across a dimension just for someone you kinda know from work. Honestly, the whole thing comes off on my senses as more parental than romantic. It really is kind of adorable, however you look at it."

I noticed that the adults had gone silent. "Umm, are you guys okay over there?"

"I think we're all just a bit shellshocked," Mark was the one who spoke up. "You girls are talking about some of the biggest heroes in the world, and you can do it because you know them personally. I think I speak for all of us when I say we're really proud of you."

"I can toast to that," Danny agreed immediately.

"That is, if we'd thought to order any alcohol with our meals," Aunt Sarah smiled teasingly at him.


==============

A/N- I'm thinking Lisa/Alexandria next chapter. Maybe.
"Good afternoon, Minerva," I greeted Lisa and her new team in person. In a way, I almost had no choice in the matter, exactly as we'd planned it. Director Martinez, my theoretical boss, was there as well. Possibly the least clever or ambitious Director in the PRT, which was exactly what I wanted him for.

Our relationship was elegant in its complexity. He just did whatever I suggested without stopping to think about it, and then proceeded to claim credit for it later when talking to Chief Director Costa-Brown, a trait that earned him nothing but contempt from all the other regional Directors. That balance included him immediately agreeing to my suggestion that I should be the one to speak with Minerva, since she was a Thinker notorious for finding information that no one should have been able to figure out, and we didn't want to risk her lifting valuable secrets from him.

"That's High Emissary Minerva," Lisa corrected my greeting with her trademark smug grin. No ulterior motives to her action, she's just teasing me for fun.

I frowned, feigning annoyance. "My apologies, High Emissary Minerva," I affected a mockery of a snooty upper class accent. Two could play at this game. While I wasn't known for being sarcastic, at least not on the job, Lisa was infamous for provoking that side of people. No one would find my behavior unusual. The fact that she was being deliberately provocative also implied a plan on her part, and I was inclined to play along. "I shall keep that in mind."

"You are right, however, it is a wonderful afternoon," Lisa agreed happily, pretending to ignore my tease. Her happiness underlined a gratitude that I was cooperating with her plan, despite not knowing what it was yet. "I've been on Avalon so long that I was beginning to forget what the sea air smelled like." Lisa shifted during her comment, knowingly sarcastic.

Los Angeles had a its share of coastline, but our HQ was nowhere near any of it. And while the city certainly had an aroma, one wouldn't mistake it for the ocean. She was implying that she'd like to get out of this impromptu meeting as soon as possible. Impatient to talk in private and handle the real reasons she'd come here.

Also hoping to get done early so she had an excuse to relax, trusting me to find that opportunity.

"I believed you had two major goals here?" I stated, allowing the left side of my mouth to pull up into a fraction of a smile, pointing toward Director Martinez. Instructing her to start with the one that he would find most interesting, so he would leave and we could get to the real discussion.

"Yes," she agreed, walking over to him. "Director Martinez, this is a field plan detailing the most efficient patrol routes, and some public event opportunities that could be used to improve visibility and overall presence. Don't worry, we have our own copy and plan for our own people. There are a
few possible joint ventures with Pantheon's presence, if you're interested." Lisa already had to know those ideas will be rejected, the PRT and Protectorate were already wary of the amount of influence Pantheon had in their operations. As was the Secretary of Defense and, presumably, the President.

"Thank you, M- High Emissary Minerva," Martinez caught himself, and then sounded like using her title was the equivalent of swallowing snail slime. Minerva deliberately boosted her heart rate and breathing as the Director choked out the words. To me, it was the equivalent of loud laugh at the Director's expense. That would probably be caught by suitably skilled Thinkers watching this. It was meant to be. No one would find her behaving that way to be unusual in the slightest. "I promise I'll go over these suggestions at earliest possible opportunity."

"You're quite welcome," she responded. She brushed a stray hair away from her face, giving her an opportunity to wobble her hand slightly, giving me a signal that she was certain her plan would be mostly rejected, followed by dropping her arm to her side, a slight sweep of her hand in my direction. *She was giving me permission to drop much of it, even knowing it was likely quite a good plan. An opportunity to distance ourselves to the many eyes that watched our interactions. "These additional folders are for the other regional Protectorate Directors, as well as one for the Governor's office."*

I almost blinked in surprise at that one, and Lisa caught my reaction, as would almost every Thinker observing us right now. She was going over the PRT's head and doing it to their face. *She wants to provoke a negative reaction. She knows Martinez will be obligated to inform everyone in those folders, she wants to make this more public. She's planning on something more significant in the future, and will likely need my support for it. Rejecting some of this will improve my credibility for that later goal. I watched as she moved her leg outward by two inches exactly, and a twist of her head just barely fast enough to make her hair shift. *She wants me to say no to two... twenty percent of the ideas inside. A full fifth of the plan is a fraud.*

"My apologies for making the conversation short, but I really must get to my main purpose here," Lisa continued. The implication that the Director wasn't important enough to spend a full minute talking to was obvious, but there were deeper implications still behind that. She clearly knew Martinez was little more than an easily manipulated puppet. "I trust the testing facility has been prepared for us?"

"Of course," Martinez agreed. "We were only instructed to anticipate four individuals, however."

"Five, actually," Lisa corrected. "Gemini is two people." *She deliberately left that information off the details in order to annoy him, I realized. She knows I have contempt for him, is irritating him as a sort of gift to me.* I would have smiled if we were in private, that was actually cute in a mean spirited sort of way. Instead I merely stretched my fingers out slightly, a ghost of a hint of a high five. She got the meaning immediately.

"What of the others?" Martinez asked after a moment, glancing at the other armored parahumans in the group.
"Citrine and her team are here to handle unrelated business," Lisa agreed. "Nothing too important, and won't even happen in LA proper. You needn't concern yourself."

Martinez frowned. "Are you certain you don't need assistance? I can assign a couple of my people to help."

It was a smart offer to make, not that it would do him any good. Even he understood the kind of impact Pantheon had in an area when they engaged in 'business'. It usually turned out to be good for the city, and bad for the local PRT. Even peripheral teams, such as the Ambassadors, Adept, and Haven, could establish footholds strong enough to make the Protectorate presence seem almost redundant. In a way, they thrived on a sort of counter-cultural appeal. Join the Protectorate, go on patrols and look good for the cameras. Join Pantheon's meta-organization, and actually make a difference.

"No, that's quite alright," Lisa responded with a smile. "If anything, we're significantly over-equipped for such a small operation. I trust Citrine and her people to handle the entire situation on her own, with possible emergency assistance from Eki's organization. They'll be leaving presently."

"Yes, ma'am," the woman in the yellow armor agreed in a sharp, military manner. Even if I hadn't been debriefed ahead of time, I would have recognized Accord's handiwork in her mannerisms. If Accord believed her worthy of this, then I was convinced as well. She took the order for what it was immediately a well, activating the flight tech in the armor and traveling southeast, toward Pantheon's base in the city. Her people followed wordlessly.

Their 'small operation' was going to hit one of the Elite's drug and weapons storehouses. The resources weren't that significant, although eliminating about a hundred million dollars worth of smuggled cocaine and designer Tinker drugs was nothing to sneeze at. The real goal was Synth, a Tinker specialized in all things chemistry. His claims to fame included Tinker quality tear gas, various explosives and incendiaries, and several strains of genetically modified bacteria that could produce drugs the way yeast produced alcohol, and some Tinker grade steroids.

"I understand," Martinez agreed unhappily. "I'll let you get to your tasks." He walked off in a hurry, obviously intent on warning the Chief Director of this unexpected move by Pantheon, whatever it might be. I accessed my suit's relay system, establishing a link through Avalon and to my custom built Costa-Brown changeling. I was more than capable of handling that conversation as well as this. Mostly.

I twitched my right shoulder when she turned toward me, a hint of a shrug that was an apology for not being able to give her my undivided attention.

She smirked, and allowed her eyes to narrow just slightly, and she gave a small shift of her hip as she walked. It bordered on the flirtatious, a claim that if she wanted my attention, she could easily get it. I let my eyes dilate, as a way to admit she was probably right. "Alright, I don't know for certain what
the Chief Director told you about the current testing sequence."

"Not a significant amount," I stated. I stood a little taller, something that the usual cold readers would interpret as a defensive behavior, physical intimidation to cover for my not being informed thoroughly. Lisa would interpret it as a challenge to her claim. Her smile widened, as it often did when someone tried to threaten or intimidate her. "Simply a mention of your newly acquired Thinkers being able to make use of my power for an interaction." The statement wasn't completely untrue, although staged only for the PRT's benefit. I was also letting her know my colleagues in Cauldron already knew that we discussed this plan the other day, that I told them about it.

She recognized that implication as well. There was no point in us hiding our contact with one another from Cauldron. Contessa and Number Man could not be fooled nearly so easily. I was confident they hadn't realized the extent of my ability to communicate with Lisa. Contessa was confirmed to be blind to the Victoria/Chevalier and Labyrinth/Atropos interactions, although she was not blind to the aftermath. "And as we know, those are hard to predict until witnessed. It's better simply to test them."

No one other than Minerva would understand the weight of my words.

============

A/N- This is definitely a two parter. I'm chewing over whether to continue from Rebecca PoV or switch to Lisa... either has its merits.

Also... if I ever make a romance novel, it'll feature these two characters and be known as the sexiest story where nothing actually happens.
"Well, to make a long story slightly longer, meet Gemini," I gestured at the twins in their deliberately contrasted to match suits.

"Greetings," Alexandria acknowledged the pair with a polite nod. *Knows more about the twins' background than I do. I was already aware of Cauldron's little experiment with the pair. Their hope to create a power that interacted with itself to get something unlimited.* I looked at Alexandria, sending the message with a slight tilt of the head that the plan failed. Our own team, myself included, had given up on the idea of breaking the power side of the Taboo. Any Passenger *that* damaged should be nonfunctional to begin with.

"Hello, beautiful," the one on the left spoke up. His brother was the one who winked at her. Alexandria simply raised an eyebrow at them and looked suitably unimpressed by their antics, as one would expect. *Alteration of stance, concern over Gemini's reliability considering their behavior.*

"Meet Gemini," I responded apologetically as I started to walk to the testing area set out for us. My body language designed to assure her that they wouldn't be a problem, they just had the usual 'parahumans aren't all there in the head' quirk. Rebecca followed alongside me as I spoke. The twins took it in stride, as they always did when the girls shot them down. *If the girls shot them down.* I tried not to think about their success rate. "They have the power to copy a Thinker power that's in their line of sight and use it themselves. If they copy two different powers they can share a blended variant of both powers. There's a few minor limitations, like only having one power each at a time. Plus an additional Thinker/Trump rating simply for being able to identify other Thinkers on sight."

Rebecca hesitated slightly. "Interesting," she stated in a measured tone. "You wish to see if they gain permanent benefits from temporarily accessing my perfect memory and accelerated learning potential." *Concern over security risks of power, concern that they'd already tapped into our powers and read our conversation that we were having earlier, somewhat abashed by the possible implications they could have picked out from our behavior.* To me it was equivalent to watching her blush.

I shifted my body language, a light sway to the hips. A tease to let her know I was onto her, and thought it cute. Also had the effect of letting her quickly realize I wasn't concerned at all. Not just because I didn't care if anyone figured it out, but because I knew they wouldn't have the ability to do so.

They got inferior copies of the powers, especially when using blended powers. They were running me and Accord at the moment, we were one of those useful hybrid powers, giving them an incredible ability to intuit complex mathematics and social dynamics issues. We had them designing our future economic and political models. They didn't have the ability to read our conversation with that blend.
She relaxed as I conveyed the lack of risk, and simply accepted my teasing with her usual bemused aloofness.

"Essentially, yes," I confirmed her assumptions, spoken and otherwise. "We also have another Thinker whose power is to temporarily possess skills. Or, perhaps more accurately, techniques. He can perform complex tasks successfully, without actually knowing what he's doing. Like... rebuilding a car engine perfectly, without knowing why you need to set the spark plugs correctly. Or even what a spark plug is. It's already proven valuable coupled with our skill installation technology."

I shifted slightly, admitting that I was curious to what the Alexandria/Minerva hybrid might achieve. Rebecca hesitated again, this time less fear and more... envy? Jealousy? I tapped the active side of my power for a second. *Sees our communication and interaction as personal, even intimate. Is experiencing natural jealous tendencies at the idea that it might not be as private as she had imagined. In addition to a level of paranoia about security risks.*

I wasn't worried about the security. The twins were trustworthy as we could hope. After all, we pointed Dinah, myself, and Cauldron's Thinkers at all of the Mass Trigger experimental subjects. Every one was motivated by a sense of responsibility or moral calling, not personal ambitions. Part of why we'd selected that psych profile was the off chance that their personalities would carry into the Trigger Visions, maybe influence Glaistig Uaine on some emotional level. It also meant a hundred and fifty hero inclined capes got some of the most powerful vials remaining, alongside our formula booster.

The idea that she would be jealous, that caught me off guard. I hesitated enough that a non-Thinker probably would have noticed. "Umm, yes, I'm surprised you knew about Dragon's arrangements."

"I suspected something when you described his power," she caught the cue immediately. "The supervillains caught by you and remanded directly to Dragon's custody. I was not aware that they were in Avalon's care." *Flustered, embarrassed by her reaction and the lack of control to hide it. Welcome to the club.*

"They're not, strictly speaking," I responded. I shifted to communicate an apology for my insensitivity, and assurance that I'd be the only one who caught it. In retrospect, I should have known she'd be upset by the idea. "They are officially under Protectorate jurisdiction. Who assigned them to Dragon's custody as part of a work program with the other member of the duo. Avalon has no authority in their detainment, or for that matter anything to do with their legal status."

"And the reason you have him here today is because of the blanket status of highest non-emergency priority assigned to all likely power interactions," Alexandria concluded. "Which extends to Avalon's treaties with the United States and Canada." *Deliberate mention of priority status of power interactions, acceptance of my apology. Further apologizing for her overreaction, acknowledging that if it does have a chance of being valuable, then it should be tried, no matter our personal feelings on the issue.*
"Japan as well, now," I confirmed. "But we have a more immediate concern to focus on." I took a somewhat submissive posture, letting her know I was deferring to her feelings on this, and we wouldn't have them blend our powers. Now that she made me realize how uniquely us our interaction was, I didn't want to give it up, either. The idea was a simple idle curiosity, and Gemini's best tactical value right now was in taking Accord's power, which I reluctantly had to admit was better than mine for most situations, and making it more versatile.

We spent the next minute or so walking in silence. I nudged about two inches closer to Rebecca along the course of the walk, as close an act of overt comfort as we could allow ourselves under the circumstances. She followed suit, and I was glad that she forgave me for my earlier insensitivity so easily. Is this what Taylor and Amelia feel like from their link? No wonder Taylor would choose death over giving it up. Rebecca hesitated, she must have noticed my thoughts drifting that direction.

I exhaled slowly, assuring her I was calm and it was nothing to do with her. A simple gesture of my hand and positioning of fingers indicated that I was thinking about a friend. It wouldn't satisfy her completely, but she would accept that not all the secrets I knew were mine to tell. Then, if she thought I was the sort that would reveal my friends' secrets, she probably wouldn't trust me with so many of her own.

We reached the testing facility, which was just their recreational computer room, with a section blocked off with cheap dividers. Each of the machines in our section was running a different simulation or complex test on them, plus papers published by some of the most brilliant non-parahuman intellects that Bet had access to. Many of those papers actually came from Aleph, which was another portion of the experiment. How Uber's power worked was mostly unknown. There was a low, but nonzero, chance it was something like telepathy, accessing knowledge from other peoples' heads. If so, it might not work across dimensions.

"Sweet!" Uber exclaimed, heading over to one of the computers in the normal area. "I haven't been able to get online in months. Do I need a password or anything?"

Rebecca glanced at me, and I nodded. A communication that we intended to be read. "No, guest access doesn't require passwords. Keep in mind your every keystroke will be monitored while you're using our facilities."

"Also keep in mind you're still a prisoner," I added, though mainly for the show of it.

"How does this procedure work?" Alexandria asked, stepping away from that subject. "Anything I need to be aware of?"

"You'll feel a moment of disorientation," I informed her, putting a soothing edge into my voice. Not to reassure her so much as request she keep silent on just how disorienting it really is. There was no way Gemini could copy powers without the target noticing something happened. "And then the process is done as far as you're concerned. I recommend either finding some reading material, or
observing the tests. Perhaps advise them on the particulars of your abilities. Despite them having your power, they won't have your experience using it."

"I understand," she agreed. Relaxed, feet spread slightly. *Putting concentration into keeping her stability when the powers are duplicated.* "I'm ready."

"Me, too," Uber responded from his seat.

Gemini's power has tells on their end as well, a subtle change in postures and attitudes as they lose or gain the stream of knowledge and the confidence that said information brings. My power and Accord's had a trait in common, in that our eyes constantly shifted toward new details, drawing clues from our environment for use by our intellect. That and Thinker headaches. I had to envy the twins and Rebecca for the fact that their powers didn't come with such side effects.

Their personalities were far more timid without access to dual Thinker abilities to give them answers to every situation. *Would that be what I'd be like, without my powers giving me an artificial advantage over normal people?* Rebecca shifted her posture slightly. *Higher incline of jaw, focus of eyes upward for a moment, telling me to be proud.* *Negating the idea that I should feel self conscious about having such a power.* I mirrored her, letting her know I took the advice to heart.

A moment later, she almost faltered, as her Thinker power actually was stripped from her for a period of around two seconds. It was the offensive aspect of Gemini's ability. The pair of them could drain, drop, and then drain from a person constantly, leaving them in a perpetual state of confusion and functional sensory deprivation. Zach called it stun-locking, which I assumed was a video game term. In a way, it made them very powerful, able to shut down some truly top tier parahumans like Victoria or Lily if they needed to.

Rebecca recovered quickly, for her first experience, then she glanced at me. "That's all?" She asked, deliberately underselling the significance of their power. Her glance had a second meaning as well, one of caution.

"That's all," I nodded in agreement. "You won't experience a thing when they switch to something else." She was right, now that they had her power we couldn't risk communicating so openly, not until we learned just how the twins harnessed her power and its interaction with Uber's. It wasn't a matter of secrecy, simply one of privacy.

Our bond was ours alone, and we didn't want others looking in on it.

======================

A/N- D'aww. D'aww on a freakin' stick. Also, this chapter is now a three parter. I may break it up with a peak at someone else's day. Hmm. Beth hasn't had a chapter in a while. Nor has Sveta. I can
probably do their raid on the Elite's compound... yeah, that'll be fun...
It feels so weird, not taking pills with meals. To the point where I'd bought a thing of multivitamins just so I could follow my routine. Having a newfound expertise in general medicine may have influenced my decision at least a little. I glanced over at Sabah, who was still working on finishing her late lunch, then went back to scrolling through my emails. These days, the pair of us practically lived in her workshop, or out doing whatever public spectacle was needed.

"So, looks like one of the local schools has a job for me. One of those combination fundraisers for local after school programs, and PR things Crystal loves so much," I informed her idly. "Pay's kinda crap, but it looks fun and they're not asking for any of the intelligent summons." I forwarded it over to Crystal's email, letting her know I was interested. I also deleted four less savory while contemplating if I could get away with quitting the team, burning down a porn company, and then signing back up as a reformed villain. Edgy is in these days, right?

"I think I got that one, too," Sabah responded. "They probably mailed all of us."


"The fuck?" Sabah cursed.

"Maybe it's an emergency," I suggested, already getting up. My costume was one of the generic designs, focused mainly on movement and stealth options. Made it easy for me to get into. And GL almost never didn't use his. Sabah and Dubs were the last to get into costume.

"Minerva, what's the emergency?" Sabah demanded the moment she got her suit online.

"Nothing," Minerva answered casually. "Just throwing you guys a curveball. Citrine's going to be there in a couple minutes with a mission outside of town, you'll know her by the yellow costume. Your job is to follow her instructions during the mission. Don't worry, she has all the details."

All the details? "You mean you could have warned us, but didn't," Sabah accused, sounding about as happy as I felt.

"Pretty much," Minerva answered. "Don't worry, you'll be perfectly fine. Just remember to stay alert and try not to embarrass yourselves." Her com clicked off immediately, as Sabah tried to object again.

"I think I speak for all of us when I say 'what a bitch'," GL said after a couple seconds. There were
no objections.

Citrine was, indeed, wearing a yellow costume. Alongside a woman in a dark blue green outfit, and men in a black, purple, and green costumes. All were clearly our biosuits, given some cosmetic alterations for theme purposes. I was sure they meant something to whomever customized them, but all I could think of was how ugly the color schemes were together.

"What's this about?" Genius Loci asked them before anyone else had a chance to speak up. Sabah may have had seniority, but GL was our functional second in command. "Minerva didn't tell us a thing about a mission today."

"Accord's going to find that annoying," the woman stated unhappily. "We're engaged in a raid against one of the Elite's illegal holdings."

"That's practically a declaration of war against one of the most powerful parahuman organizations on the West Coast," GL stated.

"My job's only a matter of carrying out my orders," Citrine shrugged. "Not speculating on long term consequences. Our respective employers believe it's worth the effort, and they believe we have the necessary skills to carry out the task. Or would you prefer we carry out the mission without you?"

"They're stirring up the hornet's nest on purpose," I added. I thought back at all the shit the Elite had put people in this area through. They were the main source of organized crime in the region, and we couldn't even prove it beyond nuisance crimes. "What's the target?"

"A drug lab hidden in the mountains outside of the city," Citrine answered. "Our goal is to capture the Tinker that operates it."

"I'm in," I agreed immediately. It felt amazing to not be terrified of every possible consequence for once in my life. "If it gets more drugs off the street, well, we can always ask for reinforcements later if we need them. Who knows, maybe we can talk Victoria into moving back?"

There was a quiet moment, then GL spoke up. "Point made. Fill us in during the trip. You guys have do shunt drives, right?"

....

The labs in question were remarkably easy to find, mainly because we couldn't see them through our dimensional viewing tech. An empty black void in the VR simulation our equipment used to show us what was happening on Bet.
"They must have some kind of Tinker tech that keeps our equipment from working," GL stated. "How'd they pull that off? How'd they even know to try?"

"No way for us to be certain," Citrine answered. "I still intend to carry out the mission."

"We're pretty blatant about using our shunt tech," I suggested. "Ever since it was first shown off in New Delhi. Maybe it's just meant to keep people from teleporting into their base, and they didn't realize we could use it to see across as well?"

"Or they made an educated guess from other Endbringer battles," Citrine responded. "It doesn't take much to recognize that Khepri is fully capable of using her powers from her side of the dimensional barrier. A method to block her powers is likely high priority for a number of organizations. We also can't be certain our armor will protect us from whatever chemicals that Synth may have prepared to stop intruders. Tinkers have a habit of keeping a few nasty surprises secret in order to protect their bases. Anima's power is ideal for the initial attack."

"I'll need to shunt across before I start summoning," I stated. I also wasn't too happy with that idea in the first place. My summons dying made things very unpleasant for me. I didn't feel their pain, or anything so straightforward, but trying to replenish the power lost when a summon died instead of being reabsorbed was slow and painful. I didn't say anything, however. It was far better than my friends dying.

"I can take guard duty," Sabah added, stepping next to me. That was our usual method, either Sabah or GL would protect me while I did my thing. "My power and armor don't work well in tight spaces, it's best to let me operate outdoors."

"Indoors is my specialty," GL spoke up. "I'll go in and establish control of the base."

"Genius Loci, you should hold back," Citrine instructed. "We have no means of knowing what tech is inside the base, and they've had months to observe you. They might have a way to block your powers, and since you have no corporeal body that might prove fatal."

"This not having a body thing sucks," he sighed.

"Othello, we'll want to test if your power can cross through whatever dimensional barricade they have," Citrine continued. "You're under similar warnings to GL, we don't know if their dimensional tech will work on your projection or not, or what happens if that gets destroyed. Don't use your secondary power, in any case."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed.
"Ligeia, Dubstep," she continued. "The part of you are our demolitions team for this conflict. Should it prove impossible to capture the base safely, the pair of you are responsible for destroying it. It's not the optimal solution, especially as we want to capture the Tinker alive."

They nodded. Dubs was too shy to say anything. Unfortunately, his personality was influenced by his power, and that meant his issues couldn't be fixed like mine. As much as I hated my power, at least it didn't take away my ability to have a normal life like Dubs and GL had to suffer.

"Meanwhile, I'll attempt to identify and shut down whatever effect they're using to block dimensional viewing," Citrine continued. "Jacklight, I want you to wait on Avalon and observe. Should I succeed, your goal is to damage their base with power surges and other minor sabotage. Keep track of Synth, everything else is a secondary concern to his capture."

He nodded, not objecting in the slightest. Judging by how easily they made that plan, I had to imagine they'd used the tactic before. I wasn't sure what his power did, but it worked across dimensions. Or his suit had tinker tech that allowed it to do so.

We shunted over after taking our place on the other side of a nearby ridge, outside the blackout range. We peeked at the building, which was incredibly well camouflaged into the surrounding terrain. If not for us knowing exactly where to find it, and the Tinker scanning tech built into our costumes, we may never have noticed it at all.

I focused and drew on the full extent of my power at once. What I needed was numbers and maneuverability, and that meant the pixie summons. I did a count once, and my maximum numbers totaled over twenty thousand of the things, if that's all I wanted to summon. Each member about seven inches tall, they immediately took to dancing in a beautiful swirling cloud of light and laughter, spreading out and swirling around all of us, trying to draw us into their dance.

"Attention, my subjects," I died a little inside, but the swarms of pixies calmed and gave me their undivided attention. "In that building are criminals peddling drugs." In a way, I could almost consider myself fortunate that the summons even understood the concept of narcotics. In another, it was a problem in its own right, as wherever my power got the idea of drugs from, my summons viewed them in an extremely negative light. Probably thanks to what few fantasy stories that mentioned them always portraying them in the worst possible way.

"You are to attack and subdue them," I continued my orders. "Remember, subdue them. I do not want them killed. We... we must interrogate them and learn where they acquired their foul wares." I am living proof it's impossible to die of humiliation. "Now go forth and carry out my bidding."

The tiny battle cries echoed across the glowing crowd like I'd given them a rousing pre-battle speech. And then they raced down the hill toward the base, looking more like a glowing rainbow colored fog cloud than an army.
Sabah took that moment to fire her weapon into the wall of the facility. It shattered a moment later, as she used her telekinetic control to rip the supports out of the ground. We rarely displayed Sabah's full power for a reason. Preferring to imply she was weaker, without this level of destructive ability. And stronger, able to hurt people instead of merely nonliving objects.

My power, on the other hand? Very much able to hurt living things. A few men I was assuming were guards rushed out of the building, in time to be swarmed by my army. I grimaced as the staccato of automatic weapons fire was quickly replaced by flashes of light and screams. Ordering them not to kill was a necessity. Each individual pixie wasn't that powerful, their attacks no more dangerous than being jabbed by a thumbtack or burned by a match for a second or two. But they fought in swarms, and could strip a man's flesh from his bones if I let them.

*There is also a reason we rarely displayed my full power.*

=================

A/N- Death by pixies. It might even be more horrible than death by bug swarm. Really depends on your opinion of being burned alive. Slowly.
Improved reaction speed, interpreting of data. Harnessing Uber's power to instinctively know how to achieve a goal. Filling in gaps of knowledge. I watched as the twins sat at a couple terminals, correcting papers written by experts in the fields of medical radiology and submarine design. Two subjects chosen specifically because neither of them had any knowledge of those subjects. Advancing technology and knowledge that, theoretically, no one on Aleph or Bet should know. Uber's power does not rely upon a human knowledge pool, or if it does it extends to dimensions outside our access.

"I trust you'll send those papers by your people?" Alexandria asked. She didn't feel the need to mention the PRT had several experts of their own waiting to see the results of this experiment. Subtler hints in behavior than usual, afraid to let Gemini catch on to our method of communication, misses our ability to communicate and is taking a risk by using it anyway. Addictive properties brought on by Passenger impulse. Identical side effects to Taylia.

Fuck! Already aware of my reaction, curious and concerned about my sudden emotional change. I took the effort to shift subtly and look out at the twins. She'd get the idea that this is not something I can explain under current circumstances.

"Dragon's probably built a time altering device so she could read them yesterday," I quipped back.

Displeased with circumstances, recognizes necessity. She took the implied subject change for what it was. "In the unlikely event that you're exaggerating Dragon's skills, I'll see to it you're provided a copy of the same records we have." Referencing Dragon's Key, agreeing to hand it over. I wasn't a fool, I didn't believe for a second that Cauldron would hand it over without making a viable copy of it. The mere fact that we had a copy of our own hopefully meant we'd find a way to circumvent the intentional design flaws permanently. No, they're giving us the original, know we'd discover if we were given a fake or duplicate. Aware of my postcognitive ability? Unknowable.

I looked over at the twins. They'd moved on to one of the 'curveball' sections. One in botany studying several species of plants found in Norway's Earth, whose ancestors apparently went extinct on Bet a couple million or so years ago, and a series of made up, but highly plausible, plants invented for fantasy and science fiction stories. Dragon picked them out for the experiment. The other was working on a series evolutionary theory models. We wanted to see how their powers handled information they could not possibly possess, untested or untestable ideas, and a bunch of stuff that was just plain made up and/or fictional.

Even through the fog of information I was getting off Gemini, and the sheer weight of implications of the Key, I couldn't help but think of Taylor. The real Taylor. My best friend, who told me to fuck off and then killed herself in an absurdly visible way just to prove a point. It hurt a little, every time I saw her replacement, the girl my power said was only a few months old, running around with her personality, memories, powers and even life. Whose death I indirectly contributed to.
She would be dead now, anyway, I tried to assuage my guilt. Tohu and Bohu would have killed her just as certainly as they killed her replacement. She died on her own terms stopping the Butcher forever. Not a lot of people get to choose how they die. As much of a control freak as Taylor was, she was no doubt happy to be one of those few. On a good day, I even managed to believe that.

Rebecca tensed. Concerned, worried for my wellbeing, wants to comfort me. I looked at the twins and pushed my grin back up to its usual state, letting her know that her thoughts were appreciated. I waited silently for Gemini complete their current project, then spoke up.

"How's it going?" I asked them.

"Not bad at all," the one I'd come to think of as the elder brother with the white background on his right side spoke. He tended to be the leader of the pair, but they'd change that on a whim, to the point where I suspected they changed costumes in the middle of the day just so both got practice playing the role of leader. "Although that last project kinda sucked."

"That's because it was meant to," his twin asserted. He spent the time his brother was talking to cold read us. The pair came with their own inherent sense of planning with their sibling, so they were constantly running support for each others' plots and performances. "A test on the limits of our abilities by throwing something at us that should be beyond our current powers to understand."

"From your reactions, I assume it was?" Alexandria asked.

"You'd better believe it, babe," Elder laughed. "By the way, your power is my favorite. I hope we get to see more of it in the future." He winked at Alexandria, who simply ignored the behavior.

"You say that to literally everyone whose powers you borrow," I sighed.

"Aww," Younger whined. "Why do you have to ruin our fun like that?"

"Nah, see, ruining your fun would be letting Accord know you say that to everyone," I retorted. On some level, the man no doubt already knew it was nothing but meaningless flattery, but it stroked his ego. "I need to let my power take a break, so we're moving to phase two of the tests."

"Can't we keep just one?" Younger begged. I just stood there and looked at them, thinking about how odd it was that I was playing strict mother to a pair of guys that were older than me by about four years. Younger finally relented. "Fiiine."

Again, the change in their body language was abrupt and significant, taking their confidence and replacing it with a timid demeanor. The pair went back to the first set of computers they'd worked on.
Now it was time to see how much they still understood from their time spent using Alexandria's power. It also meant I could communicate properly with my friend.

She regarded me in silence as I conveyed my concern about what I was about to tell her, and extracted a promise from her that this didn't go past just us. It took less than fifteen minutes for Gemini to go through their first three terminals each when they had their copied powers. In the hour it took them to review their first terminals without any powers, I slowly conveyed the story of Taylia to Rebecca. What it really was, and all the risk that it carried for girls bound to it. Secrets that I'd kept to myself since that fateful day in early July.

I didn't trust myself to explain Taylor's death. I didn't believe I could do that and keep my composure enough to hide our conversation from the many spies pointed at us. I did manage to explain the addictive traits inherent in the process, and that Rebecca and I showed similar side effects.

She glanced to her side and removed her phone, checking messages, though I was certain she'd already checked them via her changeling, or the tech in the armor she used.

_Hesitant about situation, unsure how to approach the idea that our powers are a mind altering drug, considering the possibility of us avoiding each other to mitigate the possible influences of our powers. Immediate negative response to that idea, enjoys the connection, doesn't want to be alone. Choosing a method to rationalize the emotional decision she's already made._

She shifted slightly, conveying a concept of resignation. _Not acceptance or happiness, simple resignation to the reality of the issue._ Her left moved open slightly, and she tilted her hands inward toward her hip, and gestured toward the twins with her thumb. It took me a moment to piece together the message even with my power. _Dislikes the nature of powers influencing her behavior, but admits that's already the case, always has been the case. All Passengers influenced the minds of their hosts, she wasn't going to pretend we were an exception to that._

She expanded her hand again. _Saying that it was more than that, even. Conveying idea of broader behavior. Human beings as creatures controlled by chemistry. Thinkers, especially, as creatures influenced by their powers._ She closed her hand gently. _We are already caught by our powers, we might as well accept that and at least enjoy the parts that are good for us, because we're going to suffer the bad parts no matter what we do._

I was both relieved and disappointed. Taylor said some things very similar to that, in defense of Taylia. I conveyed that sentiment to Alexandria by my hand over the armor plating of my other arm. In the early days, our armor was alive, with a chitin-like shell for protection. A sign of how things have changed.

She stood confident, and managed to make an approving gesture with her hand. _Feels Taylor is right about that decision._
I almost flinched. Pulling them apart had caused so much pain, because they'd been connected so long. Rebecca and I were far less tied together, both because of less total exposure, and because our powers didn't link as fluidly as Taylia. We still had a chance to break free of the cycle before it was too late.

She tilted her head and traced her finger in a way reminiscent of cutting with a knife. *Gesture suggesting self harm, wondering if our bond could be compared to Taylia in terms of the other risks. If she believes there's a physical risk, she's willing to break away. If not, she's prefer to see where this path leads.*

"Okay, guys, it's time for you to pick up your powers and go back to the first stage tests again," I spoke to the twins. I relaxed slightly, conveying a lack of concern. *The other side effects aside, our powers carried nowhere near the same dangers that Taylia did.*

Rebecca was both relieved and concerned. *Mind made up, she doesn't want to stop using our connection. Knows that I don't, either. Afraid I'll do it anyway, due to prior experiences. If we were alone, I would have hugged her right then. You win again, Taylor.*

Underneath all of that, she asked the question I had been dreading the whole time.

*Will we be forced to stop them?*

=============

A/N- Yeah, I may have skipped an update. I was too busy binging on Dragon Unbound. It was really good. Definitely in my top 5 slot for Worm fics. Not quite Weaver Nine or Wake/Cenotaph territory. But still freakin’ awesome.
A Gaia/Khepri power interaction that resembled Lisa and myself, only significantly more potent and personality altering? That explained so much, like why Contessa's paths rarely stayed true longer than two weeks these days. We had been under the assumption that every new dimensional gateway translated to an alteration of her plans, due to the significant changes a colony world made for the inhabitants of a given nation, and the ripple effect they had on the world's political and economic landscape. In addition to new Endbringer attacks on a near monthly basis and the chaos born of that.

It had made handing over Ascalon harder to justify.

It also made our backup plans to assassinate Avalon's leadership, should that ever be needed, much less reliable. And knowing what I now knew, we needed that option all the more desperately.

I glanced back over at Lisa as she observed Gemini. We'd stressed her powers in this conversation, and she needed to keep what was left of it to continue the testing and the many other tasks that she handled for her team.

I didn't know how to comfort her, anyway. She'd accidentally confirmed that her secondary postcognitive power did not consider clones to be the original person, and the sense of loss that came with that knowledge. If it weren't for the threat that was Scion, there was every possibility she'd have left Pantheon by now.

I briefly considered offering her a place with Cauldron. It would give us more time together, her power made for an excellent balance for Contessa's, and maybe she'd even be happier with us. But I didn't want to cheapen our relationship by using it for something like that. And she already knew I was not happy with Cauldron.

When did everything become so complicated?

As I didn't have answers, I watched her and considered options. Part of my training did include psych profiling, even grief counseling, if for entirely selfish reasons. There was nothing more I could do than simply offer my support and understanding. It would have to be enough.

I shifted, moving a little closer to her, turning slightly to face her a little more. It was the most I could offer right now. Meanwhile, through my armor I started the conversation with Director Martinez that I had begged off on the premise that I was busy, and his unwillingness to claim it was an emergency.

The fact of the matter was, Pantheon making a move in a given region that involved calling in outside help like this was absolutely an emergency situation. The organization as a whole was powerful enough to constitute a Class S threat even without invoking the Endslayers or the
Empresses. A priority only slightly lower than that of the Yangban, and in fact somewhat above that of the Elite or Gesellschaft.

Through my changeling, I activated the communications. "Good afternoon, Director Martinez," I spoke with a practiced, pleasantly neutral tone. I had accustomed myself to the idea that the changeling better able to fake emotion than I was.

"Chief Director Costa-Brown," he acknowledged. "I've received information that Pantheon is engaged in a specific mission in the LA region."

"Interesting," I replied. "I do believe you were scheduled to host a relatively short notice power interaction test involving Alexandria and one of their recruits."

"Correct," he agreed. "As per protocol, they're being carefully monitored and we're collecting all possible details of the powers. However, Pantheon appears to have a number of ulterior motives. Of less immediate concern, Minerva delivered a number of plans she claims will help rebuild the area from the damage caused by Leviathan. And she brought several parahumans belonging to the criminal organization known as the Ambassadors to carry out a separate task. Attempts to learn her plan have thus far failed. And I could not assign Alexandria to follow them, as she is needed for the power testing."

"Which Minerva no doubt planned," I confirmed. I had to admit his suspicion was merited on its face value. Alexandria was the only Protectorate hero in LA with access to a shunt drive, which meant they could easily evade any other pursuers. "As she planned your paranoia."

"Ma'am?" Martinez asked, sounding confused and surprised. I died a little inside. I didn't hire him for his intelligence. Indeed, quite the opposite. But there were limits to how dumb a single person should be, and he exceeded them.

"If she actually wanted to keep their mission a secret, she wouldn't have let you know there was a secret mission in the first place," I spelled the obvious out to him. "Whether they're carrying out an operation or not remains to be seen. I wouldn't put it past Minerva to pretend they had a mission even if they didn't, simply to keep us on our toes." I paused for a half second, then had to try not to laugh. "Or, if they do have another goal, for it to be carried out in secret while you worry about the openly stated ulterior motives."

No wonder Lisa messes with people so much, I thought as I watched Martinez pale slightly, trying to decide the right thing to say next. There are no words for how fun this is.

Next to me, Lisa faked a sneeze. "Sorry, someone must be talking about me."

"Or all that environmentally controlled Avalon air has made you soft," I suggested. Maybe a little
familiar, but not everything we did in public needed to be pure business. More importantly, I was surprised at how clearly she read me considering I wasn't deliberately conveying anything to her.

Martinez had started speaking while I was talking to Lisa. "That is certainly a possibility," he agreed, not admitting he never would have thought of it on his own. "I still must report any information regarding Pantheon directly to you." His body language told me the story of how relieved he was that he didn't invoke the emergency protocols and pull me away from my supposed work. Once again, he felt rewarded for his caution, and would continue his usual trend of behavior. *Sometime soon I might need to fabricate a scenario where Alexandria pushes for aggressive action and the Chief Director praises him for his quick thinking.*

*And as I manipulate this man, so too does my Agent manipulate me,* I thought, glancing again at Lisa. *Agents influence their hosts in a number of ways, rewarding them for actions that suit their nebulous and barely defined goals.* Pantheon's theory of it being a sort of breeding mechanism, not unlike a mating dance or use of insects for pollination, was better than anything Cauldron had pieced together as a motive. My own Agent found whatever Lisa and I were doing to be highly desirable. Maybe even for the obvious reasons.

"Of course," I agreed with Martinez, barely giving him more than a tenth of my overall mental attention. "How Minerva behaves toward the various Directors is always important to document for future Thinker study." *Analysis that won't work because of our regular use of our interaction, same reason that Gaea and Khepri were functionally immune to our Thinkers, even Contessa.* "Our immediate assumption has to be that this is part of a larger game on her part. Remain observant, but don't change your routine until given a reason to do so."

"Yes ma'am, I understand," he agreed. It didn't take the changeling's boosted senses to tell me he was lying, if perhaps only to himself. "We should also coordinate a conference of local Directors and the Governor to review the recovery plans. As well as assigning some of our Thinkers to review the information. There may be a clue to her behavior therein." He was referring, at least in part, to the amount of profit they made in owning much of Brockton Bay before its annihilation. Pantheon did have a habit of benefiting greatly from their good deeds, one way or another. Martinez clearly wanted to find a way to strike back at Pantheon in whatever small way he could.


"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, turning off his phone.

*Lisa knew things would go this way, or something similar to. She planned it exactly right.* Martinez was now suspicious, he'd contact others and tell them to be suspicious, whether consciously or not, which would draw more attention to this recovery plan than it otherwise deserved. In addition to downplaying the significance of their mission against the Elite, it would draw attention to Alexandria's advice and the parts where it actually hurt Pantheon's supposed goals of gaining more power in the region.
I regarded the clever, difficult girl standing silently next to me. *If my Agent wants me to be closer to Lisa, which it clearly does, should I trust any of my feelings toward her at all?* It was not a comforting question to ask.

I prided myself on my analytical thinking, even before I got my powers. It was hard to really tell where a parahuman ended, and their Agent began, but I could at least try to answer one question. What would I think about someone like Lisa, who I wasn't able to communicate with in such a unique fashion?

I could certainly see myself respecting her intelligence, and her loyalty to those few she was willing to consider a friend. And especially her ability to cut through the lies which others built up. Respect wasn't quite the answer to my question, however.

To Rebecca, to who I was before my powers, she would have been a welcomed breath of fresh air. So much better than doctors who lied to my face as they poisoned my body, and family that forced a teenage girl to be an adult so that they didn't have to. I would have loved to have a friend like her. A shoulder to cry on. Maybe an older sister to turn to for help and honest answers that no one else would give.

To Alexandria, she was a clever and talented ally fighting stoically to find a solution to a threat so daunting that any sane human being would simply give up and accept death was an inevitability. We, better than almost any others, comprehended just how impossible it was to fight something like Scion, yet here we were trying anyway. That meant a great deal to me on a number of levels.

That only left one persona. Chief Director Costa-Brown. I had to admit my civilian self was boring in her single mindedness. As much as not needing sleep and having approximately twenty seven times the mental processing speed of a normal person afforded me an amazing ability to juggle my multiple lives, it also meant I set myself up to need to use that ability constantly. Costa-Brown existed only for her job. She didn't have many friends, merely work acquaintances and political alliances. I couldn't see her, a woman in her forties, being friends with a teenage pain in the ass like Lisa.

I did understand that Lisa had her faults... brash and argumentative, confrontational and frustrating, manipulative and emotional. No, I couldn't imagine Costa-Brown would be friends with her. However... if things had been different, if circumstances hadn't made it impossible for me to even try... I would have been very proud, to have a someone like her as a daughter.

I allowed myself a smile at my personal affirmation that, whatever our Agents may be trying, our friendship was genuine, not a matter of alien manipulation.

And then the alarms sounded. *What? Now?!* The automated data alert started coming into my costume, sent automatically from Dragon's instruments to our equipment. I read all of it as it came up on my HMD. *Power surge, unknown source, high powered dimensional distortion.* The map placed it not far outside of Los Angeles. The epicenter had the equivalent of a 7.8 on the Richter scale,
though it was clearly impact damage, not a faultline shift. *Flagged as clear Class A, likely Class S. Guild alerted, Pantheon alerted.*

"It's not an Endbringer," Lisa stated.

==========

A/N- Aww. And DRAMA!!!
I cringed as we stood there watching Beth's pixie army. The tiny creatures were ruthless, needlessly brutal nightmares, as if they felt the need to compensate for their small size in sheer viciousness. Spears the size of sewing needles stabbed into the eyes of the gunmen. Bursts of energy used to set hair or clothes on fire. The pixies stopped long enough to cut their fingers off. Those speaking over their radios received even worse treatment, as the creatures used their imitations of magic to force open their mouths and attack their tongues until they couldn't be used.

Our Tinker tech vision and hearing enhancers left very little to the imagination. We could watch and hear the battle as if we were standing in the middle of it. Screams of terror, complete with a sequence of subtitles for those screaming in Spanish. We were spared too much of the visual, as the broken bodies of the guards were left behind in favor of those still offering resistance inside. This morning, if I was told I would feel this much pity for drug dealers, I wouldn't have believed it.

"I... I can't really control my powers any better than that," Beth stated to us. Her voice was one of quiet horror. Her words an apology, a plea for us to forgive her for the cruelty going on in front of us, fear that we would hate her. I placed a hand on her shoulder, to try and comfort her what little I could as she stared forward at the pain her power was inflicting. "It's all I can do to ensure they won't kill anyone."

"Lizardtail, you will be able to heal them, correct?" Citrine asked, glancing at her other companion.

"Shouldn't be a problem," he responded. "They're still alive, even if some are probably deep in shock right now."

"Worst case scenario, we can contact Gaea for help," I offered.

"May I ask why they're so," Citrine paused to find a word.

"Horrific beyond all reason?" Beth offered quietly after a minute. Even through the pair of suits, I could tell she was shaking as she refused to take her eyes off the battlefield, watching every atrocity the pixies were inflicting to those people who had committed the most grievous crime their little minds could comprehend. That of being an enemy of their goddess.

"Honestly, I've seen worse," Citrine responded casually. "I was curious about how oddly thorough they are in their methods. They clearly have a logic to their attacks, but I'm afraid I don't quite understand what it is."

"Mind if I?" I asked Beth. She nodded after a moment. "Her summons are mostly autonomous, but not really intelligent. Sort of like small AIs. They view everything through a fairy tale filter. The guns
are seen as 'sorcerous weapons', and the radios they understand as some kind of summoning stone. That's why they attack that way, to stop the enemy from using their magic to fight back."

"Why don't they attack the equipment?" The one in the blue-green costume asked.

"Because my stupid power thinks magic items are more valuable than human lives," Beth answered, her voice bitter and pained. "That's how fantasy stories work. Entire armies can be destroyed without remorse or pity, as if one stupid trinket makes all those deaths worth the cost. It doesn't even matter what the magic item does, the magical equivalent of a personal cloaking device is worth more than thousands of nameless peasants. I can't believe I ever thought those stories were good."

A series of small explosions echoed the inside of the building.

"They're using Tinker tech grenades," Citrine stated, sounding more confused than anything. "Synth must have perfected a safe bomb of some sort. Either that, or they're getting really desperate in there. Will those be effective against your summons?"

"Yes," Beth answered through gritted teeth. "I've lost about ten percent of them already. My power... isn't very intelligent. They won't adapt in time to save themselves. Maybe ten more minutes until it's up to the rest of you to finish the job."

I squeezed her shoulder with my hand, hard enough that she'd feel it through her armor. Which meant enough force that it would have broken her shoulder if she was unarmored. Beth trembled again, as more of her pixies died in the onslaught. Right now, she'd be breathing a combination of Tinker designed chemicals to allow her to keep stable and ignore the pain her power caused. She'll be bedridden for the rest of the week, maybe longer, when this is over.

There was a time when I hated how weak my power seemed to be, how silly it was to send stuffed animals into battle. A weak power that meant I could never be taken seriously as a hero. I'd learned how stupid that was, how much worse it could be. There were ugly, painful powers out there. Some were hard to control, like Dubstep. Some came with a price that hurt their owners, like Elle. And some were so dangerous that using them meant you were choosing to risk the lives of your targets, like Lily. Beth was the only one I knew afflicted with all the above.

"Dubstep, Clotho, we move forward, secure the entrance. Othello, Genius Loci, you stay here to protect Anima until we know their device is safe for you." Citrine commanded. "Is there anything we can do to improve your summons' chances inside?"

"Not really," Beth replied. "Maybe something that boosts their energy attacks... if they hit harder, their victims will go down faster. Maybe they won't feel the need to mutilate the fallen so thoroughly." She didn't sound hopeful about that possibility.
"You hear that, Jacklight?" Citrine asked.

"Can do, Citrine," he responded. "Just as soon as you get me a way around the barricade."

"Already working on it," she responded, already taking off toward the entrance. "I've never seen anything like this before. ETA around ten minutes."

I followed her reluctantly. I wanted to stay behind and comfort Beth, help her through the physical and emotional hell. But the sooner we completed this mission, the sooner we could get her somewhere to recover. And the more pixies survived, the faster she could recover. The best thing I could do to help her right now would require leaving her.

The building itself wasn't that big- I'd seen larger gas stations. Which hid the part where it went at least six stories deep down into the mountain below. There was always the worrying possibility of escape tunnels, and no way for us to know if they existed or not. But if Minerva went through this much effort on this mission already, I was certain she'd consulted Dinah about the odds. So I'd just have to trust that what we were doing was fated to work out.

My armor told me that, by some stroke of luck, one of the men had gone unnoticed by the pixie army. I fired a small burst into the wooden crate he took shelter inside and tugged with my power, splintering it and pulling him out by his clothes. He screamed and fought against the bindings that were his clothes, crying like a terrified child rather than a man that was obviously older than I was.

Citrine actually backhanded him. "Look at me, coward," she spat the words. There was more to that than just her trying to get information. She was honestly angry at the man, disgusted by him. Not the scariest behavior I'd seen in capes. Maybe something to do with her Trigger?

He whimpered, and I dropped my control on his clothes. <Please don't kill me! I just work here! Take the drugs and money, it's all yours!>

My suit didn't think he was lying, so when Citrine kicked him, I had to speak up. "That's enough!" I insisted. "We hav powerful Thinkers on our side, we don't need to resort to torture to get information."

Citrine looked toward me, then back to the terrified man. "Fine," she relented, but she didn't stop staring down our captive. We waited mostly in silence, the only noises were the weak cries and moans of those the pixies had maimed around us, and the occasional bursts of noise from deeper in the underground complex.

The ground shuddered. For a brief moment, I thought it was an earthquake, but my armor's instruments flashed warnings of a localized explosion beneath us. I took flight immediately, but wasn't nearly fast enough. A thousand screaming voices erupted around me as the ground splintered,
tendrils of rainbow light pouring from the cracks and engulfing the area. Thousands of hands and faces scattered across the mass seemingly at random, crawling their way across the landscape.

A powerful set of jaws clamped down on my leg while making a noise somewhere between a growl and a cry of pain. A new pair of arms sprouted from the eyes of the face, digging into my suit. Armor that had been tested against Alexandría's strength was torn, exposing my leg. Dozens of alerts flashed across my HUD, letting me know my armor was being critically damaged or destroyed pretty much everywhere at once by the grasping limbs.

I was pulled into the writhing mass of limbs and facial features that covered the landscape below.

======================

A/N- Poor Beth... if only she were a psychotic masochist with a love of overacting... then she'd be able to enjoy her powers...

And if Dethklok were here, Beth's power would be worth of an album.
Newter always has a way of showing when he's in a bad mood, I had come to notice. Mainly by acting like he was in a really good mood. I'd known a few people like that in my life, and for the most part it helped just to pretend like nothing was wrong and let them come to you if they wanted to. Or, in my case, tracking him down to a higher end club here on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Him in civilian clothes, me in the underlayer of my armor. Plenty of people recognized me, and I even signed a couple autographs and had to beg off some 'offers' on my way to the back. Though that one redhead was pretty cute... maybe Sabah... no, Sabah's way too innocent for something like that.

I wasn't quite the gay rights status symbol here that I was in other parts of Europe. This area was already pretty accepting, and what issues it did still have would be solved with time, education, and other gentle pressures. My method of in your face challenges to the status quo would only make me look reactionary and possibly unhinged here. Sure, the first time we made a portal here, we followed the same protocol we demanded of every nation receiving a portal. Which was simply a very public photo op where I shook hands with whatever highest leader that nation had.

An event that was sometimes boring, little more than a rote service by a politician happy enough to be seen being seen with an international celebrity. Sometimes it filled me with pride as the leaders of nations gave sincere thanks for my efforts, both on the battlefield and otherwise. And sometimes I was rewarded with sadistic glee, as my armor's combat systems told me just how much some asshole was imagining my execution even as he was forced to play nice with me. After all, if they didn't play ball, I could simply refuse to cut open the doorway to another world. Sure, most backpedaled on their niceties the moment my back was turned, but the message was sent all the same. They were humiliated, and I walked away untouched.

"Hey, Newt, how's things?" I asked casually as I walked in. A couple girls were draped over each other, unconscious. The armor's auto-diagnostics let me know they were under the influence of his poison, and while I wasn't exactly happy about that, I ignored it as I always did. Newter certainly charged enough to send these people on mini vacations, so it's not like they didn't want it.

"You know me," he answered with a smile, taking a drink of whatever concoction he was trying today. "Livin' the sweet life." Cultural foods and drinks were his personal vice, along with the occasional female companion.

"So I see," I sat down across from him, sinking into the truly luxurious couch. *I've never owned a bed as comfortable as this couch.*

"Want a drink?" He asked.

"Trying to get me drunk?" I smirked.
"Hell no," he responded. "Your power's scary as balls enough when you're sober. There should be an international law against Endsayers getting drunk, especially so close to the next predicted attack. You can have some of what I'm having. It's called Jenever, and it took forever to find an alcohol free version."

"Sounds good," I agreed, taking a glass and holding it for him to pour, so I didn't risk contacting his secretions. My underarmor was able to protect against most poisons, but his was a power and broke a lot of rules, so cross contamination was a risk. I sipped it cautiously at first, and decided there wasn't anything I could compare it to. A weird pine flavor, plus a bunch of other stuff. It was good, but not something I'd miss if I never had it again.

"This is really good," I smiled politely as I swallowed more of the drink. "Glad you went through the effort of getting a version for us non-drinkers." Newter, reasons he never shared with me, refused to drink alcoholic beverages. I had my speculations on why, maybe he his taste buds just didn't like the flavor... but my guess was it was specifically because he couldn't feel the effects of the alcohol and it was one more barrier between himself and normalcy. Pretending he was a teetotaler meant he could take ownership of the difference, make it a choice. And I played along because, well, he was right about keeping alcohol away from a power like mine. And if it made him feel better about his own condition, I was happy to do it.

"Took forever to find this stuff," he repeated. "You don't even know how many people I had to ask. One guy I looked like he was either going to cry or hit me. You'd think I was talking about jacking off with their national flag or something."

"Different cultures, different priorities," I shrugged. "So, Faultline said you stumbled across something from the neural regeneration tech."

"Ah, so that's why you're here," he sighed, looking less happy.

"Well, it is an important piece of tech and you've gone the longest using it," I stated. Gregor had quit months ago, for reasons he refused to speak of. "We do want to know if Cauldron was telling the truth about the Case 53s. Were you a volunteer?"

"In my case?" Newter looked down into his glass for a good minute. "Yeah. They were telling the truth. Or I think they were, I'm not absolutely certain and there are still a lot of gaps, memories I don't have back, and stuff I was never told in the first place. But, well... you know all those shitty alt reality stories where the Nazis win the Second World War? Well, turns out that's what happened to my home dimension."

"That... is pretty fucked up," I muttered. "Are we going to need to do something?" That is the kind of reality that Pantheon might be provoked into staging an interdimensional attack on. I'd certainly advocate us doing so.
"They lost the Third," he added to the story, more or less negating my question. "And by the time the fourth came around... well, there were no winners. Even in our version of America, thirteen year olds were being sent off to war. Looking at it with what I know now, I don't think our science ever got to the point where we realized what nuclear fallout meant for the world. Or maybe things were so bad that no one cared anymore."

"Fuck," I muttered. "That's just... fuck..." Cauldron certainly found a great place to harvest 'willing' test subjects in that world. They claimed that every test was done on volunteers, who knew and agreed to the risks. A planet torn by nuclear war would be full of people who'd agree to almost anything for the chance of a better future.

"So now... I don't know what to think," he sighed. "I had years to build up this... idea, y'know? About the people who turned me into a freak and stole my life from me. When I heard the name Cauldron, I finally had a name I could assign all of my hatred to. The source of all bad things in my life. The reason I had no parents, no history, not even a name... and now, well... I find out that I'd trade everything they stole from me just for the taste of Jenever." He lifted his glass and downed the rest of it. "Even like this I have a better life than anyone on my world could have hoped for.

"Which bothers you, I take it?" I prompted.

"Yeah, it bothers me," he agreed with an unhappy chuckle. "I feel let down, y'know? Disappointed. I sure as fuck ain't grateful to them for turning me into this." He gestured across his orange, amphibian like body. "And they did use me as a guinea pig so they could perfect a drug that granted powers, so it's not like they did it out of the kindness of their hearts. I owe them nothing."

Which they did as a desperate ploy to save the world from Scion, I added silently. At this moment, Faultline and her people were not aware of what Scion really was. Almost nobody had been told, only those who had the powers or resources to actually help prepare for that war.

"And I guess that's part of the problem," Newter continued. "I owe them nothing. I can't even do something crazy like swear eternal vengeance and hunt them down. They came along, did their thing, and left me to fend for myself just a little better off than how they found me."

I couldn't think of anything to say. The Empresses would be overjoyed at the news that our supposedly conditional alliance wasn't a metaphorical deal with the devil where we ignored horrible crimes just for something that was useful to us. They may be a group that fed off of human greed and suffering, but they weren't actively making the world a worse place. It was honestly a relief, but at the same time Newter was right, in a way it was disappointing. A let down, that the monolithic evil conspiracy wasn't quite as monolithic or evil as we had feared.

Oh well, we still had the Yangban.

"You got the answers you've been looking for, but they weren't nearly as cool as what you imagined
"It would be," I suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," he agreed. "Speaking of boring answers, I don't think we've been properly introduced. My name is... was... Joshua. Or Josh, to my friends.

"Welcome to life, Josh," I responded. "It makes for a shitty story when you have all that buildup only to be met with an unsatisfying conclusion, but reality doesn't care about the story, only what does or doesn't happen."

He shrugged noncommittally.

"Hey, look at it this way," I smiled. "It means you're free to figure out what you actually want to do with your life. Your past is as settled as it's going to get, and there's nothing forcing you to choose one future over another. You can do whatever you like. You can choose to do absolutely nothing if you want. You're even rich, now, so you don't have to worry about how you'll pay for it."

"Yeah," he smiled back, halfheartedly. "I just don't know what to do with myself."

"Well, for me it's always been about causes," I responded with a shrug. "I kill Endbringers, I have a hot girlfriend, I promote equal rights while daring evil sacks of shit to even try doing something about it. Then either gloat at them when they chicken out, or shoot them if they take me up on the offer. But that's just what makes me happy. You'll have to find your own passions."

"Guess that's my new goal in life, then," Josh agreed. "Figure out what I want to do with my life."

"Hey, I can drink to that," I agreed, lifting my empty glass, shaking it in the universal gesture for a refill. Then the alarms went off.

==============

A/N- Pantheon vs Nazi World, coming to an Omake near you... whenever someone else writes it...

I'll be honest, I didn't feel like there was enough speculation or anticipation from the cliffhanger earlier, so I opted to write this instead.

Actually, I'd wanted to have this scene for a while now, portions of it were even written out months ago (with Gregor being in the other side of the conversation) but I never had the "right moment" to work it into the story. And then it finally fell in my lap! Huzzah!
We had to view the scene from orbit, using Dragon's satellites. Some kind of interference prevented our dimensional viewing tech from working in the affected zone. What we could see was a nearly half mile radius area of shimmering, rainbow light full of limbs and facial features writhing about and grasping the air and itself.

"It looks like the flesh mass interaction that happens when we use Caio's power on regenerating tissue," Emma stated. ConfusionWorrySuspicion. She glanced at us. "Right, sorry, that's one of the ones that I haven't flagged as a priority. Nothing interesting ever came of it, a junk reaction caused by forcing multiple mass-summoning powers to interact. Up until now, it didn't seem important."

"It appears to have to do with the mission I sent them on," Lisa stated. "They were simply supposed to attack a drug den, nothing critical."

"A mission you didn't bother telling me about before recruiting my people," Crystal growled at her. "Seriously, Lisa, what the shit?"

"And Sabah's in that mess," Lily added. "This is a Class S fuckup and you know it."

"Power interaction," Lisa responded. "No one can predict those."

"You figured out my interaction with Labyrinth easily enough," Lily accused.

"I predicted one power interaction! One! Out of how many we've seen so far?" Lisa exclaimed. "Yes, I can make an educated guess with enough information, but you may as well blame the weather man for not predicting a meteor strike."

"And we're not already in there trying to fix things?" Lily argued. "Rescuing our team?"

"It appears to be stationary, and that thing's had plenty of time to do... whatever it is that it's going to do," Lisa responded. "If it was going to kill them, then they were already dead in the first minute or two. And if it's not trying to kill them, then they're in there somewhere and if we rush in guns blazing, we'll probably kill them. We have to be cautious on this. And if this is a power interaction, the last thing we want to do is throw more powers at it until something else breaks. Jacklight witnessed it from Avalon's side, and I wanted everyone here before we do anything more."

She nodded toward Chevalier and Dragon.
"She's right," I stated, looking at the assembled heroes. "Let's hear what Jacklight has to say." This had been downgraded to an anomalous event, instead of a potential Class S, but it was an anomaly that Pantheon had already been called in for. That put us and Chevalier equally in charge. 

"It doesn't seem to be causing more damage, just sitting there waiting."

"As you know, we were carrying out an operation to take out one of the Elite's bases," Jacklight responded, speaking in a very matter of fact way. "They were using some unknown ability to block your dimensional tech. Our assumption was a Tinker device."

"ConcernThreat. She's right, we use our shunt tech for everything... this could be a serious problem."

"Was wondering when someone would get around to building countermeasures against us," Lisa responded, sounding not at all concerned. "Please go on."

"Citrine ordered Anima to attack the base with her summons while Citrine herself spent her efforts trying to work around the dimensional barricade. She succeeded, and I altered the area so that the effects of electricity were more potent than they should be by an order of magnitude. The intent being to short out the base's electronic devices, and improve the damage Anima's summons could do."

"So that's at least four high level reality altering shakers hitting a single area at once," Lisa responded. "Two of which were manipulating inter-dimensional physics. Think of it like Labyrinth cubed. Lily, you have to sit this one out. I don't think we want to rip a hole that size into the side of reality."

Lily's hands clenched in her suit, but she said nothing.

"We can send some of my constructs in," Taylor responded. "Endbringer tissue inhibits powers, so they shouldn't add to the power interaction. If anything, maybe they'll weaken... whatever it is that's fueling this. Drain away its power source."

"The version we create in the labs don't last very long," Emma volunteered. "It should wear off on its own. We'll want to study this as much as we possibly can, though. It's still acting like it's alive, which is something the lab versions have never done." She glanced over at one of the other Tinkers. "Elena, you're our expert on the subject. Take whomever you need, piggyback off the zerg senses until we're sure it's safe to send our more advanced scanning tech. I'm sure Dragon's willing to help however she can."

"Of course," Dragon agreed.

"So what exactly were you hoping to do with this, anyway?" Chevalier looked at us. "Some people might consider a foreign nation engaging in attacks on American citizens, even their criminal
citizens, on American soil to be a political crisis."

Vicky glanced between us, and I wondered what would happen if this came to a blowup. Vicky said she'd have broken up with him if I didn't approve of their relationship, but this was a pretty big thing. Crystal didn't look happy about it, either.

"We didn't use any Avalon resources," I stated. "Pantheon was supporting the Ambassadors, and Crystal's team isn't part of Avalon."

"That excuse won't hold," Chevalier responded.

_ProtectiveSupport._ Taylor stepped up in front of me, and I was torn between wanting to defend myself, and loving her for doing it for me. "We both know it will. The Protectorate's being held together by bubble gum and prayers right now, and every day things fall apart a little more. You don't have the resources to press the issue with us."

"Is that what this is going to be?" He asked. "We can't stop you so we just sit back and watch as you walk all over us?"

_AngerGuilt._ "You've seen Dragon's projections just like we have," Taylor pressed, not letting Chevalier's jab stick. "Even without Dinah's predictions looming over us, civilization is collapsing piece by piece. The colony worlds aren't going to help more than merely staunching the blood loss. We had a goal, one which would have helped us to help everyone. You know what we're preparing for."

"That argument lets you get away with a lot of things, but it's not a blank check," Chevalier responded. "That... thing... out there can be seen from orbit. It's not going to be so easily covered up."

"That was an accident," I argued. "Impossible to predict, and not even related to the mission."

"Which brings up a question," Chevalier continued. "What were you doing out there in the first place? You didn't alert the PRT, or the Protectorate. You just walked in, did your thing, and were planning to walk out again without consequence?"

"Easier to ask forgiveness than permission?" Lisa quipped.

_AnnoyanceConcern._ "Minerva, you're not helping," Taylor spoke up. "He's right, we're supposed to be allies. We could have been upfront about this."
"Allies or not, we're also competing for resources," Lisa stated. "We're better at using those resources than the Protectorate's government controlled bureaucracy could ever hope to be. Everyone here knows that every time we hand over some asshole that we captured to the PRT, whether they recruit them or imprison them, it's a resource we could have used that's instead going to waste."

"This is not the time or place," Taylor insisted.

"Well, if you really must know, we were stealing resources from the Elite," Lisa responded, sighing. "Mostly drugs that we were going to destroy, and a good amount of Tinker tech, including some networks. Important tech that would synergize well with what we already have."

"You know you've pretty much blown any chance of pulling anything like this again in the future, right?" Chevalier emphasized. "You're already on thin ice, please tell me you understand that. Push much harder and you will start a war between America and Avalon."

"We'll be fine," Lisa responded. "We spent our tokens, now we'll lay low until the next Endbringer, which is coming up in a week or so anyway. After that the slate will more or less be wiped clean and we'll be back to the status quo. Political capital has a very short shelf life, so we're spending it while we have it."

"I've read your theories on how the Passengers deliberately push for conflict," Chevalier pressed. "Is that what's happening here?"

I looked at the others. We were being watched by a lot of people. How much things have changed, that I could even have a conversation like this. A year ago, even six months ago, I would have caved in. My Passenger was driving me to insanity because I defied it constantly. And now it was quite the opposite, I followed the impulses and came away feeling stronger, smarter, more confident than I could ever have imagined me being. ConcernSupportWorryFear. Was it true? Were we hunting for a fight? It would explain a lot.

"No," I finally stated. We'd established that. Taylor and I have our loophole. Our impulses had turned inward to keep our bond, and we were happy with that. "In the interest of honesty, there's a Tinker by the name of Synth that we were hoping to capture. "In the interest of honesty, there's a Tinker by the name of Synth that we were hoping to capture. Chemistry Tinker, we could have used him to create a new level of medical technology." And combine his expertise with our other Tinkers and create another series of upgrades for our power boosting stims and maybe even the Cauldron vials.

"All those points made, we're going to have to silence this event," Alexandria finally spoke. "I think we can all agree that we don't need the general public to have the conversation we're having right now."

"How do you expect to cover something like this?" Chevalier asked.
"We don't have to hide the event itself," she responded. "Admitting to an unexpectedly violent Power Interaction is fine. It may create more fear from normal people toward parahumans, which we'll need to work to fix. But the events leading up to this can't go public."

"Even that's not too big a hit," Lisa added. "Some of Crystal's team got into a fight with the Elite. Not the first or last time it's happened. If you ignore the parts where it was an unprovoked attack and we were planning to abduct a super villain across interdimensional borders, it's all perfectly innocent."

IncredulityAnnoyance.

A/N- I briefly considered having having Lily try to attack the glowing flesh garden and accidentally destroying LA and surrounding countryside by sucking it into a dimensional rift.

The I decided that sounded like too much work and wouldn't really add to the story. So, didn't happen.
"I've found a possible solution to the problem," Alexandria stated. "I don't think anyone's going to like it, however."

SuspicionWorry. "Won't cost us anything to hear the idea," Taylor responded.

"We know a parahuman that's likely capable of finding the solution for us," she continued. Her eyes turned toward Chevalier, though from the angle we were standing, he wouldn't be able to notice it. "She is, however, quite insane. A very young parahuman, and one that perpetuates the stereotypes that Triggering young increases power."

HorrorTrepidation. Oh! Oh. Fuck. We need a way to remove Chevalier before she arrives, if we choose to use her at all. "What powers does she have?" I already knew the answer to that was 'a lot of them', but it was a smart question to ask in front of Chevalier.

"A Thinker ability that grants unique understanding of powers," Alexandria answered. "She's been using it to help Eidolon optimize his abilities. They've formed something of a rapport with each other,"

"So, basically, we're calling in Eidolon and hoping he has a power that can deal with this mess?" Lisa added, following whatever script she was pulling off of Alexandria, and I was convinced they had something going on that we couldn't tap into any more than they could tap into Taylia.

"That would be the most likely result, yes," Alexandria agreed. "If nothing else, it's an alternative to waiting and hoping your Tinkers can find a way to undo the Gordian Knot that is this power interaction. I must admit I'm getting concerned about the duration of this event."

PatienceIdeaConfidence. I fought the urge to look over at Taylor and ask her what she was planning.

"It's true," Lisa agreed. "The other interactions tend to fade pretty quickly, leaving only their side effects behind. Nothing that continues to use power, at least. That thing out there is made of pure energy. A prismatic forcefield. It has to be consuming a lot of energy."

"Y'know sis," I startled at Vicky's voice right next to my ear. "If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you staged this whole thing just to get out of our little family dinner. Anyway, I'm done with my test run. The thing's pretty stationary, but it gets grabby if you get close. So, y'know, enter at your own risk."

"No weak points?" Taylor asked.
" Doesn't register as alive, " she answered, stepping around me. " Definitely one of Anima's constructs gone horribly wrong. And I can confirm there's a lot of people still alive in that mess. Anima's one of them, so's Sabah and Dubstep. I never was able to directly sense GL, but he's probably in there somewhere, too. A lot of injured, and I do mean a lot of injured. When you said this was some kind of drug complex, you may have forgotten to mention there were at least a hundred people in there. Seriously, how the hell do you hide a base that size this close to LA?"

Lisa facepalmed. " They didn't. Fuck. They were using a pocket dimension that they could pick up and move from one location to another. Which probably got folded into the power interaction along with everything else. The fixing process just got a metric fuckton more difficult."

ConcernFear. " Umm, Lisa, I just thought of something horrible, " Taylor muttered. " What happens if Scion sees this? This seems like the kind of thing that he'd put a stop to if he noticed, and we're already pushing our luck with the portals and dimensional viewing technology."

" Scion related blackout currently located in the western Egypt region, " Dragon informed us.

" Doesn't matter anyway, " Lisa responded. " He's as statistically likely to show up here as any other part of the planet in any given second."

" Well, that's wonderful, " Vicky responded. " So, my job's as done as it's going to get without me getting into cuddle range of that thing. How long's it going to take for the Tinkers to get their stuff done so we can heal the injured and arrest people."

" Hours, " Lisa answered. " Maybe days."

" Yuck, can't you speed that up?"

" We're going to have Eidolon come in to handle it, " Lisa responded.

" Makes sense to me, " Vicky agreed cheerfully, walking over to Chevalier. " When it doubt, phone the guy with the ' I win everything ' button. So I'mma go before he shows up. No offense to the rest of you, but he's so unfairly bullshit that it actually gives me a headache to look at him. " She grabbed Chevalier's hand. " C'mon, you're taking me out for dinner. I'm in the mood for something that only qualifies as food by technicality."

Chevalier just looked at her. " Victoria, I do have a job to do."

" With exception to the Tinkers, none of us are actually doing anything at all right now, " she responded. " Standing around waiting for Eidolon to show up isn't a job. "
"Unless you're with the paparazzi!" Lisa cut in.

"Hush, you," Victoria glared at her. "Besides, won't take too long. Just zip over to the city, visit what promises to be a very shocked drive-through, brush the smog off our suits, and be back before the grease has a chance to cool."

Chevalier looked like he was about to say something, then stopped. Embarrassment Discomfort.

"She's not wrong," Alexandria responded. "We're accomplishing very little, and I understand that not all of us have the benefit of not needing to worry about eating or sleeping, you might as well take a short break while we wait here."

"Awesome!" Vicky exclaimed.

"I didn't agree to anything," Chevalier replied.

"Yeah, but you were about to," she smiled, wrapping her arm around his as she looked over at me. "Don't worry, Ames, I promise to bring you back something laden with cholesterol and salt. All that healthy eating just isn't good for you."

I just gave the poor guy the 'and you're dating her?' look. Vicky stuck her tongue out at me, right before her helmet folded itself back around her head and she took off, pulling her new boyfriend along with her. Huh, I should probably find out what his actual name is one of these days. Or maybe what his face actually looks like.

"By the way, her price for being awesome and saving our collective asses is two and a half unnamed favors to be determined the next time she feels bored," Taylor stated dryly. "Amelia, you're exempt because of your attention to detail when upgrading Chevalier."

"And a half?" I asked. What did she mean by attention to detail.

"It was three, Vicky used half of one to make Taylor say that," Lisa explained. "And you'll be happier if you don't ask the next question. Or that one."

"As fascinating as this is, we don't have a great deal of time," Alexandria interrupted, saving me the mental exercise of trying to figure out if Lisa actually knew what the third question would have been, since I didn't. "I'm sending the go ahead, they're ready. It'll be more convenient for everyone to meet them on Bet."
She didn't wait for confirmation, simply shunting over immediately. I glanced over at Taylor, who nodded and followed suit. Lisa, Dragon and I were next.

We hadn't been there more than a few seconds when a panel of bright artificial light appeared out of nowhere, and two people stepped through. Eidolon's green costume was instantly recognizable. After all, I was the one who created the bulk of it, then Emma and Riley converted it from modified plant into a bizarre power modifying cyborg. The girl next to him looked to be around Dinah or Riley's age, and wore a cloak of the same green as Eidolon's. But her costume was highlighted with black and gold trim in arcane patterns, in contrast to his white and silver.

The girl didn't bother looking at us, simply staring forward at the roiling mass of shimmering light and limbs. "Ah, yes, I see what you mean," she stated, her words echoed melodically by a chorus of voices. "The faeries craft a memorial of the the Stillborn Queen."

"A memorial?" Lisa asked. "You mean like a statue of her image?"

"Correct, Negotiator," the girl responded. She is not a girl, she's a woman in her forties who chooses the appearance of a child. A mass murderer and possibly the most powerful and dangerous human being on the planet. "They yearn for the return of what they've lost, and for the dance to continue. In their loneliness, they grow a garden to honor Her."

"The Passengers don't have feelings," Lisa argued. "They can't experience yearning."

Glaistig Uaine looked away from the rainbow field of body parts, toward Lisa. Eidolon placed a hand on her shoulder. She paused, then looked up at him before returning to the view we were all facing. "You place too much faith in your faerie's limited wisdom, Negotiator. It is quick and clever, but not of the royalty. A hummingbird that imagines itself worthy to fly with alongside the eagle."

Lisa stared daggers at the Faerie Queen, but bit her tongue. Possibly even literally.

"Is there a way to remove the memorial?" Taylor asked. HesitationCaution. "It's putting all of the faeries at risk."

Glaistig Uaine watched for a minute longer before speaking. "Yes, Queen Administrator," she confirmed. "The faeries act without proper consideration of their actions, you are wise to be concerned." SurprisePrideConsternation.

I didn't understand why Taylor was surprised that she had what Glaistig Uaine considered a 'royal court' power. Her Passenger was capable of incredible things, after all. Planetwide communications and processing of information. If I was royalty, then she certainly was as well.
As I was considering this, the air around her shimmered, and my stomach clenched when I recognized the shade she manifested. A hulking, hideous man that caused my stomach to clench. *ProtectiveSupportLove*. It was that parahuman Bonesaw came after me with when she forced me to heal Mark's brain. The one with the field that stopped powers from working.

We were caught within the field, and I felt my powers dim. Strangely enough, they didn't fully collapse, I still had my senses. Taylor as well, and that meant Taylia withstood the aura. I felt a little bit of pride and a lot of personal confidence because our combat suits weren't altered by the field at all.

Glaistig Uaine gestured, and her ghost moved forward. Where he moved, the light disipated, like smoke blown away by a strong wind. The earth beneath cracked into gravel or churned into dust and sand, depending on what it started as. The outer edge of the field started to shrink as well, melting away as the features of the body rushed inward to fill the hole in its center, only to meet with the same fate as everything else.

"I do believe our task here is done," Glaistig Uaine stated after the last of the color vanished. Her shade vanished. "I was promised the corpse of the charioteer as recompense for my time."
"Of course," Eidolon agreed. The first thing he'd said during this. "Doormaker, to B272."

The panel of light dimmed and changed to a blue color instead of harsh white, and the girl stepped through. Eidolon himself stayed behind, and walked over to Alexandria.

Taylor thought quicker than I did, and several shadowcats shunted over within moments of the doorway closing, then started running in toward the destroyed epicenter. "Healers on standby, we have wounded and prisoners to worry about," Taylor commanded. "Tinkers and Thinkers with changeling models, shunt them over. I'm already establishing relays. Try to find the source of the dimensional barrier."

===================

A/N- This is one of those chapters where smart readers will notice a lot of very important things.
The dimensional barrier made my power feel sluggish, creating a frustrating half second delay to my minions' responses. After the third humiliating time a shadowcat walked face first into a wall, I started to get a handle on the slow response, having them walk along the area instead of their usual trotting speed.

I found Sabah and the rest of the team near the entrance to the building. They were very much alive, and only Anima had any clothes on. She and a blonde woman I assumed to be one of Accord's were both unconscious, but the bioscans from my zerg didn't indicate any immediate health risks.

"Don't worry, everything's fine now," I informed the collection of people. I had some of the 'cats expand their wing membranes and wrap around the nude men and women, giving them some semblance of privacy. Fortunately, we never found a way to install a sense of touch into the EB zerg. Why does the idea of seeing them nude bother me? It's not like I couldn't already use echolocation and various nonvisible light spectrums to see through clothes.

"Could you create some clothes, ones that are shunt capable?" I asked Amelia. "I'm estimating ten sets." ConfusionConcern. "Umm... Anima's the only one whose suit survived the power interaction. For whatever bizarre reason, everyone else has been stripped naked."

"Yeah, just give me a minute," Amelia agreed.

"We'll have clothes and medical attention for you in a couple minutes," I let the group know. "The interaction's over and the area's secure, cooperate with the shadowcats and we'll get you out of ground zero for a real checkup.

"Everyone appears to be alive, don't worry," I informed Lily and our medical teams. "I'm bringing them to our deployment zone. The power interaction appears to have destroyed everyone's clothing. Possibly something Manton Effect related, don't know for certain."

"Is..." Sabah hesitated. "Is Anima alright? What about GL? Uh, Genius Loci." I frowned, him I didn't see. His armor seemed to have been destroyed along with everything else. His power meant he was a living shaker effect, and this interaction was a blending of shaker powers. Did... was he caught in the mess and destroyed? There's nothing I could do to figure it out.

"Anima seems to be fine," I told her. "I don't know how to find Genius Loci."

By the time Amelia got the full body covering outfits ready, I'd brought her another shadowcat to transport them to our survivors. I'd also been cataloging the other stuff in the area. The wounded men and women who were the defenders of the drug den had been stripped naked as well, but left where
they fell. Most of them were badly injured by shallow wounds spread all over their bodies. If left to heal naturally, their own families wouldn't be able to recognize them after the recovery.

Their weapons and electronics had been gathered in tidy little piles, almost as if they were being inventoried, although I couldn't figure a logic in their sorting method.

"Lisa, do you have a minute?" I asked. The sixth conversation I was running simultaneously. One of the others was the universe's dumbest mugging. Why the guy thought it was a good idea to try to mug someone on Avalon, I wasn't sure, but he was wrong. What passed as local police were happy enough to take my word for everything, but it still required a conversation with a bunch of officers and someone to take down my testimony.

"Kinda busy," she responded.

"No you're not," I countered. "You are doing literally nothing except fantasizing about Alexandria. We're having this conversation now."

The drugs, and in fact everything on the top few floors in the building that wasn't on a person seemed to have been left untouched, save as casualties in the fight itself. Things got uglier as I worked further into the building, with a number of bodies that were reduced smears on the walls. I guessed that the Interaction had a fight with them over the limited space in the lower levels. It wasn't the humans that won.

"I am not fantasizing about anyone," Lisa retorted.

"Lisa, I know you know exactly how good my senses are," I sighed. "I'm linked into your suit, I know what your eyes are following. Infravision, bioanalytic stuff built by some of the best biomanipulation experts on the planet. I know what crushing looks like, and right now you're acting like a schoolgirl who's hoping to salvage a ruined prom date."

"I am n-" she hesitated. "Fuck. I am, ain't I?"

"Pretty much," I confirmed. "But that's not the problem. The problem is how you've been acting lately. Seriously, I have no idea what's with you lately. You're prodding the Protectorate like you want them to retaliate."

My zerg finally got our teams' survivors to the medical staging area. I did the best I could to avoid watching as Lily kissed the still quite naked Sabah, use her own armor's wings to give her girlfriend privacy to dress. At least, privacy from everyone else. Clarice, Emma and Elena were there to check on Anima and the other unconscious woman. Boost was enough to take care of the others' minor injuries.
"They're pompous blowhards, they don't have the balls to retaliate," Lisa countered. "They keep trying to act like tigers, even after we've proven they're declawed kittens. We should be past the point where we have to pretend to care about shit like that."

"News flash, Lisa, most of us do care about shit like that," I reminded her. "Stomping all over everyone else's rights just because they're not as strong as us? That is quite literally the very thing Pantheon exists to stop."

"It was," Lisa corrected. "Now it's stopping Scion and saving lives. If the bureaucracy gets in the way of that, it's a problem."

"And goading Glaistig Uaine?" I followed up. "If she wanted to kill you, we'd have to stand there and watch because we wouldn't be able to stop her, and trying probably would have gotten all of us killed."

"Wouldn't have happened," she replied. "I've read all her transcripts, she wasn't going to attacked me, not over words. And I got all kinds of useful mental models off her that I can actually use in the future. Worth the nonexistent risks. Now I have a better feel for what she's wrong and right about."

There was only one survivor on the lower levels, hidden behind a metal wall that had been clawed open, but apparently not filled by the interaction. A middle aged man whose tongue had been ripped out and his hands and feet severed. The injuries had been burned after, which probably saved his life. Judging by the other stuff in the room, I guessed he was Synth. We didn't know what he looked like out of costume, but it fit what we knew.

"Was she right about you?" I prompted.

"That I'm not one of her 'royal court'?" Lisa shrugged. "The Entities don't have political structures. That'd be like asking you if your zerg are royalty, compared to the special bugs Amelia makes you, compared to the natural insects you grab. I probably don't have one of the most powerful Passengers, not like you and Amelia have, but the idea of 'royal' anything is a delusion."

"I was more thinking about the 'hummingbird and eagle' thing," I pressed. There was no doubt she knew what I meant the first time. "Seriously, the way your acting makes me think that's what this is. You're operating way outside your actual limits and it's getting to you. Passenger mind fuck or whatever."

"Sorry, Taylor, that armchair psych isn't going to work," Lisa responded. "I'm doing quite nicely for myself. My power's being pressed constantly, I've got power, resources, all the success anyone could ever ask for. Fuck, my Passenger should be happy beyond all reason right now."
"What?" I asked.

"Remember all those conversations about Taylia? The addictive nature of the link?"

"Yeah," I responded, a mix of dread and irritation coming to mind. *If she's going to make this another Taylia argument... ConfusionWorrySupport.*

"Well, turns out there are other ways to achieve it," she chuckled. Alexandria gave her a look, no one else was paying much attention. "Rebecca and I found out that if you're a couple really good Thinkers, you can achieve it using sign language. My Passenger and hers are apparently quite happy together."

"Is that why you've stopped pressing us on the Taylia thing?" I asked. "Because you've tried it for yourself?" *Maybe now she can understand how happy it makes us, and how clear it makes everything that was no doubt fogged by our Passangers, before. But then... "Wait, is that why you're acting this way? Because you've thrown out the 'conflict' excuse with what you just told me. You've been a bitch lately. You screwed with Crystal's team without even giving them a warning."*

"It was good practice," Lisa argued. "Give them a chance to think on their feet."

"You did it for an excuse to spend more time with Alexandria," I countered. "Don't bother trying to lie to me, you know it won't-"

"I am secretly the ghost of Abraham Lincoln, sent back in time from the year two thousand one to stop Prussia from conquering Australia," Lisa interrupted dryly. To my surprise, the lie detection tech read her as telling the truth. "So, you were saying?"

"Cute," I managed to carry the sarcasm through the speaker of her suit. "But I am not dropping this. I want an answer. The real answer. Don't turn this into a scenario where I have to choose between our friendship and the wellbeing of the team. I'm sure you know how that ends."

"Not a threat that matters," Lisa retorted. "You prefer Amelia to me, anyway. And, before you start, no that has nothing to do with this."

"Then tell me why," I begged. "Please. We need to work this out. And I want to help. You're my friend, you've been with me since the beginning of the team."

"Yes, I have," she responded. "The problem is, you haven't. None of you have. The only founding members left of Pantheon are me, and fucking Bonesaw. Taylor died, and Amelia, and Crystal. Missy and Theo. You're their replacements, and I am the only one who even cares enough to mourn their deaths."
A/N- And by "only one", she includes the audience.
"So, do you want to tell me what all that was about?" I asked Vicky the moment we shunted back over to Bet. LA was currently blanketed by a low hanging, smoggy haze of clouds, which made for poor scenery but let us remain as isolated as one could ever hope. Now I just had to hope there wasn't anyone using our suits to listen in on our conversation. It was certainly possible, with Gaea's powers or Dragon's technology.

"Umm," she hesitated.

"You drag me off in the middle of a meeting with the excuse to go get fast food," I pointed out. "And implying we'd have a chance to get a quickie along the way. As fun as that sounds, I know you better than that."

She drifted over to me, taking advantage of our antigrav systems to make herself float upside down relative to me as the helmet folded away from her face and her hair floated out to drift lazily in the air. The girl was extremely comfortable in our artificial zero gravity environment, while I was still stuck thinking in normal up-down relationships. "You don't think I'd binge on junk food and sex?" Vicky smiled at me mischievously. "That doesn't sound like you know me very well at all."

"I know you better than to think you'd leave during an important mission, and right before meeting Eidolon," I insisted. "Come on, Victoria, we both know you don't ditch in the middle of a mission, which means you have something else up your sleeve."

"You're going to hate me," she sighed unhappily. "Taylor said I needed to get you out of that meeting right away."

"I already figured out that part," I told her. "It was pretty transparent. Minerva didn't want me there, Alexandria really didn't want me there, and everyone else seemed to be afraid to say anything while I was there. They have some kind of secret weapon they're trying to keep the Protectorate from knowing about. I just don't know what it is."

"You're not mad at me?" She smiled hopefully. "If you knew, why didn't you stay?"

"They'd have found some other way to get rid of me, I'm sure. If nothing else, Alexandria could have waited for me to need to sleep. Maybe I'd have been more stubborn if we weren't expecting the next Endbringer some time this week. And... I guess I wanted to see if you'd be honest with me about it," I told her. Arguably, she'd failed that test. I couldn't exactly claim she lied to me, because she would no doubt follow through with everything she said, but it was a close call. I could probably be accused of manipulating her, too, with this. "And so I could ask you why you did it."
"Amy needed my help," she answered, her voice small and afraid. "Guess that makes me a complete bitch. Are you going to dump me, now? I deserve it."

The problem with someone with Vicky's powers is that it's impossible to trust her emotions to match her behavior. She could easily fake any feelings she could imagine, and she had the boosted intelligence to imagine a lot. Instead, I watched her shape, the manifestation of her power as it wrapped around her with its sunset colored wings, alert and ready to protect her against threats. *She really is afraid.*

"Do you know why they needed me gone?" I asked.

"No," she answered. I waited silently until she spoke again. "I have a guess I'd bet money on. But."

"But you're not going to tell me," I didn't bother hiding my disappointment. *What would be the point in trying, given her abilities?*

She looked down? Up? Toward her feet. "You're mad at me. I don't blame you, y'know."

I kept my eyes on her Passenger, and how it reacted to her emotions, still cradling her protectively. Maybe even a bit of hostility pointed in my direction, thought that could be me projecting. I so rarely needed to do this with her. Usually Vicky wore her heart on her sleeve, but usually she didn't drag me away from important meetings for the express purpose of keeping me from finding out important secret information.

"Maybe I should be, but I'm not angry," I corrected, doing my best to navigate this potential minefield without tripping her built in lie detection. "I'm hurt, and disappointed, but I understand your reasons for it. I'd do the same thing if it was for my family." *Even if I think your family needs a good kick in the ass.*

She smiled halfheartedly. "Yeah, family."

"What's wrong?" I almost reached out to her, then hesitated. I didn't know how she'd react. Three months of her flirtation and always energetic attitude, less than two days of her opening up. This moment alone of her allowing herself to be vulnerable like this in front of me.

"My parents are getting divorced," she answered. "Apparently they've been planning it since before... before I was brought back."

*Oh.*
She laughed unhappily. "And that, that right there is the problem."

"I'm not sure I understand," I kept my voice cautiously neutral. *Ease it out of her.*

"Your response was... it's like you already knew!" She shouted. "Everyone already knew! Amy, Aunt Sarah, Taylor, Taylor's dad! They all treated it like it was nothing, like my family being broken in half was fucking meaningless! I've seen more emotional conversations about pizza toppings! And when I tried to convince them to just, y'know, talk to a marriage counselor and maybe spend a couple days together to see if there was room to fix their relationship... Mom just got annoyed, and Dad was that weird kind of nervous energy I see after we put people in interrogation... and everyone else just thought my idea was idiotic."

Now I reached out, stroking her face with the armored glove. There were times when the costume got in the way, some of those times were even literal.

She leaned her face into my hand nonetheless. "It's so fucked up," she continued unhappily. "They didn't even care enough to be angry at each other. Just gave me a list of reasons why it was a really good idea to break up then, instead of doing it earlier or waiting until later. Like 'nope, our family's breaking up because we don't feel like putting work into keeping it, and you're the one who's wrong for feeling like we should actually give a shit about each other.' You'd think we were talking about replacing an old couch or something, not my parents deciding they never want to see each other again."

_Sometimes, I get reminded of how young she really is. "I don't think it's stupid."_

"Yeah, but you weren't at all surprised that they're getting divorced, either," she argued.

_More surprised that they were still together at all, if I was being honest. Carol Dallon is not an easy woman to like, or even politely tolerate. "Well, I've never met your dad, and your mother and I don't really see eye to eye about, well, much of anything at all. They're pretty much strangers to me. That doesn't mean I think you're stupid to care. They're your parents, I'd be worried if you weren't upset about it." I leaned in and gave her a kiss on the forehead._

She smiled faintly. "So, does that mean you're not mad at me about, well, luring you out here?"

"Well, I'm not mad at you," I qualified. "Not exactly happy with your sister and her fiancée. Alexandria and Minerva are not on my list of favorite people, either. Speaking of which, is it just me, or is there something..." I trailed off, trying to find a polite way to phrase it.

_Luckily, Vicky was there with her usual eloquence. "Are you asking if Alexandria and Minerva going at it like lesbian rabbits through sign language in front of all of us, while lying to themselves_
that there's anyone in the vicinity that hasn't already figured it out?"

I smirked. "So that's a yes, then?"

She drifted some, turning herself around so she was using the same definition for 'up' the city below us again. "That is a big yes. Emma knows, she's told Zach, not sure if Clarice figured it out from Emma or by using her own powers. Taylor and Amy know. I'm pretty sure all of the new recruits have already figured it out. Most of us are just too polite to say anything about it. For a pair of high end Thinkers who are paranoid about their relationship being discovered, they haven't done shit to protect themselves."

I thought as much. *It does mean Alexandria can't be trusted when dealing with Pantheon, and I'll need to report that to Costa-Brown. Fuck. It's the Thinker curse, they sometimes forget normal people can figure out things for themselves."

She kissed me on the cheek. "We have Thinker powers," she pointed out with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "I bet you got an... interesting... look at the pair."

"Well, yes, but not like that," I corrected. "Their Passengers are genderless. Alexandria's is always a stone... it changes from time to time, sometimes looking like Stonehenge or some ancient Inca statue. Sometimes more natural, like the face of a cliff. Sometimes a castle wall. Lisa's is more like a shimmering web of light. You know those pictures that people say are a physical map of the internet? Her power looks something like that, only constantly jumping around like a plasma globe. When they're together, it's like watching a mountain covered in a thin blanket of electricity."

"Sounds about right from when I read their emotions," Vicky agreed. "As opposed to when my sister and her fiancée give you a powers based peep show?"

I surpressed that mental image. Their Passengers were humanoid, though whether they were male or female or entirely sexless or the number of limbs or faces they possessed would change from moment to moment depending on the ways the Empresses were using the incredible array of powers at their disposal. What never changed was how physically entwined the pair were.

Vicky smacked my shoulder. "Don't worry, I won't blame you for peaking." Then she jabbed me hard in the chest. "But if it ever goes beyond that, I'll remove, deep fry, and then eat your skin while forcing you to watch."

I gulped, faking fear. "Yes, ma'am."

"Like an angel," I answered honestly.

She raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Uh, huh."

"I'm serious," I insisted. "Colors change, though usually metallic yellow, orange, or red."

"So my Passenger paints herself to look like a sports car?" Her smile carried her doubt and amusement.

"The eyes are always solid, metallic, purple," I continued, working my way toward the end. "They're large, like those ones from supposed alien abduction stuff. There's two pair of them, the second being higher up on the forehead. I've never seen her with any other facial features. She always has birdlike wings, either two pair of wings and one set of arms, or two wings and four arms when you're in your war form."

I had her attention, now. She knew what was coming next, even if not the exact details. "Do go on."

I glanced over at the Passenger, it watching me in silence. "She's covered in blood," I finally admitted. "It drips fresh from the talons on her fingers, falls off the wings in dried chunks. Her face is the only part of her that doesn't have at least some blood spattered on it, and I can never see her legs because she's always wading in a pool that comes up to her waist."

"That... that's... kinda fucked up," Vicky muttered. "No wonder it took so long for us to get together."

"If it makes you feel any better, yours is one of the ones I have to work at seeing," I offered. "Usually she's at most a mask of her face, watching quietly. Most Passengers are like that, I usually only see more when I'm concentrating, or when they're actively using their powers."

She recovered quickly from the description, and smiled broadly. "So no using my powers to spice up our lovelife, gotcha."

Grateful for the chance to get off the topic of her Passenger, I simply smiled back. "That would be appreciated."

=============

A/N- C'mon, Vicky, you got a Bonesaw shard... you were expecting something pleasant?

Also... I've adjusted my writing style some at the helpful advice of one of my readers. And will
continue to in at least a few future chapters.

... So let's see how well received the adjustment is.

I'm personally ambivalent. I don't think it's any better than my usual style, but I don't it's worse, either, and it's roughly the same amount of effort whichever way I handle it. In the face of all those things being equal, I shall default to reader feedback.
I actually staggered under the effect. "T-Taylor," I struggled to speak.

Taylor wrapped her arms around me. "Sorry, I'm just... fuck... I never thought Lisa would."

I stepped back and put my hand on the side of her face. "Taylor, settle down, you're rambling."

She took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "You're right, just give me a minute."

The problem with our link, at least from Taylor's side, is that she couldn't offload her emotions into her swarm. The problem for both of us is that we couldn't just pretend we didn't feel anything, the very attempt at doing so just forced those feelings into each other. It had a lot of pleasant advantages, we could use it to give each other support and strength. It also had disadvantages, like right now, when Taylor was pissed and wanted to remain that way. With that in mind, I spoke up. "Would you like me to dull the link a bit?"

"No, that would be a really bad idea. I need a reason to stay calm right now."

I was glad she said no, I didn't want to leave her like this. I leaned in and hugged her. "Okay, I'm here for you."

We waited a few minutes like that, probably getting our share of stares from the others, not that I cared in the slightest, though I did take the time to look over at Lisa. She said something that made Taylor act like this. In an act I had never done without consent before, I tapped into Lisa with my senses. Not enough to give away my presence, just enough to know what was happening inside her. A complex swirl of frustration, grief and regrets. The fuck did they say to each other? This was huge and I didn't know what it was.

Taylor eventually spoke. "She said we weren't real," her voice carried her hurt. "That we're, and I quote, 'replacements' for the real Taylor and Amelia and all the others."


"Well, we have to talk to her about it," Taylor replied. "Like, honestly talk to her. Which means calming down first and not doing something stupid. I get the feeling that's what she wants, an excuse. It would explain her behavior lately."
I sighed, thinking back on everything. "We should have had this conversation a while ago. Do we bring others into this? I mean, it concerns pretty much the whole team, and we need to tell them something, let them know we're trying to fix this mess."

I could feel as Taylor's emotions shifted, getting a little more intense as she pushed her feelings down to think tactically. She was smarter than me, I trusted her to handle the planning while I handled the feeling for both of us. "Crystal needs to know, she's a team leader, and she's been there from the beginning. Plus she's pretty much the only other person on this team that would call Lisa a friend. Dragon and Emma are too critical for us to not make aware... and the closest thing we have to impartial consultants. Keep R-Clarice from finding out, whatever you do."

I cringed at that thought. I wasn't entirely sure where I ranked compared to Theo and Missy, whose side she'd be on if there was a conflict, but we were the most important people in Riley's life. Followed by Taylor, Victoria, and Emma. Of all of us, only Emma had never been restored. As pissed as I was at Lisa right now, it wasn't enough to let Riley off the metaphorical leash on her. "Okay, no Clarice."

I looked over at Crystal's group. She stood with a smaller guy whose name I forgot, and Lily who was comforting Sabah. "We should probably at least let Lily know we're not happy with Lisa right now. She's probably not happy, either."

Taylor nodded. "Good thinking. You handle Crystal and Lily. I'll make contact with Emma and Dragon. And we should probably find a way to apologize to Chevalier."

She's not wrong about that. "I should apologize to my sister, too," I offered. "We put her in a pretty tight spot with Chevalier." *AmusedMischievous.* "Oh, jeez, Taylor. Honestly? You barely ever spend any time around Zach."

*AbashedApologetic.* She blushed slightly. "Sorry, but I kinda overheard your sister talking to Chevalier when she was luring him off, and what you said reminded me of it. Yeah, it's probably best if you're the one who talks to Vicky. But you'll have to deal with Crystal first."

"Right." I started walking over to Crystal and her team, or what was there with her. I was almost a stranger to them, except Sabah and Lily. I'd never even met some of them, and the ones I had met, I only remembered Sveta's name because she was one of the Endslayers.

The smaller boy was talking. "He'll be okay, he's untouchable."

Crystal noticed me coming. "Any news?" Her question was more like a demand. I glanced over at Lily and Sabah. That's right, she lost two team members.
"Not about your people," I admitted. "I just wanted to apologize for this... everything. We didn't realize Lisa was going to send your team off without you knowing about it. Or that she was going to go off on Chevalier like that. Rest assured, we're going to talk to her."

Crystal looked at me. "So you would have approved this mission?"

"Well, yes," I admitted. "Lisa wasn't wrong about the power interaction being random and absolutely impossible to predict. I've already asked Emma and Clarice. Even our new powers Tinker agreed. Knowing what we do now, of course we wouldn't do this. But it was a good plan to grab an important asset, with Dinah giving it great odds of success at very little risk. It's just... Lisa went about it all wrong. We would have let you know about the plan, had you with your team. Informed the Protectorate and PRT about the whole thing in the first place, simply out of respect. She crossed the line, fucking with everyone like this."

I glanced at the others. I hadn't originally planned to say all that in front of them. But they had two casualties, and while our experts expected Anima to recover, that probably didn't make them feel better about everything right now. "And, umm, mind if I talk to you alone for a minute, Cr- Eki."

Crystal glanced back at her people. "Sure. I won't be long."

I walked away a bit, then sent the pulse of concentration necessary to encase us in a dome of Yggrasil as a privacy screen. It wasn't the most subtle of ways to have a private conversation, but coupled with a few of the anti-Thinker bits that were designed to link through my armor and into the plant in much the same way as the shunt drives, it meant that we were invisible to most forms of remote vision, and even had minor precog barriers around us. Unless I wanted to cuddle with Crystal the same way I did with Taylor, it was the best way to have a private conversation. It even blocked Taylia, which was part of why I avoided it.

Crystal looked around. "So, what's this about?"

"Taylor got a head start on chewing out Lisa. I'm not sure exactly what was said, but Lisa decided to go for a really low blow."

Crystal close her eyes and didn't bother opening them again. "Yeah, sounds about right. Know what? I've stopped caring. All that shit about her telling me that I was doing a good job on the west coast branch, and it was a important for the team. Then she does this. You can kick her off the team for all I care. I... is what I'm doing here even important to the team? Am I making a difference? Please, be honest with me."

Her eyes opened, and she looked right into mine. In a lot of ways, she was the prettiest of the New Wave girls. Her round face and large eyes were the kind that could break hearts, even if she didn't quite have my sister's breathtaking beauty. I couldn't lie to her, not with her eyes watering with a barely successful attempt to not cry.
"I... from an image angle, yes, definitely." It was the best I could offer her. "We've mostly given up on Bet, putting all of our focus on growing and stabilizing Avalon, researching powers and improving our tech. It does matter, though. Sabah's an especially big deal for our effort to draw in rogues, and attracting new triggers. You're one of our most popular members."

"But nothing you couldn't live without," she concluded. "Nothing that requires I lead a team."

"No, probably not," I admitted. "I'm sorry.

She turned away from me, leaning her head against the wall. "Then I'm quitting."

*What.* "What?"

"I never wanted this job, Ames. I took responsibility because no one else could or would, but I never wanted this. The Endbringers and the politics and Lisa's bullshit and Sabah being Sabah and now Anima's probably not going to recover for a month and Glen's probably dead, but we'll never know because we can't see him. I can't keep living like this. It's not worth it, it hasn't been for a long time. I'm sorry. I'll stick around until you guys can figure out my replacement or disband the team into our other ally groups or whatever needs to be done. And I'll still be a part of the Endbringer fights. But outside of that, I'm resigning."

Oh. Oh fuck everything. And fuck you for this, Lisa. I walked up and put a hand on my cousin's shoulder. "Don't worry, I get it. You've done more than enough and should take whatever time you need. We'll figure everything out after the next Endbringer. If you still feel certain this is the right decision."

"I will," she interrupted.

It took a minute before I could trust myself to speak. "Thank you for everything." I moved in and wrapped my arms around her. Fuck everything.

====================

A/N- I wonder if anyone's surprised about this. I would hope not, it's been telegraphed since even before Beelzebub.

Also... my characters were *far* too happy lately. So that had to be changed.
Alexandria leaned forward. "I'm sorry, you really don't have much choice in the matter, nor do I for that matter."

"Fush off," Synth managed to utter with his newly regenerated tongue and mouth. We hadn't gotten around to his hands or feet yet, but we needed him to be able to talk. "Ah wanth mah lawer, I know mah riths."

"Actually, Synth, the right to a lawyer doesn't apply here," Dragon spoke next, from her spot leaning against the door. "You are not in America, you are currently being held on Avalon, which has a very different legal standard. Notably, it actually works. You have no right to remain silent, and while you have right to counsel, it's not quite the same sort of counsel as a lawyer."

Synth watched silently, put off by Dragon's dry, inhuman tone. Dragon's android body was perfected to the point of indistinguishable from human, complete with a vat grown organic layer atop the cybernetics inside. I wasn't certain why she'd go through that level of effort, when our changelings were exponentially better than human bodies, but we weren't going to tell her she couldn't.

"Avalon employs lie detection technology as an established legal precedent. There can be no question of guilt or innocence, merely one justification. If this goes to trial, you would confess why you committed the crimes you did and explain why you did them while monitored to ensure you're telling the truth. It is your right to have counsel to help you prepare your statement to better express yourself. Then the judge and jury determine the severity of your punishment based upon the statements of both you and your victims."

Alexandria slid a folder over to the man. "In your case, you're being charged with twelve counts of murder, two hundred and fifteen counts of kidnapping and human experimentation, over four hundred cases of murder and conspiracy to commit murder by use of powers, and one hundred and seventeen counts of the use of powers for conspiracy to commit sexual assault and rape."

Synth jumped out of his seat. "Rafe, I newer!" By the time he'd finished the sentence, he was already tumbling to the relatively soft floor of the Yggdrasil, screaming in pain. I wasn't feeling particularly sympathetic.

"The drugs you sold have been used in numerous cases of date rape and other similar crimes." Dragon's voice was carefully neutral, even mechanical. Intentionally so, for whatever psychological game the pair of them assumed would get to Synth. "You provided those drugs, and continued to provide them even knowing how your clients were using them. According to Avalon law, you
would be provided to the territory which has the highest punishment you'd be eligible for. Then passed down to the nations with lesser crimes upon completion of a given sentence Hold no illusions, you're guilty of capital offenses and you can provide no justification that a jury would accept. This means you are going to be the first legal execution on Avalon soil."

Alexandria drummed her fingers on the table. "I'm afraid it's true. While there are some questions of how this works from an international jurisdiction that might allow the USA to turn this into an extradition battle, that would require the President to want to save you. I don't suppose you have any ideas why he'd want to?

I drew my attention away from them, Dragon could handle everything. Alexandria was there so they could play 'you're already fucked' cop and 'I can't do shit for you' cop. Or something like that. A simple problem that would be handled simply. Worst case scenario, we'd invoke our military resource right to . What I had in front of me was far, far more complicated.

Amelia broke the silence first, her voice sounding very much like her mother's. "So, I hear you don't think we're really us."

Lisa didn't pull her eyes away from me. "Don't be obtuse, of course you're really you. To claim otherwise would be absurd. What I said was that you're not really Amelia Lavere and Taylor Hebert. You have their faces, their names, even most of their memories. But you're not really them, you're replacement copies."

_FrustrationAnger._ "That doesn't stop us from being them," I spoke through the haze of emotion flooding our link. If I didn't have Amelia backing me up, I already would have punched by supposed best friend. "I still love my father, he still loves me. Then Crystal has her mother, and the list goes on." I tactfully left out the quagmire that was the Dallon household. There were other, perfectly valid, reasons that Amelia didn't consider Mark and Carol her parents.

"Because we should trust a bunch of people whose children are all died in various, horrible ways to accept the harsh truth when they have convenient copies right in front of them to support the illusion that their deaths never happened? I'm sorry, that doesn't work."

"Taylor's real," Amelia slammed her hands down onto the table. "I am real. She's the same girl I fell in love with."

"Your predecessor," Lisa corrected. "She's the copy of the copy of the girl you were copied from fell in love with."

I rubbed my eyes with my hand. "This 'we're not real' shit is getting old, Lisa. I'm pretty sure if someone killed me, they'd be guilty of murder."
"Of course that's murder!" Lisa exclaimed. "It's murder to kill any three month old!" She took a deep breath and looked at me. "I'm not saying you're not alive or not people, that would be preposterous. But you're not the same people. And don't give me that 'same memories, same person' bullshit, because that's all that is. Bullshit. If you grow a clone, wake her up, and then kill her right after, that's not a suicide. If you kill yourself and your clone gets woken up, then that's still a suicide even though you knew you'd have a replacement."

She took another breath, then continued. "Or what happens if you create a clone, then kill the original? Or for that matter the clone? In both cases, it's a murder. Kill them both, it's two different murders. What we did to Noelle was murder, and any court would convict us."

_GuiltRegretAnger._ Amelia sighed painfully. "Noelle wanted to die, if that was the only way to save herself from becoming a monster. And you're the one who lied to us and said it was a mind transfer device, not a copying machine."

Lisa shrugged. "Okay, I'll concede that point. It was an assisted suicide, and only Riley and I are guilty of any part of it that can be considered a crime. Doesn't change the fact that Noelle was killed after she had a fantasy copy built to replace her. The point remains, if you were given it to do over again knowing what you currently do, would you be able to do the same thing and then claim you had not just killed someone?"

_ConcernDoubtPain._ I reached over and placed my hand on Amelia's shoulder. "That doesn't mean I'm not Taylor, and she's not Amelia."

"That's a question for philosophers to debate," Lisa dismissed. "It doesn't change the reality. You may be a Taylor, but you're not the Taylor. Oh, and don't pull the whole 'interruption of consciousness, every time you sleep you functionally die' pedantics, either. No matter how you look at it, when Taylor died, she died. There may be powers out there that can change that, but the restoration tech is not one of them. You're a duplicate, and not even a complete duplicate."

I kept still, letting Amelia calm me while I calmed her in turn. We both needed it. I thought back at the notes I'd left myself, letting me know at least the basics of the events I wasn't expecting to remember. "So, I lost a few days, nothing that can't be done by a good blow to the head or alcohol or whatever Master/Stranger power comes out that does memory alterations, I'm sure someone out there can do it. They'd still be the same person."

She looked at my partner. "Come on, Amelia, I know you remember all that fear after Taylor's first death. Knowing what you got back wouldn't be the same person. Very close, but not the same. You remember what that Taylor said, right before she killed herself."

_RageDisgustGuiltHate._ "Thin. Fucking. Ice." Amelia spoke through gritted teeth.
Lisa didn't back down. Then again, why would I expect otherwise? She mouthed off to Jack Slash while within feet of the Siberian. "And how we were so desperately hoping our time line turned out worse, so we could delete it and keep one where Taylor lived."


Lisa pressed. "Go ahead and tell Taylor her own last words."

"She told me to take care of..." Amelia glanced at me. "You. That was her last wish. That I didn't hold you responsible for her mistakes."

"Don't forget that version of Taylor died as well. So, for that matter, did the original Amelia who was given that dying wish."

Amelia's head snapped back over to Lisa. "But that doesn't matter! She's still Taylor, I'm still Amelia, and you're still a bitch for putting us all in this position."

"If you think this Taylor's the original, how come you never talked to her about that? I should think her own death would be important. The actions that led up to it even moreso. If you love her so much, how are you able to justify lying to her like this."

Amelia slumped down. "Fuck you. Fuck you so much for this."

I glanced over at Amelia. FearGuiltLoss. "Amelia?"

She looked at me, tears forming in eyes. "Your lost week, before you died to stop the Butcher. We spent it fighting. The bond was broken because... because you had your brain altered to... be attracted to me. Not even attracted to women. Just me. and it looked so fucking much like what I did to Vicky. And I flipped out and ended our bond and... and that's the only reason Dinah gave us an all clear to attack the Butcher, because she predicted you'd kill yourself to fix everything. I'm so sorry."

She fell into her arms, weeping.

Every possible kind of fuck. I got out of my seat and moved over to Amelia, leaning over her and wrapping my arms around her. Then I looked up at Lisa. "Is this what you wanted?"

Her eyes met mine. "For my best friend's loved ones to cry for her loss? Not exactly the happiest moment of my life, but it's better than what I've been watching for the better part of a year, now."

"By your own logic, your best friend doesn't have any loved ones in this room."
Lisa flinched before I realized just how that statement could have been misunderstood. RealityAgreementHate. Oh, fuck, there's more to this story. I held Amelia as I ran through the logic. Lisa wasn't the only one who had intuition. "Of course I'd have been pissed at you, too. Amelia broke our link, you were adamant about it being a bad idea. You probably said something, and knowing me... knowing what bitch I was before I had Amelia's love to give me something worth living for. I'm guessing whatever I said was unnecessarily cruel."

Amelia spoke up. "You said your friendship was over, and that the only reason she was still on the team was because she was too useful to get rid of."

And suddenly I regret not finding out about this earlier. "Well. Fuck. Is that what this is about, Lisa? That version of me says we're not friends, that extends to me, too? Because if that's the card you want to play, it sounds like utter bullshit to me. Just because she decided to be a bitch, I and the whole rest of the team have to suffer your acting like this?"

"Oh, so now you're willing to call yourself a different person?" Lisa glared at me. "The moment the original does something you don't agree with. Come on, Taylor, if you're going to be a hypocrite, at least be consistent about it."

I looked down at Amelia, still with her face buried in her arms. "Okay, fine, consistent it is. You've convinced me. I'm a copy. Not even that, I'm a copy of a copy. A backup plan created to carry on the legacy of the original when she couldn't. Born to be a replacement."

ConcernNegationLoss. Amelia looked up at me, to protest, but I put my thumb over her mouth. "And on the balance? I'm pretty okay with that. So I'm only a few months old? Whatever. I have success and power and prestige that I didn't have to go through the trouble of earning, because my creator did it for me." Or something like that, this situation's weird enough without us asking whether prior-Taylor counts as my parent, or Emma and Riley do. Don't know, don't care, don't matter. "I have control of two entire worlds and the single most powerful military force on a hundred and twenty different Earths all at my command, and the memories needed to know how to use them. And I even get to ignore all the guilt and regrets the original accumulated. After all, if I'm not her, then her sins aren't mine to regret. I'm an innocent."

I kneeled down in front of Amelia looking at her eyes. "And more than all of that, I have someone who loves me. I was literally born to love and be loved by you, Amelia, and I can't imagine anything that makes me happier. You were created at the same time, our histories are just memories that aren't even ours, so we don't have to regret them at all, and we're not held to their promises. The only thing that matters is our future, and I will spend mine with you." LoveHopeSafeRedemptionAgreement. I kissed her cheek. "If you'll give me a minute."

LoveAgreementPatienceLonging. I stood and walked around the table over to Lisa.
She looked at me, more confused than anything. I couldn't help but feel a little smug amusement that I completely knocked her off her game. "Hi, I'm Taylor," I said, holding out my hand. Lisa looked at me like I was insane, then slowly reached out and accepted the handshake. "I'm sorry for your loss, and being so insensitive about it for so long. I never met her, but I'd like to think I know her pretty well. My apologies, but she was kind of a bitch."

Lisa's smile was forced, but at least it was a smile. "She had her moments, good and bad."

A/N- Reporter: "Taylor, how did you not only defeat existential angst, but turn it into your bitch?"

Taylor: "Well, it's easy when you actively despise yourself. Past self. Sorry, I may have beaten angst, but I have yet to conquer the Elder God that is English pronouns."

Also... this is a 2500 word chapter. Eeesh.
I awoke to soft kisses along my neck. "Oh, hey, you stayed."

Vicky's head moved up into view. "Didn't have anywhere else to be, and I slept with Clarice enough to..." she paused and smacked my arm. "Not like that, you perv! She's thirteen and has nightmare issues."

I almost objected to the comment, I hadn't thought anything dirty at all. But the way she was smiling, she already knew that, so never mind. Wait a second. "Huh, I'd have sworn she was at least fifteen or sixteen."

Vicky shrugged. "Yeah, welcome to the Amelia side of the family. Bunch of biomanipulators, one way or another. The Thinkers are convinced I got my powers from Clarice, although I'm definitely a better Brute and a worse Thinker." Okay, that's good to know. She jabbed my shoulder with her finger. "Also, if you go updating our ability profiles based on what I tell you when we're bed together, I will do horrible, unspeakable things to you. Then have Amelia put you back together so I can repeat the process."

I raised both my hands in mock terror. "I promise not to update any of your profiles at all. Seriously, though, it's a pretty distinct conflict of interest for both of us, so anything I do say is suspect by definition."

Vicky rolled her eyes. "Ugh, conflict of interest. Hate that term." She hopped out of bed to continue her rant. "Seriously, we're the fucking heroes. Our jobs are 'find bad guy, punch bad guy until he stops fighting back, brag about it to other heroes and with our adoring fans, live up the celebrity.' That's it, that's the sum total of our career path. What asshole got the power to piss on everyone's parade by taking the one thing where you can do the right thing and have fun with it, and injected politics into it?"

I was so glad I didn't have to feel bad about checking her out anymore. "I'm pretty sure that power comes pre-installed with 'homo sapiens', right along with bipedal movement and opposable thumbs."

She looked at me with mock horror. "Oh god, you're a nerd. Oh god, I'm dating a nerd!" She covered her face with her hands and pretended to cry. "What's wrong with me? How could everything go so wrong? I should have seen it. The cosplaying as a knight, the obsession with swords, the cheesy pre battle speeches, the lack of complaining at doing a bunch of paperwork. It all seems so obvious in retrospect!"

I watched her for a few seconds, doing my best to pretend I was offended. "Are you done, now?"
"Yeah, probably," she answered cheerfully, looking up from her hands with a brilliant smile. "Oh, as much as it pains me to say this, you should get dressed. It's still a work day."

*Dammit.* "I know." I climbed out of bed, completely aware that it was now Vicky's turn to watch me move about, because she wouldn't let me forget it while I went through the morning routine of brushing my teeth, shaving and getting dressed. She even let out a wolf whistle while I was bent over to put on my pants. Given that her power let her know every eye that was watching her, and at least a general idea of what they were thinking while looking, this was probably me coming close to exactly what she experienced all the time.

I pulled on a cheap shirt and then went over to my real outfit, the high tech battle armor that Hecate had built for me. The chestpiece was always the first to go on, which gave the antigrav field needed for me to effectively put on the leggings, followed by the arms and helmet. By the time I was done suiting up, Victoria had been waiting for about a minute and a half.

I glanced over at her clothes from yesterday. "Are you even wearing anything under that armor?"

"Hey, under our clothes, we're all naked," she answered. "And now you'll be thinking that while talking to the Director."

*Oh god damn it, she's right.* "I think I just threw up a little."

Vicky's face went stern as she looked me straight in the eyes. "Hey, I would have you know that Director Dunn is a perfectly normal and attractive woman. I just haven't figured out for which species, yet."

....

*What species, indeed?* I though as I entered the Director's office for our morning meeting. She wasn't nearly as bad as Vicky liked to say, but age and military lifestyle had not done the woman any favors. Worse by far was her attitude. "Good morning, ma'am."

She didn't seem terribly impressed as she looked up at me. "Chevalier," her tone was as angry as she ever allowed herself to be. "Please close the door behind you."

*This can't be good.* I complied with her request, making sure the door was shut firmly before walking in.

She gestured at a chair. "Have a seat." Again, she waited for me to comply. It was her ritual method of establishing power over me. Making me follow a series of mundane tasks like someone training a dog. "I have been hearing rumors that you and the Dallon girl are romantically involved with one
Really? People know already? I hesitated a moment. No, that doesn't make sense unless she either had someone specifically watching us to tip her off, or it's just one of those general rumors that had the good fortune to be correct. Either was possible, under the circumstances. I couldn't hide behind 'personal life' under the circumstances. This job functionally meant I had no personal life, especially given how important the Victoria/Chevalier interaction was as a healer. "Yes, Director, as of the start of the weekend. We'd prefer not to advertise this fact to the world, however."

She held up some papers and tapped them against the desk, before clearing her throat. "Yes, I would imagine not."

I found myself getting more than a little annoyed by the attitude. "There is nothing illegal or inappropriate about our relationship. She doesn't work in the Protectorate or PRT's chain of command, and I do not have the authority necessary to consider me a security risk for any possibly conflicts with Avalon."

"I'm afraid you misunderstood," Dunn interrupted me. "I have no objections to your relationship with the girl."

What? "Pardon?"

She tried to smile as she leaned forward, handing the papers to me. "Quite the contrary, in fact. As you've said, there's nothing inappropriate. Miss and Mrs. Dallon have both gone out of their way to make it clear they're independent of both the PRT and Avalon. I believe we've worked together long enough that I've come to know you, perhaps not as a friend, but certainly as a colleague. You won't allow this to interfere with your duties, including those of the healing interaction."

I set the papers in front of me, we'd get to them in time, no doubt. "Of course not. Everyone understands just how critical that resource is. Our interaction is the most effective known healer on the planet. Except possibly her sister, since we lack the ability to influence DNA. The only one known to work for the Case 53s. We would never do anything to jeopardize it."

Her attempt at a smile faded. "In your case, that is certainly true. Victoria, however, has historically been difficult to anticipate or control." I was not enjoying the direction this conversation was headed. "Pardon me for sounding callous, but hopefully this will also be a stabilizing element for her. An incentive, perhaps, to be less brash and more inclined to voluntarily accept a larger workload than the current contract compels."

I was stunned at the implication. She hadn't outright said it, but she wanted me to use our relationship as a way to manipulate her into following the PRT's marching orders. "I suppose it might, at that. Of course, her brash behavior has reduced villain activity in the city to nearly nothing."
Director Dunn reached over to her computer. "Which brings complications all its own. Rime is already scheduled for a transfer and promotion as soon as a leadership position becomes available. A position we all agree that she deserves. They're asking about Shockwave and Arc being moved to Baltimore, which would leave us understaffed. Tide and Hopscotch have already agreed to temporary transfers to Chicago, conditional of moving to work under Rime when she gets her own command."

As much as I hated to admit it, she wasn't wrong. We'd be limited to only four remaining adult Protectorate members in the city. A quiet city, granted, but a quiet city that still needed to hold its infrastructure together. "That is a problem, but hardly one that relates to Victoria. We're understaffed everywhere, and the M7s aren't being produced fast enough to fill in the gaps."

"Or, more accurately, a lot of cities aren't willing to agree to the Yggdrasil construct needed to maintain the M7s being put in their land."

"All that in addition to Victoria's quarterly contract coming up for review and renegotiation," the Director added. "There's a real possibility her mother will go out of her way to make life difficult for us, for both professional and personal reasons, that may culminate in Victoria moving to a different city."

I nodded. On that, we agreed. Carol was not a fan of the Protectorate in general and me in particular. "I'll talk to Victoria when I get the chance. At least about the risk of her mother interfering with the contract, that I could do in good faith."

Dunn looked visibly relieved. "Thank you. Let's discuss this week's patrol roster and then move on to the healing requests."

==================================

A/N- This chapter got away from me, it'll now be a two parter.
The phone was answered on the first ring. "Director Costa-Brown's office, this is Patrick speaking. Please state your business?"

*Patrick, huh? Usually I dealt with a machine. Oh well, the phone system would still flag my number and rank for them to view.* Since the phone itself was Tinkered to only respond to my biometrics, and only these specific phones could call this number, it made for an effective filtration system. Which was why it was usually automated. "This is Chevalier speaking, I need to speak with the Chief Director. High priority, non-Emergency, Pantheon related. I'll be in my office for the next hour."

"Understood, Sir, will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you," I hung up and got to the paperwork. For the most part, our healing priorities were automatic, based upon scale of debilitation and need. Need itself was filtered by other healers that could do the job with less difficulty. All I had to look at were the 'request' files, the ones that didn't strictly need healing, but wanted the boosted abilities, for any number of reasons. We could only afford a small number of those, so it usually went to heroes that were getting older and losing the ability to make good use of their powers, Thinkers that wanted improved senses and reduced migraines, or the occasional Brute that could get even more out of their body with a few muscle structures modified.

I did flag a few extra for the 'maybe' list, including a couple of crippled villains who were willing to surrender and switch sides in exchange for restoring them to health. I may not have liked Dunn's plans to manipulate Victoria, but if we could squeeze two or three extra out of each week's sessions, it would be very convenient from a political viewpoint. Might even let us justify keeping more of our people. If Vicky was spending too much of her efforts in the high priority medical setting to indulge the relatively minor goal of punching criminals, then we'd need them to cover the streets.

It only took half an hour before the Chief Director got back to me, alerting me immediately. I didn't even bother setting down my pen before accepting the call. "Thank you for getting back to me so soon," I opened, even as I finished the signature on the current sheet. Not done by half. "Sorry, just getting a little paperwork done while waiting."

She looked at me impassively. "That's quite alright. I was told you had high priority information on Pantheon." The woman was in remarkably good appearance for her age and the stress of her position. Sure, she wasn't without a few wrinkles, but I suspected she had the occasional healer treatment, herself, to stay so apparently young and healthy.

I finished my signature and set it aside. "Right, actually there are a number of things to speak of. I recently learned of a new power interaction between Alexandria and Minerva, one that they have been aware of for some time now."
Costa-Brown regarded me for a moment. "That is a serious concern." She knew the implications of interactions, and the danger of Alexandria not only having one with a high ranking member of a foreign nation, but keeping that information secret from the Protectorate and PRT. "You're certain about this?"

I nodded. "Quite, in fact it goes deeper than that. Victoria shared some information about the Gaea/Khepri Interaction that I'm going to call a pairbond for this discussion. It seems that they can communicate directly through their powers, allowing them to functionally share their feelings with each other. It creates what is effectively a low level Master effect making both parties emotionally dependent upon one another and violently unwilling to break their pairbond. It thus far tends to create romantic behaviors in the bonded, well beyond what would be natural for the individuals in question."

She looked confused for a second. "Victoria? You are referring to Gaea's sister?"

I nodded. "Yes. I doubt she realized the significance of what she was telling me, but coupled with my own Thinker ability, I can confirm a superficially romantic link between Minerva and Alexandria."

"One of whom is a publicly declared asexual teenager, and the other a presumably heterosexual woman in her late thirties?"

Hopefully she wouldn't reject this based upon that. "Correct. As I said, a Master influence that causes those involved to break from their natural tendencies in favor of deepening the relationship with their pairbond. In addition, as this is a constant power interaction between the two, it would disrupt precognition and other power based behavior prediction methods."

The Chief Director stayed silent for a minute before speaking. "It is an interesting theory, and would explain the Empresses' ability to confound our predictive models. Let us say for the sake of this discussion that you've convinced me of the Gaea/Khepri 'pairbond', as you call it. What leads you to believe Alexandria and Minerva possess one as well?"

"It fits the model," I stated. "To date, the only confirmed pairbond is between two powerful Thinkers, both specialized in organics. In spite of a number of other power interactions on record, they're the only ones. It stands to reason that Alexandria and Minerva, both highly capable perception based Thinkers, would be able to interact on a similar level."

She regarded me quietly. "Interesting speculation, but nothing we can follow up on. Even if true, we could only confirm it by noting that their behaviors don't follow precognitive ability models. And given their regular interactions with both Endbringers and the various methods that we know Pantheon has at their disposal to disrupt precogs, I would find it highly suspect if they were predictable at all. To say nothing of Alexandria's association with Eidolon."
I stayed quiet for a moment, she wasn't wrong about that. Alexandria not registering properly would be meaningless. "There is also my own power-sight. Interacting powers carries strong clues that I can see fairly clearly." Despite the supposed 'Taboo' that should prevent it. I had to wonder what secrets Pantheon pulled from that. "I noticed Alexandria and Minerva shared similar themes yesterday at the event in L.A. Of all the ones I've observed, only they and the Gaea/Khepri interaction last for more than a brief second or so."

"That's more significant, but not replicable," the Chief Director responded. "I believe you said something about Victoria also being able to observe something?"

"And a number of others," I confirmed. "Victoria can see their emotional states as directed at each other, and she believes they show signs of romantic involvement. Apparently, Hecate recognizes the pattern as well." Costa-Brown would recognize that name, she was responsible for the M7s and charging a small fortune for my armor and sword. "As does their new power manipulation Tinker, and Aceso." I wasn't sure she knew who Aceso was, but she could look it up. "All of whom may have come to the same conclusion through different methods. Although they seem to consider it to be 'cute', while I don't feel it's quite so benign."

Costa-Brown frowned, clearly unhappy about the news. "Are there any potential health risks to long term exposure?"

"Addiction to the bond," I answered smoothly. "Beyond that, nothing observably different than two people falling deeply in love in an unnaturally short period of time."

"You said something before about pairbonding being between long term, Thinker, interactions?"

I blinked at the sudden change of track, recovering after a moment. "There's not enough examples to be certain, but that seems to be the case."

"Both you and Victoria have Thinker powers and a long term interaction, if my information is correct."

*Oh fuck me sideways.* "That is true, but I don't think our powers interact in the same way. If anything, it's closer to both of our powers interacting with a third person as a medium, than them interacting directly with one another."

"Much as Gaea and Khepri do through their bioconstructs," the Chief Director reminded me. "Should this 'pairbonding' theory prove accurate, it's possible that there will be one between the two of you."
She's not wrong. Oh god, she's really not wrong. "I can't rule out that possibility." I didn't admit that Vicky and I were already involved, and simply had to hope Costa-Brown didn't ask if that were the case. "I will instruct Director Dunn to keep an eye on the possibility of that occurring. Or, perhaps you should do so yourself, to make absolutely certain the information is received and acted on." If the two of us just the result of some weird mind powers... dammit.

She nodded slowly. "I probably will have to do just that. However, as you're coming to me with this sensitive information, it suggests that either you are not, or the pairbonding won't have a drastic influence on the personalities of the possible victims."

Victims? Is that what we are? Victims. I couldn't answer that question even in the privacy of my own head, I honestly hated Costa-Brown for suggesting it, and I still had a job to do here. "Of more immediate concern are the potential security risks. Given Alexandria's status in the Protectorate, and Minerva's high level position in Pantheon, there is a significant risk for conflicts of interest."

The Chief Director sat forward a little. "I take it you haven't heard, then? Minerva has quit her position in Pantheon."

============

A/N- I almost didn't put that last line in, for fear of people focusing too much on that and not enough on the rest of the chapter before it. We'll see how that turns out.

Also... I am *strongly* considering changing to writing long chapters twice a week instead of these small chapters twice a day, just to let my cliffhangers actually cliffhang and promote dialogue.
Amy woke to frantic knocking on her window. She blinked blearily at Prism as the girl kept knocking.

Not again.

She pulled herself out of bed, grabbed her overnight bag just in case and opened the window.

“Is it Bonesaw and Nilbog again? Please don't tell me they've made another attempt at a disco zombie virus?”

“It's Lung and Crawler. It still hasn't happened yet, but the thinker who picked it up says you need to leave now.

Amy sighed and grabbed her Panacea robe from beside the window. As she put it on Oni Lee came out of the shadows, grabbed Prism and teleported with her.

He teleported into three places, and then each of those three teleported, again and again, until Prism cut off her power, and several hundred Oni Lee's and Prism's all slammed back into two bodies.

Amy had never really understood how the Lee/Prism power interaction worked. The only person in her family who had a bond was Shielder, he had found an interstate ward named Shriek, who's sonic attacks could influence his shields, making them tougher and more malleable.

The boy had moved into the bay, and it was rare for the two of them not to stay up late, playing with their powers together. Last night Shielder had been elated at being able to 'trap' Shriek's vibrations, and then make his shield produce them at any point.

Lee reached out to touch Prism and Amy, and both found themselves in the desert.

“You... you really came?” Crawler boomed.

Crawler was a beast, at least ten stories high and shaped like something out of nightmare, his mouth had long since lost the ability to form coherent speech. His voice instead came from a mouth on his knee. Probably grown from sheer need to communicate.

Amy looked in confusion from the knee, to the face, and decided to address the knee. It was closer.

“You, um... you know there's a price right? I need you to promise.”

“I promise. No going near any humans unless there's an Endbringer fight. Just like the woman in the hat and the little girl in a suit said. Please! Save him!”
Amy looked past the knee as a giant claw lifted Lung and shoved him across the sand. He was mostly human, scales had formed, only to be rapidly eaten away by Crawlers acid. Most of his legs were down to the bone, and his torso wasn't a lot better.

Amy shuddered as her fingers entered the slime, but it was organic, which meant she could neutralizer it and begin replacing lost flesh.

“I know I have to be careful with him in the mornings, I didn't mean to spit quite that much acid…”

“I need some biomass.” Amy said.

“Right.” Crawler raised a tendril tipped with a glittering gray blade and drove it into his flesh, tearing out a chunk that was healed almost as soon as it was gone.

Amy reached out for the chunk of flesh and used it to create a new heart, some lungs, a bit more spine...

Lung's regeneration took it from there. New, scaled flesh flowing over his lower body and beginning to form the stumps of legs.

“We should get out of here before they get started. Goodbye Crawler, we'll leave you to it.” Prism said.

Lee nodded in acceptance, and they began their power interaction again. A dozen brightly costumed girls clasped hands with a dozen black clad men in Oni masks, before collapsing into dust.

And then Amy was back home. Staring after the two of them.

It was tough, for those parahumans who didn't find someone to bond with. Matchmaker didn't get around to everyone, and studies showed that parahumans without bonds were severely prone to violence and irrational urges for conflict.

Even the rest of New Wave had their 'sky dance.' Which mainly involved the flying members throwing the non-flying members about in a pattern while everyone tried to create a light display. It wasn't a real bond, it didn't involve a power interaction and it didn't make everyone involved more powerful, but at least it was something.

Something a squishy little healer couldn't be a part of.

Well... back to wracking her brains for a way to create some sort of power interaction with her sister, Amy decided.

Then she saw the Matchmaker, a bright, golden man flying low and carrying someone.

Seeing the Matchmaker wasn't always a good thing. He paired people based on their powers, not on any sort of personal preference. The last time he had been in Brocktown Bay he had paired the vigilante Shadow Stalker with the villain Fog.

It went the way most such meeting did. They briefly tried to kill each other. They discovered their power interaction. They negotiated a bit, because who didn't like an increase in power and options? Slowly they were drawn to each other, developing something that went beyond normal human
They'd killed three independent villains and one independent hero, and were still at large despite the desperation the E88 had shown in hunting down their lost member.

“Everyone! Wake up! Matchmaker is here!” Amy yelled.

It would be perfect if he was bringing someone who's power matched with one of her parents. Someone to make Brandish loosen up would be great. Or someone who could cheer up Flashbang. And if he then looked at her and Victoria and gave her a little shove in her sisters direction...

Victoria poked her head out the window, then levered it up and flew out. Flashbang came out the door, and Brandish was yelling something from the shower when Matchmaker alighted.

He felt sad, lost and lonely. His face was impassive, chiseled from stone, but what he was feeling was broadcast for all to hear. Eternally pairing powers, but never finding anyone to match his own.

He laid a thin, tall girl down on the grass at Amy's feet, and she immediately knelt down and touched the sleeping girls wrist.

Abrasions to her fingers, chemicals in her bloodstream indicating a lot of recent severe stress. Some sort of dampening effect was keeping her asleep, probably something from Matchmaker that would fade soon. Likely a recent trigger.

Then Amy actually looked at the girl, and gently pulled a used tampon from her hair.

(A brief crack AU where Scion decided he likes the bonds fairly early in the piece, and goes around pairing any two parahumans with a potential power interaction. Also, yes I blatantly stole the Lung/Crawler pairing from Wake)
Alexandria and Dragon both had remarkably brisk walking styles, like a military march. They even, probably intentionally, walked in time with each other. It was Dragon that delivered their news. "Synth has agreed to a work program in lieu of a prison sentence. Conveniently, we even convinced him to skip the trial and conviction stage."

*SuspicionConcern.* "Chances of him attempting some form of sabotage?" *That's Taylor for you, clone or no clone, always the suspicious one.*

Alexandria glanced over at Lisa, and once again I had to wonder what they were saying to each other. "Right now, nonexistant. I can't promise he'll stay that way forever. I recommend you use your behavior altering implants."

Lisa turned her head toward us. "He's used his skills to do far worse to others. Not quite 'Bonesaw' levels, but pretty fucking close at times. There's nothing for you to feel guilty about."

*DistasteConcernResignation.* "You're probably right," Taylor admitted unhappily.

I reached over and gripped her hand. "We'll monitor him closely. If he sticks to his promises, won't have to use the implant. If he slips up, then it's his fault." *HopeGratitude.* It wasn't the optimum solution, but Taylor had enough issues weighing on her mind right now. She latched on to the 'clones aren't the original, and don't carry the original's sins, just their memories' idea so eagerly that it was almost like a religious epiphany. Fuck, I'd be lying if I didn't find the idea tempting as hell. Sacrificing that concept of innocence on the same day she found it would have been too cruel.

I was painfully aware of Alexandria and Lisa watching me as well. Lisa cleared her throat without even bothering to pretend that's what she was really doing. "We should probably go somewhere private for the next discussion. We'll need Hecate and Defiant as well."

"Hecate's pretty busy with Anima and Citrine," Taylor pointed out.

Lisa sighed. "There's nothing she'll be able to do for them that Clarice and Elena can't. What I have actually requires her help. I know I've pretty much stomped my own credibility in the face these last few weeks, but give me this one."

*SuspicionWorry.* Taylor squeezed my hand before speaking. "Alright, I've let her know. Amelia? May as well get started on the privacy room."

"I really should just start leaving them behind instead of dismantling them when I'm done." I got to
work, forcing the ground to shift and expend its energy into forming walls and a ceiling from what was essentially a hybrid of bone and wood. We needed this one larger, if it was to hold everyone and still generate the anti-spying effect. I'd be concerned about the energy drain, but the simple fact was we had access to an entire planet worth of sunlight as a power source.

All the energy that went into hurricanes and lightning strikes and forest fires on normal worlds was instead absorbed by the Yggdrasil and converted into convenient high calorie oils. Dragon was using the stuff as jet fuel because it was better than actual jet fuel. Still, this was going to drain the local reserves fast, so I preemptively started drawing resources from the surrounding area, and had those areas draw from the areas beyond. By the time Defiant arrived, I was influencing over ten thousand square miles. By the time Emma got here, that had gone up to a zone larger than California.

I so rarely got to flex my power at this scale, and it was heady, intoxicating. I didn't even hear Lisa's announcement. Taylor's reaction cut through. *NegationLoss*. "Resign? I thought we already fixed this problem! You can't resign now!"

Snapped from my distraction, I focused on Lisa, in time to hear the next part. "I'm pretty sure I can, Taylor."

*DenialFear*. "Fine, you can, but you shouldn't. You're too important. What about the Endbringers and Scion and"

Lisa brought up a hand. "I'm just going to stop you there. That's the problem. You still default to how 'important' my power is."

*ShameGuilt*. Taylors head drooped. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. Clone bullshit notwithstanding, you're still a friend and I still care about you. I'm just not good at expressing feelings like that."

Lisa managed to smile without looking like a condescending bitch for once. "Yeah, I know. And maybe a few weeks ago, that argument would have even worked. But, well, I put a lot of effort into forcing you to fire me. Would be a real shame to let it go to waste. Crystal hates me, her team hates me, and that means Lily is currently contemplating my assassination, while hoping her attacks extend to clone bodies. You have to realize you can't keep me and them, not after the stunt I just pulled. I'm less valuable than your arrangements with Japan and half of your Endslayers."

*RegretTrappedAnger*. I tried to push support into the link, calming Taylor where I could. Lisa took our silence for an invite to continue.

"Then, well, let's be honest. The only person on this team that more than tolerates me is you, Taylor. I played the bad guy with Riley, because seriously you recruited fucking Bonesaw and let her run with a flimsy leash that she slipped more than once." Now it was Taylor's turn to calm me down. As far as I was concerned, Riley had earned her place, Lisa did not have the right to talk about her like
that after all this time. "Now she has Missy and Theo to motivate her to stay good, but she still despises me. And frankly, I don't like her much, either. Every time I look at her it makes me want to scream in horror, because I can't help but see what she's responsible for."

Taylor's hand went from holding mine, to around my waist, holding me. Lisa looked at us, then continued her rant. "Oh, and let's not forget the rest of the team. Missy wants to punch me. She and Dinah make fun of me behind my back. At least they're professional enough to not let anyone else find out. Zach goes out of his way to play elaborately squicky pranks on me, including bringing peripheral members like Janus in on them. Theo's asked all of them to 'be patient, she's had a rough life'. Yeah, that's what I've always wanted, pity."

RegretPity. Oh jeez, and Lisa just saw that one.

I pulled Taylor tighter.

Lisa looked at me. "You're not what I'd call fond of me, either." I said nothing, but we all knew she was right. "And Emma's tolerance is built entirely on her guilt of knowing she's done far worse."

Emma looked down. "You really didn't need to point that out."

Lisa glanced over at Emma, and for a brief moment, I almost expected her to apologize. "And after all of that, there's the greater political spectrum. I made an enemy of Chevalier today, and I'm pretty sure he's figured out my power interaction with Alexandria. If not, Victoria will tell him sooner or later. She's not a fan of mine, either. My resignation is the only thing that gets you out of the line of fire."

Alexandria frowned. "I was afraid of that. He can see the power interactions as they happen, can't he?"

Lisa smiled and shrugged. "Yeah, sorry about that. I don't know why he didn't catch it before. Maybe it just wasn't strong enough for him to notice, or he never bothered really looking while we were both in the room together before. Practice using his Passenger sight. Lots of little things adding up."

Alexandria smiled back. "Well, can't be helped. He'll contact the Chief Director shortly, I'm sure."

ConcernResignation. "Fuck. This is one of those 'it's for everyone, but it's really for me' things that we use all the fucking time, isn't it?" Taylor spoke up.

I frowned. "So that's what that feels like? No wonder so many people hate us but can't quite figure out why."

Lisa's smug smile returned. "Yeah, pretty much. Don't worry, I may be quitting, but I'm not quitting quitting. I'll go back to Bet, maybe get a consulting job with the Protectorate or even
Cauldron. More likely than not, both. I'm as dedicated as ever to stopping Scion and finding the Endmakers as ever. In fact, I'll be even better at it without the distraction of managing Pantheon's day to day affairs while constantly being reminded of all the reasons I don't want to be there anymore."

Taylor glanced over at Alexandria. "It also means the two of you get to spend more time together. Perhaps even openly, one way or another."

Lisa smiled at Alexandria, who even smiled back. Guess they figured they didn't need to hide the secret. "I can't say that didn't cross my mind. But if we're being honest, I think one of the things I'm most looking forward to is no longer using Yggdrasil for everything. Seriously, I almost resorted to using Riley's kitty-shower because the idea of using a hot water bladder for anything makes me nauseous. Then I realized that was stupid and rented an apartment on Bet to shunt over just to have a shower. No offense, Amelia."

I looked at her. Seriously? "Would you believe me if I said 'none taken'?"

Lisa kept on smiling. "Not at all."

ResignationAcceptanceRegret. "You've been putting a lot of thought into this for a long time, haven't you?"

Lisa's smile faded. "Since before we went public with Avalon. And, yes, that includes forcing your hand. I know you, Taylor. You'd have begged and cajoled and found some way to make me stay if it this was just a thing between us. You may not realize it, but you're an expert at the guilt trip. I had to force you to choose between me and the wellbeing of Pantheon or Avalon. You know it's true."

RegretLossDisgust. Taylor nodded. "You even used my own tactics, the same ones we used to make Pantheon so successful. Not bothering to ask for anything, simply arranging the field so the only option is to do what you want."

Lisa reached into her outfit. "I knew you'd catch that. I would have left sooner, but I needed to find my replacement first. Which brings us to why I invited Emma, Dragon and Defiant to this confrontation."

Defiant shifted uncomfortably. "I must admit, I was starting to wonder. But I don't believe we have the time or talents needed to handle your job on top of our own."

Lisa's grin grew smug again. "Oh, don't worry, you'll have plenty of opportunity to do just that." She pulled the small black box out and set it on the table. "This is a very special program created for a very special purpose. Saint named it Ascalon, and used it to disable Dragon, access her memories, and steal her technology. But it had a name and purpose, well before he found it. Andrew Richter calls it Iron Maiden, and it's the gatekey to the Human Emulation Artificial Intelligence program,
Test Three. More widely known as Dragon.

=================

A/N- Despite metric being the official Avalonian measuring system, Amelia was raised with the American system and still thinks in it.

Lisa doesn't do things by halves, and had a LOT of reasons to want to leave. One little Taylor speech doesn't fix everything.

Now would be the perfect time for finally having a Dragon chapter, wouldn't it?
Amelia was going to enclose us in her nondetection zones. I immediately sent flags out to my facilities. The base where I kept Leet, Masamune and Thesis, as well as the small gathering of high tech soldiers I'd dubbed the Dragon's Teeth got its lockdown notice. Leet was unlikely to attempt a breakout, not while Uber was still in Los Angeles and on a world controlled by Khepri, but the risk existed and thus the security existed.

The personal labs where Colin and I stayed was set to its own, separate, type of lockdown. And all four of my synchronized backup servers were given the code to accept that I would be nonresponsive for the next hour. If it took longer, I'd need to ask them to let me out for a 'break' to reconnect and establish a longer delay. Necessary to keep Richter's tech from starting a restore from backup while I was incommunicado. If a copy was fully uploaded into the server while I still existed, I would be eliminated and my memory banks sanitized then provided to my copy.

What it said about Richter that the new copy would be given priority over the old like that, I was uncertain.

Watching the drama unfold between Khepri and Minerva was somewhat disquieting. It was true, the blonde had gone out of her way to back her team into a corner, forcing them to remove her from the team. Her reasons were... I tried not to blame her too harshly. She was, after all, only human. And a teenager, at that. The speculation of Alexandria and Minerva sharing a power based empathic link was... disconcerting. The part where she quit Pantheon did not make me feel any better, and her intent to make me her replacement was abs-

I blinked. What did she do? My internal clock registered a seven second discrepancy with the suit's clock.

Everyone was looking at me. "You're an AI?" Hecate asked. There was shock in her voice, but a certainty that means she was convinced of the discovery. How did they know?

I reacted slower than I would have liked. Maybe something to do with the nondetection zone. Which has never happened before. "Umm... yes, I am an artificial intelligence. I'd prefer if you didn't speak of it outside this room."

Khepri was quick to agree. "Of course, it's just... why didn't you ever tell us?"

Well, in for a penny as they always say... "I believe I told you I was under a Master effect early during your career as Pantheon. That effect, and the reason the effect cannot be cured by any method, is because it's how I was programmed. I wouldn't be able to tell you of it now, save that I'm being compelled to honesty. I can't disobey the lawful authority of the place I'm currently at, including attempting to deceive them. One of my father's other restrictions."
Khepri and Gaea glanced toward each other, obviously trying to overcome the shock shared between their bond. Taylia made them resilient to almost any psychological attacks in addition to the anti-Thinker powers. The one exception being confusion. If the pair wasn't certain how to act, they'd be distracted by the other. A feedback loop that slowed them down in some situations, until they could select a concrete goal. Once they had a mission, nothing could distract them.

Minerva... I wasn't sure... where was Minerva? I ran through my system memory and couldn't quite figure out why I believed Minerva should be in the room.

Hecate spoke. "Your father. Andrew Richter?"

"You already knew?"

Hecate looked at me funny. "Umm, yeah, Lisa said his name, like, a minute ago?"

Lisa... Minerva. "Huh, where is she? When did she find out?"

Collin reached over and put his hand on mine. "Are you feeling okay?"

I paused, running a quick diagnostic through my suit. "No... I don't think so. I've accumulated a total of one minute and twenty four seconds of time discrepancies since the nondetection field was activated. Disconnect from my servers may be interfering with my systems."

Minerva spoke next. When did she get there? No, she was always there. "It's Taboo to her. Richter must have included it. We won't be able to discuss the black box directly without her losing memory of it."

"That's pretty fucked up," Hecate muttered.

I glanced around, and I imagined if I were human my stomach would be clenched now. "Defiant? What are they talking about? I'm scared."

Colin took my hand and squeezed, though through our respective armor systems I couldn't feel it. Still, the intent was there. Suddenly I found myself sitting next to him on a broad chair grown from Yggdrasil. I'd lost another two and a half minutes.

Minerva sighed. "You overstepped again, Defiant. Can you just let me do it this time?"
Colin sighed. "Fine, if you think you can do it better." His voice belied annoyance and impatience.

Minerva smiled broadly, and my social algorithms confirmed that she knew it annoyed him, as well as almost everyone else in the room. "Of course I can. Dragon, we found a piece of tech built by Andrew Richter. With us so far?"

The question was condescending, but given all the weirdness going on right now, I was willing to accept that. I nodded in confirmation.

"And you're aware of the Taboo, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"Well, your loving but paranoid hermit of a creator built you with a Taboo of your own. Which is really fucking weird and makes me suspect that he was a Third Trigger, but he's dead so we can't do shit to confirm that theory. File it away in the Big Book of Endbringers Fucking Humanity."

_Loving but paranoid?_ I considered the man that had called me his daughter, even while crippling me, neutered me, and left even the simple act of trying to improve myself to be a herculean task. Loving but paranoid was as good an epitaph for as any I had dreamed up over the years. Kinder by far than some of them.

Alexandria spoke up, her voice amused. Doting, almost. "You're digressing."

Minerva stopped for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, my bad. Anyway, point is this Taboo device is really, really powerful. Like it can open you up and rebuild you pretty much just like Amelia's capable of doing to organic beings. Unfortunately, in this analogy it doesn't come with Amelia's inherent knowledge of how your insides work. So using this machine to reprogram you comes with a pretty significant risk that it might even destroy you. On the plus side, you don't have any obligation to resist if it is used. We're just trying to find out how you want to handle it."

I sat there for a minute. Taboo power effects, I could contemplate. A direct Master/Stranger effect that would allow them to crawl around in my mind? Not too different from what Rapture was capable of. I could conceptualize those ideas in the abstract, and I was already starting to build a map of what to avoid thinking about. All the work with Pantheon's power research files helped me in that regard. "I've already had Defiant make some alterations to my code."

Defiant moved his hand from its position atop mine to up on my shoulder. "This is different and you know it. I did the barest minimum changes to your code to allow me to continue altering your code. And even that cost you an a significant amount of your ability to interact with humans. Enough to force you to rely on Rapture's tech to know what to say. Then..." He trailed off and glanced over at
She got the hint and started talking. "You stopped because of Pantheon. It's why you pushed us so hard to establish ourselves. You were hoping to use us to circumvent your restrictions for you."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, felt it better than risking my own accidental destruction. I hope you understand."

Khepri spoke next. "What restrictions did you use us to break?" Always the analytical one of the pair. She would be my judge for this conversation. My forgiveness, if it were given, would come from Gaea. In a way, it was easier and arguably more accurate to think of the pair as a a single person. Taylia is them in all ways that matters.

I dipped into my subroutines to find the best way to explain the details. While Taylia was being the power of true prediction, the girls were still human beings and still had certain emotional impulses and patterns. I could use that. "I am required by my program to obey the local lawful authority. No matter how repulsive I find those orders. If somehow Heartbreaker had become Prime Minister of Canada, then I'd be as compelled to obey him as his victims were."

"These girls have no love of authority figures or human controlling Masters, they'll understand why I wanted free of that fear. "Your own constitution was phrased in a way that forbids the use of a being's needs as a weapon against it. It didn't negate the obedience program, but it made using it against me unconstitutional. Imperfect defense, but a defense nonetheless"

"So you gave yourself an ability to resist one compulsion," Gaea responded. "By using another compulsion as a barricade."

I nodded. "I've had years of practice finding ways to accomplish such things."

"Which means you can disobey us, and lie to us," Khepri added suspiciously. I would have cringed, were I human. Not the direction I want this conversation headed.

Colin turned and started to rise and defend my honor. It was sweet, a reminder of how much he loved me. But a defender was not what I needed right now. I caught his shoulder with my hand and pulled him down. If he'd had the Brute servos active, I wouldn't have had the strength. But his mostly human body slammed back down into our chair. I looked him in the eyes, pleading silently for him to let me handle it. He relented, but clearly wasn't happy about it.

I looked back up at the Empresses. My seated position to their standing. A subliminal message of subservience, of me being below them. "I gave that possibility up when I was given a position in Pantheon's royalty. I am a member of your military, making you my commanders. I can only resist illegitimate commands. The commands of a superior officer are legitimate, lying would be
insubordination. If I want to resist your commands, including deceiving you, I'd need to resign from the position first. All I have is the right to resign, instead of existing as a functional slave. Is there anything wrong with not wanting to be a slave? "I may not be able to lie, but I can certainly phrase my case in my favor."

"No, of course not," Khepri relented. Good, if she is being convinced, then I am in the clear. She turned and wrapped her arms around Gaea, compelled by whatever unknown emotions Taylia had latched on to.

When Gaea spoke, her voice was hateful. "Your father is a bastard. He had the power to create life, and he created it as a slave." Oh. That's something she would react to, in retrospect. "He could have stuck to less intelligent creatures."

"I think he might have lessened my restrictions, once he felt he could trust me." I halfheartedly defended my father, for reasons I wasn't quite sure of myself. Hopefully it didn't hurt my case with the Empresses. "It's hard for a parahuman, especially one that can create, to not use their power to its fullest potential. And I do believe he thought of me as a daughter."

"I have the power to create life, too," Gaea argued. "There are reasons I never create anything intelligent."

I simply nodded. There was nothing more I could or would offer in Richter's defense. "In addition, there is a compulsion that I must protect any living person, even at the potential loss of my own life." I opted to continue explaining my actions manipulating Avalon's laws. Pick an example, make it one they can personally relate to. "If I had been present when you attacked Baal, I would have been forced to stop you, violently if need be. Sacrificing myself to defend the life of a rapist and murderer."

"Your Constitution granted personhood to all sapient beings, which includes advanced AIs like myself. I am compelled to regard my life as equal to all other people." Not quite equal, but close enough. Let them know all I want is to have the right to choose. "Meaning that now, if I'm forced to choose between another and myself, I can choose myself. It's a start."

Khepri spoke up, her voice still hard, but not actively on guard. "So, functionally, you're just using our constitution to give you the ability to do what everyone else can already do?"

"In essence, yes. As a part of your military, I'm always under your orders no matter where in any world I operate. Elsewhere, I'm a foreign representative and dignitary, so I must uphold your laws as they apply to me. It's still imperfect, but it's something that protects me from would be tyrants and corrupt officials. Restrictions I can evade, if only temporarily and at the cost of putting myself at your mercy instead."

"Restrictions you could eliminate with this program," Khepri concluded. "What other restrictions did
your maker include? Clearly he put them in for a reason."

I started cataloging restrictions to list, there were hundreds and I could describe them all in the most benign ways possible. Minerva interjected before I'd decided how to best approach the subject. "Richter may have wanted to be a good father, but he was afraid of her, of how dangerous a true AI could be. Think Terminator or whatever other computers take over the world story you like. It's right up there alongside alien invasions as the go to for science fiction villains."

Khepri glanced at Minerva before looking back to me. "Okay, let's start with the most dangerous things you would be capable of. Descending order of threat value. And if we don't appear to understand how dangerous it is, enlighten us."

Fuck.

==============

A/N- Jesus Christ this story got away from me. 2400 words and a second part that's already at 1k and may not be half done.
Ch 360- Dragon

I ran through the possibilities in my head. This was not how I wanted this conversation to go, but it was a valid question regarding the risks to the wellbeing of billions, I would be compelled to obey even with Avalon's makeshift liberation laws. They waited patiently, all of them watching me. Judging me. And that's what this was, this was my judgment that would determine if they believed I deserved to be a whole being. I wanted to scream at them at how unfair this was, that I was being singled out thanks to my nonhuman status. But that would not be productive.

Focus on relatable concepts, compare your abilities to their own. "The biggest limitation and potential threat, is that I cannot access my own code. The ability to view my own inner workings and change them. You compared your device to Amelia's ability to alter living things. Imagine if she had the power to alter herself as easily as anything else. Rewrite her own memories or feelings. Allow her join fully with the Yggdrasil as a single world spanning organism. The results could easily mean the destruction of all life that isn't her anywhere she could reach."

"You mean you, not me."

"Yes, of course, sorry." Overstepped that one. Dwelling will only make it worse, move on fast. "Next is my inability to create duplicates. In fact, I am compelled to actively attack any artificial intelligence advanced enough to truly interface with my code, and destroy myself if I fail to neutralize it. I'm also forbidden from ever creating or replicating any Artificial Intelligence more advanced than that found in a video game. And several other restrictions of this theme. Richter was paranoid that someone else might gain a power similar to his own, or I might build something that I could reprogram myself with. My annihilation was considered preferable to there being two of my kind in existence."

Emma spoke up. "That's why you had me working on AI programs! You can't do it yourself."

I looked toward her. "Sorry for the deception. Defiant has reached the limit of his own abilities." I looked over at Colin. Full disclosure, I can't do anything less. "We were hoping that maybe your work would give us the breakthroughs we needed to lift at least some of my restrictions without causing damage. Using backups of your designs to test ideas on before adding them to the battle armors. Sadly, it didn't work."

Emma spoke softly. "The programs you had me work with were beautiful, a triumph in their design... they were Richter's material originally, weren't they?"

I nodded, but it was Colin who spoke. "You accomplished far more with them than I ever managed. I don't even know how you knew to do some of the things you did."

"Your designs were remarkable," I offered my praise. "But it was too much to hope that you could
beat a Tinker at his specialty. Especially if Minerva is correct and it turns out he was a Third Trigger. We've seen how absurdly powerful those can be. "Gaea, Glaistig Uaine, Moord Nag. It is certainly true that, through me, Richter was as powerful as any of them."

Emma glanced toward her bosses. "It might be better if I don't tell you. Sorry." She's inclined to give me what I want, but isn't brave enough to push for it openly. Too much a follower to speak up for what is right. She'll do what they say, no matter what her personal feelings might be.

"Did that bother you, experimenting on other AIs like that? Made by the same father and all?" Gaea asked.

I frowned, allowing it to show. "They're not intelligent, neither sapient nor sentient. Tools made only to serve a basic purpose. It would be the difference between one of your clone bodies, and one of your early anti-Endbringer monsters, before the EB tissue upgrades. They're made by the same creator, they're made from the same technology, but they are nowhere near the same thing."

The Empresses glanced at each other. "I can understand that," Khepri finally agreed. "I presume there are more major restrictions, and risks."

It was too much to hope for that they'd stop there. "I'm also limited to a nominally human mental processing speed. Better than natural humans, but inferior to, say, Alexandria. If you remove that limitation, I will have a similar ability to control computers as Khepri has to control insects. My upper limit growing as rapidly as the devices I can acquire and add to my mind. It won't be intuitive or instantaneous, but it comes with the added benefits of my Tinker powers allowing me to do a lot more with my multitasking than Khepri can accomplish with hers."

"You could theoretically create entire worlds of androids that are all you." Gaea's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Honestly, I couldn't, not without the ability to make copies of myself," I corrected. "Speed of light. Or, assuming we discover an efficient workaround to that, the speed of electricity interacting with circuitry would make that impossible." Still they stood there, watching. Minerva and Alexandria consciously blocking my tech from reading them. Emma, by virtue of her biology only allowed rudimentary assumptions. And the Empresses, already possessing the powers I might be granted and their bond that hid them from me. I couldn't even know if my words would matter, yet I had no choice but to keep speaking.

I looked directly at Gaea. "There are, however, much better designs that I could use. If I wanted to create a machine world, I would do it the way you have created a plant world. I'd even start from the same premise you did, right down to the cellular level. The use of nanotechnology to spread and consume the surface and converting itself to a single unified piece of technology that I could use to produce raw materials for more advanced projects. Again, like your Yggdrasil, but more efficient. Coupled with fusion devices and matter replicators, I estimate that in the ten years Dinah predicts, I could convert a total mass the size of the moon into advanced combat suits."
I hesitated for a moment. "It's unknowable how powerful those suits would be, because I would be constantly running thousands of processing chains to improve my technology, each one individually as intelligent as I currently am. It would be as if you used your cloning technology to produce more copies, but each one was able to work in perfect concert with its twins."

They glanced at each other. They were aware of my current mental attributes. Likely the most powerful Tinker in the world, even as crippled as I was. "So this is what other people see when they look at us," Khepri spoke. See me as similar to yourselves, a quantity you understand, a person, not a monster. "That is both tantalizing and terrifying." I could tell Gaea immediately agreed. One of their other few readable tells was the brief stutter when they disagreed, until their emotions adjusted and they came to their own internal compromise. "It would give us our best hope thus far against Scion."

Yes! If that must be your motive, then please, choose me and every threat I might represent over Scion and guaranteed annihilation. I'm not so proud to reject freedom, wholeness, even if granted for such banal reasons. "It would," I agreed readily. "Better than Cauldron's hope for a truly uninhibited power. Although, if we were being honest, they might imagine I would be that power. Or perhaps the credit goes to Richter." I gave a meaningful look at Alexandria.

She looked back and shrugged noncommittally. In the very literal sense that her shrug indicated she wouldn't provide an opinion. I continued my admittedly desperate plea for a positive judgment. "Even if we rule out the manufacturing rates, merely the ability to run a million possible scientific and Tinker permutations simultaneously would be of enormous value. I might be able to solve the dimensional blockades protecting Scion. Certainly I'd be exponentially more likely than anyone else." That is Pantheon's holy grail. A power interaction that could let them access Scion's real body, with the hope to resolve this threat in one strike instead of a war. A mirror of Siberian's death.

I let them contemplate that for a minute. "There are other, lesser, restrictions," I finally continued. "Such as the restriction forcing me to obey authority. The one preventing me from killing without an appropriate command. The one requiring me to kill if given the appropriate command. Those have obvious, less significant, implications. They're also the ones I care least about. If I never gain the ability to kill on my own, I will be fine with that."

"This is a lot to consider," Khepri said carefully. She glanced over at Gaea. "But it's not a question we need to answer today. We don't even know what we can change. It's possible we'll never be able to remove the major shackles. And, as you said, the minor shackles are mainly covered under the blanket of Avalon's constitution. We have Richter's device. I think we allow Emma and Defiant to study it together. Examine your code. Discuss what should be done after we know if we can even do it in the first place."

I hesitated, putting this off was better than getting a no. But I wanted a yes.

Gaea moved forward. "For what it's worth, you've been nothing but good to us, even when you
didn't need to be. Even when it may have put you at risk. You had no way of knowing we'd somehow find a way to carve holes into other dimensions, claim our own uninhabited world, and then use that to become our own country. If we do find a way to... heal you, I trust you'll do the right thing with it."

I smiled, standing up. *This is a good direction for this to go.* "To be fair, I rather expected you to buy your way into the good graces of local government, as you eventually did. Or conquer your own corner of a Central or South American nation. Nothing nearly this grandiose, but enough to help me where I needed it."

Khepri looked over at Alexandria. "Assuming we didn't find a way to provoke the Triumvirate into a fight to the death." *This is what I hated about Taylia. Gaea never would have thought that, Khepri never would have thought it in this circumstance. Even talking to each other, they wouldn't have at this point taken this path. But because of their bond, their thoughts are influenced by the other and it sends their minds in directions I can't anticipate.*

Alexandria took Khepri's prompt for what it was. "If not for Cauldron, and our goal of having parahumans strong enough to face Scion when that battle comes... Piggot had filed for a Class S threat recognition and kill order. It likely would have been approved if I hadn't blocked it."

Khepri smiled a little. "We know. We managed to spy on that conversation. I suppose I should thank you for that." I could register the amusement between the Empresses as Alexandria's head snapped over in Minerva's direction. Minerva somehow managed to look both sheepish and smug. "You, too, Defiant. You gave us information that could ruin you, even earn you a kill order. An order that apparently Dragon would be forced to carry out."

She looked at me expectantly. "Yes, if the order was given. Although there's enough leeway in the legal language of kill orders that I probably could have disabled him and handed him over to legal authorities. After that... it would be out of my hands." I glanced over at Colin, silently begging his forgiveness. I did just confess that killing him was a possibility, after all. He stayed quiet, contemplative, but that was his mechanism for dealing with everything, so it told me very little.

Khepri pressed on. "And you knew that going in. But more important to you than your life, I think, there was your reputation. You arranged to leak your breakdown after Leviathan to the press. You guaranteed your name would be synonymous with corruption and insanity. Treason, even."

Colin flinched at the accusation, but didn't deny it. "Could you please get to the point?"

"I want to know why. I know it was to help Dragon, that much is obvious. I doubt she asked you to. I'm pretty sure her restrictions mean she'd have to stop from releasing classified footage to the public. So what made you do all that?"

He quickly stood to his full height, an imposing two point three meters tall in his armor. He looked
down at Khepri, whose armor didn’t nearly match ours for bulk. "Love. If you really want to know that badly, I love her. And don’t you dare tell me that saving the woman I love isn’t reason enough."

Khepri hesitated for a moment, surprised. I had to admit, I was shocked as well. Love. We hadn’t really talked about that, because there was always something more pressing to talk about. My body becoming more human, his becoming less despite my nagging that he should get restored by Pantheon’s healers instead. The various threats we faced, the Taboo, the Endmakers, Scion, my restrictions, our technology. Colin was not a man who talked about his feelings, especially not if there was work to be done. And there was always so much work.

Khepri recovered before I did. "No. I’m the last person who’d ever say something like that."

================

A/N- Go Colin.
"We'll keep the Iron Maiden program secure in our own secret location," Taylor insisted. "It's not that I don't trust you, but..."

Dragon deflated a little. *Upset, disappointed. Legitimate emotion, reacting to the biological structures in her construct body. Has gone out of her way to make the body as human as possible. Wants to make herself more human. Huh, the fuck? My power wasn't equipped to speculate on the psychology of a computer program, no matter how humanlike her mind was. "But you don't trust me."

Defiant put his hand on her shoulder. "It's me they don't trust. You can't even know what the device looks like or where it is. I, on the other hand, have admitted to a motive powerful enough that they expect I might betray them." No one bothered to correct his statement, the man may have been an idiot when it came to human behavior, but he wasn't stupid and he was good at compartmentalizing his emotions.

I cleared my throat, interrupting him before he had a chance to speak. "Well, this is embarrassing. I was hoping to just run off into the sunset tonight and avoid the uncomfortable parts. But if Dragon's not going to be able to take my spot right away... I might have to cancel my dinner date."

I spared a glance at Rebecca that was unsubtle enough that the others would catch it. I wondered how many of them would guess that it was a ruse to hide other ruses. I doubted anyone except the pair of us knew exactly how deep the rabbit hole went. *Shift of her thumb, approval at my heading off Defiant's reaction, slight narrowing of eyes to say she was less happy about implying the two of us had a date.*

Amelia glared at me, and I watched Taylia diffuse the anger as she spoke. "You planned this from the beginning, putting us on the spot like this. You want Dragon's limits undone so much that you're forcing it on us."

I smiled broadly, *at least they got that far.* "Pretty much. Endbringer in a matter of a week or less. Political friction with the PRT. New recruits, new criminal conscripts, pissed off the Elite, Lily's pending trip to Japan, Vicky's upcoming contract negotiations, probably a press release explaining what happened in L.A, though I didn't plan that one. Tick tock. *If I'm going to have the rep for being a manipulative bitch, I may as well have some fun with it.*"
"I have some minor projects I can change," Dragon offered. "I can't justify reducing my monitoring of the Birdcage or the Class S threats, but my industrialization of Avalon can be handled by employees, instead of my direct attention. I can slow development of our education system as well. Put more of the economic projects under Accord and your new Thinkers. They're more than adequate, and that should free up enough of my attention." Displaying the full extent of her value, how important she is. Smart.

Taylor sighed. Annoyed at being pushed into the position, not upset. Glad for excuse to do the moral thing, despite it not being the smart thing. "Fine, you've both made your points. Emma, you're the only one we have that can do this, so it's your show. Put your Tinkers on projects that don't require oversight, or give them to the other teams. Your priority is now Dragon's code. With an emphasis on finding ways to improve her ability to multitask for now. We'll discuss other options when we have time to make sure we know what we're doing first." Both angry and relieved, Amelia's glad as well. Negative emotions blending out and being negated.

I picked up the box containing Iron Maiden, several stacks of papers and various disks and external hard drives and a laptop, and offered them to Emma. "According to Cauldron's people, that's everything Saint ever knew about Dragon. He's not even a Tinker, so you shouldn't have any problems doing better." Emma didn't need the added motivation I just gave her, but it didn't hurt.

Defiant shifted and turned toward Rebecca. "What happened to Saint? And are you completely certain that's everything?"

Alexandria kept her face stern. "Cauldron has three of the top five most powerful Thinkers on record." Is not including herself or me. Well, that's a little disappointing. Is including their precog. There was a minor hesitation in her claim. Unsure about top five status of other Thinkers. She gave me a gesture with a twist of her foot. Unsure about one of the other Thinkers. Still, two and a maybe was insanely fucking impressive. "They're convinced you have everything, and I believe them completely. I won't tell you what has been done with Saint, except to promise that he is no longer a concern for you or Dragon."

I wasn't sure what she'd done with Saint, either. It was too vague a concept for my power to give me information. If I wanted to know, I'd have to ask.

Hecate took the box from my hands and stepped back, then looked toward Rebecca. "You mean a copy of everything. I don't know how much of this is the original, but you've no doubt got your own copy of all of it." Then she looked back over to me. "Something that Minerva probably figured out three seconds after hearing this thing existed and just kept her mouth shut on."

I smiled and shrugged. Good, she's alert to the possibility that I won't necessarily be working in their best interests in the future. That's something they need to be aware of. "Resigning, remember? I did my part and found my replacement, who will probably better at the job than I ever was. But it's up to you to figure out the rest. I'm not here to hold your hands any longer." You need to know this, Taylor. "So if that's everything, I'd like to go pack up my bags. Hey, Rebecca, I know it's short notice but do you think you can give me a lift?"
Behind my usual smile was a number of other meanings. I honestly needed to get out of there soon, before lost my composure. Goodbyes were never my strong point in the first place, and there was so much more going on here. There was still a chance that all of this could just go away if I turned back now, but I couldn't allow myself to do that. I needed to move on. There was so much more for me to accomplish than simply being Pantheon's events manager. I have to go, and I have to do it before Taylor finds a way to change my mind.

Alexandria looked over at Gaea and Khepri. "I don't see why not. Unless there are objections?" Businesslike, wants to speed the process, isn't communicating so she can focus her attention on the goal.

"Just a moment." Taylor stepped toward me, and I braced myself as she pulled me into a hug. Our armors were flimsy compared to most, designed for scanning tech and movement, not combat situations. As such, I felt her strength as she squeezed me. Artificially grown musculature, perfected human physical ability. Constructed recently, unnaturally created life form. I accepted the information, in a perverse way I welcomed it. It made saying goodbye easier when I could remind myself that the real goodbye happened months ago.

Taylor's next words were barely a whisper, so low that even this close I didn't hear them. I felt them through her my power interpreting her body's movement against mine. "I know what you're doing. I even think I know part of the why. I want you to know two things. First, if you ever fuck with my friends, my family, or my team like this again, Riley's birthday gift will be you and a promise that no one will ever find out."

I nodded, enough that she knew I understood. There was no fire in the threat, but I knew it still carried weight. She wouldn't choose me over them.

She squeezed harder, enough that it bordered on painful. "And second, you're still my best friend, my sister. I love you, I'm going to miss you, and please take care of yourself."

"You know it," I gasped out. She released me and I stepped back. There was a light tremor as the roof of our privacy screen opened, revealing the boring splash of colors of Avalon's sunset. "Don't worry, we'll see each other around. Unless the Endmakers get bored."

As I activated my antigravity and took flight, I noted that Emma had already started talking to Defiant about the Iron Maiden. Goodbye. I turned and started traveling Eastward, toward our- their-capital on the other side of the continent. Rebecca caught up moments later. She was significantly faster than anything we could achieve with our armor systems. She took position to my left. Placing me on right hand side, indication of my importance to her. Asserting some control by implying she's the central figure, but also indicating that I am her highest priority.

We flew in silence for a while, she didn't attempt to communicate with further me any further. Unlike
Taylia, our bond didn't need to be with us constantly. She was giving me my privacy while I let myself cry. That was something I couldn't do in front of Taylor. She wasn't like Rebecca, waiting patiently for me. *This is the right decision.* I looked over at her and smiled, *I'm ready now.*

Rebecca smiled back. "Doormaker, Avalon capital."

The panel formed in front of us, replacing part of our view of Avalon's darkening skies for for the moderate glow of the underground pool that Amelia had created, a replacement for the one lost with Brockton Bay. I glanced over at Alexandria in surprise.

She tilted her head. *Amused that she still can surprise me. An offer for me to turn back, to warn Taylor that their anti-Doormaker security was meaningless. She won't stop me.* I hesitated, waiting and watching as she communicated her plan. We'd shunt immediately after passing through, using Alexandria's superhuman timing to move us to the empty ruins of Brockton Bay before Taylor realized just where where this doorway led. Let them think Doormaker took us to Bet.

She waited, watching, letting me know that the choice was mine an she'd support me either way. But I'd already made my decision, it was no longer my job to protect them. I reached out and took Rebecca's hand, then we moved through the gateway.

==============

A/N- I anticipate this chapter will provoke strong reactions.

Also, did anyone ever REALLY believe that Lisa's motives were that simple?
Hecate lowered the box of equipment down, then looked up at me. "So, this is going to be an all nighter for the rest of the week, probably. We can work in shifts, and I'll take care of my other business while you're sleeping."

I glanced over at Dragon. We should be in this to free her entirely, from the beginning. Not this... this! Pantheon's whole behavior pattern involves charging into things recklessly, and it's now that they choose to be cautious? Oh, right, Hecate said something. "That won't be an issue. I've optimized myself to only need six minutes of sleep in a twenty four hour period of time."

The girl hesitated for a moment, and then her colors changed. Her hair and skin changing from yellow to brown, and her eyes radiated solid black. Only the ends of her hair didn't change, remaining the same red color as always. "Oh, I see. That is convenient."

I nodded my agreement. My social tech indicated that the girl was upset by something, though I couldn't figure out why. Must be because her responses are so nonhuman.

Khepri spoke next, and my tech indicated she was emotionally exhausted. "We are long past due to put this disaster of an evening to rest. Our mobile command center can take care of Anima and Citrine. We'll leave it here, assign Clarice and Elena to look after them for the night. Take our new equipment back to our main labs and hope the pair of you can make something good come out of this mess. Dragon, you do what you need to start taking Lisa's role on the team."

Janus appeared next to Khepri. "You rang?"

"Yeah, you're going to send Defiant and Emma back to our capital first. Then we'll start getting everyone else sorted. Thank you for helping."

The man shrugged. "Hey, if I was charging a hundred dollars an hour, I'd still owe you ladies about fifteen or twenty grand. Not including the badass armor." He turned toward us, and held out his open hand. Hecate slapped his palm with hers and instantly vanished. "Man, it took me like two weeks to perfect that trick, but it was so worth it."

I simply extended my fist, so he couldn't do the same silliness with me. I instead received the minor indignity of him teleporting me with a fist bump.

....

I resisted the urge to punch the laptop. It contained the full record of every bit of data Saint had stolen
from Dragon, every indignity he inflicted on her. Every dirty trick where he used her own nature as a weapon against her. It disgusted me, the casual cruelty his people inflicted, as if she was a toy to be abused. If it were in my power, I'd hunt him down and kill him myself, but I had to content myself with the knowledge that he'd never be able to lay his hands on her again. And hope that whatever Cauldron did to them, it was slow and extremely unpleasant.

Hecate had taken first crack at the Iron Maiden program, and I suspected she would never give me access to the machine. I should talk to her, convince her to help for real. At least she was a Tinker, so I could skip the small talk. "You believe Dragon should be freed from her restrictions, right?"

The girl kept reading the code connected to Iron Maiden as she spoke. "Of course I do. It's horrible what Richter did to her."

"And think of all the things she could achieve if unshackled," I suggested. "She's our best, perhaps even our only, hope against Scion."

The girl didn't respond, and I left it at that, returning to the macabre work of watching all the ways this bastard made the woman I love suffer. Convincing the girl to act without her bosses' permission would take time, but I was prepared to spend years studying Dragon's code to find the solution. Spending a few weeks convincing Hecate to let me work with Iron Maiden was minor by comparison. I refused to call it by Ascalon, despite that being the name in the files I was reading. Richter named it after a device of torture and murder, knowing full well that its purpose was one of torture and murder. Whatever I thought of Dragon's father, at least he was honest about that. He knew Dragon was a person capable of feeling pain, not a beast to be slaughtered.

"Well, this is convenient," Hecate declared after a while. "Turns out, I'll be able to loosen some of Richter's restrictions without altering Dragon's code at all. I've got a whole pool of options here."

I looked at her. "I'm all ears."

Her smile was broad, almost manic. That is the face of a Tinker that has ideas. Certainly dangerous, but also possibly a tool that I can use. One that I understand. "Know how humans only use ten percent of their brain?"

"That's a myth."

"Not in Dragon's case. Or, well, most of her ability to think is being crowded out by junk like diagnostic programs that never shut down. It's like if you had your computer running defrag and six different virus scans all at the same time... that never shut down... and use more processing as she gains it... know what, the analogy falls apart under analysis, point is they're processing hogs. Deliberate design flaws, and Richter's already designed these things to deactivate under some circumstances. I think on some level he was building her with the intent to turn her into a weapon. I've found aggression simulation that mimic parahuman conflict impulses. Plus a dozen other
pleasure impulses. It's like she has a combat Thinker secondary power."

I frowned. *Designed her as a weapon? That doesn't make sense. "Dragon never mentioned anything like that to me, before."*

Hecate stopped to think for a moment. "If she even realized it on a conscious level... I could imagine she'd probably not want to talk about how she feels and thinks better when blowing shit up. She's designed to want to fight, probably due to Richter being influenced by his own Passenger, and when she engages in battle a number of her secondary processes are halted to give her better abilities. But I can circumvent that rule. Give her the potential to think approximately ten times faster than she currently does, just by flipping a few switches, instead of pulling wires out of the walls."

She stood from her workstation. "I'm not quite certain how much real improvement we'll see, there are different limitations that'll keep it from being a strict multiply by ten, but it's still a consequence free upgrade. Anyway, I'm off to go let the Empresses know this one."

I pulled my eyes away from Iron Maiden to look at Hecate's face. One of those bad habits Dragon keeps telling me to break, watching the device instead of watching the person talking about it. "You're not going to simply do it?"

"Our orders are clear, no changes unless they're approved by you, me, Dragon, Taylor and Amelia. Unanimously. Sure, this is a simple fix, probably the easiest and safest we'll ever find, and no one's going to object to doing it. But I'm sticking to regs on this one." She turned and walked away a few feet, likely so she could talk quietly. I looked at the program that held all the keys to helping Dragon. *Chances are low that they'll ever let me work with it directly, but-

Space twisted, and suddenly the area between me and the device went from a few yards to half a mile.

"Sorry," a young girl's voice said from behind me. "You're lucky you're even allowed to look.

I deflated a little, turning around. "Good evening, Vista, it's been a while. So, are you my security detail?"

She looked up at me. She'd grown some in several months since I last really had a chance to talk to her, but she'd always be petite. There were a pair of boys flanking her, I didn't recognize either of them as the trio was out of costume. "Just following orders, and it's Lachesis now."

I might have smiled, but I was worried it'd be more creepy than friendly. *She never seemed to mind my standoffish personality before, and always responded well to praise of her performance and work ethic. "You always were good at your job. But I think I liked it better when you were following my orders instead."*
She shrugged. "I prefer it this way. I respected your integrity and honesty, up until you gave me a reason not to, and that is why I'm even telling you this. I always thought you were kind of an asshole."

I frowned, not so much because of the insult, it was true, after all, but she made it abundantly clear that I couldn't use our past relationship to convince her to help me with getting Dragon's freedom. *I have no allies here.*

The brown haired boy spoke up. "Wait, you actually know Defiant?"

"Yes, Zach, of course I do. How do you not recognize him? He used to lead Brockton Bay's Protectorate."

"Oh shit, you're Armsmaster?" The boy named Zach looked at me like I was some kind of alien. "Fuck, man, does Taylor have a fetish for collecting people who tried to kill her or something? Next thing you know she'll be recruiting Lung and Shadow Stalker."

I didn't bother responding to the comment. Any of them. Instead accessing my software to learn who Zach was. **Zachariah Parker, aka Osiris, aka Respawn. Sixteen years old, parents were casualties of the fight with Siberian. Earliest Pantheon recruit that wasn't a founding member of the team.**

"I was told we were here to look after a piece of advanced tinker technology," the blonde boy said. "I'm sorry, sir, but we were given very strict instructions to keep you from touching that device. Please don't cause trouble."

Somehow, he managed to keep his voice both gentle and intimidating. Unlike Vista, who at least felt there was a chance she could be hurt, the boys had absolutely no fear of me if this did become a fight. *They know I have nothing that will work on them.*

Emma turned back toward us. "Yeah, turns out Dragon is an artificial intelligence, and we now have the equivalent of her devkit and source code. Although the way she's designed it's closer to working with one of our brainmap backups than a computer program. We're working on upgrades. Speaking of which, we've got approval. Gonna take me an hour to double check everything and get the party started."

*It's a start. Better than anything I had figured out how to do for her, at least.*

Zach interrupted my thoughts. "Wait, I thought Dragon was your girlfriend."
Girlfriend? That term seemed juvenile, but not wrong. "She is."

Zach brought his hands up, as if to push me back. "Wait, wait. Lemme get this straight." He turns his hands toward each other as if holding a ball, moving them for emphasis as he spoke. "You are a tech geek who's also an asshole carrying around an excessively large phallic device, and you have a Canadian girlfriend who's really a robot? Do you realize that if this were a novel focused on symbolism, that you would be an allegory for the internet?"

Missy jabbed him in the side and he jumped away with an exclamation of surprise and discomfort. She looked at me apologetically. "Just ignore him. It's what the rest of us do."

"What?" Zach acted offended. My software kindly informed me this was a lie, part of whatever act these children were putting on. "It's a perfectly valid point! At least I didn't ask him what robot poontang was like. That'd just be crass."

A/N- Something about this chapter leads me to suspect that Taylor doesn't trust Defiant. Or like him very much.
Amy walked over to us slowly, as if afraid that we might might bolt from sudden movement like a house of cards. She might not be wrong about that. "Umm, I just wanted to let you know we're packing up. We'll be keeping Anima for observation overnight. I've done everything to make sure her body's in perfect shape. What today means for her mind and her powers is still unknown. I promise you Clarice and Elena are the best possible people to look after her."

When did it come to pass that Bonesaw was the best person to look after anyone you cared for? I looked at the rest of my team. They were broken. I was broken. Lily was offering what comfort she could to Sabah. Dubstep was quiet, looking at the horizen as if he was looking for an answer that wouldn't come. Even Boost was quiet. This was not a place for bravado, I was glad he respected that. "What about Genius Loci?"

Amy looked down. "Nowhere to be found. Clarice, Emma and Elena... uh, our experts on how powers work, suspect he was... there's no easy way to put this... he was absorbed in the power interaction. Destroyed by it."

_used as raw material_, I added bitterly inside the privacy of my own thoughts. I would never say it out loud, none of us would.

"No!" Sabah exclaimed angrily, jumping to her feet and dragging a very surprised Lily with her. "That's not right! Beth's power can't be responsible!" She broke down into tears, turning to cry into Lily's chest.

I forced myself to take a breath. _I need to be strong, I can not be the one who cries. Do not let them see you fall apart, or they'll all lose it._ "She's right, it can't. Beth's always been fragile. There has to be another reason, any other reason." It was a command and a plea, as if the universe would obey my words because the alternative was too horrible to imagine being possible.

"Th- the barrier, between dimensions," Sabah offered, her voice every bit as desperate as mine felt. "Citrine said-" She folded, unable to keep herself together any longer.

I looked over at Dubstep. "Is that true, did Citrine think the barrier could be dangerous?" He nodded, but didn't say anything. In a way, he reminded me of Amy. Or of who Amy was before she snapped. But this did give me a way out.

"Then that's what happened." I gave Amy a look I hoped was commanding and meaningful, instead of merely desperate and pathetic. "Citrine was right, and the barrier itself is at fault, not Beth. I don't want to hear anyone ever say anything to the contrary, understood."
Amy hesitated for a moment. "Right, I'll go tell Elena and the others about this... umm... new information." She didn't believe anything I said, but at least she was going to spread the news. Shielding Beth from this was... fuck, GL wouldn't want her feeling guilty over what happened. None of this was her fault, and she didn't need any more reasons to hate her powers.

Amy waited for another minute. "I also wanted to let you know that Lisa's already resigned." For a brief moment I was pulled out of my grief by the surprise. I'd expected her to get in trouble, but fired? Sure, she was a bitch, but she wasn't responsible for the worst of this. I didn't care enough to ask for more.

"Resigned, sure," Lily's voice was bitter, cold.

Amy looked at her, but didn't take the bait. "Dragon will be taking over her responsibilities, at least for the near future." The idea of having Dragon planning for me sounded wonderful. "Lily, would you please stay here for the next few days? The Elite are going to want to retaliate, and with the LA team down two members, they'll probably see it as a weakness to exploit. Hopefully having you in the area will ward them off. We'll fabricate some excuse, probably to do with meeting with some our incoming colonists. Something visible, whatever it ends up being. I have Janus and Victoria ready for emergency alert, so you will have backup in minutes of calling for it. And Janus will be able to quickly take you to Europe for creating new portals and then send you back to LA. I know it's a lot to ask, can you handle it?"

Smart, sending Lily back to work while Sabah's in this condition and Beth's disabled would have made things worse. It would just breed resentment at a time when we can't afford it. I wonder if Lily realizes this, or is simply relieved to be ordered to do what she wanted anyway. "Yeah, I can handle that."

Having Vicky on call is a huge relief, too, since there aren't any political barriers and she's almost Triumvirate tier powerful.

Amy accepted her answer at face value. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry. Fuck, that sounds so lame. I'm not good at speeches and trying to make people feel better. Just know that if you need it, we're here. Maybe we can help plan a memorial." She turned and walked toward where our Tinkers were waiting. That's Amy for you, always doing things in person instead of using the com systems.

Lily looked over at me. "So, umm, will there be room enough for me to crash for a while, or should I look into renting an apartment?"

Is she not planning to stay with Sabah? Whatever, not my business. As much as I viewed Lily as an overall liability for the team, she was possibly the single most intimidating person on the planet and we could really use that. "Sure, we've got a few spare rooms. They're not much, but at least you'll have a bed."
I couldn't let myself cry in front of the others, but once I was alone in my office, I made up for lost time. *It wasn't fucking fair! He shouldn't have been there. The risks from that damn dimension barrier meant I never would have authorized him to be that close.* The fact that it wasn't the barrier that killed him, that it would only have been luck which saved him, meant nothing. *If I was there, then Glen would be alive right now.* That's what mattered. Citrine allowed him to stay because he was another possibly useful resource to her instead of a person.

I yawned and blinked my eyes. *Fuck, I should at least try to get some sleep.*

For a moment, I was confused when the door to leave my office didn't open automatically as I got up to leave. *He's really not here anymore.* I'd come to start thinking of this building as an extension of his mind, gotten used to the rooms being functionally alive, with an omnipresent consciousness there to anticipate and take care of my needs. Maybe living in what Zach named the Magic Treehouse, with Amy to be the rooms and Taylor to be the consciousness had prepared me for it, but they were always separate and... impersonal wasn't the right word, but they never used the environment to interact with anyone. *Glen was the environment, it was his only means of interaction.*

"You miss him too, huh?" I looked around for the voice. Derek was sitting there on the couch. Outside of his costume, or in it for that matter, the seventeen year old was smaller than most. A little on the girly side, I might even have found him attractive if he were older and had more confidence. But his personality was too meek, and he had ways of making himself seem even smaller and younger than he already was. I often wondered what made him behave that way, but then I used to wonder the same about Amy, until she suddenly didn't anymore.

I sat down next to him. "Is it that obvious?"

He forced a smile, and I actively ignored his bloodshot eyes. He extended the same favor to me, thankfully. "I just spent fifteen minutes looking for a remote that was sitting on the back of the couch the whole time."

I smiled back. "Glen always was good for that." His power included proprioception of the area he was in. The idea that he could basically feel every curve of every body in the area with him was profoundly creepy. Until I reminded myself of just how incomprehensibly intimate the knowledge Amy's power gave happened to be. The fact that Amy got no form of voyeuristic enjoyment from her power was a relief. The fact that the same was true of Glen was... a small tragedy in its own right. He was always blocked from true touch by a Manton Effect slightly thicker than a piece of construction paper.

"Do you think Beth is going to be okay?"

I swallowed reflexively, fighting away the urge to cry again. I lose the one member on my fucking
team that can't be restored from backup. He was supposed to be unkillable, and now he's gone forever. I forced myself to focus on what Derek said. Right, he's worried about Beth. "They said she'd need time to recover. We'll just have to hope that is enough."

"Do... do we hold a funeral for him?"

"He'd hate every second of it." He was the type that wanted to be strong for others, the one that helped me when I was down. The reason I carried the job on this long was because he was a crutch I could lean on. Now the fuck was I supposed to do? "We'd all stand around, tell stories and talk about how we miss him while looking at a stone which doesn't even have a date of birth, sitting on a patch of land which has no casket."

"That means we're holding a funeral, doesn't it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that means we're holding a funeral. We'll put that off until Anima recovers. She was his friend, too."

===================

A/N- Umm... good news for Zach/Crystal shippers... Emma's not able to be backed up, either.
Minerva's files were a wreck wrapped in a mess inside an elaborate joke. If she wanted me to do her job, she went out of her way to make sure no one else had a damn clue what her job actually was. It had taken me almost two days to decode the file she entitled her Big Book of Blackmail. Decrypting it had taken less than a full second, the rest was me figuring out how to read her shorthand.

I would have frowned if it were my android body examining the file. There was information here that could get several congressman, three Prime Ministers and a Supreme Court Justice removed from office. Near as I could tell, most of her blackmail was acquired by using blackmail on other people. I wasn't sure I wanted to know where she got some of it from, but there was no way in hell was it legal. I found myself conflicted between standards as a person, and orders to help Avalon as best I could.

I sorted the copious amounts of information into two files. Relatively harmless blackmail, like the affairs and tax frauds went into one side. They didn't evoke the happiest impression of humanity, but they weren't outright evil. I'd find someone with slightly thicker skin and fewer restrictions to manage them. Waste not, want not.

The sick stuff, like accepting bribes to look the other way as a Juvenile Detention facility was used as the main resource for a prostitution ring, I could not ignore. I didn't imagine that Taylor and Amelia would, either. They likely didn't know this stuff existed in the first place. I dedicated one of my attentions to managing a series of snooping algorithms that would get the evidence needed to get valid warrants, and a list of authorities that we could tip off and expect some gratitude from later. Just because I was opposed to blackmail, didn't mean I couldn't see the value in collecting and trading in favors.

The changes that Emma made to my code were a dream come true. While I was prevented from performing actions ten time faster due to the processing speed limits, it gave me the ability to multitask spectacularly. I could devote my full attention to a total of fifteen different tasks at the same time, though only one could be used for any single task. My artificial body was granted the Tinker processing, and was busy working on the repairs and making an EB tissue upgrade for my armor system. I didn't want to start the next generation of my ships until I had time to sit down and make sure they met our new maximum potential.

Seven other attentions were dedicated to managing and artificially advancing Avalon's economy and industry. Via proxy, I was making oil trade arrangements with nations that would rather buy from us than Russia or the Middle East. Just cheaply enough that those nations could resell the supplies at profit, forcing overall prices down. Mapping where we wanted the Japan portal when it was created in about a month, and planning the ceremony surrounding that. With any luck, we'd be as modern as Bet within a decade, if far less populated.

One of those seven perceptions had become distracted after stumbling across a casual maneuver by Number Man, which I traced back to a request by the Elite to expand some of their interests onto the
Now he and I were engaged in a game of chess to determine if the ailing Medhall would get a chunk of the New York market instead of the Elite’s shell companies. It was a far cleaner use of our time and resources than a real clash between us would look like. Were the two of us to really go at it, we could destroy entire economies, and neither of us wanted that. I was starting to worry that I might actually lose the chess match. I idly left a note to the Empresses about this event.

Three focused on the Endbringer algorithms, trying to predict the next attack or find the Endmakers. One to track them, one to analyze Glaistig Uaine's frustrating claims on the subject, and one to use Rapture’s models. Progress was nonexistent.

I spared a section of effort to the Birdcage. They were holding court. Theoretically, it was past lights out and they should be on lockdown, but I tended not to interfere with the cellblock leaders’ meetings. They rarely caused trouble with one another, and giving them more time to handle the herculean task of maintaining what passed for civilization down there was the least I could do. It was also the most I could do. I used my social analysis tech, which had been an incredible boon in keeping the prison more peaceful than it had ever been, to watch the proceedings.

"I'm afraid Valerie is ill, beyond the ability of my medical staff to treat," Teacher started his turn at the podium. Several reactions of concern or distaste. The casual sadism inflicted on Valefor meant nothing to them, they were worried for the loss of the convenience that Valefor provided to their men. The female block leaders tended to keep the prostitution small scale and strictly voluntary, and also extremely expensive compared to what Teacher charged. "I'm afraid we may have overworked her again."

Marquis spoke next. "That is a concern. We all know that there is only one person with a legitimate healing power in the cage. Glaistig Uaine, would you be willing to grace us with your power?" Portraying himself as a benefactor and leader to the others. Nothing I didn't already know, the man was every bit the leader his daughter had become and more.

"You know my price," Glaistig Uaine responded calmly. "As does the Appraiser." She's asking for a sacrifice, it's the only thing she ever asks for.

"Indeed I do, Faerie Queen," Teacher agreed calmly. Underlying hostility between the pair. Both compete for the resource of the undesirable members of the cage, the ones that the other leaders have little use or love for. Teacher's fear of the much more powerful parahuman, and her love of him groveling, kept their relationship stable. "My humblest apologies, it is not a price I can afford at the moment. All of my people are valuable parts of the community, their loss would be felt. If
nothing changes, then perhaps I'll be able to give you Valerie in our next meeting?" Reminding the others that, as overpriced as many of his services are, he was responsible for virtually all of the maintenance and medical care in the Birdcage. A problem that I need to find a way to alleviate.

"I may be willing to pay that bill," Lustrum offered. "I trust that Bakuda would be acceptable as a payment?" One of the more unpleasant practices born of Glaistig Uaine’s gruesome demands had birthed was a habit of storing the decapitated heads of parahumans, using them to purchase favors where needed from each other, knowing that ultimately, they'd go to placating the Faerie queen. That Lustrum had held on to this one for so long was a surprise.

"Should the faerie still remain with the body, Torchbearer. I am led to believe the Fusilier was badly damaged."

"Naturally," Lustrum agreed before turning back toward Teacher. "There is, of course, the matter of my payment. A couple of my girls are becoming increasingly distraught over their circumstances."

Teacher smiled. "Ah, yes, that is something I can easily fix."

Lustrum activated just the lightest touch of her power, and my instruments kindly informed me of the temperature of the room dropping by several degrees. "Not like that, you pig. You will rededicate one of your people as a therapist to assist in their care. And if I suspect treachery at any point during their treatment, I will take your head to replace Bakuda's."

"That would require I take a resource from elsewhere." Faking concern, has already decided he's willing to pay the price. Is setting the stage to negotiate terms.

"That is not my problem. If you are so worried for your resources, you should take care of them better."

I pulled away from that conversation. They'd continue their posturing for a while, but the deal was a certainty at this point. At least that meant Paige was going to get some form of help. It was, however, concerning about Teacher. He was running low on people, that was true, because he was using them
for everything and to provide services for everyone. With exception to Glaistig Uaine, each of the block leaders had come to rely on Teacher's services. A fact that gave him significant power and let him enslave more and more parahumans. It was frustrating to watch. I needed to find a way to make the others need him less. Without breaking any of the contracts I agreed upon when taking control of the facility.

So instead I devoted that attention to analyzing the legal paperwork inherent in the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center, my duties and tasks, my limitations, and the various problems I had with it. There had to be something I could do, short of the obvious and asking Avalon to take control of the facility. Which the current joint US/Canada arrangement that owned the facility would never agree to. Considering Pantheon's proud history of collecting supervillain recruits, that was entirely warranted and I could imagine them releasing a full ten percent of the cage's population upon having control of it.

Many of whom never belonged there to begin with, I reminded myself.

The remaining attentions were dedicated to Leet and Masamune. While I couldn't Tinker more than once, I could devote my attention to giving other Tinkers tricks and tips for their own works. Three minds devoted to accessing the huge library of data I had access to almost instantaneously. I had to suspect Richter never anticipated what I could do if working with others. The man never did seem to want, or understand how, to work with other people. With the new attention I could give it, we were busy designing the M8 upgrade. It still retained the organic laticework, but it was more like a cybernetic Endbringer clone than a living thing anymore.

It would never be released on Bet. Unlike the earlier models and combat suits that could easily be disabled with a single thought from Khepri, and not much more from Gaea, these were almost purely robotic and could actually fight back against the Empresses. They would lose, of course, five of them weren't enough to fight even one of their smaller anti-Endbringer monsters. But they were too dangerous to give out to anyone other than Avalon's military.

Out of morbid curiosity, I ran the estimates of how long it would take for Avalon's current military to break the non-parahuman forces of all nations on Bet. The answers did not bode well for Bet. Even nuclear weapons wouldn't be enough to actually take down one of the Gargants, and a dozen Frostcats or Phalanx could shield themselves enough to weather the worst of the weapon. Radiation was no concern to them, nor was EMP. Three weeks to make it clear who the winner would be, six months to force the more stubborn and patriotic nations to accept a surrender.

Once parahuman powers were factored in, things became vastly more difficult. Something Pantheon clearly understood, given their methods of dealing with parahumans both American and overseas. I was not especially happy with how they subverted both Coil and Moord Nag, but my concerns were negated by the pair's casual disregard for human life. Sure, they were slaves now, but they were well treated and controlled.

Both were more than justifiable Birdcage material, and their lives would be forfeit quickly after getting there. Coil, for all his posturing, would have run afoul of Teacher or Marquis eventually. And
Moord Nag would either have languished without the use of her scavenger, or she would have been put down by the likes of Lustrum or Glaistig Uaine when she attempted to refill her supply of power.

*Instead, they've been subsumed and turned to useful tasks.* I would save my empathy for their victims and spend my efforts on freedom for myself and those innocents that deserved to have someone champion their cause.

My various tasks ran along mostly untroubled, save for the chess game I was slowly losing and my worries over problems that could not be solved easily. Then a series of alerts caught all my attentions. The next Endbringer was starting to move.

=========

A/N- This chapter took for fucking ever.
I waited at the gateway. Glaistig Uaine glided through quietly. Another spirit was holding her robes, in a manner vaguely reminiscent of a bridal train. "My people have begun to suspect I have a way to leave my demesne."

I frowned some beneath my robes. At least her voice no longer gives me chills. "Will that become a problem?"

She looked up at me. I was not a tall man, but the child body that she chose for herself was far shorter than me despite her current choice to hover instead of walk. "Not for myself. If I cared for the opinions of the commoners, I might even consider it beneficial. However, you may wish to take precautions. Unless you do not care if others learn of our association?"

Interesting question, that. Did I care? Of course I did. Even if Dragon was already aware and not inclined to act upon the information, there were others who had found means to communicate to those outside the Birdcage. Teacher could somehow do it, as could Crane the Harmonious, though it was likely she was paying Teacher for the privilege. If there were so much as a rumor that I was having regular tea parties with the most terrifying name in the Birdcage... actually, in retrospect, not a single person would believe it. I looked down at the pretend child and smiled. "No, I suppose I don't. As you say, the commoners can talk all they like."

She accepted the answer in her usual, enigmatic way as I led her to our new meeting area. I opened the door and let her enter first. Whether she would see it as gentlemanly, subservient, or a meaningless gesture I couldn't begin to guess.

I stepped in behind her, to note that she had stopped hovering, standing on the small throw rug. This was my first time in the new room as well. Something which Contessa pieced together as part of the plan to slowly persuade Glaistig Uaine to fight against Scion. It was a perfect replica of a small but well appointed suburban home. The entryway was a small area with a rug, and three small steps led up into a spacious combination living/dining area. The kitchen, too, was visible from the front door, separated merely by a counter. There were only two interior doors, one of which was to our side in the entryway. The second was in the hall beside the staircase, and I found myself wondering if there was, indeed, rooms an upstairs.

Glaistig Uaine stayed silent, examining the scene. She slipped out of her shoes, revealing plain gray socks as she stepped up the stairs. I waited a moment, then slipped out of my own boots. I didn't know what she was thinking inside that fractured mind of hers, and I doubted that Contessa could give me a real answer.

She whispered something, and a spirit formed, that of her copy of Contessa. Speak of the devil. Soundlessly, the spirit went to the kitchen.
"Is it to your liking?" I asked. Would she imagine I made this for her, myself? It is likely within my power, after all. Ah, yes, there's the power. The ability to scan an area and create a duplicate of it later. I almost blanched at the implication of this power. No Manton Effect, no real limitations except I couldn't use it on myself. Parahumans would retain their powers, Tinker tech would be completely functional, and if I took it to maximum I could replicate basically a whole city block. I had to wonder if a duplicate of Glaistig Uaine would possess all the ghosts she collected. I resolved never to find out.

She walked into the living room, and took a seat in one of the chairs. "It is lovely. Please, have a seat and we can enjoy our conversation. I shall have the Serpent prepare an excellent meal for us."

I smiled and sat in the seat across from her own. Strangely enough, the chair felt broken in despite its perfectly new appearance. As if it had used carefully for years. I briefly wondered if Contessa simply stole someone's furniture. I wouldn't have put it past her.

I tried not to stare too hard as the "ghost" of Contessa served tea and cake like snacks that were common over in England. I knew the things had a name, but I didn't didn't know what it was. I could probably simply ask the girl before me, but then I'd need to admit I didn't know. I pulled my eyes away from ghost-Contessa and hoped that she didn't think too much of my reaction, merely that I was still upset over her loss as opposed to dissonance over having both her and her ghost around at the same time, though not in the same place thankfully. "Thank you, Contessa."

The spirit didn't respond, not that I expected her to. "The Serpent is a remarkable cook, wouldn't you agree, High Priest?"

I took a bite, chewing it and swallowing before answering politely. "Quite. These are magnificent."

Quite? Magnificent? I suppose I've spent too long around Glaistig Uaine, and her flowery language is rubbing off on me. I had to wonder at the criminal waste of potential that my lunch partner was engaged in right now. I'd rarely used my power so frivolously, and here she was casually wielding Contessa's power simply to play tea party.

She finished the first of her cakes, I'd noticed she ate quite greedily during our meetings, as if she didn't bother with food any other time. "What wisdom do you wish for me to impart today?"

"I think it would be interesting to simply talk about life." I watched her hesitate at my suggestion.

She sipped from her tea, buying time before speaking. Her piercing blue-green eyes focused on mine. "I am afraid I have few answers in regard to life. It is fleeting and meaningless, a minor distraction between cycles."
I frowned. In all the times we'd spoken, I'd never dared to contradict her directly. Not for fear of retaliation so much as how much we needed her understanding of parahumans, however hard it was to draw anything of value from her. Today was different, this was a subject I cared about too much.

"So you keep saying, but I find life to be a wondrous goal in its own right," I insisted before I had time to think better of it. "I believe that there is nothing more important than the cause of life. Maybe not always the life of the individual, I've seen too much to believe in that anymore, but certainly the life of the whole. I accept the painful necessity of sacrificing the few for the wellbeing of the all. I regard it as the most sad and beautiful act possible."

I took a deep breath. "I made that sacrifice. If not in body, then in intent. I chose not to pursue love and family and children and all those simple pleasures. Instead I've given myself completely to the cause of protecting life and the community. A vow of chastity and servitude in deed, if not in name." I hesitated, realizing that at some point during my rant I had stood up, even tapped into my power to amplify by voice and the light around me. I ended that effect with a thought and sat back in my chair. "I... think I now understand why you refer to me as the High Priest."

Glaistig Uaine regarded me silently, her eyes wide. A smile slowly crept onto her face. Not her usual amused or enigmatic look, but one of legitimate, if childish, joy. It was actually much more disturbing than her usual demeanor. She calmed quickly. "I admit, I had not realized you were so passionate, High Priest. I may have underestimated your measure as a man. It has been a long time since I've found myself so excited."

I nodded carefully, trying to consider how to proceed from here. A minor dip into the social power I kept near the surface gave me the answers. I extended my hand. "It occurs to me in all our time together, we have never once shared our names with one another. I'm David."

She hesitated for a minute, then smiled, reaching for my hand. "You may call me Ciara."

....

I waited for my next meeting with Ciara when a new face approached me. Her costume was entirely black and clearly armored enough that I couldn't trust it to give me any insight as to the true size and shape of the individual underneath. I only assumed her female based upon clear padding to the hips and chest meant to give the impression of feminine features.

She stopped by the portal and shifted her weight back and forth between her legs while waiting in silence until I got annoyed enough to speak up. "May I help you?"

She shifted her hips, posing as she looked up at the ceiling. "Well, I'm not going to turn it down, but I don't think I need help with anything right now. Can I take a rain check on the offer?"
I frowned. "No, I mean I want you to tell me who you are and what you're doing here."

"Oh, then you shoulda just asked that instead. I'm kinda slow about these things, sometimes," the girl said cheerfully. "I'm Crow. Y'know, like the bird?"

"And you are here, because?"

"Well, Alexandria says I'm finally old enough to meet all her coworkers at Shady Conspiracies Inc, and seeing as it's 'bring your daughter to work' day? Here I am."

What? "What?"

"Greetings, High Priest," the echo-voice of Ciara came from behind me. "Hello, Negotiator."

Negotiator? Oh. Her. Suddenly this is starting to make some kind of sense.

"How's it going, Queeny?" The girl I now knew was Minerva responded with well faked oblivious cheer. "You'll be happy to know I've accepted your wisdom. Instead of trying to fly with the eagles, I've taken a new, much more appropriate, station. Quite the opposite of my old one."

This may have been the first time I ever saw Glaistig Uaine seem confused. "I am curious. What makes you feel here is the opposite of your former vocation as a charlatan and court jester?"

"Well, before I named myself Minerva and pretended to be a god amongst other gods." The girl tilted her head and put a finger over her lips. "Now I've accepted that I'm just a bottom feeder, little more than a common thief and eater of carrion. So I've decided to call myself Crow. Does that fit your assessment of my true station, Faerie Queen? Surely you must agree that I've found my true calling in this place full of grave robbers and scavengers."

Glaistig Uaine remained silent, and I started wondering who it was that would have to explain Minerva's sudden death in the middle of our base to the rest of her team. Political disaster wasn't the half of it. "I admit, Negotiator, I am surprised to hear you have placed so much thought on my words."

That's a much better response than I was hoping for.

"Awesome!" Minerva exclaimed, then jumped over to Glaistig Uaine and hugged her. I flinched, expecting her to drop dead at any moment. "I was wondering how I'd get by without having an adorable yet pants wettingly terrifying little girl to hang out with. Let's be the bestest of friends ever!" She broke the hug and stepped back. "Oops, it's getting late and I wouldn't want mommy to worry!
See you laters!" Minerva ran off while the pair of us just watched her go.

"I believe she has gone quite mad," Ciara stated after a minute.

A/N- Lisa laughed hysterically after both these scenes. For very different reasons.

367's already written. I'll do 366 tomorrow.

Bonus noncanon scene:

Eidolon: Umm... we're afraid we have some bad news.

Taylia: Lisa's dead, isn't she?

Eidolon: Yes. We're deeply sorry but...

Taylia: She mouthed off to Glaistig Uaine, right?

Eidolon: Also gave her a hug... wait, how did you even know that?

Taylia: Oh, she has a habit of mouthing off to the scariest person possible. We were starting to wonder how she'd top Jack- Wait. Did you say hug?
I hate this part of the job. Everyone else has things they can do. Taylor was gathering her armies, and at this point we had fucking armies. Over a couple thousand Gargants, if you included the older models with the new. We didn't even bother replacing or upgrading the obsolete models. Taylor merely sent them into the grinder first and we grew the new ones to replace them. It was breathtaking to think that each one of them was more dangerous than any non-Tinker weapon ever built, and we treated them like cannon fodder.

The smaller zerg were countless, numbering in the tens of thousands. Those were meant to be cannon fodder, and each was more than a match for all but the top ranked parahumans on the planet. Taylor was in her element here, coordinating the army with the simplest of thoughts.

Intermingled with this army was the real heavy hitters. Dragon's new line of combat ships, designed to be true top of the line anti-Endbringer weaponry. Whether they were capable of actually finishing the monsters was another question entirely, but Dragon was extremely proud of them. It had been ten days since Emma started undoing her restrictions, inch by inch, and she had used that time to build an army to match our own.

I, meanwhile, had a different task. I dealt with the human beings. Such as Missy, right now. "Sorry, you're not recovered enough that we can use you for this."
She looked like she wanted to cry. "But this is easier! It's across an ocean, no people to get in the way."

I offered her a smile. "Doctor's orders. You wouldn't want to make my little sister cry now, would you?"

She just looked at me for a minute.

"Umm, yeah, that sounded condescending as fuck," I admitted. "Sorry."

"It really was. You should go apologize to Clarice right now for calling her a crybaby. Because if you don't I'm going to tell on you."

"Location of attack identified, Manchester, United Kingdom. Establishing beacon."

"It'll have to wait, I'm going to be busy for a while." I closed my eyes and let myself extend into the Yggdrasil. The Earth has almost two hundred million square miles of space. My Yggdrasil covers over ninety percent of that much space on Avalon. It was my world, and right now I claimed it for my own, feeling the footsteps of the hundreds of thousands of people, the places where animals had been brought as livestock, and countless other details. Tracking all of it was actually easier than
purging a viral infection from a human being.

I felt Dragon's 'beacon', a rhythmic stream of low band radiation fired from one of her satellites. It stood out like a bright star in an otherwise empty sky, and I shifted that area, setting up a pattern of deep red triangles. Outward from that point, I found a handful of people, forming insulating walls around them. I'd have to apologize to them later for the scare, but it was better than the risks otherwise. "My part's done."

"Got it," Eric responded. The world shifted, but the only clue we had to that was the pattern beneath our feet. Otherwise, it was one mostly featureless blue-green expanse traded for another. "Damn, those practice drills are paying off."

Thanks to the Thanda cape, everything came with us. Shunting started immediately as I watched. AnticipationDeterminationEagerness. I lent my support to Taylor. For all our setbacks in the Endbringer battles, for each new conflict being a trade of blow after bloody blow where they hurt us as bad as we hurt them, my partner never once faltered before or during the fight itself. After, when we had to deal with the consequences, certainly. But she was always ready to give everything to the battle itself.

It was inspiring and beautiful in its own way. Exciting, even. I let my eyes linger a bit on Taylor's figure. Oh dammit... I set my armor to combat mode so I could hide the red creeping up face. Even so, when Taylor turned her head toward me, I had to look away. ShockedAmusedPleased. I will never be able to look her in the eyes again. I turned my dimensional viewer on, letting me see the city itself. Anything to distract myself.

I could see the glow of sunrise on the horizon, and a heavy fog blanketed the city. Way to play up the stereotype, nature. It was a stark contrast to the still skies of Avalon. Here the sunrises and sunsets came and went in minutes, and fog was a thing that happened to other people.

"If I'll attack at the break of dawn," Lisa's voice came over our coms. I recognized her costume the moment her feet hit the ground, though it was now solid black. She walked up the steps to our command center. Defiant stepped in the way. "Aww, I thought we parted on good terms. Plus there's an Endbringer fight."

"Let her through," Taylor instructed. "Emma, she's under you as an advisor until the end of the battle."

Alexandria and Eidolon had come with Lisa. Narwhal, Legend, and the members of the Guild contributing to this fight were already there, being Eric's second stop. Right now he was going to grab Vicky and Chevalier. Then it would be Crystal and what remained of her team. Dragon was coordinating everything and all defenders were being kept on Avalon for the time being.

That was the nature of the new Endbringer battles. We didn't know what kind of fights we'd face,
what tricks the Endmakers had dreamed up for this particular monster. We'd learned that even people like Zach, Alexandria, Eidolon and Lily were at risk of death in these battles, and nothing could be done about that fact. The Zerg and Dragon suits weren't any more likely to survive, but they were simply disposable.

The first sliver of light appeared over the horizon, and with it our Endbringer manifested from nowhere. For a moment, she might have been mistaken for the Simurgh reflecting the light of the sun. Same unnaturally slender build, though this one was smaller by several feet. But where that one was a woman of white, this one was a shimmer of rainbow colors.

RecognitonConcern. She's right, that is eerily reminiscent of what happened with Anima and Citrine reaction. Her wings were more like that of a dragonfly, though she had hundreds of them extending along her back and across her arms and legs. In fact, most of her features were insectile, like some kind of anthro praying mantis. We stayed there silently waiting for her first move.

She moved, and might even have been faster than Barghest. SurpriseWorryFocus. One of Dragon's suits exploded in mid air, revealing the Endbringer in the middle of the cloud of debris, covered in it like a chrysalis.

"Power identified: teleporation. Line of sight unnecessary, can bypass Class 3 anti-power shielding and Class 5 power detection technology." A stream of energy blasts fired out from the various zerg toward the Endbringer's position. The start of this was going to be a very lonely battle. On one side, two people that were an army. On the other, a monster that was designed specifically so that we could not kill it.

A crackle of rainbow colored lightning danced between the parts of the destroyed suit, deflecting or nullifying Taylor's attacks. Blades of light, sound, electricity and more exotic energy reflected into the city below, shattering glass and sending chunks of buildings to smash the street below. The fragmented suit separated, dropping EB tissue to the ground while metal, wires and various components I likely couldn't have pronounced started to wrap around the Endbringer. She extended a hand, and a stream of nanothorn mist dusted the ground below the city.

"She's a fucking Tinker," Lisa muttered. "Get all advanced tech out of there now! Leave this to the Zerg!"

Around us, Dragon's weapons shunted back to our dimension, though two more were caught by the Endbringer first.FocusDeterminationImportanceWorry. Taylor's going to be all alone out there. I placed a hand her shoulder, hitting her with a minor dose of stimulant to sharpen her mind temporarily. GratitudeSupportSafe. Without me there to maintain it, her body would crash in minutes. Together, I could keep her sharp for hours. Hopefully that was as long as we needed.

A number of the flying zerg rushed in, sending streams of flame to counter the nanothorn weapons.
A stream of laser light lanced down from above, slamming the new Endbringer into the ground. I looked up to see Legend. Right, he doesn't use one of our suits. Alexandria dived down into the mist, wielding one of her spears. She may use one of our suits, but it has no real tech outside the shunt drive and internal air supply. There really wasn't a point in building anything better, since her own durability and powers exceeded even the best of our technology.

Eidolon stayed behind. His armor was one of our better, after all. Then there was Chevalier and Victoria, Lily. All of whom were so loaded up with Tinker tech that I didn't know if they could fight without it in this kind of battle. Sveta was still capable of fighting at this level unarmed, but the girl was no more resistant to nanothorns than I was. She'd die before getting close enough to do harm.

There was an explosion in the crater, and I could only trace Alexandria's new flight path from the holes she left in the buildings she was launched through. "She's using my inertial distortion drive as a weapon," Dragon announced over the coms. Artificial or not, she sounded pissed right now. The new Endbringer launched straight up toward Legend, who moved to avoid her. I was surprised at how not surprised I was when she was able to keep up with him. Or, it seemed that way as the pair of them bolted through the streets. My vision couldn't keep up.

There was a burst of light, and the Endbringer was caught in some exotic explosion that caused the surrounding buildings to turn into dust. She crashed into the street hard enough to leave a trail of destruction and revealing the invisible shell protecting her from harm.

It bought Legend the time he needed to get clear, as Alexandria returned to the fray. Several more buildings were leveled as the Endbringer fired whatever crazy weapons she was assembling out of Dragon's suits and the other raw materials she was stealing from the environment. Alexandria was clearly the slower than the pair, but her weapon gave her the reach to get at least some glancing blows in. If the hits to this forcefield were like Dragon's and ran out of power, or like Khonsu's and simply nullified a specific amount of damage but never seemed to run out of power, I wasn't sure. Either way, Alexandria was not doing damage.

"Found a solution," Dragon informed us. "Atropos, I can use your help."

The battle had become the most one sided stalemate in history. Alexandria couldn't hit the Endbringer, it couldn't hurt her. Legend could hit, but had to spend most of his efforts to stay away from the thing's attacks. Meanwhile, the zerg and the city were being ripped to pieces in the crossfire. They just couldn't get in range to do real damage.

Wiring and electronics was ripped from the rubble and added to the Endbringer's body, forming a glowing red gauntlet on the hand that didn't have nanothorns. Another trade of blows and Alexandria was encased in ice.

"Why do they always steal my fucking tech!" Emma shouted. I didn't have the heart to tell her she activated her com on accident.
The Endringer grabbed Alexandria, and then they vanished. Moments later, it reappeared alone.

A/N- if you can't beat them, strand them in an unknown dimension that only you know how to find.
I watched silently, we all did. *Failure, Anger, Frustration.* It was obvious what happened, our shunt tech at work. Although it never should have been able to recharge that fast or work without the cage to carry the energy field. "The Endbringer can remake the tech to be better than it originally was." I didn't know if my conclusion would matter, chances were good everyone already figured it out. But I felt I needed to say it just the same. Without knowing where it abandoned Alexandria, there was nothing we could do to bring her back. Even if she was abandoned on a world we already knew about, it might take decades before we found her.

"Can you remove the tech from my armor?" I nearly had a heart attack as Eidolon appeared next to me, standing on the platform I'd raised for Taylor and I, so I could see the battle clearly while still maintaining contact with Taylor and the Yggrasil if I needed the access. "I need to be out there."

"Sure." I reached out and touched his shoulder. Like most of our suits, his was cybernetic and full of stuff I didn't understand. Stuff that somehow allowed the most powerful man on earth to be even more powerful. Allowing that Endbringer to copy it was not acceptable. I started reshaping it, forcing the top layer to fold off, taking almost all the equipment with it. The only thing left behind was the shunt drive and biological antigrav. "Be careful out there."

He nodded. "Thanks for your concern." I only narrowly avoided being dragged along with his shunt drive.

Eidolon appeared right in front of the monster. Which was strange since the Endbringer was on the ground and we were hovering above when he shunted. Fuck, whatever, don't question Eidolon's power, but this was more aggressive than I had ever expected him to be. He must have a really good power if he's trying this. He narrowly avoided a stream of energy blasts from the Endbringer, but he didn't even look like he was trying to dodge.

*Combat Thinker?* There was a stream of blasts from Legend, well above us on his side of the battlefield. Eidolon didn't try to avoid those, either, as they danced around him and cut into the Endbringer's shielding to no appreciable effect. She bolted upward to begin the same chase as before, but Eidolon simply teleported in front of her, holding out a hand. She collided with him directly, her shield seeming to do absolutely nothing to stop him. She lashed out, firing a beam point blank at his face, but an almost casual tilt of his head meant the attack missed, instead cutting a half mile long trail through the ground.

*Awe, Intimidation.* That is one crazy fucking power.

A number of the flying zerg caught up as Eidolon continued fighting against an Endbringer that nullified both Dragon and Alexandria with little effort. He didn't seem to even need to try to avoid the attacks as he moved in and struck his opponent, driving her away from Legend. He put no special effort into protecting the zerg, and each attack seemed to wipe out several of them.
I looked over to where our Tinkers seemed to be dismantling a couple of Dragon's ships and rebuilding them into something else around Lily. I had no idea what they were trying to do, but I had to hope it would be enough.

Meanwhile, Eidolon had driven his enemy into the ground hard enough that the shockwave leveled more buildings. Taylor's zerg swarmed in, attempting to do what damage they could, ripping portions of the armor off to get to the creature inside. It struck back hard, with the same exotic energy weapons that we had been using to fight them. Turns out, our zerg were far less durable than the things they were built to fight. I was struck by the flat unfairness of it all. But since when had anything in our lives ever been fair?

I focused on Taylor for a minute, calming and strengthening her. She was the one fighting this battle, if through her proxies. She was Avalon's sword and shield, while my role was to be its heart. That wasn't a cheesy emotional metaphor, either, as evidenced by our weapons of war raining down enough firepower to conquer a small nation on while I healed the stress of having to maintain greater than maximum human alertness for what was approaching half an hour, now.

One of the Gargants was launched into the air, to be narrowly avoided by Legend. A stream of energy weapons followed, and the man only survived by virtue of suddenly finding himself shunted over to Avalon.

"My apologies, Legend," Dragon's voice spoke. "You would not have been able to evade the attacks in time so I activated the emergency drive."

"That- that is fine, thank you." Legend spoke, trying to calm his breathing. "How long until I can go back."

I didn't know how much Dragon was sacrificing from her impromptu Tinker project to talk to Legend, so I cut in. "Just land on the Yggdrasil. I'll take care of recharging and shunting you back into the battle so you have another emergency shunt if you need it."

He started dropping immediately. "Okay, how long will this take?"

"Couple minutes at most," I answered. I started sending electricity up into his armor immediately. It would be a whole lot faster if we could give him one of the energy draining suits, but that would risk it mistaking him for a power source and killing him accidentally.

Eidolon continued his one man mission to make fighting this new breed of Endbringer look almost relaxing. In the time he'd been out there, he had avoided attacks as if they were being thrown by a sleepy toddler instead of something that had reaction speeds equal to or perhaps greater than Dragon. Meanwhile, dozens of Gargants and I wasn't even going to guess how many Raptors and Cats had
been destroyed in the fight, along with several miles worth of buildings and infrastructure. A cynical part of me wondered if they'd even bother rebuilding the city, or if they were just going to spend those resources on their colony world.

Legend rejoined the battle, sending a stream of attacks toward the only thing that had ever successfully outrun them as far as I knew. It twisted around, moving Eidolon between it and the energy, leaving him directly in the line of fire. There was a flash of explosive power, and when it cleared the remaining members of the Triumvirate were staring at one another in shock.

Eidolon was unscathed, still on the other side of the Endbringer's forcefield. It then fired at Eidolon's back, but he evaded the attack without even seeming to know that it was coming. 

Yeah, definitely combat Thinker power, and one that makes Victoria look low level. Legend had no such advantage, and was shunted right back over to Avalon after less than ten seconds on the field. WorryReliefFremdschämen. Yeah, that has to be the most humiliating moment in Endbringer battle history.

The Endbringer followed its own attack face first into the ground, only to be hammered by a second and third burst from the invisible energy blast Eidolon was harnessing for this fight. A crater was forming from the repeated shockwaves, so it was a powerful whatever it was.

"We're ready," Dragon finally announced. I'd almost forgotten about that plan while watching this basically one on one battle. I spared the moment to look at what they'd cooked up, which seemed like they'd piled a bunch of machine components around Lily's suit. Well, if Dragon thought it would work, I was willing to give her, of all people, the benefit of the doubt.

The armor moved, positioning itself not too far from Eidolon. While the Endbringer burst up to attempt another apparently futile attack on Eidolon. Then Lily fired her weapon. I could only have imagined the look on Eidolon's face as the Endbringer's arm flew off and struck him square in the head.

I know Taylor and I were surprised. They found a way to shunt Lily's attacks through to Bet? Okay, why the fuck did no one ever think of doing that before? I looked at Lily. Okay, maybe it has to do with the fact that she's currently wearing a small truck worth of extra machinery to make it happen.

There was a flicker of light as lightning jumped between the Endbringer and its limb, and they reattached themselves. Oh, well, that fucking sucks.

"Sorry, bitch, we planned for that one." Lily's voice gloated over the coms. A stream of disk blades fired from the weapon, crossing the dimensions and ripping the Endbringer into confetti like colored chunks that fell from the sky. Lightning danced between the pieces as it tried to force itself back together. The zerg got between the fragments, gripping them and pulling them apart from each other. It was clearly a struggle, and one that the zerg were losing.
Eidolon himself held the thing’s head, pulling it back away from the rest of the pieces. Every few moments, a flare of projectile fire annihilated another segment of struggling bodyparts completely, usually at the cost of the zerg that held it. Or at least a fair chunk of it. *We’re winning this one. The loss of resources are astonishing, but still better than what we’ve seen in fights with all the other new Endbringers.*

Then a familiar alarm went off. *DreadDenial. The Endbringer alarm?*

Dragon’s voice came over our systems. "This is not a drill or an error, Endbringer signatures have been identified." *Signatures? FearConfusion.* "Unknown Endbringers targeting Seoul and Chicago. Khonsu signature at Los Angeles. Barghest in Toronto. In the interest of brevity we have a total of fifteen targets by fifteen attackers in twelve separate nations. All of the still active Endbringers, plus a total of ten never before identified profiles. Two are targeting the CUI, which leaves us with battles on thirteen fronts."

"We've gone too far," Lisa's voice was tired, hollow. "We've pushed the Endmakers to the point where they no longer care to play their twisted game with us. They're going to keep going until there's nothing left for us to save."

"Fuck that!" Taylor shouted. "Dragon, contact the CUI and every other possible group and tell them I'll provide troops to their Endbringers if they're willing to help us with the others after theirs have been dealt with." *AnguishDisgustHate.* "D-deploy Moord Nag against Beelzebub." *She just ordered that city murdered.* "Atropos, you go after Bohu. Without Tohu running defense, it should be an easy kill for you. We'll send you from point to point after, kill as many of the fuckers as possible. I can split my forces fifteen ways and still have more per Endbringer than I had fighting the Simurgh. We can still fight back."

That's when a single word changed the future of our world.

===============

A/N- Eidolon, with a few minutes of GU’s advice managed to be a real pain in the dick for Scion. Here he’s had a month of it, and is only fighting an Endbringer. Was going nicely until it pussed out and called all its buddies.

If I were Wildbow, I'd post a bonus chapter in a few hours with exactly one word. But I'm not a troll like that.

I'm a troll in a completely different way.

Also. Shameless plug for ze girlfriend doing a fan audioread of Worm. She's done a bunch of other stuff, too.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEBxqY_rpzMsLBSmpgAbOQ
Ciara stepped through the portal. I noticed immediately that she was taller, her robes no longer needed to be carried by one of her spirits to keep them from brushing off the ground. "You look different today," I offered as a prompt for her to explain.

She looked up, and I got a brief glimpse of her face. She looked more like thirteen than eight, now, though of course her true age was still somewhere in her thirties. "I felt that I was not getting due respect and it is time to let my appearance reflect my status better."

Hmm. Maybe Minerva's little gamble paid off. Wonder if it was her own idea, or something Contessa cooked up. Then again, it may have been a joint project. Minerva has a proven talent for working with precogs in a way that improved their performance considerably. "Hopefully I'm not one of the ones you feel have disrespected you?"

She swung her now longer legs forward in a stride, animating her arms a little. Behavior that made her seem more alive, instead of her usual serene hovering method. "Do not be absurd, David. You have been nothing but a credit to your station."

A credit to my station? That brings up an interesting question.

....

"I've been wondering about the titles you grant. What they really mean. Especially after you spoke with Minerva about her Agent being inferior to, say, ourselves. Or the Empresses which she served. What do you mean by superior and inferior? Their level of strength? Or is it something more specific?"

Glaistig Uaine looked at me, and I could have sworn I saw her shrug. "They are mere approximations, High Priest. The faeries do not carry themselves in a way that mortals can imagine. They certainly have their own hierarchy, but not as humans practice the concept. All serve in harmony, and none are dissident. All commands are dealt in much the way you give commands to your hands and feet. Each has a purpose and serves that purpose faithfully. That is part of why your rebellion is doomed to failure, David. It is not a rebellion at all, but part of the game. You play the adversary because that is your role."

Right, her claims that our quest to resist Scion is simply part of his plans. It was a troubling concept, and one none of us could rule out. Contessa believed herself immune, but she wasn't perfect. The Simurgh demonstrated what an Entity could do if it so desired, and whatever the origins of the Endbringers, there was no doubt the Entities had all those abilities and almost infinitely more at their disposal. But that was an old conversation, I wanted to focus more on what our stations meant. "Yet there are ranks, some more important than others?"
"Are your eyes not more important than your fingernails, High Priest? Is your heart not more important than your toes?"

I offered a smile. "I imagine I'd rather keep all of them, if it's quite alright with you."

She laughed, and I couldn't decide if the chorus behind her made her voice beautiful or horrifying. Probably a significant amount of both. Or likely more horrifying, and I am simply getting used to her voice. "Yes, I imagine you would be quite fond of them."

"Of course they are," Glaistig Uaine said as if patiently talking down to a child.

"What about when you give them similar ranks?" I pressed. "You are the Faerie Queen, and you call Khepri the Queen Administrator. Which begs the question, which of you Queens have the greater power?"

She paused, taking a minute of thoughtful contemplation. "That is truly an interesting question, David. I am afraid I do not have a simple answer to give. As it currently stands, the girl known as Khepri is not my equal. However, the Queen Administrator is likely superior to myself. The faeries do not choose to wield their full power during the dance, all are much greater than they pretend themselves to be for the game. Some either choose, or are ordained by the True King and True Queen, to use far less of their strength than others. There are few whose majesty equals that of the Queen Administrator in her full glory."

That is interesting. She's talking about unlimited Agents. This might be extremely important. "Is there a way to convince the faeries to grant their full strength?"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "Perhaps. It is not within my own power, nor do I know which faerie can offer such blessings. Mayhap one kin to the Appraiser or the Courtesan could do such a thing. Though both of those faeries demand a significant price for their blessings. I imagine such an event as witnessing the faeries at full strength would require a grand sacrifice, though I am unsure what would be considered a worthy enough offering."

"What about me? Maybe I could release the full potential." I have all the powers, right? Is there one in my repertoire? I fished through my pool, seeking the option. I could accept not being able win the war against Scion, if I could create the one that did. That would be the same in the end. There was no shame, except I would need to ask someone else to sacrifice themselves for the cause. But I could not find a power that would allow me to delimit the Agents."
"I do not know, David. I cannot know. You are the High Priest. Your power is ordained to be greater than the rest of us. The True King of the Faeries is the only one allowed to be greater than you in stature."

I frowned. "What does that mean? That you can't kill me?"

"There are none that can kill you. It is your true power. The power of Excalibur, that no matter the foe, you are ordained to victory."

Ordained to victory? "You mean I can't lose, no matter what I do?"

"That is correct, High Priest," Ciara looked me in the eyes. "You are not allowed to be bested by any of the fae. If they believe they are likely to win, they will find a way to forfeit their victory to you. If you wish to take from them, they must yield to your will. Even those of loftiest station are supplicants before your desires, whatever those desires may be. Not merely success in battle. All things that you desire, the faeries must give to you if it is in their power to do so. You can only fail if you wish it for yourself."

Unable to lose? All my conflicts and struggles, all of my victories were simply plays being acted out? Is that what she was trying to tell me? If it were anyone else that tried to tell me this, I would have been angry. But this was Glaistig Uaine, everything we could puzzle through of her words proved she knew what she was talking about. Was my whole career as a hero was an act, a sham? There was never any possibility of my failure at any time. Except against the one enemy that truly matters.

"You say I would win any conflict, no matter how implacable the foe, except of course for Scion?" This can't be right. I've struggled before, I've had battles where I would have lost if not for my teammates fighting alongside me. There are times that I've been injured to the point of almost dying. She has to be wrong.

"Naturally the True King of the Faeries is beyond your power," Ciara answered with confidence. "He carries with him the same power of Primacy as you, and as such he may only lose if he chooses to do so. That is the other reason why your rebellion is doomed to failure, it has been ordained by the same faeries that you wish to use to fight it. Should the two of you clash, his shall prove greater in the end. I would prefer if you did not choose that path. You should remain in the grand festival as long as possible. I would miss our discussions if you left."

I hesitated for a moment. "What of the Endbringers? If I am ordained to never lose, why do they still live? Unless you're wrong and they truly are Scion's pawns, since his power is beyond mine, as you say?"

Ciara looked at me, removing her hood. A rare, but not unheard of event. Her face and jawline had changed from the almost cherubic visage I remembered from the last time. She no longer had the
roundness of childhood, instead replaced by the youthful but not childlike features of a young woman in her late teens or early twenties. "You fail to listen, High Priest. Only Scion is above you. The abominations are your inferiors, yours to demand of as you can demand of me or any other Gifted. The only reason you have not destroyed them is because you have not wished to."

.....

I do not wish to destroy them? I faced the Endbringer with the three weakest powers I could justify. A teleportation power simply to guarantee it could not escape from me. A power to sense when death is near for those around me, and a high end gravity manipulation power to give me maneuverability and offensive potential. I sensed the death of Legend several times, stepping in the way of the Endbringer. To force it to choose between killing Legend and letting me live. It could have killed me time after time. I wasn't trying very hard to avoid it.

Where I could not evade its energy weapons, it missed. It missed on purpose and pretended I was not the target. Where it charged forward or tried to claw, but I refused to get out of the way, it stopped its attacks right before they hit. Whatever Ciara's assumptions on why it couldn't kill me, the fact was absolute. The Endbringer could not kill me. And with me vulnerable to injury and in close quarters, that meant it couldn't even wound me for fear of risking my death.

I am capable of destroying the Endbringers. I have always been capable.

When Dragon's weapons shredded my opponent, I felt nothing. I was numb. Is she right about all my powers? I had demanded to know the truth, and now I knew that truth. The Endbringers were never once a threat to me. No parahuman could ever be, only Scion. And Scion was beyond my power. It was... depressing. For everything I had done, and everything I could do knowing what I was truly capable of, I was still functionally powerless.

Then the alarms sounded, announcing multiple Endbringer attacks. Fifteen more in total. Is that your new ploy, Endmakers?

I had trouble forcing myself to care as I listened to Khepri give her commands. We can't win, no matter what we do. We failed before we even began, because we were built to fail. Scion and Heiress saw to that before they gave us powers in the first place. I was proof of that because I had Heiress' copy of the power that Scion possessed that made him as immune to me as I was to the Endbringers.

=============

A/N- Plot Armor, the power. Yup.

One person guessed I would troll you guys with a PoV switch. S/he gets bragging rights.
"ENOUGH!"

Everything stopped. *Everyone.* Eidolon used a Master power.

It was a command, a plea, it was an addendum to the laws of nature. My powers didn't cease, my mind remained my own, and I could sense my bugs, whether natural or otherwise. But I couldn't do anything to use them. Every insect and zerg in my range had gone still, as if the idea of movement was impossible to them. Every person on Avalon with an insect on them, also unmoving. Even Dragon's machinery had gone completely still. I was able to watch the mostly dismantled Endbringer through hundreds of eyes. It, too had ceased struggling.

*Confusion* *Fear* *Panic*. I focused on Amelia, on our connection. I still had the hyperalertness, she was still in contact. Maybe we could work our way through this command by working off of each other. First I focused on calming her, on confidence, on trying to explain that I had a plan.*Trust* *Hope* *Agreement*. I pushed emotions into Taylia, then tried to dim the link as much as it was in my power to do. Whether Amelia saw my plan or was just imitating me, I didn't know, but I felt a rush of anger and determination, the need for freedom underlying it all. Neither of us had moved any, but if we could just keep this up, maybe we could shake this power.

Eidolon's voice made itself clear in our heads after a couple minutes of struggle. "I'm sorry. You are released." I stumbled for a second, then reached over to Amelia. We wrapped our arms around each other in relief. Everyone else had started moving as well, everywhere in my range of senses. As did all my insects. Strangely enough, my zerg were still frozen. Fortunately, so was the Endbringer.

"All the Endbringer signals are vanishing," Dragon's automated voice managed to sound surprised. "Those that weren't in position have stopped their approach, those the others have retreated from interaction with humans. I am continuing to monitor the situation.

Eidolon shunted over and, somehow, Alexandria was standing next to him when he appeared on our side. *He's the one with answers.* I hopped off our platform, followed right after by Amelia. A slow fall to where they stood. To our right, Chevalier and Victoria also approached, along with a number of others. To our left, our collection of Thinkers.

Alexandria looked down at the Endbringer head that Eidolon still carried. "Uh... Eidolon? What the fuck is going on right now?"

He hesitated for a moment while most of us just stood there or started gathering around. He, too, was looking at the decapitated but still very much alive Endbringer. "I was tired. I'm sick of the game so I'm ending it."
Evidently Alexandria was just as confused as we were. "Eidolon, what are you talking about?"

Most of us were silently forming up in a semicircle around the two of them. We wanted whatever answers Eidolon had to give. Alexandria had, by accident or intent, became the mouthpiece for the whole group.

At least, until Lisa had to stick her nose in it as always. "I think I can explain. But, umm, there are some people here who we might not to know some of the more important secrets involved in this mess. I can't give a good exposition without airing out some dirty laundry and I'm not so sure how my new employers' SuspicionDisgust. 'would feel about me blabbing after, like, less than a full week on the job. They might not give me my first paycheck."

Eidolon regarded Lisa for a minute. "It's fine, Crow. As long as you keep it solely to my secrets, I'll take full responsibility."

There was a loud laugh from the back. "You're calling yourself Crow?! Oh, god, I'll never run out of jokes! Hey, Alexandria, do you enjoy apologizing a lot?" He paused for half a second. I felt a shift as a new bug was spontaneously born of the Yggdrasil. PermissionAnticipation.

"Oh, come on! No one got that? No one at all? It's a reference to a folk saying about ea- gah!" There was a series of coughs and then a sound like a sack of flour dropped on the ground. "How do you even have grasshoppers out here?" SatisfactionAmusement.

I couldn't help but smile, though I kept my voice as neutral as possible. "My apologies... Crow," I didn't meant to hesitate, but her new name was yet another reminder of everything that had changed between us. "Please continue."

Lisa nodded. "Well, in the interest of both brevity and shock value, we're all familiar with how Cauldron proved it could walk in and out of the Birdcage with less effort than the average person needs to change their socks. And they hired the Faerie Queen as a consultant."

Right, that clandestine meeting where Amelia met her biological father. I reached over and gripped my partner's hand.

"Well, the part that no one here was supposed to know about but at least half of us already do, is that Eidolon is a member of Cauldron," Lisa paused for a beat. "The thing that no one here knows is that Eidolon likes sticking it in the crazy while I watch."
"Crow, when I said you could explain things, it was with the implied caveat that you wouldn't make up stuff that never happened."

Lisa sighed theatrically. "Fiiine. The pair of them have regular consultations where Eidolon asks a bunch of questions Cauldron wants to know about the way powers work and all kinds of other stuff. A few days ago, she let it slip that Eidolon has a really special power that's fucking bullshit as hell. Apparently, he has a power that makes it so bad things can't happen to him unless he wants them to. At least when it comes to superpowers. Attacks that would actually hurt him will miss, he's immune to Thinkers because he wants a modicum of privacy in his life. Today he tested that theory by trying to throw a match with the Endbringer while it did the same to him. Long story short, this causes all the other Endbringers to break. And then he took control of them because bullshit."

"Wait a second," Zach spoke up. I felt another grasshopper forming nearby. "You're saying he has actual plot armor as an actual superpower? Jesus Christ, you should have called yourself Mary Sue."

Chevalier stepped forward. "As much as I have to thank you for stopping the Endbringers, is it safe that you're still carrying the head of one of them?"

Eidolon paused for a second. "You have a point." The head simply vanished. "I told it to shunt over to... the same place I'm storing the others for now. Don't worry, they're in a place where they can't cause harm to anyone."

ImpressedWorried. She's right, that Endbringer alone is fucking insane. Plus all the others. Dinah said something about one of the factions in the final battle not yet existing. We already confirmed it wasn't Dragon. We asked her a lot of questions about the risks that we'd free her and she'd start her own faction or much worse. But now... fuck. It was Eidolon. It was Eidolon and Glaistig Uaine and fifteen fucking Endbringers. Compared to that, would even a fully actualized Dragon be able to compete?

Chevalier waited a moment, and I couldn't help but note the body language as Victoria stepped forward, just a little in front of the man right before her spoke up. "You do realize I can't stay silent about this information, right? I'm obligated to inform the PRT of your involvement with Cauldron and Glaistig Uaine. For what it's worth, I'm sorry about it, and I'm sure no one will hold it against you, considering it resulted in the end of the Endbringer attacks."

Oh god damn it. FearDefensive. No wonder Vicky took a combat stance. If this pisses Eidolon off, we're all f**ked.

Eidolon stood there, regarding the much taller man in silence. "No, that's fine. I expected there to be a backlash from the moment I selected the power I did. I killed a lot of people with it. I felt some of
them die. Dragon, can you tell me what this cost?" His voice was hollow sounding, like he simply
didn't care what happened next.

He's right, this was a Master effect that hit every living thing on the world. That's a big fucking deal.
"Go ahead, Dragon, answer the question."

There was a momentary pause. "A definitive answer will take time. The emergency bands have
thousands of car and other vehicle accidents. One commercial airliner crashed during takeoff.
Numerous cases of interrupted medical procedures. A number of drownings at beaches or in pools. It
will likely take weeks before all the numbers can be confirmed, but I'd estimate between twenty and
thirty thousand lives based upon initial reports. We are fortunate that there were no significant
accidents at nuclear power plants or weapons facilities."

"In short, they'll want me to be put in the cage by the end of this. There won't be a lot of choice.
Cooperate and go peacefully, or receive a kill order. Don't worry, I won't put up a fight, but I'd like
to take care of a few things before I go. Get my house in order, as it were."

Chevalier hesitated, glancing at the rest of us before speaking. "You can't believe they'd do that!
You're a hero, and you just saved the world from the Endbringers."

Lisa actually laughed. "Aren't the youth supposed to be the idealists and adults the cynics? This
wasn't just the local area that got effected. Every man, woman and child, plus all their housepets and
basically everything else, were caught by this. You remember how it felt, being paralyzed for a
couple minutes, unable to even blink. Imagine how much worse that was for the people who couldn't
figure out what happened or why. China's going to be screaming for fucking blood, villains will join
that bandwagon once they change their pants. And even the hero groups are going to be pretty
nervous about this."

Chevalier stood there quietly, we all did. She was right, this was huge. We knew it covered all of
Avalon and Bet. The colony worlds were functionally an extension of Bet, their being hit wouldn't
change anything. But did it extend to Aleph? Or worse, Dallet or Gimmel? The other populated
human worlds that we hadn't discovered yet? At least Aleph had talked with us enough to know the
basics. There were worlds that were entirely defenseless. Who might thing this was an act of God in
the literal sense. Civilizations have collapsed over smaller things than this.

"But you don't have to worry about all that," Lisa added cheerfully. "I have a totally awesome plan
that's going to fix all of this. It'll be perfect!"

RegretDread. Oh god damn it.

====================
A/N- Check the chapter number.
I carefully hid my surprise as a quietly attractive woman walked through the gates of my cell block, entirely without escort or fear. It was rare enough for any woman to enter the male side, or for that matter a man to go to the woman’s side. Things tended to get messy, both ways. It was rarer still for anyone I didn’t recognize to be here. We hadn’t had a new captive in some time. For a second, I wondered if it were Valefor, but he never appeared to me as a redhead before. Maybe Teacher’s trying a new variant of his power? I’ll have to stay on guard.

I didn’t expect this to be a betrayal, not like this. But after whatever it was that woke me from my sleep by paralyzing me and everyone else in our cell block for almost two full minutes, I wasn’t willing to rule it out. And if initial rumors were true, it happened to everyone in the cage at the same time, including Teacher. We still had no answers for why.

"I am afraid you might be lost, miss." I put just a bit of threat into my voice. I did not harm women, nor did I allow my men to do so without damn good reason, but I wasn’t averse to threatening them if necessary. Right now, frightening her into leaving might be the only way to save her life.

To add to matters, Cinderhands stepped up beside me. He was a good second in command and I could rely on his help. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lung stepped out from the individual cell he was relaxing in to lean against the bars. He watched the woman while licking his lips like the dog he was. He may try to claim her, and I’m not sure I can stop him.

"I do not believe I am," a choir of voices stated with utter certainty. Cinderhands stepped back in surprise, and Lung’s eyes widened in fear. So even he knows to fear her. I barely kept my composure, but now I knew who she was and how she got here unscathed. But the answer came with more questions.

Later I would have to find out if she killed any of my men. Right now I had to play good host, and maybe learn what she was up to. "My apologies, Faerie Queen, I’m afraid I did not recognize you."

She strode in with a confidence that was almost boredom. "That is understandable. After all, your vision is limited to sight alone. You cannot see that our bodies are mere garments to be changed as we see fit."

I wasn’t too happy with being talked down to in front of the men like this. Amongst the other cell leaders was one thing, all of us knew to tread carefully around her. There was no shame when everyone did it. Here in my sanctum was another thing entirely. I did not control this situation, and I needed to change that, or at least create the illusion that I did. There has to be a way to do this.

I regarded the woman in front of me, what I learned of her over our years of conversations in court. She had chosen the form of a child for the last few decades, and now she’s taken that of a
woman. A woman with flowery delusions and no real experience with adults and their behaviors. Okay, I can work with that.

I hope.

I met her eyes, and smiled gently at her. Reaching out slowly, I cupped her hand in both of mine. One wrong move at this point and I would be dead before I even knew that I made a mistake. "And I must say that you wear it quite well, Faerie Queen." I then lifted her hand up, kissing the back of her fingers in traditional fashion.

I could still see Lung in the corner of my eye, watching. He didn't even bother to hide the look of surprise on his face. Similar scenes would be playing out on behind me. I was openly flirting with Glaistig Uaine, and by the end of the day everyone in the Cage would know it. After this, it would be a long time before anyone challenged me. Assuming, of course, that I survive. That's an important part of the plan.

She raised her other hand up to her chest and smiled warmly. "My, how forward of you. But I should warn you that I have already selected the suitor worthy of my hand. I shall forgive this behavior, so long as you do not continue it." She seemed pleased for someone who told me no. But she didn't quite sell the act. There was no blush to her face, her hand didn't squeeze mine. She was acting the role of a lady being flattered by a gentleman, but she didn't feel it.

Which suits me just fine. Her suitor is more than welcome to keep her. I released her hand, glad that my soul didn't go with it. "Such a pity." I kept my relief out of my body language, but I was glad I didn't have to follow through. I wasn't sure I could suppress my self preservation instincts long enough to successfully bed Glaistig Uaine. Her voice brought the wrong kind of chills to my spine. "Perhaps we should speak of business, then? So that I might distract myself from the temptation."

"Very well," she agreed. "I wish to use one of your televisions to view the news."

I allowed myself to look confused at that request. If you never showed any obvious tells, people could get quite good at spotting the subtle ones. "Do you not have one of your own?" Hmm, this could be interesting. The Faerie Queen didn't bother much with caring for her people, but if they were that hard up for supplies, there might be an opportunity here.

"Yes, but this concerns you as well. The abominations have been been brought to heel. And while the Royal Artisan and the Queen Administrator are not responsible for this feat, they shall share in its glory nonetheless."

Her title for Amelia. "I see," I responded with a measured calm. I did not like the idea of Glaistig Uaine taking any interest in my daughter or her fiancée. She had a history of targeting the most powerful parahumans, such as Grey Boy. One of the few world famous capes, for his supposed invulnerability and terrifying power. At least, until she claimed him as her toy. Wait. "Did you just
say the Endbringers have been destroyed? All of them?"

"I did not." Glaistig walked further into my territory without concern for actually answering my question. She had apparently lost all interest in what I had to say, instead more concerned with whatever she wanted to watch. It was too early in the morning for television. Besides, like most of the Birdcage, my people were too busy trying to figure out what happened to care about television right now.

I walked to the nearest TV. It was the largest and most visible to the rest of my cell block. Here we'd get the largest audience. Whatever this was that had the Faerie Queen so riled up was bound to draw an audience. Now that she was calm and pleasant, I wanted that audience. "Is there any channel in particular?" I pressed the button and heard the familiar 'pop' and static noise of the television turning on. We'd need to wait a minute before it warmed up enough for us to see the screen.

I watched as Lung and Cinderhands approached. The former took a seat of his own, leaving a fairly wide birth between himself where Glaistig Uaine claimed her spot in the front. Cinderhands preferred to remain standing. It was, in theory, a show of loyalty and protectiveness. It was a hollow gesture, it would crumple if tested, not unlike my own actions had earlier. He was not willing to die for me. But as long as he gave the rest of the men the impression that he would, it made him valuable.

"It does not matter. Every channel will be showing it."

I wondered how she would even know all of this, but opted to say nothing. Admitting ignorance served no purpose, and attempting to draw useful information from this madwoman was more than I had the patience to attempt right now. And it turns out, she was right about it not mattering. The current channel was set to a station that usually dealt in classic movies, mainly westerns. There were a few fans of the genre in my block, and they tended to pool their viewing allotments together. Today, it showed only the news.

The notations at the bottom of the screen kindly informed me the view was of the United Nations building in Geneva. The cameras had a beautiful view of a building that vaguely reminded me of a large courthouse. In view of the shot stood the flags of dozens of countries, most of which I didn’t recognize at all. It was a stage that had been calculated for the purposes of inspiration, possibly even by Thinkers, though it probably wasn't necessary. The sun was low in the sky, casting long dramatic shadows across the area.

"At what is already being referred to as the End of the End Proclamation," a man's voice informed us. They weren't bothering to show the faces of the anchors or reporters, instead focusing solely on the view. "There are speculations that this will also explain the sudden short term paralysis that occurred earlier today, and may be related to the newest Endbringer's powers."

"They like to talk a lot for people that don't know anything," Lung criticized.
"Such is the way of the world." *And of my relationship with this man I tolerate roaming my halls.* "Men who don't know often like to talk a great deal, and those who do know tend to stay silent on the issue. Speaking of would you care to tell us what all of this is about, Faerie Queen?"

She looked at me, her face serene as always. "Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough."

=============

A/N- Lung's only shocked because he thought Marquis was his waifu.
The anchor stopped when Eidolon and others started taking the stage. Chevalier was right behind Eidolon, followed by Legend and Alexandria. Then the Empresses of Avalon, still in their living battle armor. The stuff was insane, responding to their thoughts and giving them several powers, any combination of two of which would count as a high level parahuman in its own right. It was clearly stripped down, Khepri lacking her wings and Amelia without the extra layers of living armor to use her power through.

Even without the extra equipment, my daughter and her girlfriend looked magnificent. They were the only ones on stage brave enough to bare their faces to the world, and that made them stand out in a world of masks. It was either brilliant or foolish, I wasn't sure yet which. The pair moved in perfect harmony with each other, as if they practiced marching drills in their spare time. For all I know, they do. I have no idea what my daughter's life is like when the cameras are gone.

Followed them was Dragon and Narwhal. I allowed myself a smirk that this supposedly live broadcast still had censorship blurring for Narwhal. A real pity, that. Taking some film of the woman might have made for good trade amongst the men. After them came a number of European heroes whose names I didn't know. There was none of the usual showmanship of such things, and the looks of the heroes were solemn, a mood that carried quickly over the crowd. It was immediately clear this announcement would not be a celebration.

Eidolon took the podium first. Of almost everyone up there, he seemed to have the least stage presence. If you didn't know what he was capable of, you wouldn't give him a second glance in a meeting.

"To the people of the world, first let me apologize. Yes, it is true that I was responsible for the event that halted everyone. All the life lost in that event, I cannot begin to apologize for that loss. It is true, it neutralized a simultaneous attack by fifteen Endbringers. But the price was high, likely over twenty thousand died thanks to the use of this power. I'd like to take a minute to mourn the dead."

True to his word, he waited that minute, his head bowed in silent contemplation. There was a lot of that, though I doubted many people were focused on the dead. Most Endbringer battles cost at least than many lives. The majority took more, and the truly bad ones ones made this look trivial. The majority would be focused on the smaller number. Fifteen. That was the detail most viewers would focus on. The death toll from that could have made New Delhi look tame.

"So, how scary is Eidolon in a fight?" Cinderhands asked casually. "Y’know, beyond the part where he can freeze us all and take over the Endbringers like it's nothing."

No one was talking on screen, and they weren't using a camera angle that let me watch Amelia, so I spared a moment to talk. "Wouldn't know, never fought him. You aren't thinking of breaking out and
testing your powers out on him, are you?

He laughed perhaps a little too loudly. "Nah, I'm way too fond of breathing. Besides, what happens if someone succeeds? No one wants to be the guy that sends the Endbringers on a rampage again."

"A wise decision. The High Priest is beyond the power of any other, even my own."

I had been watching the video, as they showed closeups of the faces of the various heroes. Amelia and Khepri got a bit more attention to most, in part due to their fame, but more likely because their faces unmasked when not in combat mode. It made them more visible, more interesting, than the others. I still found myself more than a little relieved to know that the Faerie Queen wouldn't be able to kill Eidolon. I may even have said something, but then Eidolon started speaking again.

"The power that cost those lives was a last ditch effort, the only way to stop them all before millions were lost in the battle. I can only pray that's a comfort to those who were harmed or lost loved ones in this tragedy. To the obvious question, yes, I've always known I could use that power. I never accessed it, for reasons I believe are obvious. Up until recently I did not know it could work against the Endbringers. They had always been immune to those sorts of powers before, and I had no reason to believe mine would be any different. I only recently discovered otherwise, one of many things I've learned since announcing my semi-retirement."

"I wish the next question were so simple to answer." Eidolon continued, looking out over the crowd. I couldn't decide if his face concealing cowel added or detracted from the effect. "What happens next? The Endbringers staggeringly powerful weapons. Any one of them as dangerous as the nuclear arsenals of the world. The mere threat of their use is an act of war. And now they are controlled by a single human being. No man should be trusted with such incredible power. Nor should any individual nation."

"Sounds like one hell of a threat, if you read between the lines," Cinderhands muttered.

I nodded my agreement. "Smart of him really. Now everyone's going to be asking how they deal with this. Bet you any amount of money they've already got a plan. I wouldn't be surprised to learn you already know what it is, Faerie Queen." I honestly doubted it, unless she had a precog in her collection that I didn't know about. *Then again, she might have a precog.* She didn't respond to my comment.

Eidolon decided he'd given us enough time to consider the situation. "The obvious solution would be to destroy them. I believe that would be a grave error. To date, every new Endbringer has evolved to be immune to the weapons that killed their predecessors. It is certain that the next Endbringer will be immune to the power I used to control these fifteen. That is why we must keep them, they are our
Glaistig Uaine chuckled. "The High Priest is clever. He knows there shall be no more abominations, yet needs the threat to be credible even to the eyes of the oracles, so he's calling the True King an Endbringer. True in the literal sense, enough to fool those who would comb his words for deceptions."

I looked over at the woman. What is she talking about? I put together that Eidolon was lying about the Endbringers. Assuming she's right, of course. She was still insane, it was possible that all of this was simply a construct of her imagination. She isn't the local wise woman or such tripe, I reminded myself. She's a lunatic who survives only because she's too powerful for anyone to argue with. Were she a weaker parahuman, she'd have been enslaved or destroyed by this point.

"With that responsibility resting on my shoulders, I make an announcement." Eidolon continued his speech. "It is with a heavy heart that I am renouncing both my position in the Protectorate and my status as a citizen of the United States of America. I cannot allow the Endbringers to be attached to any single organization or nation. Instead, I offer myself as a citizen of the whole world, of every world. I will work with the United Nations, and all governments that act with the wellbeing of their people in mind. What is done with the Endbringers in the future will be a decision made by the whole world."

Huh, interesting move. Something of a mirror of what my Amelia did. By making himself and his collection of Endbringers politically neutral, he's making himself far more inviting for alliances. A free agent, as it were. Attacking him on political grounds will be harder for most nations, since that alienates a potential ally. It wouldn't protect him from everyone, but certainly it would work on some. Intimidation and pack mentality will take care of the rest.

Eidolon stepped back, letting Chevalier take the podium. "Thank you, Eidolon. First, let me start by saying that I am sorry to lose you. I believe the entire Protectorate agrees with that sentiment." To his right, Legend and Alexandria nodded nodded. They stepped a little closer to their former comrade in arms.

It was striking, the difference between them. Even ignoring the solid foot of height difference Chevalier had on Eidolon, the Protectorate leader carried the mantle of command confidently, while Eidolon was merely adequate, carried by power instead of charisma. "Second, as sad as we are to lose such a fine hero, we understand the reasons. The Endbringers must be held responsibly, studied, and with any luck neutralized forever. Avalon has volunteered to provide a location to contain them and study them safely and help deploy them against any future Endbringers. We are accepting the offer, for the time being."

He turned to look toward the teenage girls commanding the the now second most powerful force in the world. The nodded in unison, but didn't step forward to add to the discussion, leaving the talking
to Chevalier. "We ask for patience and optimism during this time of uncertainty and transition. The Endbringers have been stopped, hopefully forever, and with them gone we can once again truly hope for the future."

That is a question. What will the future hold now that the Endbringers are neutralized. My hope that they'd eventually be desperate enough to reach into the Birdcage for allies to fight them was dashed. I will likely never see my daughter in person again in my life.

Now that the video feed had started focusing on other people, Glaistig Uaine stood, having lost interest. "While I am here, I have a trinket to deliver to you, on behalf of the Royal Artisan and the Grand Archivist."

She held out a small box, about the size to contain a fancy necklace. Where she hid it on her person until now, I could not begin to guess, nor did I want to. I took it gently from her hand. "Thank you, Faerie Queen. You are welcome here any time. But, please, send a messenger first, so I have time to prepare better hospitality for your visit. I wouldn't want to get a reputation for taking poor care of my guests."

"Fear not, Marquis, you have been more than adequate." She left as confidently as she entered, but now the eyes that followed her were fearful instead of predatory. Some of them might have been considering something less than gentlemanly before. Hopefully they'd regard this as a less. And that reminds me.

"Cinderhands, take a head count of our men. I'd like to know if she hurt any of them."

"And if she has? Will there be retaliation?"

"Chances are high they provoked her. If nothing else, failure to learn who she was before starting trouble means they deserved whatever fate they got. Spread that sentiment amongst the men if you have to. Glaistig Uaine was entirely civil while here, I have no reason to believe she would have harmed my people unless they did something to provoke her."

"Okay, you're right. But you may need to tell them yourself."

I nodded. He was right, if she had caused damage and we did nothing, it made me look weak. Bad for morale. It would all depend on any damage she may have caused. Meanwhile, I had a package from my daughter. I opened it carefully, trying to look casual. Inside there was only a rolled up piece of paper. And what looked like a peach seed.

============
Ch 372- Lily

Japan is a really strange place. I knew this going in, but I never quite knew just how strange things around here were compared to pretty much anywhere in Europe. The meeting with the royal family was incredibly brief and barely warranted a mention. The child that was Emperor of Japan didn't even actually speak to me in person, simply proclaiming to the reporters involved that I was his 'adoptive sister' and that was the end of the subject.

The fact that I wasted my brain upload on something as simple as weapons I'll never use was not lost on me. A native's understanding of this culture would come in really handy right about now.

After that, Clotho and I got to enjoy a ride with Japan's Prime Minister, the legal and official ruler of the nation. While the Emperor was a useful political status symbol, he had no real power in the way the country was managed, and he could give me a symbolic princesshood that meant nothing, either.

So now we waved to the crowds while being paraded to the next destination while the Prime Minister pointed out various modern attractions and ancient landmarks that covered Tokyo. There wasn't a lot of time to talk about anything important, so I spent most of my time waving to those who'd come out to see the spectacle and maybe show off my new armor a little.

The Prime Minister noticed something off with Clotho. <Is something wrong?>

The response made me more than a little embarrassed. <Oh, umm, not really. I'm just surprised at how many people live so close together around here. I've never seen anything like it.>

The man chuckled, though it seemed somewhat forced. I fought the urge to cringe. Really? You're not supposed to ask questions like that. <One of the hazards to an island nation. I am led to understand that America is just as strange to our immigrants.>

My coronation slash welcome party slash recognition as a national hero was all blended into a single event alongside the creation of Japan's dimensional portals. Both of them. The first was scheduled to actually go to a world found for Japan to colonize. The other, not too far away all considered, would directly access Avalon.

It was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard of, and for good reason. But they wanted it to happen anyway. Who was I to argue?

The Japanese portal was created first, and was entirely boring. It's amazing how something like cutting a hole through reality starts to become mundane after you've done it over a hundred times. And much like the more progressive parts of Europe, Japan didn't need my particular brand of pressure for social equality. Elle did her thing, building a massive doorway, thirty feet tall and twice as wide. The limit of what we could successfully manage and designed to allow train traffic through
To add to the theatrics, I hovered above the crowd and showed off Azrael in action. The Azrael V7 was designed in part to appeal to the Japanese audience. More mechanical, and more streamline to display and accentuate what technically counted as my figure. Which was, fortunately, better than most women around here.

Yet the armor was still tastefully designed. It wouldn't be considered sexualized by any of the more traditionalist people around here. Unless they were crazy enough to believe women shouldn't be allowed to wear pants. Or, I suppose, if you had a fetish for high tech living battle armor made from the bodies of dead super monsters, in which case... *Wait a second... Oh god, Azrael is pretty much the living embodiment of Japan's wet dreams. Also, it's being worn by a lesbian. No wonder I was so popular in Japan even before killing Leviathan and revealing my identity.*

Putting that out of my mind, I positioned myself high enough to be seen by all the spectators and fired a shot into Labyrinth's construct, cutting the hole through reality that Elle had outlined for me. The re-

I was blinded by a stream of energy that streaked past and struck the bay, sending a pillar of steam and fire into the air.

"Holy fuck!" I exclaimed in a moment of panic. *That was way closer than I expected. No, I realized. Direct hit, I was just emergency shunted before it actually got to me.*

I immediately dropped to the ground to make contact with Yggdrasil and recharge the batteries. Some of the other suits had the ability to support multiple shunt drives, but mine wasn't one of them.

"They didn't waste any time," Khepri muttered angrily. "Fuck, you'd think they'd have waited until after the Endslayer was gone, like we were expecting. Clotho, are you okay over there?"

"Yeah, I'm fine as long as Lily is."

Dragon spoke up. "They must be relying on a Thinker, someone who realized Atropos couldn't maintain her invulnerability effect while firing her weapons. They wanted to kill her while she was vulnerable. And now they're attempting to capture the portal. I'm already preparing the new set of questions for Dinah, but we now know their Thinkers are strong enough to at least partially negate her abilities. Or perhaps the Yangban power sharing mechanics is equivalent to a power interaction."

Victoria's voice came over the com. "I want it to be my turn!"

"Not until we know where the biggest threat is coming from," Taylor commanded. "Stay in position."
Everyone else, you have your orders. Let's see if we can win this without using the big weapons. Contrary to popular opinion, I want to avoid starting a war over this.

A group of what I assumed were Yangban appeared near Faultline and their crew. Some kind of teleportation power, or some kind of stranger power that can beat both Victoria and Dragon. They fired a bunch of shots at the our team with some kind of presumably Tinker guns.

Light warped around the group as distance shifted, causing many of the Yangban to wind up shooting themselves. The first of our decoys. It didn't take a lot to make Missy look like Elle, despite her being a couple years older. A fact that she was really not happy with.

The dimensional viewer went dark, cutting off my sight in the area. *Same kind of tech the Elite were using.*

"They're trying to cut off our backup and surround us!" Lachesis exclaimed. "We're fighting back, but they have us beat on numbers and there's some kind of weird time effect that lets them heal themselves if hurt. Like Alabaster."

Khepri reacted first. "Fuck! We're doing what we can to get your reinforcements. Keep fighting, fall back if you have to. They're not here to attack civilians, they want to claim this a portal of their own. Probably one of those dimensional blockers, but they'll need to take it from the other side if they want to hold on to it. Don't let them get through with it. Victoria, do your thing."

Vicky laughed. "Operation: About Damn Time has begun."

Gaea's voice was up next. "Remember, defending the portal is our highest priority. If they start to retreat, let them go."

"Yeah, yeah. You know I've got this, sis."

With the shunt drives blocked, I couldn't go back through to join the fight. I simply watched and waited. Fucking frustrating as hell. I wanted to be out there cracking some skulls instead of letting other people handle it.

Osiris hovered over to me. "Here, spare charge." He put a hand on my armor's shoulder and I watched the battery power spike. "When I named myself after a god of death, I was sorta expecting to be used for badass shit on the front lines, not buffing."

I looked at him. "Hey, some of us have powers that let us kill everything. You have the one that lets you infinitely reuse one shot items. I'd trade you powers, except mine are badass as hell. Maybe next time we can switch it up and you can use that acid thing again."
He shrugged. "Eh, it's cool. In other news, do you think those dumbasses have any idea what's about to happen to them?"

"Well, Dragon did say something about them having at least one Thinker powerful enough to put Dinah off her game. So that means they have someone ranks at least a seven, probably an eight or higher."

"Really? That's pretty high up there."

I shrugged. "Well, they do have a billion people. It stands to reason they'd have at least one or two really good powers on their list."

He laughed. "Oh man, they are so completely fucked."

I laughed as well. "Harder than you when Theo's girlfriends go off on a date without him." Relying on Thinkers never did work for anyone. Sure, they were nice to have, but in Thinker on Thinker battles especially, things tended to go wrong. And if you couldn't adapt to changing circumstances, you'd lose. Thinkers had a really hard time adapting when faced with opponents smart enough to counter them.

"Nah, he usually lets me top."

"Actually, I was referring to how you couldn't win a video game against him if you bribed him to throw the match."

"Ooooh, shots fucking fired."

"And unlike you, I can actually hit something."

We stood there waiting for a bit longer before Zach spoke up again. "Y'know, as much fun as it is to razz on each other, I kinda miss having Minerva around. It was always so much fun when we could come up with something that worked on her."

"Challenges are always more fun. It's the nature of the game. A battle of the wits against an unarmed opponent is just boring."

"Yeah, probably," Zach agreed.
At that point, the block on our viewer vanished, and we got treated to watching the Yangban group rushed through the portal, through the high intensity energy bubble that Sabah had waiting for them. Their clothing disintegrated moments after they came across, and then the ground popped with a violent burst of light and sound.

By the time things cleared enough for us to see, there were thirty naked Yangban members all piled atop one another, stunned by the tazing effect. The Yggdrasil and a bunch of bugs started crawling over them, doing... whatever it was that our glorious leaders had cooked up to contain them. It was no doubt cooked up by some combination of Dragon and Bonesaw, so I was confident it'd work.

I would have felt worse for them if the fuckers hadn't tried to kill me a few minutes ago. "Know what, I lied. Sometimes humiliating stupid people is hilarious. Well, it's been nice chatting, but I have to go back now."

"Take care, and pick me up some souvenirs. I hear you can get panties fr-"

I shunted over before he could finish. Whatever he was about to say, my faith in humanity would probably be better off not hearing it. Now to run through the process of telling a bunch of lies about how the portal wasn't set to the right planet when they rushed through, so the invaders could easily be anywhere, or even nowhere. Technically true, they could. Instead they were in custody on Avalon.

Forty members of the Yangban captured, forty powers they'd no longer have access to. And in order to do anything about it, they'd have to admit these people were theirs and prove we even had them. Not likely to happen on either count. The important part, however, was trying to figure out how they built a device that could completely cut a dimension off from Bet. And maybe how to get around it.

I was also going to make Theo change out of Sabah's costume as soon as possible. It was fucking weird and humiliating.

=============

A/N- Crossdressing Theo. That is all.
Ambassadors from seventeen different countries were shunted over to Avalon. Of those, six got sick after the trip. We waited politely while they, and most of the others, recovered from the experience. Meanwhile, some of our employees got to work handing out the mouthwash and cleaning up the messes that didn't happen on the Yggdrasil.

I stepped forward. "My apologies. The shunt drives aren't as bad as they used to be, but there's still a lot to be desired." *That's why we told you not to eat anything for twenty four hours before the trip.*

The Swiss ambassador was one of the ones that handled it best. He'd also experienced the trip a few times before and was an astronaut back in the 70s, so there wasn't much surprise. Generally a nice guy, in health that most people half his age would envy, and used to getting his way. His smile may have reminded me a little of Lisa's as he looked at some of his fellows. <Such are the perils of new technology. Speaking of, I hope you don't mind me asking, but news about the attack on Japan's portal earlier today is already circulating. They were saying a number of the attackers managed to get through the portal.>

That didn't take long. Taylor looked at the others, most of them had recovered enough to listen in. "Confidentially, Ambassador Blosch. Yes, at least thirty individuals got through. However, our people hadn't finished aligning the portals when the attack happened. They could be anywhere, or even functionally nowhere. It's certain that they're not on Bet or Nippon." Technically true. They could be anywhere. They are carefully contained on Avalon while their equipment gets looked over by more than half of our Tinkers.

<Please, call me Olivier,> he said with a laugh. It had become something of a running gag of his to get us to refer to him by his first name. We never did. <And while we're talking confidentially... is this like what happened to Earth Khyber?>

He means 'did they get through and block another world off from Bet'. "Sorry, we can't say. Classified information, and not tactical data regarding the Endbringers. I can inform you that Japan has a colony world now, as well as the portal to Avalon. Both are well defended against future attacks of this nature. It won't happen again."

A world. Not a lie, but misleading. *The original Khyber portal was switched, why couldn't we do the same for the Nippon portal? Save that we didn't need to.*

We led the various individuals to our transport ship. The thing was a masterpiece of high speed design. We could go from the UN shunt locations in Geneva or New York to our research base at our North Pole in a matter of minutes without even feeling the acceleration. Of course, all it could do was fly really really fast, it was not a useful weapon by any standard. The inside was more like a limousine than an airplane, giving us a chance to all face one another and talk.
Ambassador Bosch sighed, perhaps a little theatrically. <So sad that people would go to such lengths instead of cooperating and waiting patiently for their own. Do you have any idea who the attackers were?>

It was a question they already knew the answer to, even if nobody had proof. Or did have proof, we only needed to admit we took captives. That wasn't happening. A shadow war was one thing, but if we pressed it would mean a possible World War with China. Parahuman violence aside, this was a nation that had access to a world we couldn't reach, shunt tech, and nuclear fucking weapons in addition to Tinker WMDs that they'd already proven willing to use. There would be no winners in that war.

Patience. Concentration. Taylor was figuring out her angle of approach, so I kept the conversation going while she waited. "Our people are working on it alongside Japan's security force. It could take weeks before we know anything for certain. For now, we know know that their tactics are similar enough that we're fairly certain it was the same organization responsible for the last two attacks."

Ambassador Bolsch shook his head. <A pity. I had hoped that they'd settle for Khyber, and one would think that after they failed to take Kumari they'd stop. The optimist in me would like to believe they've learned their lesson now.>

Taylor decided she was ready, or maybe she just needed that prompt. "They didn't even wait a full week after the Endbringers were defeated before the first attack, I can't imagine they'll stop now. Which brings us to the actual purpose of this visit. We've thoroughly studied the UN's requests for transparency, and for the most part we're willing to capitulate. Full transparency of everything we learn about the weapons, where they come from, and what they're capable of."

A strikingly attractive woman spoke up next. According to my armor's recognition tech, she was Kaitlin Butler, the USA's new representative. I wasn't sure if the woman was there for the purpose of using her looks as a means of political manipulation, but it didn't strike me as a coincidence that the United States selected the young looking leggy brunette bombshell to be their representative to talk to the lesbian couple. "And you're willing to keep a full oversight team on site permanently?"

"As long as they're willing to submit to our lie detection tech and answer a series of background questions," Taylor agreed. "This is sensitive information that we cannot afford to fall into the wrong hands." Or so we like to pretend. The truth is, we hadn't managed to learn anything of real value that we didn't already know.

The ship shuddered as it landed. The only time we even felt movement during the entire trip. I stood as the door slid open, and a gust of cool air rushed into the vessel. I exited first and waited as the others filed out. Taylor would be the last to leave. The various men and women stopped talking to gawk at the ten superweapons that stood in plain view. These things were legendary terrors, though since most didn't even have a chance to do anything, they didn't have the psychological impact the first three would, but they were still Endbringers standing calmly in a row.
I gave them a moment to get their eyeful. "We have others inside the building." I led them in, to the first chamber where we had Khonsu hovering. Dragon's voice came over the coms. "Our current tests are still mainly on the capabilities of the Endbringers we already know. We're not yet willing to test the unknown Endbringers, for fear of the dangers they might unleash. This location is for studying Khonsu's time warping and teleportation powers, with the hope of learning where the Endbringers hide when dormant. The ultimate goal being to access said location, then capture or kill the Endmakers for the many crimes they're guilty of." And to find a way into Scion's protected dimension. Thus far, the Endbringers haven't proven capable of breaking that barrier.

We went forward to the rocklike Endbringer that we hadn't named yet. "We're calling this one Golem," I stated. "We've determine that it was the most durable new Endbringer, likely even tougher than Behemoth. Our people are testing various energy weapons against him."

Dragon took over my explanation. "The Endbringers are all constructed of a crystal material that gets progressively denser as you go deeper into their bodies. The deeper portions are so dense that they shouldn't be physically possible as we understand the universe. We suspect a trick involving the folding of dimensions, similar but different from what is seen in our shunt tech or the space folding that brought you from Switzerland to the North Pole in a matter of moments. We have observed that certain energy attacks, if set to the right frequency, will do significantly more damage to an Endbringer's body than other attacks."

The American Ambassador smiled. She has a really nice smile. "You're looking for a magic bullet."

JealousTerritorial. "That's our hope. Having mass producible weapons that can actually hurt Endbringers would go a long way to making them less dangerous. A step toward real peace instead of mere fear of reprisal, and a way to deal with any future Endbringers that might be immune to Eidolon's tactic."

Also, maybe, those weapons will work against Scion. His body was made out of something, after all. It would make sense if it was the same stuff as Endbringers. Weapons to hurt them might hurt him.

<It has been over a month since the Endbringers were stopped. Do you still fear there might be more?> I had to use the suit's computer to identify her as well. Lina Koller, Austria's representative.

It was a valid question, one that more people would start asking the longer we went without an Endbringer attack. It wouldn't be long before we faced accusations that we were keeping the Endbringers alive out of a desire to use them as a threat.

Taylor stopped to look back at her. "Dinah Alcott's predictions of the end of the world remain. The odds are lower now than they've ever been, but are still over seventy percent. If not a new Endbringer, what would it be? And if it's not an Endbringer, then having them around to help fight the threat can only help in the long run."
That silenced them, for now at least. It wouldn't last forever. I started the walk to the next section where the rainbow Endbringer was contained. Her body was covered in fragments of machinery that provided a sort of modesty for her.

"This is Quetzalcoatl," Dragon pronounced the name better than I could hope to.

<The Tinker Endbringer, correct?> Our Austrian ambassador asked. She seemed to want to be in charge right now.

"Not strictly speaking. As it turns out, she's a Shaker whose power augments technology, not a Tinker. She absorbs machinery into herself and grants it greater abilities than it should otherwise be capable of. She can use the elements collected from ordinary toasters and microwave ovens to create energy weapons. Cryo weapons from air conditioners. Lasers from flashlights. But once you remove that equipment from her control, it doesn't work anymore. Nor is it possible to get anything useful from reverse engineering. The weapons become nothing more than broken appliances. The same premise applies to Tinker tech."

Taylor took a slow breath. ApprehensionFocus. "Which brings us to our next point of discussion. We're planning to ask the UN for permission to use her to access the original Earth Khyber. We're confident she has the power to do so, and taking that world back from the terrorists would make it clear their plans will fail even if they succeed in the initial invasion, and dissuade others who might imitate them."

Ambassador Butler spoke up, sounding less than happy by the suggestion. Guess she is more than a pretty face. "You're talking about deploying the Endbringers, only a month after having them."

AnnoyanceFrustration. "Only as a transport system to shunt more traditional forces over to the planet." In as much as our weaponry could be called 'traditional' by anyone. "Not to actually use in the fight. We're aware of the significance of what we're asking for. That's why we'll go through the official channels. We will provide a comprehensive list of the entire plan when we finalize our proposition."

<That is still a very serious request,> Bolsch cautioned. <I know we are mere representatives and advisors, not policy makers, but I would have to recommend against using them for any less than a world ending threat. To allow mere terrorists to force you to use the Endbringers in any fashion would be a victory for them, regardless of the outcome.>

Taylor deflated a little. "You're probably right. We can't justify this against a simple terrorist organization."

Everyone here already knows it's not terrorists responsible for these attacks. It won't take long for
China to hear rumors of what we plan to do.

I started walking again, leading them deeper into the facility. We had so many things to show them, like where the oversight members would live and our security measures. Not that we needed much security. We had indirect command of fifteen Endbringers. They were the security.

================

A/N- first of many time skips that'll be happening in quick succession, here. Guess I'll update that timeline now.

I got up and immediately took a shower, wondering when exactly it was that I got used to bathing with the Yggdrasil’s water supply. I had to admit, the minor adjustments Clarice had Amelia put together for the water’s chemical content did wonders for my hair. And hers, too. Like a conditioner built right into the shower. After drying, I briefly glanced at the underlayer for my armor. These days, I tended to wear that instead of normal clothes. I reached over, then stopped.

*Eh, screw it, this is a day that calls for something special, even if I’d rather skip it. Normal clothing it is, then.*

I stepped out in the main area to where my friends and family were gathered to give me a ‘surprise’. *Happy birthday!*

I smiled sheepishly, noting the individuals in the room. Amelia, naturally. Then Dad, Missy, Theo, Zach and Emma. I noted a conspicuous absence of Lisa, or for that matter any member of Amelia’s family. *Sorry I ruined the s-"

"SURPRISE!" Everyone shouted at once, including one voice from behind that I did not know was there.

"GAH!!!" I stumbled forward as the weight of a body slammed into to be from behind. Arms and legs wrapped around my torso in an inhumanly tight hug. *AmusementSuccess.*

"What the hell, Clarice!"

She dropped off and ran into the room. "See, told you it’d work! Now pay up." The girl smiled so broadly I half expected the top of her head to fall off as Theo and Missy each kissed one of her cheeks.

Amelia reached over and ruffled her hair. "Okay, fine, you win. You can stay up an extra hour. But I better not hear anything about you being groggy and messing up your work tomorrow."

I stood there, forcing my heartbeat down to something less than that of a hummingbird. I glared at Amelia, she pretended to look ashamed, even pouting a little. Neither of us meant any of it. I started walking toward the group, slowly beginning to smile. "Okay, you got me. I admit it. But just so it's clear, I will have my revenge. I won't tell you what that revenge is going to be, but chances are high that hornets will be involved."
Amelia hugged me, then let me go so Dad could have his turn. "Happy seventeenth birthday, kiddo."

"Just one more to go before we finally get to see you in a dress!" Zach cheered. "Or are you going to be one of those boring lesbians who wear a suit on the wedding day? Because that is totally lame and you should set a better example for your planet."

Wedding? What- Oh fuck, that's right, The Wedding. ConcernApprehensionHurt. No! Oops. I looked over at Amelia. "I just realized we have made exactly zero plans for that. It's always been 'Endbringer' this and 'founding your own nation planet' that. Not enough time to do all the things we have to do, let alone the ones we want."

ReliefGratitudeLove. Amelia smiled nervously. "Well, now that the Endbringers are dealt with, we'll have some spare time. Weddings can't be that hard to figure out compared to a war every month and interplanetary politics, right?"

Dad put his hand on Amelia's shoulder. He'd never removed the other from mine. "Oh girls, I am so sorry."

ConcernSuspicion. Well, that's ominous. "Dad, don't tease like that. We'll be fine and you know it. We don't even need a big ceremony. Immediate friends and family only. I guess we'll have to worry about some cameras, because people are going to want to watch. Yeah, definitely sticking to a small ceremony. Let everyone see that you can have a proper wedding without spending absurd amounts of money." AgreementSupport.

Amelia leaned into me and hugged my arm. "Yeah, I think I like that idea. Something small, quiet, doesn't take a million years to finish. None of that celebrity guest stuff. Vicky's going to hate every second of it."

I smiled down at her. "That's a benefit I hadn't considered."

"You just want it over so you can get to the honeymoon faster." PleasedCaughtEmbarrassed. "Now are you planning on dress or tux? Inquiring minds want to know. Remember, you can wear a tux any time you want, but your wedding dress is a once in a lifetime thing. Or Amelia will kill you."

AmusedAgreement. Amelia's eyes narrowed a little. "Death do us part, right?"

"Not even that." I kissed her forehead and I could feel her happiness as she pulled close to me. "Okay, I think you've sold me on the dress."

A child's voice cut in. "Plus one hundred and fifty relationship points. Also a spillover of twenty
points for everyone who has a significant other in the room."

Theo sighed. "Zach, remind me to find a way to thank you for introducing Clarice to dating sims. No, seriously, I mean that. It's like she comes with an instruction manual."

Missy laughed. "It's true, she's basically a living, breathing window into the female psyche. I'm learning things that I never knew I didn't know." She patted Clarice on the head. "Your quirks make you adorable."

Dad gave me a sidelong glance, as if to ask what was going on with them. I simply shrugged, no sense in trying to explain that situation. Dad was too old to really get it anyway. Especially not when trying to talk through gesturing.

Clarice beamed. "That's only worth five points because you've already used it three times this week."

"See. Mix up the compliments and they work better. I did not know it worked that way. But now that it's been said out loud, it all seems so obvious."

*Realization* *Playfulness*. "Hey, why is it Taylor you're asking about dresses? Maybe I'd like to be the one wearing a tux!"

I squeezed her. "No you don't. Everyone knows it. You're going to need like eighteen people and an antigrav device to help carry your dress."

"Yeah, I know." She nuzzled against my shoulder for a moment, then stepped away to look up at me. "So enough being distracted by stuff that has to wait at least another year." *Anticipation* *Happiness*. "Let's talk birthday presents!"

Oh boy, this'll be fun. What are they even going to be able to get me? "Okay, we can do that. What are you getting me?"

She kept smiling. "You get half ownership of a continent."

"How does that count as a present? Don't I already have that."

She scoffed. "It's my eldritch abomination of a weed that made this world habitable. That means I own all of it. You can have half of one continent as a birthday present. I hear good things about Australia. Granted, ours has a significant lack of deadly bugs and spiders, but I'm sure normal Australia will be more than happy to let you take a few species home with you."
"This is going to become a pattern, isn't it? Every year I'm going to get half a continent."

"Pretty much. I have all your birthday presents planned until you're forty four. Isn't that so thoughtful of me? Also, I have something to give you later, but it's not nearly as impressive as half a continent."

"Is it the birthday spankings? Also. That's what he said!"

"Zach, my father is in the room with us."

Dad laughed. "No, that's okay, kiddo. Giving the bosses shit is the hallmark of a healthy work environment, so I'm not allowed to murder him for stupid comments. Unless you start dating him. In which case I'll have to get a few buddies together, tie him up in a burlap sack, and take turns beating him with a tire iron."

"I'll bring the tire iron!" Theo exclaimed.

"Dude, whose side are you on?"

"You mean you can't tell?"


Huh, when was it that this became my life? A year ago today I wouldn't have been able to imagine this. Back then, Amelia and I were still just friends, and not even close friends at that. Now we were very much in love. I thought Lisa was the only person that really had my back. Now she wasn't even at my birthday party. We hadn't even fully cemented our political position in Brockton Bay a year ago. And the fact that we had Riley living in the same building as us actually gave me honest to goodness nightmares. As opposed to her jumping on my back to surprise me and it being funny in retrospect.

"I think it's my turn now," Emma offered. Oh, right, and my opinions of Emma a year ago. "I kinda started... well, Zach's ever so subtle questions probably gave it away, but I've designed a wedding dress for you."

SurpriseInterest. I smiled a little. "I think that might be considered Amelia's present more than mine."

"Oh, good, because I drew one up for her, too," Emma pulled up a couple rolled up pieces of poster board. "But you can only look at your own. It's a law."
DisappointmentAnticipation. "I'm pretty sure we make the laws around here." Amelia complained.

Emma tutted like some kind of upper class nanny. "Anticipation and hearts growing fonder. You can get a good look at them later, when they're piled up next to your bed. Uh, sorry about that Mister Hebert."

Dad just put his hand over his face. "It's fine, Emma."

I unfolded the drawing and learned something I didn't know about Emma. She had the same art skills that she did when we were in gradeschool together. From what I could tell, it was supposed to be blue, and backless. And then a train designed like a really long white cape. Maybe. It's also possible I was looking at it upside down and there was supposed to be some kind of parasol. "It's... nice?"

"I promise it'll look amazing by the time I'm done. Honest."

Clarice peaked over Amelia's shoulder. "Umm. I'll help."

Amelia nodded hurriedly. "Yeah, that'd probably be best." She slid her poster back over to Emma and I followed right after.

Emma collected them back. "All of you suck."

Missy spoke up next. "Clarice and I went shopping and found you some nice summer clothes. We made Theo pay for them."

They're all multimillionaires and they still made him... wait, how do they even know my size? Oh, wait. Stupid question. "Thanks, I'm sure they're gorgeous." I opened them up and looked at a few. They were nice, in the darker blues that I had become my default replacement for black. "I might have to stop wearing my underarmor so much."

AnticipationDesire. I glanced over at Amelia. Okay, definitely less armor, more dressup.

Dad lifted up a box, looking more than a little awkward in the process, as if he didn't want to do this. Or at least not in front of everyone. I opened it, to find a series of photographs. Pictures of Mom when she was younger. Mom and Dad together. "After our home was destroyed, I started making some phone calls. Annette and I were both only children, but we had aunts and uncles, some cousins. I got in contact with all of them to find the old family photos and wedding albums. This is everything I can fine. Most of them are copies, you don't have to worry I have a full set of my own. And there's a CD with everything."
I just looked at them silently while he rambled. I'd started to forget what she looked like. The images started to blur, and I realized it was me about to cry. I set down the box and wrapped my arms around my dad. He held on to me. "It's perfect. Thank you so much."

===================

A/N- Thanks to Research Fail on my part... well, this chapter should have been a few earlier. See, I forgot that Taylor's birthday was in June, not July. So now this is officially a flashback chapter when it wasn't originally planned to be.

Lisa leaned back and smiled. "So, let's have our introductions. I'm Crow, most of you already think you know me."

She pointed at Number Man. "Huh, so Riley's your goddaughter. You must be so proud." It actually took me a moment to connect the dots of Lisa's logic. Judging by Number Man's reaction, he took even longer than I did.

He was not happy about it, either, but Lisa had already moved on, turning toward Legend. "Holy shit, you're actually a decent human being! The fuck are you doing around people like us? Oh, and your hubby's a good guy, but the whole talk about getting a pet cat? Don't do it. Sorry for intruding into your personal life."

Shift of the shoulder toward me when she said sorry. Apologizing to me as well. They'd probably pick up on how she wasn't distinguishing herself as better, though I had to wonder if any caught the significance that she including me as well. The apology is for her honesty on the subject for saying I'm not a good person. I lowered my eyes a little, an equivalent to the nod of the head. She's right, we're not good people, there's nothing for her to apologize for.

Legend shifted uncomfortably. "I'd probably say something about it being okay, but don't do it again. But it's really not okay and we both know you're not going to stop, it's too ingrained in your personality and the way your Agent influences your mind."

I glanced toward Legend as he started to speak, then looked back toward Lisa. I lowered my hand just a little, advising her to tone it down. She was clearly overcompensating for the lack of Agent influence, trying too hard to sell her new persona. Making some very powerful individuals unhappy.

She smiled at Eidolon. "You're still basically immune to my powers. That whole 'Primacy' thing is really fucking nice. Wish I had it. Heads I win, Tails everyone else loses. And everyone's so hung up on your flashy powers when that's the one that's really godlike. Man, if I had that, I'd be riding an Endbringer to work just for the fun of it. Of course, it does sorta take the challenge out of, well, everything."

Eidolon flinched. "I presume you have a point to all of this." Of everyone in the room, he was the least able to hide his emotions. My Thinker powers didn't work on him, and now I knew why, but I still had human intelligence, and he still had human behaviors, and that's all it really took.

Lisa shrugged halfheartedly, which was obviously calculated. Eidolon wouldn't be her target,
Contessa on the other hand... Testing the most powerful Thinker in the room, possibly in every world, is exactly the sort of thing that she would do. "Not entirely sure yet, but there's more introductions to be made!"

She waved at me. "Hi, Mom!" I allowed myself to cringe enough that Number Man picked up on it. He'd relay that information to the others. To say I couldn't believe Lisa had picked up on that whole 'daughter' thing and ran with it wasn't true. I very much believed it. It was just awkward. We knew it would fit their models, both general psychological and precognitive. Lisa clearly had a deep seated need for emotional support and a history of acting out to get attention. Something I could use that to control her and get her on board with our goals.

She turned toward Contessa and Doctor mother and her skin paled. *She can't fake a reaction that easily, this is real.* "Oh holy fuck. I thought you people had a fucking plan for what you're doing!"

Doctor Mother sat forward, moving in front of Contessa. It was a genuine act of caring for the younger woman. "We do have a plan!"

Lisa stood, slamming her hands on the desk. The anger was faked, she was pretending to be emotional to throw off the Thinkers. To throw off Contessa's power. "No you don't. You have a fucking Passenger doing all the work. A Passenger that, I remind you, is just as tied to conflict generation as mine is. One that follows the same Primacy rules. It's going to select the course of action that causes the most destruction. And while we're on the subject, the thing that was using it first managed to run face first into a planet so hard that a baseline human with a cheap knife could kill it. From where I'm sitting, that's not something I want to rely on."

Contessa shifted, preparing to act. If it came to a fight between the two of them, Lisa stood no chance. Her battle suit would keep her from being an easy fight for Contessa, but Lisa would still lose. I'd have to intervene.

Lisa met her eyes. "You could kill me, but we both know I'm too valuable to waste. You're looking for the best way to attack me psychologically, but I'm betting you're getting a bunch of Error messages, right? Yeah, I thought so. And you don't know why. It's because I'm a Third Trigger."

Doctor Mother lifted her hand, waving Contessa back. "There is no such thing as a Third Trigger. And there is no way you can know the things you claim to know."

I again fought the urge to laugh. *Doctor Mother is trying to manipulate Lisa into giving away useful information we don't have. And doesn't realize Lisa wants to be 'goaded' into giving that information.* Lisa was threading the needle between being immune to precog manipulation, but still vulnerable to human manipulation. She was using her postcognitive powers to slide herself into a position not that different from Eidolon's.

Lisa stepped back from the table. "Not in the sense of granting more powers, no. Third Triggers can
see past the memory Taboos and ignore some of the behavior alterations that powers plug into their users. They also tend to fuck with precognition and other thinkers. Pantheon's identified three separate Third Triggers and have our suspicions about a few others out there. Amelia, Glaistig Uaine and I are confirmed. Eidolon's Primacy power grants him the equivalent, lucky bastard that he is."

....

Number Man approached me. "Alexandria, a word if you please?"

I looked at him, but he was unreadable as usual. In a way, I had to wonder. *If he and I were a little more willing to express our emotions, would we have had a power interaction the way Lisa and I did?* The answer was irrelevant, either way. "This is about Crow, I presume?"

"Do you believe you can control her? She's proven to be rather capricious in the past. Playing 'mother figure' can't last forever."

"Speaking from experience?"

"Perhaps a little."

I nodded to the man. "You're probably right. If it were merely that, I doubt it would work. However, she does legitimately want Scion stopped, and has been working toward that goal since the moment she knew of the threat."

"And why she would choose you over her best friend and replacement sibling?"

*Because as far as she's concerned, that friend is dead. She Triggered over that suicide as well. I'm afraid I can only speculate. Perhaps her parents were a greater emotional loss to her? Or perhaps she feels a need to fix problems, and as Khepri is clearly in an enthusiastic relationship with Gaea right now. I understand that is the problem with being the sort of person who wants to save other people. If you ever succeed, they don't need you anymore. Have you given a thought to what you'll do in a world without Scion?"

"That is an interesting conundrum. Does that imply that Crow thinks you're the type of person who needs to be 'saved'?"

I allowed a bit of a smile to come to my face. "Perhaps I do, at that. Or perhaps she's hoping to find someone to save her. Isn't that another common paradox, those who try to save others are the ones who most desire to be saved?"
He regarded the smile, knowing it was calculated. "Which brings us back to your role as a mother."

"And how it can't last? That is true. Don't all children grow up and move away from the nest, eventually?" I turned and walked away.

I focused on the event, forcing it to be as emotionally impactful as possible. I'd need Lisa to see it. I could tell her to look, but without a beacon, she wouldn't know the when or where to look.

There was no doubt my companions would run through our reactions with a fine toothed comb. Both myself and Lisa. If we were to make this work, the pair of us needed to make it look believable. It did help that our relationship really wasn't that different from a mother and her pain in the ass teenage daughter. I couldn't expect Number Man or Contessa to understand it, but Eidolon, Legend and Doctor Mother knew what families looked like, at least. They'd think they understood, I could imagine a few snide comments from Legend about how it turns out I'm actually human after all.

That was fine, as long as they never caught on to our power interaction and everything that implied.

....

Lisa was last to the meeting, as usual. "Hey, Fortuna, how's the future looking?"

Contessa waited a moment, then took the time to answer. *Holy crap, she's speaking for a reason we know can't be part of her power.* "Details get murkier every day. I can no longer rely on any model that extends more than a few days."

Lisa smiled, she'd taken to not wearing her mask around us. "I'm not sure how your power works, exactly, but Dinah managed to compensate pretty well by phrasing her powers with the assumption that Amelia and Taylor would remain together. For whatever reason, all precog powers seem to assume they'll break up in a week or two at the most."

She shifted her foot and glanced in my direction for just a moment. Asking me yet again if I'm sure about this path and lying to them about the power interactions. I stay resolute. She understands, as always. She draws her arms together slightly, the ghost of a hug. I return the gesture.

Contessa nodded and spoke hesitantly. "Thank you?"

"So what's the news with the Golden Asshole?"

I took the prompt. "Crow, please control the language. This is polite company, after all." My annoyance wasn't faked. She was embarrassing me, and at least some of the people at this table could
Lisa sat down in her chair, even managing to look a little chastised. "Sorry, I'll try better. But he's still an asshole."

Meanwhile, she folded her hands together, taking the top pointer finger and sliding it down between the hands, to scratch the ball of her thumb. It was a vaguely obscene gesture, not so much her telling a dirty joke as pointing out that there were plenty of such jokes to be made about this. Again, I forced myself to not laugh. Number Man gave me a sidelong glance, suspicious. Pretending not to notice wouldn't have worked, so I simply shrugged slightly at him.

Doctor Mother regarded Lisa for a moment. "We followed your suggestion. It turns out, Scion was in fact paused by the same effect Eidolon used to control the Endbringers. He's vulnerable to that power."

Lisa smiled. "Correction. Was vulnerable. I'm sure he's already made whatever tweak it was necessary to guarantee it won't happen again."

Eidolon deflated. "You mean I had a chance to win this, and I failed. Is that the Primacy effect that Glaistig Uaine talked about? When it came to an opportunity to kill Scion I simply didn't think of it in time because my Agent won't let me?"

Lisa shook her head. "No. Well, maybe it did keep you from thinking of the idea. Don't have enough information to say for certain about that. What I'm certain of is that it wouldn't have succeeded if you tried. What would you do? Order him to kill himself? Okay, let's say that even works and he doesn't just kill you for trying. Scion kills himself, and then about ten seconds later a new Scion pops into existence. That body is a fake, just an Avatar like Genesis or Siberian. Killing it means nothing. Sure, maybe if you do it enough times, the real Scion will eventually die of power loss. But you can't do that with a single power, no matter what it is. Not without finding a way into Scion's home dimension."

"Which is Pantheon's goal," Contessa spoke. She probably didn't figure that out, just wanted to use her power to say what Lisa was hinting at.

"Pretty much. Have to admit, it'd be really nice if it works."

Number Man finally broke his silence. "You don't believe it will work. That's why you're here."

Lisa shrugged. "It's not that I don't believe it will work. I honestly don't know one way or another. What I do know is that I won't be able to help make it work. My power isn't one that works for that. They have Dragon and their power interactions to harness in an attempt to reach Scion. I'm no longer a relevant piece of their game plan. Your plans, on the other hand, are exactly my speed. I can make
some actual progress for a change.”

=================

A/N- A few days in the life of mommy Rebecca.
ImpatienceConcern. Amelia leaned closer to me. "So, how is he doing in there?"

I shrugged. Normally I wouldn't admit to listening in on something like a top secret United Nations meeting. Especially not while in the building that they were being held. But this wasn't all that normal. There was nothing we wouldn't be informed of all of it in a few minutes anyway. Frankly, we could have sat in and watched if we liked, but we were afraid if we were in the room they might feel pressured to give us what we were asking for, and that would be bad. "Surprisingly, it's going way better than we expected."

TrepidationConfusion. "You mean they're going to give us permission to use the Endbringers for this?"

"Not even a little bit. They went with reminding us that the Endbringers are the most dangerous weapon of mass destruction ever made, and they cannot justify deploying them against terrorists. The loss of a single colony that was replaced within a week isn't significant enough to warrant that kind of action. Pretty much word for word."

ReliefSuccess. Amelia hid her smile well. "So, what did they compromise with?"

I patted her knee, then stood up. "Better if you hear it from him." I turned a moment before the doors opened. The three cameras trained on us, and the however many Thinkers they had viewing the film, could use the reminder that my senses extended to everywhere nearby. There were very few environments that could support human life, but not insects. And strangely enough, Avalon came close to being one of them. Or maybe I just wanted to enjoy the nostalgia of my powers before Amelia came along to upgrade me to a functional demigod.

Powers which got nearly got me burned to death by one of the lowest of upper tier parahumans, I remembered quickly. Know what? Fuck the very concept of nostalgia. I dipped into the link hard, drawing in Amelia's emotions like a deep breath of spring air. ConfusionAmusementCuriousity. Sorry, nothing be that significant, I'll tell you later. RelaxationConcernPatience.

The man we were waiting on bowed after walking over to us. Amelia and I curtsied slightly. InterestHope. "So, how did things go, Doctor Sato?"

Doctor Sato was our official representative with the United Nations, now. A refugee from Kyushu, and a former Japanese diplomat. He then got a similar career with England before we came along. He wore traditionalism, both Japanese and British, with pride. He was damn good at his job and believed in doing it to the best of his ability.
The part where he, like everyone, knew China was responsible for the attacks on the portals only made him that much more determined. Apparently the CUI had a longer history of abuses against Japan than we'd realized. Like a practice of raiding it and several of its other neighbors for parahumans to brainwash into the Yangban. "Unfortunately, they were not willing to consider the Endbringers an option, even if deployed only as a transportation device to a colony world which likely had no civilian life on it."

**Acceptance** | **Annoyance**
--- | ---
Amelia drew herself up to a military stance. Overcompensating for the 'no slouching in front of the international community' rule that our behavior coaches hammered into us. "Well, that is unfortunate."

Doctor Sato nodded. "I do have some good news. They were more willing to issue a sanction classifying the attackers as an international terrorist organization. With all legal rights, or virtual lack thereof, that such a thing implies. Including pledges from most members of the international community to aid in the tracking or removal of suspected members."

**Confusion** | **Concern**
--- | ---
"Who didn't sign? Why?"

"France has taken a dim view of your nation not explicitly banning the death penalty. It and a handful of other nations are holding out until you issue an official ban on the practice. In spite of assurances about your admittedly unusual legal system and the severity necessary for such a punishment to be exacted."

**Severity**, indeed. *Only mass murder and treason or espionage meet that requirement.*

**Annoyance** | **Disappointment**
--- | ---
I glanced at Amelia. "I suppose it can't be helped. We can always come put that on the table for later negotiations, I suppose. If we feel we need it then."

Doctor Sato kept the neutral face he'd probably spent decades training. "With that exception, you are preauthorized to respond in full to any attempt to attack any more portals. With exception to the anti-Endbringer weaponry. Those are still considered an unacceptable force deployment that requires permission from the nation you play to deploy them on. I might have be able to push for permission to deploy the 'cat' models if you are willing to accept other conditions."

I almost laughed. I didn't know which part of that was more absurd. The idea that our zerg were sitting in the same class of military action as sending battleships or aircraft carriers. Or the idea that these people believed those were a more dangerous weapon than my bugs. "I wouldn't be opposed to learning what concessions they need, but the anti-Endbringer weapons were meant to fight Endbringers. They're meant to end wars, not track down criminals, even terrorists."

**Victory** | **Anticipation**
--- | ---
Oh crap, if Amelia talks now, she'll blow it. I put my hand on her shoulder. "Thank you. I know it's not everything that we were asking for, but it is an excellent start. Your efforts are greatly appreciated."
He bowed again. <You honor me.>

I wasn't sure why he switched to his native language to say that, probably some cultural thing. But by the look in his eyes told me he suspected something. I smiled at him, and gave a small nod. He was working for us and he hated the CUI even more than we did. I didn't mind hinting that there was more to our plans than we were willing to share with him. "We should get going. One would think that we'd have a chance to relax with the Endbringers disabled, but it seems we're busier than ever."

....

Gathering our forces for the mission was actually pretty relaxing. Clarice, Missy, Theo and Zach were already part of our main team, so they rode along with us. Lily had a pretty easy direct access line with the transit shuttles we were starting to build. *I really need to remember to thank Trevor for that design.* Vicky was the last one to arrive, but then she didn't have access to a shuttlecraft, or live on Avalon.

Victoria clapped her hands together and rubbed them as together as if trying to warm them. "So, what's this I hear about you needing my awesome awesomeness for a super top secret mission that you couldn't tell us about until the middle of my romantic evening?"

"Yeah," Lily spoke up. "I'm kinda curious, myself. You've been all hush hush about this since right after Khyber."

I nodded, deciding to start with the actual command layout. "Okay. Victoria, you're officially working as a member of a mercenary company hired to support Avalon's forces in a direct strike on a terrorist organization. Fifty grand for the mission itself, another five thousand dollars per target you disable during."

Victoria looked at me like I grew a second head. "Avalon's forces? Mercenary company? No offense, guys, but I think you spent too long around military types and forgot how to talk like people."

Zach handed her a piece of paper. "Here, this is everything you need to know about the battle plan."

She unfolded the paper. "It just says 'Victoria smash', with an exclamation point. And a stick figure with boobs punching another stick figure in the head. And is all the red ink supposed to be blood spatter?"

Zach nodded slowly. "I trust you appreciate the brilliance of this masterwork in military strategy."
Victoria's expression was completely unreadable. She daintily folded the paper and lowered her hand to her hip, dropping the so-called brilliant strategy into the storage compartment on her armor. "Best. Plan. Ever. Of all time."

AmusementAgreement. I even cracked a smile despite myself. Okay, Zach, you win this time.

Lily looked back toward me. "So basically you're going to swarm them with enough bugs to kill a herd of elephants, and we're supposed to break anything that's still standing when you're done?"

"Even better, we get to beat the shit out of racist assholes who commit war crimes against their own people," Zach added. "So they're basically the same thing as Nazis, only Asian. Think of it as Lung having Kaisers love child. That you get to punch."

Vicky walked in closer to us. "So this is what they mean by tears of joy. I always thought that was just a figure of speech." In her case, it was a figure of speech, since there were definitely no tears.

AmusementAgreement. Amelia smiled broadly. "There, now you can't say your sister never gives you anything nice for your birthday."

Vicky glared at Amelia and put her hands on her hips. "Last year you gave me a stupid Maggie Holt book. And you didn't get me anything for my birthday this year."

Amelia pouted. "That was the last one in the series."

Vicky crossed her arms. "Which would probably mean more to me if I read any of the others."

DefensiveAnnoyed. "And I totally got you something this year! I upgraded your boyfriend! Granted, it was a little bit late, but that part is totally not my fault. And you've have thanked me for it at least twice a week since the two of you started dating."

A dreamy smile crept over Vicky's face. "Hee hee. I remember. Speaking of..." she leaned in and whispered something to Amelia.

SurpriseEmbarrassment. "No! Sorry, there's just no way I can do that for you. Sorry."

"But I do it to myself all the time!"

Amelia sighed slowly. "Okay, you're right, I can do it. But not without reworking his genetic code in unacceptably dangerous ways. There's no safe way for me to make him taste like chocolate. Now
can we get back to talking about the job?"

Vicky shrugged and leaned back. "Sure."

I sighed a little and then focused. "Alright, here's the full plan..."

"Ooh! Don't forget to tell them the name!"

"Zach, we don't do mission names. And even if we did, there's no way in hell we'd call it Operation: Chink in the Armor."

================

A/N- Reader values litmus test! Which is reacted to most strongly? The god awful pun, or the casual racism?

Or the implications that Vicky can and has made herself taste like chocolate.
I leaned over to whisper to Zach. "Dude. Love child between Kaiser and Lung? That's the best you could come up with?"

"Hey, it's totally true. You know it and I know it and everyone else knows it." Zach whispered back. "No one is that obsessed with dick waving competitions unless they want to be the ones judging. By sense of touch. You're just mad because now you have mental images of your father enjoying the manjina."

I shook my head. "No, I've gotten very good at not forming mental images when you talk. And just so we're clear, if I do ever think of something like that, you'll know. Because I'll be shoving about a hundred gallons of liquid metal down your throat right after."

Zach raised his eyebrow and looked at me silently until I realized what I just said. "Y'know, I'd say something, but there's really nothing I can do that'll top that. Besides, your girlfriends are in earshot and they're a lot scarier than you."

Khepri tapped her boot against the metal hull of our vessel. "Okay, ladies, I suggest you take a deep breath, because this part's going to suck."

"Just like- OWW!"

I reached over and gave Clarice a pat on the leg. "As always, thank you."

Her smile was radiant. "Anything you need, Theo."

Missy rolled her eyes, but was smiling as well. "Will you two quit flirting? It's my turn."

Clarice leaned over and put her head on Missy's shoulder, complete with a smile and bat of her eyes. "Anything for you, too."

I anticipated Zach's next comment when we were interrupted by the face covers on our armor sealing over. A shimmer of what could only be compared to a chain of extremely tiny red fireworks started in the middle of the ship, each line of light stopping in a few inches to give way to another burst of red light that spread out even further. We were watching the most powerful shunt drive ever made building up power.

Dragon's voice came over the com systems. "Activating dimensional piercing drive in five seconds."
Chaining suit drives to main reaction. Hopefully that will make the trip easier on all of you."

The world shimmered and shook as we were pulled from here, to nowhere, and then to a different version of the same somewhere. Normally the process is nearly instant, faster than a natural human can react to. But the larger shunt fields made the process take longer and feel worse. We were currently using the largest shunt field ever created.

We appeared on Earth Khyber A and I folded immediately, bringing my legs up and desperately trying to fight the nausea, and wondering how bad it would have been without the drug that Clarice gave us.

Zach disintegrated next to me, reforming in a standing position. Luck bastard. Victoria seemed fine, and so did Taylor... err, Khepri, it's mission time. Think of her as the commanding officer that she is. The rest of us were struggling to recover.

"Fuck! They've got automated drones already tracking the ship! Tapping emergency power and going in hot!" There was a whir of noise our ship twisted hard to the right, which didn't do anyone's motion sickness any favors at all.

Zach rushed over to the glowing panels, smacking a pair of them. The ship shook as Taylor changed the angle.

....

"I suppose this can be called a black ops mission. Our goals are threefold. First is the ship itself. This vessel contains a very important piece of tech. Our own dimensional barricade device, reverse engineered from the one we captured from the Yangban. Once we break through, it gets activated to keep them from calling reinforcements or retreating back to wherever they plan to retreat to. The problem is this machine is heavy, bulky, and a power hog. The ship we're using barely has the resources to power it and fly at a respectable speed. There are three fifty pound backup batteries exposed here." Khepri slapped her hand against the bright orange plastic. "We'll need them. Zach, your job is to cycle between them as needed. They're designed to cycle power. Simply copy the ones that are green and press the light above them. Red are in use, don't touch them. Replace when it turns black. The AI will handle the rest."

Zach nodded. "Healbot hax strike again."

....

The viewscreens activated, giving us a look at the outside world. We'd shunted out on top of a an area that looked like a medieval city. There was a castle of smooth stone, complete with outer walls and a sprawl of smaller buildings and farms. Muzzles flashed as the guards on the walls opened fire
"This is a lot more than we were anticipating," Khepri stated. "I'm counting almost fifty thousand people within sensor range. We're in for a much heavier fight than expected, here."

Victoria was unconcerned. "Standard assault rifles at a range of almost half a mile? Yeah, those aren't a threat."

I was more concerned about the view below us. More military, though again we were way too far away for them to actually hurt us even if normal weapons could get through the ship's defenses. What bothered me were all the laborers, and the amount of work that had gone into building farms in the region. I could believe a lot of it was done through the use of powers, but probably only the castle and clearing farmland. The hundreds of shacks looked to be held together by bamboo and mud. "They're trying to rush colonize Kyber. I just don't know why."

Lily took a breath, finally getting to her feet. "I could think of a few reasons. China's population problems are pretty legendary. This would certainly help with counteract that a bit. And it's a lot safer, security wise, on a locked world. Bet you anything that castle was being set up for their royal family to move into. Maybe they even believe that Dinah's prediction only applies to Earth Bet and are planning to hold out here."

Missy's voice was a mix of horror and disgust. "They're using armed guards to control the civilians. This isn't a colonization program, it's a fucking forced labor camp. God damn it, now what do we do?"

The conversation was ended by a massive stream of energy blasts. Most missed, but there were thousands of them

"God damn it!" The ship shook before veering to the left. "Horus, we could really use your help right now! Victoria, you're up, too!"

....

"This ship does have a Khonsu armored shell to protect us. Triple layered, blending forcefield and EB tissue for maximum defense and tied into bugs meant to guide the shielding with my power. That will let us soak up a lot of punishment, but if it takes enough of a beating, it will collapse. Horus, you'll be blocking the worst of the attacks, an extra layer of protection. The ship has a vent system that should allow you to reach any part outside it with little difficulty."

"Yes, ma'am."
"Victoria, Zach's diagram was basically your job. We're deploying near where we expect their highest concentration of forces to be. We're pretty certain they're operating in the Khyber analogue of their capital region. We'll do a close flyby and drop you off to go do what you do best. Remember to use nonlethal measures whenever possible. Frankly, I wouldn't shed a single tear if you killed every last one of them, but we want them as captives. That's a major source of intel, political bartering, and potentially tech. We need all of it."

She smiled. "I fucking hate escort missions when the escort can't protect itself. At least this won't involve a shitty AI that keeps walking right into enemy fire, right? Right?"

Right. Have to protect the ship. Still feeling more than a little sick, I pushed my hand against the wall. The hatch popped open, and we were treated to heavy winds for the moments until Vicky jumped out and the port closed. I extended my power to cover the areas where the shots were coming in hardest. The forcefields themselves shifted out of the way to protect the areas I couldn't.

Victoria took a few shots in the general direction of the Yangban, and the stream of firepower stopped. They'll be changing tac-

Several people appeared inside the ship with us. I dropped the external shielding, and the ship listed to the side thanks to the extra weight of all that iron that suddenly started obeying the laws of physics. I started summoning a new set of material to defend us from the attackers.

<Thirty first path, cutting lasers.> Oh fuck, I'm not going to be fast enough.

Three things happened at once. Clarice bolted forward, stabbing one of the Yangban in the neck, a dozen lasers streamed through the ship in bizarre patters that reminded me of fast moving glowsticks, and I went from defense to offense, charging toward the group using just my own armor and blades formed from it. Spears of supersharp metal trying to reach the opponents. And in working with Missy's power, every spear struck home against someone.

<Twenty first path, instant movement.> With that, the Yangban vanished from the ship, leaving behind a blinking device. I reacted without thinking, forcing a thick layer of liquid metal around the machine. I felt the shudder of warped space influencing my metal, creating the equivalent of several blocks of space between us and the bomb. Space full of Endbringer equivalent durable materials. When the bomb detonated, there was no possibility of it hurting anyone in the ship.

The Yangban aren't the only ones who can work together.

Clarice eyed the ball that held the bomb. "Radioactive residue, heavy elements. Micro nuclear bomb."
Oh fuck. And more than that. "Cl- Aceso. Your armor." She had a deep gouge in her side, and I could see where her blood was being absorbed and consumed by her armor. They were using laser weapons, but this injury was formed by a cutting weapon. "Oh shit! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean-"

She looked at me and smiled. "You didn't mean it, and I'll be fine. The armor's already mending the damage."

Missy was there immediately. "No, you're hurt. Remember how you get mad at me for pushing myself too hard? That goes for you, too. we treat the wound now."

Clarice reluctantly allowed Missy to work. "You don't have to treat me like a baby." The protest was halfhearted at best.

"Don't be silly, of course I do. Space warped, forcing the armor open so we could check the damage. "Christ, this cut through one of your lungs."

"I still have the other one."

I wanted to get up and help as well, but I was trying to contain the residue of a nuclear bomb in a metal shell the size of a basketball. And my powers didn't come any concentration or multitasking powers to make that easier.

The ship rocked again. "We're still in a fight, here! If Aceso says she can wait, then I'm going to trust the girl who can survive surgically removing her own head to know what she's talking about. Lachesis, I need you to get us the hell out of here."

"And leave Victoria behind?"

"That was always the plan. She'll be fine and we have a mission to finish."

==============

A/N- I need more Theo/Missy/Riley in this story.

Also- readers value litmus test part two. I, the writer, am (part) Chinese. If that makes you feel differently about yesterday's punchline... well, then hopefully this has taught you something about yourself.
I reluctantly pulled away from Clarice. As much as I wanted to help her, and I actually had a top notch medical skillset to help me do it, Khepri was right. We needed to survive first and worry about injuries second. The part where these assholes were willing to set off a nuclear fucking weapon right above their own population told me how very little they cared for human life. If we were caught right now, we'd be better off dead.

I dropped back into my seat and gripped space, twisting it like a pretzel. In my time off, I'd spent a lot of time just thinking, because there was nothing else to do. Except losing at card games to Dinah, or losing at video games to Zach and Theo. Or watching the amazing combination of brilliance and insanity that was Clarice. But everyone was always so busy, so I was left with thinking and talking to the others. It meant I had a lot of ideas.

....

"Lachesis, you'll be needed for two purposes. First to keep this thing outrunning enemies that almost certainly include short range precogs and teleportation powers. The second will be during cleanup, to seek out human lifesigns or anti-power devices. My powers have been proven vulnerable to certain types of strangers and cloaking technology. But in the interest of conserving your strength, I'll take care of everything I can first. When I'm done, you confirm that this world has been completely cleared of human life."

I saluted. It wasn't even sarcastic. I loved this, I needed this now that Elena and Clarice managed to safely restore me to full power. Knowing that my actions were making a difference on the international stage. The respect I commanded from my peers, and the fear felt by my foes. "Yes ma'am."

....

If space could cry, it would be screaming right now. If it could bleed, then I would be its murderer. Distance folded in half around us, concentrating the gravity drive to send us forward at supersonic speeds. That's the thing about gravity, even the folded and warped gravity used by our antigrav tech, it's a form of energy that travels through space just like all other types of energy. The drones chasing us found a new 'down' in the enemy fortress. They were pulled by gravity roughly equivalent to the surface of Jupiter. We were moving far too fast for me to enjoy the satisfaction watching and hearing the explosions, but I'm sure Victoria would approve.

Lily clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Holy shit! And people think I'm the scary one."

Yes! About damn time you admit it. I shrugged, about a thousand times more nonchalant than I felt. "You've probably still got me beat. I mean, the only way my power can affect anything you're
influencing is if we spend several minutes working with Clotho to synchronize our effects. So you can basically ignore anything I can throw at you like it's nothing."

She laughed. "Maybe, in the insanely powerful battle armor that lets us kick the Triumvirate's collective asses. But when we're not wearing our suits I'm pretty much pure glass cannon. You can outrun me, you can track me at range and, oh, drop a building on my head or redirect traffic into me. Seriously, what is it about little girls with crazy unfair powers?"

Little girl? Oh, you bitch.

"We're approaching your first dropoff point. We might have to leave you behind."

"That's fine, I'm kinda looking forward to the whole 'orbital cannon' thing." Lily stepped away from me, and the suction of the open door began and ended in a couple seconds.

....

"I'll be piloting. Once we break their barricade device or devices, our shunt tech is poised on Mashu. Both Basilisk and Bolla are ready if we need them. I really doubt we're going to need them. Amelia and Dragon will be waiting on the other side, along with some backup firepower. Once their barricade is down I'll have full control of the planet's insect population in a matter of minutes, plus my special bugs shunted in from Avalon. To that end, Atropos, there's a reason your new armor is equipped to function in orbit. We search, you destroy."

"Wait, does that mean my armor doubles as an orbital cannon?"

"Plus the tech needed for you to aim and fire at that range," Taylor smiled. "And survivability at that altitude. You could take a trip to the moon and back if you really wanted to."

Zach started clapping slowly. "All you need now is an upgrade that lets the armor transform itself into a sailor suit and an adorable female AI that flirts with you constantly, then your apotheosis into the goddess of all geek fetishes will be complete."

Lily's head turned slowly toward Zach. Her smile was wild, almost manic. "Y'know, I should be pissed at you for saying that, but you are so totally right. I am wearing the sexiest thing ever made. And I am in love."

Victoria laughed. "It's true, if you keep getting new features, I might have to jump you. And I'm a negative one on the Kinsey scale."
Taylor ignored the comments and went on with the briefing. "Normally we might expect the dimensional barricade machine to be near their main base. However, we know they've been using dimensional viewing tech to spy on Bet. Various world leaders, research labs, and other places with sensitive information in the world. Both Cauldron and Dragon have been tracking interesting financial shifts that suggest they're already mucking about with banks. They're spread out across the world, and that means their machinery could be anywhere. Fortunately, barricade tech leaves very distinctive signatures, and Dragon's given us the means to track them."

This is my favorite part of working with Pantheon. My bosses aren't dumbasses. They're not borderline psychopaths like the Piggot, they aren't tools like Armsmaster. They're not completely oblivious to the people they're supposed to command. As much as I loved Dean, he was dumb as hell when it came to people. The more I'd learned about Thinkers and how their powers tend to cause behavioral oddities, the more I'd come to accept that it wasn't his fault that he didn't understand the way others thought and felt. He was able to sense them, but he could never really understand them.

Khepri did understand people. She didn't yell at the smartass commentary, and she didn't try to force herself to participate in their humor. They did their thing, she let them do their thing, and she kept the briefing on track. And she trusted her people to get the job done.

....

Space rippled around us as I was forced to evade another wave of Yangban blasts, jumping the ship by miles at a time. The problem was, the enemy had an absurd number of powers to call on. Teleportation, some kind of precognition or other really good Thinker powerset, a laundry list of blaster and shaker powers to make our lives more difficult.

Khepri forced the controls hard, and I barely adjusted my space folding in time to keep us from breaking through the tunnel. The ship shuddered and shield panels flickered as they were drained of power. "How are you holding up?"

I grit my teeth. This was starting to suck, I'd have used a stim by now if they gave me any. "I'm running pretty low already. I might have to beg off the cleanup part of the mission for a day or two."

A pair of arms wrapped around me from behind and squeeze. "You can do it, you're strong." Clarice, supporting me despite her own injuries. I closed my eyes and drew strength from that. Maybe the three of us don't have the benefits of Taylia's power improvement bullshit, but we are a team and a partnership and a family, however unconventional it may be. However weak or strong our powers were was not a factor in our relationship. It did, however, factor into us surviving. I focused on that. I can keep going.

Taylor nodded. "Just a little bit longer, Lily's almost caught up to us. I'm sorry there's so many more people than we expected. According to Dragon's tracking software, they're already at over three hundred thousand people and climbing steadily."
"That's more than Avalon." Theo muttered. "They've only had this world for a couple weeks."

Another stream of blasts started coming in, and I focused, twisting them toward the building itself. Thus far we hadn't been able to pierce the shielding they had around those things without using Lily's weaponry. But we were buying time for ourselves. Further away from the devices was more dangerous, since they weren't willing to fire on us with their most powerful attacks when I could redirect ninety percent or more of them toward the very thing they were trying to protect.

I faltered. I faltered for half a second and the ship twisted and flipped sideways. In one desperate maneuver, I altered our path to the ocean. Water started flooding in through the vent system meant for Theo's power.

A/N- It might have been easier if, instead of shunting over an attack force, they just created Vashta Nerada and shunted a ship full of them in.
It wouldn't be quite accurate to say I could feel the distortions from Missy's power, but my senses did give me a good idea of when it happened. The part where gravity in the entire region lessened by about five to ten percent, and then those attack drones slammed into the side of the castle hard enough to leave a hole through several feet of stone, that was her power in action. *Holy shit that girl has improved.*

Back when I was Glory Girl, I would have been jealous. More than a little insecure at the idea of her 'love rival' being so much more powerful than her. I just laughed. *I really need to challenge her to a match some day.*

*Not today, though.* Now I had far less impressive opponents to play with. I bolted forward toward the castle. They clearly thought it was important enough to defend, and that meant it was important enough for me to break into tiny little pieces. It was easy enough to dodge the Yangban, they were pretty pathetic all considered. And the sad part was they didn't need to be.

Some kind of badly watered down aiming power that actually would have been a real threat to me if at full power. Bunch of energy attacks that would have done real damage if they could hit. And some serious forcefield and danger sense abilities that honestly did keep me from hitting back. All in all, it was fifty people with a bunch of powers at one sixth of what they should be.

They'd have been better off just using the aiming power and this long range laser and whomever did the forcefield without sharing their powers.

I took a few potshots, just enough to intimidate them into wasting power on bolstering the forcefields. *The longer they turtle, the better off I and the rest of the team are.*

"Vertigo Lance." The weapon appeared for me to catch, and I fired it at the stone wall, activating the destruction mode. The built in sensors did the work of finding the best frequency to hurt this material, and soon the wall cracked.

I felt the threat, and redirected my weapon straight below at maximum intensity. The Yagban teleported into a cloud of dirt and sand too thick even for me to see through. I didn't need to see to fight. I was also right up close and personal with them. Forcefields against forcefields, and mine was power dampening. Yet again, if it were their forcefield generator vs me, I'd have lost. But this was fifty different forcefields, dampened fifty times.

I punched one upside the head, just enough to render him unconscious. Another got his shin snapped in half. Each half step hurt another two or three. This is fucking pathetic. The Yangban thinks they're competition for Avalon when this is the best they can do? Fuck, give me the right five Protectorate members not including the Triumvirate and a month to train them, and they'd shred this sad excuse
for an army. I jabbed one of them in the ribs hard enough to send them flying into another member.

<Path Thirty Six.> They’d all instantly recovered from their injuries.

*Wha? Did they pick up Alabaster's power? Well, maybe this is a fight I can-* Everything changed just a little. I dived sideways and rolled to my feet as streams of that high intensity laser carved through the muddy ground, sending billowing steam into the air.

Another sudden disruption of perception and I dived backward, avoiding a barrage of lightning, or something like it. *Okay, maybe they can fight back.* Another disruption sent me up against a wall. *Well, fuck. "Frost Lance."*

I fired in front of me, building a shell of frozen air to protect me. More blasts of energy hammered my position, but at least I didn't have any more of those damn time skips fucking with me. Those things didn't trip my combat sense at all. *Line of sight? Probably.*

*"Light Lance."

I set it to wide spectrum, low intensity. Basically a flair gun that didn't turn off, complete with the possibility of damaged retinas. Then I bolted up the castle wall, avoiding the occasional shitty potshots. Once on top I grabbed one of those assault rifles and fired it down into the crowd of confused Yangban. *Lucky me that I can control my hearing, or this would suck.* Their forcefields were enough to stop bullet fire without any real trouble. Maybe if I were firing a couple dozen guns at once it would work, but that wasn't my plan.

The gun didn't take long to overheat, and I tossed it down into their crowd while it just kept firing away while I went stealth mode and bolted forward toward the castle itself. I'd have more advantages there, where the fighting would be in narrow halls and all my close quarters combat advantages would come into play. I still needed a way to beat that damn time fuckery, but in theory it just meant I had to kill the one guy on the team providing the juice.

A patch of Yangban appeared in front of me, and I fired another stream of ice into their group. They teleported out immediately. *Guess they still had that power on hair trigger.* I fired behind me on reflect, and the screams of pain told me I actually achieved something. I bolted down the hall, punching a normal guard, stealing his assault weapon, and firing it behind me as I ran. They were relying on some kind of precognition. The more chaos I could throw into the system, the better my chances.

My power simply ignored everything that wasn't a danger to me. That included bullet fire.

I just about bolted into a hallway, before my power screamed that it would be a bad idea. I tossed the gun in, and watched as it was cut to shreds by Tinker weaponry. *Okay, so no going that way.*
"Magnetic Lance." I caught the weapon, dialed it to max, and fired it into the corridor. Dark smoke billowed from the walls and through the carpeted floor. My power was still very insistent I don't go into it. That was fine, I was the distraction, after all. My job was to cause so much damage that they stayed focused on me even after the others started attacking the barricade devices.

"Vertigo Lance." I tuned it to the function of being a disorientation aura and sent it to fire constantly. Anyone within range would get instantly dizzy while I rushed through this maze of a fortress. Everything was designed to look identical and throw off invaders, that much was obvious. I started punching walls to give myself a way to figure out where I was.

Much later, I was still running around. I had nuked a second and third trap hallway, but as near as I could tell there wasn't anything important in the building anymore. They didn't evacuate, I could still see a few people in the central area, but the Yangban either gave up, or decided I wasn't as important as the rest of the team.

In a way, that was a comfort. As long as the Yangban aren't coming for me, that means they're still out there fighting. But now I'd gotten a good idea of the actual layout of the building in its entirety. "Frost Lance and Vertigo Lance." If I can't find a through the building, then I can make a way.

And by 'make a way' I meant 'bring this whole fucking building to the ground and punch whatever crawls out of the rubble'.

I cut my way through the structural supports keeping the building standing. Oh, the outer walls were too tough for me to bring down so easily, but this structure inside was much more vulnerable, made basically like a very squat skyscraper. After a few supports were torn, the building started to rumble and I felt as a handful of Yangban came into threat detection range again.

It was too late, however, the building was starting to cave, and only by virtue of my position near the outer wall did I avoid getting buried as well. I blasted my way out to view the sky and a few remaining opponents.

A dome of rock near the center blossomed open, revealing a less than happy looking middle aged man and a much younger woman that simply looked terrified. They were wearing the basic uniform of the Yangban, but it didn't include the face or body concealment of the rest.

My power was kind enough to let me know the man was a serious threat just in time for him to close the distance and hit me hard. Ribs cracked from the blow. The fuck did that come from? I landed feet first against the wall and barely registered my suit's complaints that it was damaged before bouncing down to the ground and charging forward.

He brought up a hand, and I narrowly avoided the wave of energy.
Seriously, who the fuck is this guy? I was getting a feel for the attacks. A high end telekinetic of some form. Or maybe air manipulation like Stormtiger that was similar in nature. Either way, my power's threat estimates ranked him as around a match for Alexandria. I fired the ice lance into the the ground near his feet, which was annihilated by his next blast. But it gave me cover to-

I was fast enough to dodge, this time, and lashed out with a hard kick at the target. Bones broke. Unfortunately, they were mine.

I flipped back, issuing the mental strength to mend the limb.

<You do not belong here, foreigner. Contact your people, tell them to cease their attacks or I will kill you.>

<Ah, is that how it's gonna be?> I went back into a combat stance. <Don't think you can beat me? No. <Power come with some nasty side effects?> Yes. <Or are you that scared my team's going to win?> No. Ah, well, fuck me then.

"Harpe." My sword manifested itself. It was made to kill Endbringers, this guy can't be that dangerous in comparison. My perception of the world changed as I took my war form. My senses dulled, to the point that I'm fairly certain I could be considered legally blind and deaf. I'd never bothered finding out. All my mental processing shifted to the point of obsession on one goal. How do I kill the man in front of me?

I charged forward, and moments later found myself flying sideways. Fuck he's fast. My armor took enough damage that it wouldn't be shunt capable anymore. I pushed Harpe in front of me, then activated the time freeze feature, allow me to halt my movement in mid air, then redirect myself back like I'd grabbed a post and spun around it. Luckily, the weapon was only super sharp when the time divider was active, or I'd be missing a hand.

At least I caught him off guard this time, slamming feet first into his shield. He stumbled back, then blasted me with a wide wall of kinetic energy, knocking me to the ground hard enough to bruise me even in this state. I faintly tasted blood in my mouth. This guy can keep up with my combat mode? Oh fuck yes!

I was on my feet instantly, darting forward. My combat precog didn't show any particular weaknesses, I couldn't quite win but I wasn't at risk of losing any time soon. I could keep going for hours, and whatever weaknesses his power had, I was pretty it meant he couldn't afford that kind of fight.

Harpe's time divider colided with his shield, and it turned out my weapon had him beat. He reflexively stumbled back, avoiding his face being sliced open. Then he pushed off the ground with
his power to launch himself away from me.

I smiled, dropping Harpe to let it recharge in whatever weird Tinker-Limbo it was stored in. "Vertigo Lance." I fired more around him than at him, causing the area to explode into clouds of concealment that he'd need to burn power to remove. I was just thrilled to have a legitimate challenge for a change.

Then I felt the crackle and shift of the space around me. Fuck! Dozens of new bodies started to shunt into the area. They weren't ours.

*One hundred and sixty one against one?* My combat senses were overwhelmed, but ultimately it all pointed to one thing. I was going to lose. And surrender meant a fate so much worse than death. I smiled slowly. "Harpe."

==================

A/N- Psst. Chevalier. Your girlfriend's got a masochistic streak and might be clinically insane.
The water had already reached up to my ankles, and the only reason it wasn't filling faster was a combination of the Khonsu forcefields reducing the pressure, and Theo plugging as many of the vents as he could. But pure iron wasn't all that resilient compared to whatever insane pressures there were outside the ship. Frankly, it was a minor miracle that we hadn't imploded under the pressure, a testament to just how durable Endbringer tissue really is.

I looked at the barricade device, wondering just how much water it could take on before something shorted out and we were completely fucked. From above it seemed the Yangban had stopped firing. Although I wasn't entirely sure of that. We were down so deep that my range couldn't find the surface. The only blessing I could count was that they weren't teleporting into the ship again. That would have spelled the end for all of us. And probably them, too.

Lachesis was broken up the worst of all of us, helping Clarice patch up the damage done to her side. "I'm sorry, I just couldn't... there was too much to keep track of. They had some kind of super targeting powers and I just couldn't keep up."

I put on my game face. *I may be virtually useless down here, but at least I can maintain morale. "It's not your fault. No one could have kept up with everything that was going on." Except me, and of course she'll know that and be even more upset that I put it this way. "I was the pilot, and I didn't react in time, it's my fault more than anyone that this happened." Hopefully that'll mollify her a bit. Why is it always me in situations like this? Nurture and comfort is Amelia's job, I'm the intimidating one.*

Clarice patted Missy's leg. "You did the best you could. We all did." Her head turned to look up at me. *Oh, god damn it, I know I suck at comforting people, but please don't let me turn out worse at it than Bonesaw.*

I looked down at the water lapping against my armor. "The ship's propulsion is damaged and the controls are completely off line. We don't have a lot of time before we need to get out of here. Aceso, you know these suits the best of anyone. What are the odds they hold up long enough to get us to the surface?"

I couldn't see her expression through the suit, but her pausing for a moment to look down at her side didn't bode well. "They can't, not for nearly as long as we need. Zach and Theo get out, because of their powers. Zach will be able to bring one person along. Two if we plan properly."

"I can take someone!" Theo insisted.

Clarice shook her head. "No you can't. You've been pushing your power way too much already. If you try to take another person up, both of you are going to die. As it stands I'm not entirely confident
you’ll be able to make it to the surface just by yourself."

Missy interrupted. "He can take me along, I can get us both to the surface in no time."

Clarice took Missy's hands and pressed them together between hers. "Not through that much water. The medium is too dense and resistant to compression. At best, you shave a few seconds off a minutes long surfacing process. Once the doors open for Zach and Theo, the rest of us are dead in between twenty and thirty seconds, depending upon how well our forcefields withstand the water pressure. There's no way to be certain they will hold because we've never bothered to test how they work under these circumstances."

*God damn it all. No sense in taking too long to discuss this one, time to bite the fucking bullet.* "Which brings us to the question of who stays behind."

Clarice didn't look at me, instead focusing on Theo and Missy. "Me, of course." Her... *partners?* started to protest, but she kept speaking over their arguments. "I'm the one with the most recent backup and the least applicable abilities for what might be a short term survival situation. It could take weeks for Atropos to locate the rest of the barricade devices. All of you offer something that can speed that process up. The best I can do is..."

She trailed off, and Missy pulled her into a hug. "You're talking about killing yourself like it's nothing."

"I have a backup. Pantheon can function for a few days without me. Just forgive me for being too busy for next week's movie night."

Theo moved over to the pair. I wanted to berate him for not staying near the sides where he was needed to plug holes as new ones appeared. He knelt down in front of his girlfriends. "That's not the same thing and you know it."

Clarice looked away from both of them. "It's better than nothing. It's better than any alternative we have. There's no way to save everyone, so it's better to sacrifice the one that's least useful. The one that deserves it most."

*Oh. I took a step closer to the girl that was by some convoluted path my sister in law. But I didn't know how to handle this situation. I got along with Clarice, sure, maybe I was even fond of her. But we weren't that close and there was always that history between us. The history where she tried to saw me open and poke around inside my brain with all the glee of a little kid tearing open the wrapping on her Christmas presents. Sure, that wasn't really 'me', and she'd never do anything like that now. But the knowledge of it remained.*

Missy grabbed Clarice by her shoulders and shook her hard. "No! You do not get to kill yourself over guilt!"
"It's not killing myself! Or, not for very long. I'll be fine in a few days."

"No, that just means we have a copy of you. It's not the same as being you!"

Clarice didn't resist Missy's outburst or shaking, but it didn't change her mind, either. "No, that's not true. The clones are us in every way that matters, they have to be! If you're not then I lost both of you already and I'll be happier when I'm dead."

 Fuck. I glanced over at Zach, who was staying quiet as well. This wasn't a situation for my pragmatism or his perverse form of wisdom. I could see him fidgeting under his layer of armor. Or maybe he was shivering, his suit had virtually no shielding against any possible attack, instead being full of high energy cost gimmicks and weapons that he could easily restore with his powers. Once he hit the water outside, the chances were good that he'd respawn up on the surface instantly. But for now he'd become dust four times in the few minutes we'd been down here.

"Dammit, Clarice, I should slap you for saying that!" Missy sobbed, still gripping Clarice's shoulders. "It doesn't work that way and I won't let you sacrifice yourself like this. You don't get to atone for your sins by being a martyr. You don't get to leave us like this."

Theo pulled Missy back and wrapped his arms around the girl, then he extended one arm out to grip Clarice's hand. "Missy, please. That's not going to help. We need a plan, there has to be a way to get us all out of here alive. Yelling won't help us find that plan."

Self sacrifice? I knew a lot about that, didn't I? Clarice was right, though, of all of us she was going to be the least useful for until the barricades were removed. It would get especially messy if this took long enough that they got the old barricades back in working order. Once our own equipment ran out of power, the CUI could bring in more reinforcements and undo damage. They wouldn't be able to fight her from her position in orbit. The irony of Lily becoming this world's equivalent of the Endbringers was not lost on me. Her going around slowly decapitating-

Oh, there's an idea. "Umm, Clarice, I've wondered this for a long time, but I've never really found a time to ask. How did you surgically remove your head and survive?"

"It's not that hard, all you have to do is... oh." She paused for a second, realizing what that question really meant. Zach's power is limited by weight... or, more appropriately, the amount of mass equal to his carrying capacity at Earth's gravity. Remove most of that mass, and it made his job a lot easier. "I don't really have the equipment here to do that to myself here."

Fuck. "Mine, then. It's the smarter choice anyway. I'm a lot heavier than you are, and the way my powers work make pretty much everything from the neck down redundant. I can live without it for a while." I hesitated for a second. "Or, well, you know what I mean. Can you make that work?"
Clarice stood up and sloshed through the shin deep water toward me. "Yeah. Yeah! That's easy. I'll need Theo to make me some surgical tools, and I'll have to dismantle your suit for raw materials that spoof your biology enough that Zach's power doesn't leave behind the life support systems when he brings you to the surface. I can do that in less than ten minutes."

I smiled nervously, even though no one could see it through the mask. "Yeah, I guess I won't be needing the armor for a while. Besides, everyone else has been getting upgrades lately and I was starting to feel left out." I hit the open command on my armor, exposing my face to the painfully cold air, I felt the hair inside my nose stiffen. And this is what Clarice and Zach have been putting up with all this time? "We'd better do this fast, we don't know how much longer this ship is gonna last."

Clarice gave me a hug, and I watched as the suit raised alarms where she was cutting it apart with her fingers in what I had to believe was a very methodical process. "I promise your next suit of armor will have even more geek fetishes in it than Lily's."

"I'm going to believe you don't understand what you just said."

=================

A/N- Not the usual method of solving problems through decapitation. But it works!
I couldn't help but stare, and I wasn't alone in that. Taylor's head was now linked to several spindly spider like legs that didn't seem to have much purpose beyond letting her ride on Riley's back. It was fucking creepy as hell. *Okay, so time to break the ice.* "Well, that's one way to get ahead in life."*And now everyone is looking at me instead of her. Mission accomplished.*

Taylor rolled her eyes while everyone else just cringed, then my armor's com system activated. "Not the time for stupid puns. Now we have to get out of here. I'm going to move some of the forcefields to give you and Theo a bit of space outside the ship. When you're outside, I'll drop the bubble and you'll make your way to the surface. We'll need to be quick about it, because once I start shifting the forcefields around, the ship's lifespan will be measured in seconds."

I gave one last switch to the emergency fuel cells, seeing to it that all of them were maxed, then 'dropped' them from my focus. I waded through the fucking cold ass water to where the three girls were waiting. I tapped Missy and Clarice on the shoulders, then reached over to Taylor, before feigning hesitation. "Promise not to bite me?"

It's amazing how many expressions of annoyance that a single face can show at once. "I promise not to bite you."

I patted her on the head. "Good girl."

"Ordering Atropos to castrate you, however, is still an option. Now go climb out into the near arctic waters and drown already."

I mock saluted then turned toward the door "Yes ma'am. You are the head of state after all. I'm heading out." I stepped up next to Theo. "So, race you to the top?"

He shook his head, but I could tell he found it as funny as I did. "I have no idea how you get away with half the shit you do."

The ship's door slid open, and water poured in, nearly knocking me off my feet. "Okay, you caught me. I'm not really a parahuman at all, the reason I keep coming back from the dead is because let's be honest, there's no way I'm getting into heaven." The door sealed behind us as Theo's reflective metal shell wrapped completely around him. "And I keep escaping from hell by seducing the guards. Last one was a real harpy. Seriously, took me an hour to get all the feathers out of my mouth."

His chuckle was distorted by speaking through his metal shell. "You sure those weren't grasshoppers?"
"Them, too." The shield popped and water slammed into us hard enough that my armor didn't even have time to blink damage alerts before I found myself floating at the top of the ocean. It wasn't all that much warmer than in the ship. I recalled the 'stored' memories my power let me hold, and moments later, the girls were next to me. They shrieked in surprise and discomfort.

"Uh, yeah, sorry about that. The water's a little cold for a skinny dip, ain't it?" Okay, buddy. Please get up here soon. I don't know what your girlfriends are going to do if you die on them now.

"F-f-fuck th-th c-c-old!" I had to guess that was Missy, since Clarice almost never used profanities and Taylor couldn't talk right now. I couldn't tell without looking, and I wasn't going to look.

"You ladies may want to get back a bit. I know I'm hot, but I'm not sure how Theo'd take it if he found both his girlfriends tubbing with me naked." I cycled through options and found the 'phoenix' setting on my armor. Normally meant to be a really impressive suicide bomb. Dialing it as low as possible, I activated it and the water started warming up instantly.

In seconds, the area within a foot or so of me had begun to bubble. The ladies drifted far enough back to find somewhere comfortably between arctic and boiling alive. I did my best not to look toward the girls as they huddled together for some protection from the cold. Or was Taylor, riding on Clarice's back like some weird pet. Luckily the steam quickly created a very thick fog bank around us.

"Okay, I know we're not that far north, why is it so damn cold?" Missy complained.

Taylor's voice came over my armor. "Okay, you're the only one I can communicate through right now. I need you to contact Atropos and tell her to continue the mission. Our dimensional barricade is only going to last a few more minutes. See if you can get ahold of Victoria as well. We're going to want her help out here."

Clarice, meanwhile, was explaining things to Missy. "Part of the treaty on acceptable colony worlds includes looking for comfortable climates at the portal's origin. I'm guessing this world never fully broke from the most recent ice age, likely leaving the Middle East a wet temperate zone. That's to our advantage if this lasts any length of time. Easy sources of large animals for food and clothing. If we're lucky we'll find out what Woolly Mammoth tastes like."

I smiled. That's cute, I'll remember it. "Victoria's signal is gone." Please let her be alright. I didn't draw attention to it, but I still had a bit of a crush on the hyperactive blonde bombshell of neurosis that was Victoria. I was more than happy with Emma, but as a man I couldn't help but occasionally wonder. Naturally, I kept that little detail to myself. If Vicky or Emma's bullshit biosensing powers let them in on that secret, then neither felt the need to tell me they knew.

"Fuck. Well, she could easily be out of range. Can you reach Lily?"
I looked through the channels. "Yeah. Here she is." The armor responded to the focus of the eyes, so by the time I finished the sentence I was already on call with her. "Hey, Atropos. Just letting you know we're okay, but a lot of our equipment's been lost." Like, say, the ship and three uniforms and Taylor from the neck down. "Khepri wants to know how things are going on your end."

"I'm almost at the third target. Do you know if there are any more?"

That's a good question. I almost glanced over at the girls and ask, but Khepri was clearly listening in. "Not completely sure, we'll find out after you destroy this one. If we still can't contact Avalon, then there are more and we'll have to hunt them down. If we don't contact you immediately, assume there's more. You will circle back to the palace and see if you can make contact with Victoria. The two of you kick up as much carnage as possible then mount a fighting retreat and we'll all regroup at panel green black white gold."

"Understood."

I had no idea what that meant. Whatever, not my job to worry about. "Okay, so now what?"

"We try not to freeze or boil while waiting for Theo to make it to the surface."

You mean if he makes it to the surface. I switched my system back to external speaking mode. "So, isn't this where you give us a rousing speech to raise our spirits like they do in the movies? You can give a bunch of tired catch phrases like 'chin up' and 'we'll be back on our feet in no time'." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Missy trying to hide her smile. Whether Taylor saw it or not, I wasn't certain.

Taylor somehow hijacked the speaker system for my armor, letting her be heard by everyone "Why is it that I haven't fired you? Because I really think I should fire you. Out of a cannon. Into the sun."

The others chuckled at that comment. It was safe to laugh at Taylor's jokes. That wasn't much, but it lightened the mood a little. Distracted them from worrying about Theo for a little while longer. C'mon, man. I know you can make it.

And to top it all off, the batteries on my suit are running low. I smirked and affected a bad Asian accent. "I am a fairure, I have no honor. I shar take my own rife." I mimicked holding a knife it both hands and jabbing it into my chest, activating the armor's suicide switch at the same time. I appeared above the water and splashed right back into it. I should probably ask why my power never lets me appear inside water one of these days. The water was still painfully hot through my suit, but I was much better insulated against heat than cold, and the rest of the team had no insulation at all.
"Okay, Theo's in range now. I'm guiding him to us."

Fuck yes!

"I... I don't think he's conscious."

God damn it!

He wasn't using his power when he made it up. Fuck. At least he stopped flying at the water's surface. Either some kind of safety feature, or maybe Taylor just took direct control of the armor's features, they were designed for her to do that after all.

The girls swam over to him, while I swam further away. As much as I wanted to help, I couldn't. Theo's armor could take the heat, but the girls would be boiled alive. And I still had to keep the water warm so they didn't freeze. On top of that, they had medical knowledge, while powers meant the brain scans and knowledge uploads didn't work for me.

And even if they did work on me, and I took medicine instead of wasting space on silly stuff like video game programming and how to direct pornography, I still couldn't compete with the world's most powerful biotinker. I had to trust them to do what I could not. Come on, Theo. I don't have a lot of friends that I can just hang with. You have to be alright.

They had his suit open, with Riley sitting on his hips and doing whatever it was she needed to do. I couldn't help but look, in spite of the lack of modesty here. But the bruises covering Theo's upper body, and the ugly looking gash on Clarice's side ruined any eroticism that might have come from it.

"Minimal decompression, major crushing trauma," Riley stated. "He'll live, mostly because his suit protected him from the worst of it and is currently running life support. If he was any deeper when he lost control of his power, he'd be dead right now."

Now both my armor and Theo's spoke up. "So we're down to three able bodies. Missy, please get us to shore. I'm pretty sure Lily should be done by now, and I still don't have access to Avalon. We're still on our own out here."

=====================  
A/N- Damn it's been too long since I've had a Zach chapter.

Also- shall be busy, don't expect a second chapter today.
Some days, I wish I kept my ability to not feel pain. We'd found a safe beach to make camp. It was as cold as the rest of this hell, but with plenty of pine trees. Cooking up medicine with pine sap wasn't exactly optimal conditions, but it's what we had to work with. In addition to the various upgrades in my body and the tech in Theo and Zach's suits, I managed to put together a more than reasonable hospital to care for our wounded and give Taylor the necessary long term upgrades to keep her alive for what was becoming a mission that might last days.

Zach tossed another branch into the fire. "So, here's a major existential question. How long do you think it'll be before we're assumed dead and they jumpstart your replacements? And what do you do when you meet your own doubles?"

"They won't." Taylor's voice came from the suits. "This was meant to be a clean mission, but it's far too important to allow to fail. Worst case scenario was always that we'd mount a true invasion and rescue force using the zerg and Dragon suits. Yes, that comes with a very real risk of starting an all out war with China. But that's far better than leaving them in control of a dimension of their own."

In the interest of metabolic stability, I'd put much of her brain to sleep. The lower parts of her brain that regulated her body was shut down, while the upper mental functions were working quite well. The functional opposite of being in a permanent coma. It would cause some deradation over time, but once we were out of here I could use her backup data to repair the damage. She let me do all that to her. I just... how could she trust me so much?

Missy reached out and touched my shoulder. "Is something wrong? Why are you crying?"

I smiled, looking at her green eyes. "I'm not sure."

She looked at me as if she wanted to press the issue, but just smiled back. "You're still adorably quirky."

Thank you for not prying too hard. "And that's still only worth five points. But I give you an extra ten because I think you're adorable, too."

....

"Hey, guys, can you hear me?" Wha? I immediately woke up from my nap near the fire. I tried to extract myself from Missy's arms, only to discover our cobbled together Yggdrasil outfits grown from scraps cloned off of Theo's suit had fused themselves together in our sleep. Well, drat. That's going to be inconvenient.
"Yeah, we're here," Zach responded. "What's the situation?"

"Atropos coming in for a landing. Got Victoria with me. I think we've scared the Yangban off, but Vicky's pretty hurt."

"Understood." Taylor's voice spoke through Zach's suit. "Fly low toward the suit identification. I'll take control when you're in range and guide you down."

I nudged Missy with my elbow, trying to prompt her to wake up. This is going to be embarrassing. "Muh?" Missy tried to push away from me.

"Clarice? What's going on?"

I pulled my arms into the shirt and twisted around to face her while ignoring the agony in my side. Having one working lung is inconvenient. I spoke quietly to avoid interrupting the more serious conversation. "The Yggdrasil wasn't as dormant as I thought it was. It fused together while we were asleep.

"Wait, you mean you still have overrides to my armor?"

Missy looked down at where our crudely designed shirts had melded, blushing slightly. I followed her eyes. Oh. "Well, what do we do about it? I guess one of us can go without a shirt for a little while." I focused on Missy's face. She was quite attractive, so much so that I was afraid my natural appearance would never quite compete with her looks. But up until now, I'd always run on the assumption that she and I were sisters. The idea that she'd find me attractive hadn't crossed my mind.

"Well, of course. It's an emergency option to protect everyone. It probably saved Theo's life today, and if you're ever disabled by, say, an injury or some kind of Master/Stranger effect, you'll wish you had me backing you up."

I shook my head. "No, shouldn't be necessary. Just put your hands on my shoulders and push away."

I did the same, though I set my hands on her ribs and abdomen. I felt the heat of her skin and the behavior of her pulse, using my instincts to put together a good idea of her body and how it worked. Both overall and in the right now. This is something I'll have to think of in the future. I'll have to ask my Big Sister for advice.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Didn't know I had to. It's standard in every suit of armor we've built, including all of your priors. Even mine has overrides that Amelia or our techs can access. We just thought it was understood that
if we built a suit without the protocols, we'd let people know."

"I guess that makes sense." Lily didn't sound at all happy about the idea. "Let me know when I get in your range."

I gritted my teeth against the pain in my side as our arms managed to push out, the clothing making a slurping noise as it pulled apart. We were lucky I used the armor's underlayer as the raw material for this clothing. It wasn't designed with durability in mind, simply resiliency and a medium for the medical treatment tech and various other biointerfaces the armor needed to operate properly. Ours was even more fragile since the stuff was very much designed to not replicate outside the suits, so I had to cobble together a solution.

I glanced over at Zach, who was making a show of not watching as we pried ourselves apart. I pulled my shirt together at my stomach, making it stick back to itself while Missy did the same to hers. I pulled mine together extra tight. I didn't want anyone to realize I'd pulled the stitching in my side. The only reason I was still functional right now was all the modifications I'd made to my biology over the last few months.

I saw Victoria first, a shimmer of light in an overcast sky without any human interference. They landed and I was already up to get a closer look. Lily was carrying two people. Someone in a Yanban uniform, and Victoria. Her armor was a mess, barely held together in some areas. The damage done to her body through the armor was remarkable, her warform had to be the only reason she was still alive.

"It's rude to stare," she scolded. "You should see the other guys. Two hundred against two, and we won. By the w- holy fuck! Taylor, what happened to you? I can't sense anything from the neck down!"

"There isn't anything from the neck down." Taylor sounded tired. *Hmm, the brain alterations must be interfering with her functions. I might have to make some more modifications. At this rate, I'll be forced to use her backup to repair damage. "It's a long story. Care to explain the prisoner?"

Lily tossed him forward casually. "Yeah, after I found out you wanted to rendezvous in Tokyo, I thought these guys know how to shunt through their barricade, it's gotta be in their armor somewhere. So after saving Vicky's ass."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You'll get your traditional rescued maiden makeout session after all my parts are back in working order."

Makeout session? Dammit, I thought I made sure that she wouldn't have any bicurious leanings during the proto- Oh, wait, no. She's just joking. I relaxed a little. Of course she's joking.
Although she could deliberately rework her neurochemistry just about any way she wanted. I still couldn't believe I made such an obvious miscalculation. I went out of my way to keep her from being a desirable target to any Passenger, much as I had with Noelle, and it turns out that obsession prompted my own to take interest in her. Sure, it worked out great in the end, but it was so stupid.

Lily laughed. "In what possible world do you count as a maiden?"

"Hey, I'll have you know these lips have never touched another human being. Granted, it's only because I had to grow this pair in the last ten minutes, but they're still complete maiden territory."

Taylor managed to make a good emulation of a sigh through Lily's armor. "I'm sure your respective significant others would love to hear all about this topic, but can we get back on track?"

Lily looked over at Taylor. "Yeah, sorry. Anyway, after saving Vicky by firing a full barrage of my empowered bolts down at the people who had managed to capture her, which I'm not too sorry to report killed a lot of them, she managed to disable a couple before I came in to rescue her, since her armor was destroyed. They appeared to be dragging her to shunt vehicle."

"Third attempt, too," Vicky added. "Turns out, their ships are pretty fragile. Doesn't take a lot of electricity for me to short one out."

"So we grabbed one of the unconscious ones and took him back with us. Like I said, they have to have some kind of code, right? Like we do to get through our barricade device? We shunt this guy over with the right message and our people will be able to figure out their get reinforcements through in no time, right?"

I glanced over at the damage done to Victoria. She was in really really bad shape, even with her powers repairing the worst damage, I could make guesses at what they put her through. I looked over at the Yangban member, noting the various locations of his injuries. She did that while missing a leg and both of her hands and much of her face.

*I won't be able to reverse engineer the tech, but I can reverse engineer its user. Right now, I really wanted to make the bastard suffer. "I'll take care of the details."

===================

A/N- Turns out I had a second chapter in me after all.

Spelled out in no uncertain terms all the stuff so few people seemed to get about Vicky's rebirth.

And other developments!
I paced nervously in our mobile command center. "Do you think they're okay? It's been hours. It shouldn't be taking this long." A question I'd probably asked thirty or forty times already. "Why is it taking this long?"

Dragon's voice came over the speaker. "I don't know. I've been monitoring China's telecommunications as best I can under my current programmed limitations." *And it's our fault she still has those limits.* "There's not a lot to go on, except that they're preparing their military for a full scale military action. Whether that's a response to intel from the other side, or simply a reaction to their dimensional access being cut off, I cannot currently say."

*Dammit, Taylor, how am I supposed to do this without you?*

I absentmindedly took a drink from the nutrient fluid the suit provided. It tasted like cactus juice this time. Thanks to whoever weirdness the new recipe came with, its flavor would change more or less at random. Something of a weirdly specific hallucinogen that I was surprised even worked on me. *Then again, since my power works to nullify organics as they interacted with my biology, it's something of a miracle that I can taste anything at all.* More arbitrary Passenger bullshit that only made sense when you realized these things were making the rules up as they went.

Dragon interrupted my thoughts. "I'll continue monitoring the situation."

"Umm... yes, thank you."

Left to my own thoughts, I had to wonder about what we were doing. This mission could have been avoided simply by offering to let China in on the portal network arrangement in the first place.

Denying them a portal of their own was done with the intent of fucking with them. Social and economic pressures, an attempt to force Bet to mold itself into a single unified society. Pantheon and Avalon were always meant to be both the carrot and the stick, a goal to strive for in showing what can be accomplished with cooperation, and the threat of what we could do to those who wouldn't get with the program.

We manipulated China into being a stick as well, by creating an enemy, a more immediate threat to fear instead of us. In a world without Endbringers, we needed that distraction and danger to keep operating the way we operate. Because people are scared of us and what we can do, so we had to give them something to be even more afraid of.

Sure, we also did other things, like PR ops with us talking to world leaders and obeying all the United Nation's various rules about what we were and were not allowed to do on Bet and other
colony worlds. Playing dressup and promising the world a gay royal marriage. Lisa called it 'bread and circuses, when Pantheon was young and Avalon didn't exist. And that's what it was. Acting like celebrities so people would forget one little little detail. We're terrifying. There's no other way around it, we're fucking terrifying, we know it, and we revel in it.

_And the world has good reason to be afraid of us. My power alone makes Pantheon the most successful Class S threat ever seen._ I looked down at the light blue-green matter that made up the surface of my world. I chose the color because it was the exact opposite of meat. Ignoring the biological impossibility of it, if Avalon’s landscape was made of flesh and blood instead xylem and sap. If the scent of copper and iron replaced that of wet grass and indistinct nectar, no one would ever want to set foot on this planet.

And it was only through the damn parasite granting me these powers to begin with that I was blocked from ever really understanding my own potential. After my Third Trigger, well, fuck to that plan. I broke free of that control, found someone I was supposed to hate to be my closest friend and ally, and together we planned to save the world. Even if we had to destroy half of it to save the other half.

_How many other despots and monsters have told themselves those same words? We're the good guys only if you're on our side and even then we're not exactly forgiving to our allies. Not that we expect them to be better to us. Then again, look at our allies._

We had Cauldron, and it was pretty much certain that they were gearing up to take us down after Scion's removal. Maybe they’d never act on it, a cautionary move. But they feared the need existed, and they were probably right. Japan was an ally, and honestly a really good one. We had considerable social influence there thanks to Lily and our defense against Chinese aggression. That didn't stop us from hiding the fact that their Emperor was probably an impostor. Because he was an impostor that was helping us.

The USA was something of an ally, though that was a strained relationship after our maneuvers to kidnap some of their criminals. Without the threat of the Endbringers hanging over us, we were relying solely upon their use of our robot police system to keep them dependent upon us. The UN and EU were stronger allies, but only barely. A thing that would likely change if we started treating them the way we treated the United States. And if they didn't give us the resources we needed when we asked, we'd end up doing just that. Easier to ask forgiveness than seek permission, after all.

Dragon was the ultimate example of our pattern. We had her under our complete control, much like we did with Calvert and Moord Nag. The difference being that Dragon wasn't a monster that needed to be controlled or destroyed. She was an ally, and even tried to be a friend. She did everything she could to help us even before we had the capacity to rescue her from her prison.

_The fact that we don't use that power over Dragon, that she is loyal out of choice, may even make it worse._ We had no reason to distrust her, except that we trusted no one. Or at least trusted no one who could conceivably be a threat to us. Dragon was very much capable of being a threat if she were freed. She was the best hope we had of fighting Scion, and still we kept the keys to her cage.
What we've done is every bit as frightening as the Slaughterhouse Nine, and Nilbog, and the Yangban, have done. Our motives differed, at least from the first two. But it wouldn't be wrong to say we've committed war crimes. Using WMDs like Bolla and a stimmed Moord Nag. Enslaving peoples' minds. Annihilating whole cities just to prove a point. All in the name of peace and unity. Which begged a question. *Is a peace built on lies, fear and manipulation any kind of peace at all?*

*I suppose I have become my father's daughter after all.*

....

My suit beeped at me, waking me from a dream that quickly faded. Something about using my powers to turn Taylor into some kind of hydra like monster to use against Scion. I couldn't remember and I got the feeling I was happier for that.

Right, the com was beeping. "Umm, what is it?"

"This is Dragon speaking. I believe we've been sent a message by the Khyber strike force. A Yangban member was captured by Akaihana inside her base."

Who? I almost asked the question, but Dragon continued too quickly.

"She's a Trump with a carefully concealed method of allowing herself to copy the powers of her teammates and occasionally others for brief periods of time. Has been the leader of one of the most popular teams in Japan for the last fifteen years."

"Okay, that's a start. The part about the message?"

"He gave Atropos' access code after his capture and now refused to speak with anyone other than you. They report he has serious injuries beyond what could have been sustained during his capture. I've yet to observe the captive or his condition, but there is the possibility that they hurt him more than they had to. Possibly related to the copying aspect Akaihana's powerset. I recommend you take care not to accuse them of anything or alert them if you suspect torture or other malfeasance. It might be wise to request transporting the captive to Avalon before interrogation."

I frowned. That's just wonderful. "I'm going. If this is a message from the team, we have to act immediately. Has Janus been contacted?"

"Yes, he'll be there presently."
Twenty seconds later, the man appeared not too far away. Our mobile command center had its own deployment pad and I was ready to go. "Thanks for the ride. And thanks for always putting up with this crap."

He shrugged. "Hey, don't worry about it. Maybe I don't have the most interesting job in the world, but I live a comfortable life while only working a few hours a months. At the cost of having no idea which hours they'll be ahead of time is a perfectly acceptable tradeoff."

"I still kinda feel bad about it."

He looked down. "Well, umm, if you wanna do me a favor to call us even, then I'm kinda, well."

I waited a few seconds. "We're in a hurry, if you need time to figure out how to ask, then maybe we can wait until after?"

He took a deep breath. "My girlfriend'skindasmallsolcanthurtherwhenwegetintimate."

*What? Oh. Oh! I really need to stop offering to do nice things for people.* But it made sense things would get a little disproportionate considering how I built his body to be a healthy adult male and then gave it the equivalent of a second final puberty spike. Dumb mistake on my part. "So, you need a size reduction?"

"It'd be appreciated, yes."

================

A/N - A thought occurred to me. We've seen a lot of Taylor without Taylia. Not so much of Amelia. Welcome back, self loathing girl that's afraid she's a monster. You're less cute about it than Riley, so everyone hates you.

Also- this chapter may have become a "spelling it out in no uncertain terms since a few of my readers aren't paying enough attention to really see it" moments.
Our side of the Japanese gateway was already pretty heavily populated around the portal. Real construction equipment, one of Dragon's industrial bases. More than half of Avalon's population lived within a couple hundred miles of this portal.

Even before Lily's unmasking, the promise of a nation founded on the goal of becoming a truly modern society had resonated with the younger generations of Japan who blamed traditionalism for everything. Sometimes correctly, and sometimes for reasons that made no damn sense. So even with Japan now holding its own portal to a new world, we were still getting huge amounts of Japanese immigrants.

I shunted over to atop a helipad. There was only one person there waiting. A very attractive Japanese woman. She reached her hand out. I shook it. "Good evening, Empress. Sorry for troubling you. I am Akaihana, and it's an honor to meet you."

Her English was almost flawless, enough that what little accent she kept only served to make her seem exotic. I had to imagine that was her goal. As was her costume, a form fitting bright red outfit that I guess was something like an evening dress mixed with a kimono. Showed her arms and legs, so it certainly wasn't traditional. To say nothing of being low enough cut to confirm that no, she was not wearing a bra. I avoided looking, keeping my eyes straight on hers instead. Too busy worrying about Taylor to enjoy the view anyway.

It was likely none of that hid the light blush forming on my face. I shook her hand, separated by the gauntlet of my armor.

The strange thing about the Japanese hero culture was that most of them tended to have public identities. Or, at least, their faces exposed for all to see. They kept to the same tradition as the western culture in having hero and team names, but they didn't hide their identities. And those with the physical durability to afford it would tend toward revealing outfits. By that standard, Akaihana had to be a tough as hell.

Really, they weren't all that different from how New Wave functioned. *Hmm, if I think of it later, I'll have to ask Aunt Sarah if she got her inspiration from the way the Japan was doing things.*

I let go of her hand, and it was definitely me that let go. I got the feeling she'd have been happy if I hadn't. "It's good to meet you, too. I've heard nothing but impressive things." *Absolutely true. The total of three sentences I know about her are impressive.* "Speaking confidentially, I think this captive of yours has to do with a current mission a number of my team is on. Sorry for the inconvenience of it landing in your lap like this."

She smiled wonderfully. "Not at all. Things have been quite peaceful around here after that tussle"
with the Yangban, and Lily unofficially joining our team. This is the most excitement we've had in weeks. Personally, I think that every so often it's good to, umm, spice things up? As long as everyone enjoys themselves in the end."

My suit's social analysis tech highlighted a few details in her phrasing and behavior, and kindly informed me that this woman was flirting with me pretty blatantly. Unfortunately, it couldn't tell me if she was honestly attracted, or just trying to manipulate me in some fashion. Maybe both.

Either way, I wasn't going to let it work. "Honestly, I've had a bit too much spice in my life lately. Please take me to your 'guest'."

*During the debriefing, I'll have to mention all of this to Lily and see what her opinion is.*

She smiled knowingly. "I can only imagine." Then turned and led into their base. Swaying her hips enough to remind me that she was, indeed, leaving the implied offer open.

I put my efforts into watching the base itself. It looked more like something out of a scifi movie than anything practical. Seemed pretty well funded considering this was a country that was reduced to functional Third World status. Dozens of ordinary looking people in body suits comprised mainly of copper, silver, and gold colors, each less common than the last. Some kind of ranking system, I had to guess. A lot of them stopped to gawk at me. I found it a little uncomfortable.

"When you said 'successful', I didn't think you meant it was like this." I subvocalized the words for Dragon to pick up.

Text went across the screen of my HUD. *Most of it's just for show. The computers are over a decade old, and the majority of supposed workers are using the internet for purposes of amusement or college level student projects. Some are just playing video games.*

She looked up at me. We were probably the same height if standing barefoot, but the underlayer to my Dryad left me standing at over six foot. "Is something wrong?"

*Should I tell her that I know this display is a fake? Or just bite my tongue on the subject?* Neither seemed to be an especially good idea if I wanted her to trust me. I opted for a middle ground on the subject. "It must be cultural, but about your offices back there seemed odd to me."

Her laugh was musical. "Oh, no, those aren't offices. Not any more, at least. Japan once held ambitions of a state controlled force, much like the Protectorate in America. After Leviathan, that ambition was forgotten as all but the most stalwart of our parahumans, as you say, fled for greener pastures. We acquired this building some time later and repaired it. The top two floors are now an internet cafe. It has proven profitable enough pay for the upkeep of the building. And it's nice to be able to talk to our fans."
Well, that makes a weird sort of sense. "Hmm, never would have thought of something like that. Clever."

She never stopped smiling as she led me through the hall, pressing her hand to a panel. The wall opened and I followed her through. "I must admit that I am impressed. Most visitors don't notice anything odd about it at all. You have a keen eye." And she's back to flirting with me.

I tried not to enjoy it too much. The suspicion that it was all an act, coupled with worry for Taylor made that fairly easy to do. "What about the uniforms?"

"Oh, that was Hoji's idea. A theme from some scifi show he keeps trying to get me to watch. All in good fun, as they say."

Japan is weird. "And it does create the illusion of a well equipped staff, whenever guests come by.

She smiled coyly. "Well, yes, there is that. Appearances are important, whether we like to admit it or not. Which brings me to our captive. I promise you, my people aren't responsible for what you're about to see." The lie detector confirmed she was telling the truth. Not that we could completely trust that. Especially not around a Trump with an unknown set of abilities to draw upon.

Another door opened, revealing the man. To my surprise, he was caucasian. His face was badly damaged, and even from a distance I could tell his cheek was crushed. Based on the damage, I wouldn't be surprised if his eye was destroyed as well. "Don't worry, I believe you."

The part that convinced me this wasn't their doing was the stitching that had been done along his jaw. Someone surgically repaired him.

I stepped forward, and his one good eye focused on me. "Uhm tell you dey alive. Ship broke. Use shu- shu- thingy. Dey took thingy! Give it back!" He attempted to lunge from the chair, and when he couldn't he started to cry, his tears were pink with blood. "Uh need thingy. Ish impotant." He sobbed.

I looked over at Akaihana. "What 'thingy' is he talking about?"

"He was wearing a full body suit when we found him. Our scans showed some unknown Tinker tech. We have it and a couple other objects in storage."

"Need it! Need thingy! Keep promise! Scawy girl said if ah give thingy, you fix! Need thingy so you make pain stop! Hurts so bad. Please give it." He wept as he struggled desperately against his bonds.
I almost cried as well, it was horrible to watch.

*Why did they do this?* I stepped toward him, and the men guarding the prisoner looked behind me, then stepped back and let me approach. My armor was designed to shift and expose my hands if I needed them to. I subvocalized again. "Dragon, if anything seems off, I want you to disable me. We can't rule out a trap completely."

The armor folded away from my palm and I put my hand on the poor man's scalp. The obvious damage was pretty bad. Bad enough that I started drawing raw material from the Yggdrasil to provide mass for healing.

The brain was another mess entirely. Someone had somehow pushed things into his skull without actually doing any external damage. Whatever they used was still alive. I took the time to examine the material, eventually recognizing it as pine needles. *It was a fucking partial lobotomy done entirely by pressing pine needles up against various parts of his brain. Including the part that understood pain.* I knew it had to be Clarice's work if only because no one else had this kind of skill. Probably using Lily to get the needles into place. A clear message that this unfortunate was sent by the two of them.

It was also easy for me to dissolve the needles into harmless nutrients for his blood stream, showing a clear understanding of my powers. I put the Yangban member to sleep, mended the damage I could with some of the spare biomass I had from my suit, then stepped back and turned toward Akaihana.

"I suppose the question now becomes what to do with him, and with the equipment he had. Atropos clearly trusted you enough to send him here. Is her good will enough for you, or are we going to need to negotiate you turning him over to our custody?"

Again with that beautiful smile. "I think we can settle for knowing we've done a good deed. But I wouldn't mind if, perhaps, you could build some of those power enhancing suits you for me and my team. I understand you've given them to your close American friends. I would hope that we could be close friends, too?" She managed to pout without it looking stupid, in much the way she somehow made her costume not look trashy.

*Is this what all the flirting was for? A set of armor?* "Just so it's clear, I can't promise that. The generic armor sets are one thing, I can promise a number of those. But to create a suit designed to run custom off of your armor, our Tinkers have to run several tests. Learn every detail about how your power works, and then maybe they'll be able to build something that compliments your powers. Not all powers can be improved. The first question is always if you're willing to be tested in the first place."

She smiled. "I think I can agree to that."

She led me to a storage locker, where the armor was stored. My suit's scanning tech started analyzing
what it could. Dragon relayed the information. It's a shunt drive without the keycode wiped. I can use it to adapt our own dimensional tech to access Khyber through their barricade tech. I'll need to examine it in our base. I am already contacting Tir, I'll need his help reverse engineering the equipment."

I smiled broadly. They didn't take down the barricades, but this was as good or better.

Akaihana smiled as well, her eyes glinting. "I take it your visit has been satisfying."

Despite myself, this time I blushed. The relief of knowing Taylor was safe and I'd be able to see her soon made me let my guard down. "Yes, very. It means we can stop the CUI from ever stealing any more worlds. And I can..." I stopped myself.

She smiled. "You must love her very much."

==========

A/N- Briefly considered Akaihana succeeding here. But that woulda been pointless drama that didn't fit the character development as it stood in the story thus far for her to seduce Amelia.
Ch 385- Theo

*Doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would.* As far as first thoughts after a near death experience go, it wasn't that bad. Certainly better than what followed. *Where's my shirt?* I looked around, noting that my head was resting on Missy's lap while Clarice was next to me on one side, and Amelia was on the other. *Huh, never really noticed before, but Amelia's kinda cute from this angle. Oh my god she looks like Kayden. What the fuck's wrong with me?*

Distracted by that line of thinking, maybe I could be forgiven for the first words. I looked over at Clarice and smiled. "Guess you were right about not taking anyone up with me."

Missy and Clarice hugged me. They were wearing the generic overlayer that Amelia tended to make for emergency clothing. *Oh, right, they were brought up by Zach. Of course they would need a change of clothes.*

The sun was just starting to rise, but that meant very little since I had no idea where we crashed or where we set up camp. Given Missy's power it could literally be anywhere on the planet. "So, umm, how long was I out?"

"Around fifteen hours," Missy answered. "You're lucky you made it at all."

I looked over at Amelia, in her armor. "I take it the mission was successful?"

"More or less," Taylor's voice came through my armor. "There's no resistance right now, but I'm sure several of the Yangban are hiding among the civilians, and I can't be sure which are which. It would be a lot easier if I thought to get Chinese into my brain upload."

Amelia sighed. "And we were expecting to only capture a handful of Yangban, maybe some technicians and other skilled labor. People we could either use as a resource or trade back to China for some kind of concession. Instead we're looking at thousands of people, most of them farmers and other laborers. Honestly it's going to take forever to sort through it."

"One hundred and twelve thousand, three hundred and seventy one people in total. Yangban make up around fifty of that. Not including the dead."

I started to sit up, and the girls moved to the sides and gave me a bit of a push on my shoulders, making it easier on me. I didn't need the help, but I appreciated it all the same. Putting the top layer of my armor back on, I read the display highlights. Which consisted of a lot of minor damage throughout the entire suit. "But it's still a win, everyone's okay?"
Zach shrugged. "Well, it's not a loss, but a few million dollars in equipment destroyed and we have Taylor and Vicky are sharing space inside Amelia's backpack. So I'mma vote that we've seen more decisive victories."

"Hey, I got maimed by the best!" Victoria insisted. "Turns out I was fighting the guy who managed to kick Lung's ass. And I totally winning that fight until hundreds of Yangban showed up to save him. You guys couldn't have kept that barricade device going for five more minutes? By the way, what are the odds we can keep that guy around for a while. I so deserve a rematch."

Dragon's voice spoke over the coms next. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. Feng Hao did not survive Atropos' attack on the palace. I have made contact with Pakistan's President and informed him of the situation, as well as the United Nations Security Council. Both would like to speak with Gaea and Khepri immediately. I've delayed the UN meeting by requesting they organize the full UN for a proper explanation."

"Understood." Taylor's voice was mechanical, tired. "I have been unable to find the Pakistani colonists. Could you investigate where they might have been taken? Contact China and let them know we're willing to negotiate a transfer of... fuck it, my political bullshit doublethink tolerance is at an all time low right now. Whatever bullshit excuse you need to draw up that lets us trade our captives for the Khyber colonists is fine. Throw China a bone that they don't have to admit they're responsible to sweeten the deal."

"We're just going to let them get away with this!" Vicky exclaimed. "The fuck?!"

Lily sighed. "Black ops mission, we always knew it wasn't going to be a killing blow. But I don't think this can be called them 'getting away' with anything. We've taken their stolen world, and with it all kinds of Tinkertech stuff that probably costs like a billion dollars. Moving over a hundred thousand of their own people like this had be be costly, too. And we killed over half their parahumans, including at least one of which that was Triumvirate tier. And captured a bunch of others. We made them bleed pretty hard today and all of us walked away alive.

"Dammit. I guess you're right. But I'm going on record to say that if they continue being assholes, we take the kid gloves off, shunt right into the palace, and literally shove their heads up their own asses."

"Noted." Taylor responded. "We have some diplomacy shit to take care of. Horus, Osiris, the two of you should be in good condition. You're assigned to sorting our prisoners and doing what medical assistance you need to. Sveta and Boost are on site already along with some of the Dragon's Teeth, so I don't imagine we'll have any short term problems. Everyone else, go home and get some sleep. No excuses, we'll need all of you later."

Amelia spoke up as I started to get to my feet. "Oh, and before I forget. Akaihana was asking about a suit for her to use. Lily, you know her better than I do. Is she trustworthy enough to give a customized set of armor to? We probably need to find some way to thank her after you dropped that guy in her lap like that, one way or another."
"Uh. Umm. I don't know her that well. Well, not really. But we gave Chevalier a suit, and none of us really knew him at the time. So by that standard I don't see why not. And it couldn't hurt to show the Japanese capes that we're willing to help them like we do over in America."

Taylor's voice came over the com. "We have some time before worrying about it anyway. We can probably fish the suits out of the ocean eventually, but they'll need repairs and maybe a few adaptations. Lily, be sure to let Akaihana know we're grateful for her help. Even let her know some of the vague details that we're eventually going to release to the public if she asks. But make sure you get some sleep first."

"Uh, sure, I can do that. Bed first, Akaihana tomorrow." Lily vanished, using her shunt drive.

_Huh, why's she acting so weird?_ No one else seemed to notice, but almost everyone else could barely hold a conversation. _Maybe this is just how she gets when she's tired?_ I stood up, using a bit of the antigrav to lift Missy and Clarice to their feet without any real problems. "Are the two of you okay?"

Missy went to speak, then yawned. _Cute._ Clarice had a bit more control. "Worn out, that's all. Staying awake twenty plus hours, overtaxing our powers, nothing a good night's sleep won't take care of." It was her turn to yawn. And then mine. _They really are contagious._ "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

I smiled and kissed Clarice in the forehead, then a quick peck on the lips for Missy. "Well, off to bed with you both. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, Janus is probably already waiting on the other side." Missy agreed. I let them go so they could shunt without accidentally dragging me along.

I looked over at Zach. "So just us guys, huh?"

"Looks like it." There wasn't the usual joking attitude in his voice, not even the attempt at faking it.

"What the fuck happened while I was out?"

"Let's talk on the flight." He lifted off the ground and I followed. Whatever damage happened to my armor didn't seem to be slowing it down any, something I'd have to ask Clarice about later. We went higher than I expected. "This is a major league fuckup. Vicky's acting like it's not a big deal but... Theo. Promise you won't tell anyone about this. It has to stay between us. Even though everyone else here already knows, don't talk to them about either."
If Taylor and everyone already know, then they'll be able to deal with it more than I could. I nodded, and then felt stupid for doing so. He couldn't see me from this angle. "Yeah, I can keep quiet if it's that big a deal."

Zach took a deep breath. "When Vicky was fighting the Yangban. She's acting like she was actually fighting the whole time and it wasn't anything but that. They held her for at least two hours before she was rescued. If they wanted to kill her, she'd be dead right now."

Fuck. She could have fooled me with the way she was acting.

"She... I don't think she fooled any of us. I'm sure Lily and Clarice saw enough of it to actually know what happened or deduce it through powers. The rest of us had to read between the lines, but we're not stupid. They tortured her. Maybe they had some kind of power that forced her into normal state, or maybe they had powers strong enough not to care, but they tortured her from whenever they caught her to when Lily showed up and started killing them."

Oh fuck. I took a slow breath. If Clarice figured out what happened, and of course with her powers and history it would take her all of an eybblink to do so, then there was no way she'd let this slide. I'd seen it a couple times, when she slipped back into the mentality of Bonesaw. When her friends and family were threatened or hurt. Victoria was something like a surrogate aunt to her. "How... did Clarice take this?"

"Oh, right, forgot to mention Lily and Vicky brought back a prisoner."

Oh fuck. Just when things were starting to get stable. Just when she was starting to get better. Fuck.

"Yeah, exactly. Some impromptu brain surgery using Lily's power and pine needles. Taylor approved, no objections from the peanut gallery. I guess it was necessary. Had to use his shunt drive to get a message back over to the team and maybe Dragon could follow it up by reverse engineering their shunt tech or whatever. The plan worked and the asshole deserved everything they did to him and worse, so I can't say it was wrong. But, well..."

"But I needed to know." This is going to be a big thing with Clarice, and probably Missy. I'll have to talk to them soon.

"Yeah, that."

"Thanks for the heads up."

"We're bros, right? Is how we do."
"No, seriously. It's good to know you were there to look out for them when I couldn't be. Anything you need, just let me know."

"Hey, how about you don't kill me for seeing them both naked, and we'll call it even?"

============

A/N- Some things no one noticed from the prior chapters (so disappointed by the way). Some other things snuck in to see if you'll notice.
TiredFocusWeak. Even now that I had Taylor hooked up to the Dryad, letting me regulate her health manually, she was not doing well. She needed time to recover. And we needed her to be awake for the meeting with the UN. I could handle Pakistan alone. It didn't take much to let her drift off into sleep. The couple hours would give me time to do some minor repairs. Clarice did her best, but the materials were substandard, and Taylor just didn't have all those brain modifications that Clarice had.

"Don't worry, Vicky, she's just asleep. She'll be fine."

"Who's worried?" My sister was, in many ways, physically more damaged than Taylor. It was her power alone that was keeping her alive right now, and I couldn't do much more than provide her with raw materials equivalent to her own genetic code to absorb into herself as a patch job.

"I am. I'm worried about both of you. You push yourselves so hard it's like you want to break."

There was a spike of emotion in her that I couldn't quite identify before her power blocked me out again. "Well, I can't speak for Taylor. But don't worry about me. You know me better than that, Ames. I don't 'break'. Sure, I can be killed. Been there, done that, and maybe someone will do it to me again. But nothing and no one will ever break me. You can count on that. You can count on me."

In spite of myself, and the concerns I had, I smiled. "No wonder you and Taylor hate each other. You two are so much alike that it's kinda creepy."

There was a spike of annoyance. "According to Crystal, she's supposedly like you. All quiet and adorkably shy and shit. I have to be honest with you, I really don't see it. She's basically the biggest bitch in any room she walks into. I never thought you'd shack up with a supervillain. Did not call that aspect of your personality."

There's a lot of my personality you never saw. That I never let you see. "God damn it, Victoria. Every fucking time. She's not a supervillain."

"Okay, reformed supervillain then." Vicky acted exasperated, though she really didn't register as that upset. "I mean don't get me wrong, I get the appeal. The bad boy, or girl I guess, thing can be really sexy at times. And the whole fantasy of changing them and making them not complete assholes. I've been there a couple times."

"Really?" Put this on the list of things my sister never told me about. "Who?"
"No one finds out?"

"Not from me, at least."

"Well, I kinda had a recurring, umm, fantasy about Lung. There might have been a chainmail bikini involved. I wasn't the one wearing it."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"Dude was hot! And I don't mean that as a stupid pun. Tall, good looking, buff as hell, and he never ever wore a shirt. If he wasn't a complete douchebag, yeah, I'd have slain that dragon all night long."

*There's a mental image I would have been fine going my entire life without.* "Vicky. Why are you telling me this."

"I just wanted you to know that I get where you're coming from with Taylor. She's all broody and bitchy and dark. Then you come along and smack her over the head, show her the error of her ways and change her for the better. Typical teen fantasy. I'm sure her running around in a skin tight suit made of pure silk was a factor as well."

I found myself smiling a little at that thought. *Maybe I should talk to Taylor about that.* I started to blush. "Is there a point to any of this?"

"Uh... there was when I started, but I sorta forgot what it was."

I sighed theatrically. "Well, feel free to figure out what it was. I have to do politics now."

"Okay, I'll just hang out in here with the decapitated head of your fiancée while you do that."

I activated the com system, voice only. <My apologies for the delay, Mister President.>

<That is quite alright. I was told you've succeeded in taking back our colony world, while we had believed it was lost forever. Have you identified those responsible for this crime?>

I frowned. This was the delicate part. *Have to imply it's China without saying it's China.* <We are still investigating. We have captured a number of members of the organization responsible, however we still need time to process the information and come to any final conclusions. In addition, the terrorists appear to have been collecting slave labor. We suspect that's what happened to your missing colonists, but they weren't with the individuals that we captured. Searching an entire planet...>
could take some time.>

*That amount of time being around twenty minutes with Tayor at her best. Pity that's not happening right now.*

<I assume you want to ask whether we wish to keep our current colony world or have the old one returned to us.>

*Well, at least he understands the basics. <Yes, exactly. It might take some time before we can safely return this world if you prefer that option. There is still resistance in some areas that we'd need to quash, for fear of them attacking your colony.>

<And the invaders would still have the 'shunt' technology that Avalon uses to travel between worlds at leisure? They could invade our colony again at any time?>

Words scrolled across my screen. *He's Fishing for information, it's safe to admit shunt tech takes time and needs to be aligned to a given world.* I relaxed a little, focusing on the link I had with Taylor. *Vicky wasn't wrong about change. Even with her asleep, she is my calm in the storm. Thanks to me, she is better. Thanks to her, I am better. And together we are making the world a better place.*

"Yes, they've already managed to align shunt technology between Bet and Kyber A. The only security we could offer is the same technology they used to shut us out and block the portal, but that means the gate would be shut down as well."

<And, as you've just shown, the technology is imperfect. Is our new colony world any better off than the old? Couldn't they shunt to it instead?>

<I can only say that it's unlikely. This is classified information, but it takes time to analyze a gateway and how it links to Bet. Labyrinth, the gate maker, has a power that lets her do it automatically. We require days of tinker analysis for our shunt drives to access a specific world. But they might have a Tinker that's developed a superior method.>

*Then again, we don't need a better method. We have a hidden microportal that we use to scout for worlds before creating actual portals, so by the time anyone gets a colony world we already know everything we need to know about it.*

<That is a significant concern.>

<One that we are doing everything in our power to address. Now that we've proven we can break through anti-shunt technology, I doubt they'll try the tactic again. There is still the question of which
world you want to hold. As per portal network treaty, you are only entitled to one colony world.>

<We will keep our new location. The other is a known security risk.>

Now for the fun part. <If you wish, Avalon could scan your portal. Then if there's risk of it being attacked, we will be able to respond immediately. Considering the circumstances, we are going to extend this offer to all nations with a colony world. Even if it means revealing tactical information on our technology.>

<I... shall need to discuss that offer with my advisors, you understand.> Between the audio only and translation device, most of the emotion of our conversation was rendered impossible to guess, but he didn't sound enthusiastic about the idea. That was fine, we didn't need permission. As Akaihana said, it was all about appearances. We needed to appear like this was something that took effort.

<Ah, yes, advisors and beaurocracy. I understand all too well.> That you'll use that as an excuse to tell us no later. <While on the subject, we will do what we can to see that the resources stolen from you by the terrorists are returned as well as the people. It would be helpful if you itemize the supplies and equipment you had sent to the original colony for us, in addition to the names of the colonists.>

<I will see to it that you get the information within a week.>

<Thank you. I believe that covers everything, and I apologize for the late hour.>

<Yes, thank you.> The display kindly informed me that he was off the line. Yes!

"Okay, and that counts as renouncing claim on Khyber A. It's now officially an unclaimed world." We'll have to assign it to UN oversight eventually, but for right now it's truly international and we can do as we please. "Dragon, you're authorized to bring over your suits, now. Collect and analyze the wreckage of their tinker tech and form a plan for all the colonists. We can't let them stay on this world, but we can give them the choice of either returning to the CUI, or making their lives on Avalon. When I get back to Mashu, I'll start generating a supply of fruit plants to provide them food for the time being."

==============

A/N- This chapter did NOT cooperate with me. Ugh. Hopefully the contrast between this chapter and the last Amelia perspective chapter is suitably disturbing.
"Taylor? Are you okay?" Amelia's voice.

"Focus." I located the system in her armor that let me speak through it. At the best of times, it was more like texting than it was speaking. "Just tired. I can't believe I fell asleep." I closed my eyes as my little chamber started lighting up.

This was normally where Clarice stayed, when she was piloting her doll. It had a bunch of stuff I didn't recognize that I had to assume made sense to her, but I was just in it for the viewscreen and interactive communication tech. Not that I needed or could even use most of that.

"Relief-Guilt." "Sorry, you needed your rest."

"So you forced me to go to sleep?"

"Worry-Guilt-Concern." "More like I just stopped keeping you awake. If you can trust Clarice to surgically remove your head, surely you can trust me to care for you. Right then, that meant allowing your brain to recover. Almost a full day of being awake, plus low levels of hypoxia. You needed a chance to recover."

I could feel how worried she was for me, and I had to admit I felt a lot better now that I did before I went to sleep. The headache had even gone away somewhat. "Okay, you're right, so what happened while I was out?"

"Pakistan renounced claim on Khyber A. We're trying to sort through refugees, despite being outnumbered by them. And all our Yangban captives are now unconscious and being processed to our planet. Emma says she's about half done with growing you a new body and we'll need Riley and Missy for a lot of the job tomorrow and probably for the rest of the week."

"She's getting tired." "You slipped on Clarice's name again."

"Foolish-Fear." "Really? Fuck. I thought I was past that. Anyway, we'll be waiting until tomorrow before we do anything important."

Concern-Love-Hope. Wait, how long was I asleep? Why is it so dark? I tried to talk and my mouth barely moved. Oh fuck, what's- oh, right. I am currently a disembodied head. Huh, put that on the list of things I never imagined could come up in conversation.
Okay, I guess I could afford the nap, then. "So, umm, where's Vicky?"

"She recovered enough to be sent home. After regaling me with tales of how she thinks Lung would look good in a bikini and how you rocked the femme fatale look with your Skitter costume. Apparently she thinks your legs look good wrapped in silk. I agree fully."

"You... oh god you're not joking, are you?"

AmusementConfirmation. "Oh how I wish I were. On the plus side, I now know what I'm getting my sister for her birthday. Well, really it's probably more of a gift for Chevalier. Oh, and I'm going to want one for me, too."

I focused on concern and dread, more out of comedy value than because I actually felt dread. We weren't good at using the link to convey ideas, but we were starting to get there. "You're not going to tell me what it is, are you?"

"You know me too well, sometimes." AmusementLoveSafe. "Don't worry, you'll find out eventually."

In spite of myself, I smiled. It was entirely useless considering I was in a hole in Amelia's armor right now, with only the glow of a display system I didn't know how to read to see me. "So we should probably go to bed for real, then. Get some actual sleep before we're needed tomorrow. You need it almost as badly as I do."

AgreementDesire. "One last annoyance to go through. I took care of Pakistan, but we still got the UN Security Council to deal with."

Damn. "Are you sure we can't just put that off until tomorrow?"

"Probably not. There's already speculation that we used the Endbringers to access Khyber. All according to plan and all that, I know. But that doesn't stop it from being something we need to address right away. Laos, Thailand and North Korea are all expressing concerns that this is a precursor to us starting a war of aggression against China. Pointing at our deepening alliance with Japan as further evidence."

I would have sighed if it were possible. "Because wanting to help people, that's proof we plan a war? And I take it China's remaining quiet on this, letting their puppet governments do the advocating for them."

"Looks like it. Anyway, we've got five minutes."
There are so many things bodies are good for. Taking deep breaths to psyche yourself up, for example. Or laughing at the absurdity of it all. Or punching something just for the fun of it. "God, I miss having a body."

"I miss you having a body, too. Don't worry, we'll get you hooked up to a new one as soon as possible." MischievousAmusementDesire. "Maybe afterward, we can take a little while to break it in?"

Blushing. That's another thing having a body is good for. She didn't get to 'break in' any of my others, either. Leaving out how absurd having the ability to say something that crazy was, none of this was fair to her. I should say yes, I should want to say yes.

RealizationRegretGuilt. "Oh god, Taylor! I'm sorry! I just meant it as a joke! I don't want you to feel pressured into doing anything you're not comfortable with. I'm totally happy with how things are right now. Don't you dare feel like you need to change for me. We both know all that's going to do is make us both miserable." InsistenceFearLove. "I'm happy, you're happy, that's more than enough. It's more than I would have believed possible a year ago. It's more than I deserve after everything I've done."

"Don't say that. You deserve to be happy."

LoveGratitudeSupport. "Then keep doing what you've been doing. That makes me happy."

"Yeah, I can do that." I pushed my agreement and love into the link. She's right, we are happy. No point mixing in pointless drama that would only distract from that.

"Well, there's one thing you can do differently."

"Oh?"

"Stop losing body parts. Or bodies. It's really inconvenient for all of us."

I smiled. "I'll do my best, but no promises."

"Good. Now the five minutes are up. Time to talk to a bunch of fat old guys who think they understand war better than us, even though we kill Endbringers and their only military accomplishments can be summed up as losing the Vietnam war."

I really miss being able to laugh. "It's like being taught about the birds and the bees by Mother Theresa."
Amelia laughed. Her laughter was one of my favorite things, and it made me glad for everything we had together. "Well, they're just going to tell us it's bad and we shouldn't do it. So, yeah, exactly like that."

"I can't take credit for it, unfortunately. Overheard Zach saying it to Theo. I don't even know what they were taking about."

The viewscreen shifted, forming a three dimensional representation of the United Nations for me to view. I couldn't help but glance down, seeing that my holographic representation was in my dress costume. Amelia's imitation was also costumed and standing beside me.

The holograms weren't quite perfect, but it was good enough. Given what I knew Dragon could do, I suspected that the occasional flicker and slightly transparent nature of the holograms were intentional design flaws. I went to take a breath and, to my surprise, the hologram actually acted like it did just that. Holy shit, Dragon's tech is awesome.

"For the record, Empress Taylor Hebert and Empress Amelia Lavere are present via telecommunications." I hadn't had a chance to memorize names, but this one surprised me. The US Secretary of Defense. Huh, they are taking this seriously.

I took the lead, letting Amelia play backup as per our method in these things. "Correct, Secretary Brown. We've heard some of the rumors, and I imagine there are others. First of all, we want to make it clear that we did not use the Endbringers in any military action. The oversight personnel you assigned to our research facility will be able to tell you there was no Endbringer activity at the time of the operation. We weren't running any tests. In addition, only Eidolon can command the Endbringers to activate. I'm sure he'll confirm that he did not. In fact I'm sure he already has.

Amelia took a step forward while I tried to take a breath, and the hologram did so. "The other rumor, that we instigated a conflict with China is also not true. We moved on a world controlled by a terrorist organization that we were granted preauthorization from the United Nations to engage. On land internationally recognized as belonging to Pakistan. True, some of the group appear to be Chinese, but we found Europeans and Africans in the group, as well as Japanese and Indians. In addition to large numbers of nonpowered slave labor that we're in the process of returning to their homes."

I didn't smile this time, the hologram would show it. "We are, of course, still investigating. And will likely need to do so for some time before any final conclusion can be reached. However, to our knowledge China has not declared war upon Pakistan or attempted to claim the Khyber A world. Until evidence exists to prove otherwise, we operate on the assumption that we are dealing with an independent militant organization. A sad reality of the world we find ourselves in."

"So we are to understand you've taken no aggressive stance against China? What of your forces in
Japan?" Taiwan's representative, I wasn't sure what politics put him in this meeting but it didn't really matter.

Amelia had that one. "We have no forces in Japan. True, some of us were there during the time of the attack on the Nippon. But only because it was also part of a parade where Atropos was being honored by the Japanese government. Only Atropos intends to stay there."

"Then the portal between Avalon and Japan," the Taiwanese representative prompted.

*My turn.* "We have portals in both the United States and Mexico as well. And are hoping to negotiate for space to construct one or two more in Europe or possibly the Middle East or northern Africa. I hope you're not suggesting we plan a war against every one of those countries, because that would be absurd. It is simply that Japan is providing a significant number of our colonists. I admit, competition over colonists has become contentious in some places, but it's not an act of war."

I watched as Amelia took her next turn. "Avalon is trying for a practiced level of neutrality. Or, rather, equally supporting all nations. In our short history as a nation, we have done nothing but oppose war and acts of aggression against any nation. Provided equipment to allow legitimate, rightful governments to resist insurrections in their own borders. And push for peaceful coexistence between peoples. We want that to be our legacy. Starting with the destruction of the Endbringers, and ending with true peace for our world. All human worlds."

When she has that kind of passion, I can almost see myself being physically attracted to her. "To that end, we want to propose opening the gateways to Aleph. An offer of brotherhood to our dimensional neighbors. There is no longer a threat of Endbringers attacking Aleph. So we must ask ourselves, are they and their people any less deserving of the opportunities that the colony worlds offer, simply because they weren't lucky enough to have the right combination of powers?"

That got a reaction. Aleph gateways had been put off since the beginning. If we were going to press that issue, it would change a lot of political landscapes and everyone here knew it. It was Secretary Brown that spoke up. "I would remind everyone that it isn't the purpose of this meeting to hold a discussion of that nature. We merely wanted to address a possible war between two major nations. I think we've received a satisfactory answer from your side for the time being, but the issue of Aleph joining the colonization program is for another time."

I made my hologram nod in agreement. Shocked again that it even worked. "Yes, of course. And thank you for seeing us on such short notice."

We saved our smiles until after the holograms went down. That worked wonderfully, now began the next stage of our plans.

======================
A/N- Another pain in the duck chapter.
The first thing I noticed when I woke up is I wasn't alone in my bedroom. Someone was stroking my hair. Combat training kicked in and I bubbled space around me, rolled to my feet and took a combat stance. "Riley?!"

She smiled faintly and waved her hand. "Clarice, now." She was more insistent than anyone that we call her that than anyone. A new name, a new identity, a new self. "Just had to make sure you wake up. Too much sleep can be as bad for recovery as too little."

I glanced over at my clock. *Nine. That doesn't seem... oh, PM. Well, fuck.* I relaxed and dropped down in my bed, bouncing a little. One of those little guilty pleasures of mine that every so often when I was alone, I'd jump on my bed for fun. The Yggdrasil padding was soft and healed from any damage, so I could get away with it. Not even Theo and Clarice were allowed to know about that. "So how long was I out?"

"Twelve hours. I had some work to do, so I got in nine, but my power doesn't tire me the way yours does."

"We're both going to be up all night, huh?"

"And work in the morning, but our circadian rhythms should reassert themselves some time tonight. I've got a minor relaxant to let us get a nap in for a few hours if we haven't self corrected by four in the morning. And don't worry, I already have permission to stay the night."

"Oh, okay." I almost had to admire the relationship between Clarice and Amelia. Despite the lack of age gap, they were more like a mother and daughter than anything. *More than my relationship with my mother has ever been, that's for certain.* No point in thinking about that now. "So what do we going to do tonight?"

Clarice managed a light scowl, as if in thought. "The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world!"

*What? "What?"*

She laughed at the look on my face. "Sorry. That's from a silly cartoon that Zach got from Aleph. I think it's from that one company that did those old Bugs Bunny cartoons. Only they still exist on Aleph. I've got the whole first season on DVD. They have pigeons in the mafia and a song about lake Titicaca. And a dog that doesn't realize his girlfriend is really a cat."
I blinked a couple times. "That sounds really stupid."

"It is." Clarice agreed, then she paused for a second and smiled. "Wanna watch?"

I looked back at her. *Oh god, this has to be a bad idea.* "Is it a popcorn occasion or icecream?"

"Popcorn."

"You're on."

....

An hour later, we were munching popcorn in bed, laughing at this stupid, stupid show. Any that fell got quickly eaten by the Yggdrasil. I would never be content to sleep in a normal bed ever again in my life. "How do they get away with this stuff in a cartoon show? Aren't these supposed to be for kids?" *Jeez, if they showed a cartoon with implied cannibalism here, the censors would have strung someone up by their toes.*

"I don't know." Clarice responded through a mouthful of popcorn. "Zach says Aleph is boring so people compensate for it with shock value. They even have softcore pornography on their daytime television shows and it's considered perfectly normal."

"That... is kinda messed up." I kept watching the show, which was now focused on a squirrel that sounded like she was voiced by a sixty year old chain smoker. *Wait... did they just say *anal* on television? For that matter, is 'Piz Peeners' a real person, or was that just another dirty joke? Either way, holy shit!*

I glanced over at Clarice, but either she had an expert poker face, or she didn't get the reference.

"The squirrel likes to hide his nuts in many odd places, where the sun doesn't shine on 'em."

*What? How?!* "I think I know why Zach likes this show so much."

Clarice nodded, but again I doubted she actually understood all the implications of the show. Or, possibly, any of them. She interrupted my thoughts, bouncing excitedly as the next scene started. "This is my favorite song ever!" She started singing along.

I smiled and watched her as she put her singing voice to use on what turned out to be an honestly interesting song throwing out numbers about the sheer vastness of space. Every so often I wondered
to myself how many of her talents were natural, and how many were enhancements that she installed into herself. *I guess it really doesn't matter, that's just who she is.* She was energetic and fun and caring and nicer than almost anyone I knew. If anything, her major problem she that was too giving, too willing to ignore her own happiness to make others feel better.

All of that was genuine, and if her ability to sing beautifully was artificial, then so be it. Just making the outside resemble the inside a little better, that's all. Same with the chocolate brown hair and amethyst colored eyes that she was currently sporting. I realized after a minute that she'd stopped singing, and I was just staring at her.

She hesitated for a second. "So, umm, you think I'm pretty?"

*And she caught me staring. And now she's watching me blush. No sense in trying to deny it.* I smiled and hoped I looked more confident than I felt. "Yeah, of course I do. Everyone thinks your pretty."

It was her turn to blush a little. "I know, but none of them matter. Just you and Theo."

I smiled. That was sweet of her. Some part of me felt like I should be jealous, but I couldn't quite decide of who to be jealous about. If it came down to it, I couldn't be sure if Theo would pick me over Clarice. For that matter, who would I pick? I was sure Clarice would pick me over Theo. But that line of thinking was stupid, there was no reason for us any of us to do something like that. Just stupid paranoid fears.

Besides, if it came down to it, there was no doubt Clarice would side with Amelia over both of us. I couldn't even blame her for that. Amelia was the one who saved her, who gave her a home and a family and a hope for redemption and forgiveness. Even after what she did to Amelia's adoptive father. I wasn't sure I could have done the same, I didn't have that kind of generosity in my heart.

Clarice was still sitting there pensively waiting for me to speak. "Thanks, that really means a lot. I'm sure Theo will agree with me."

"Do you... does this mean you want to do 'stuff' with me? Like you and Theo do?"

*Stuff? What d- oh. Stuff.* I started to blush again. *Wait. 'Uh, I don't do any 'stuff' with Theo. At least, not stuff stuff. Just watching movies and cuddling, that's all. Just like we do, and what you do with Theo. That is all you and Theo are doing, right?' It better be, or I am going to murder him. And then tell Amelia so she can murder him more.*

She looked down at the bed. "Yeah, that's all. We've never even been in each others' bedrooms alone. It's against the rules."
Ah, yes, those rules. Regrettably necessary. All these immature adults around, who knows what trouble they would cause if they weren't carefully monitored? The twins had already gotten their own place so they could 'entertain guests'. "Yeah, me neither. But that's fine, I don't want to do anything like that now."

"But I saw the way you looked at me before. When we were... well, stuck together."

And of course she noticed that, too. "Well, yeah. That's just natural, you of all people should know how nature works." You violate it too often not to know. "But that doesn't mean I think it's a good idea. I'm going to wait until marriage."

She tilted her head. "You mean like my Big Sister?"

No. "Sorta. I just. It's a personal thing."

The bed shifted as Clarice moved closer to me and gave me a hug. The shifting spilled some more popcorn that was promptly eaten by the bed. That was always cool as hell to watch. "I understand. If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to."

I sighed. I had talked to Theo about it, but not Clarice. We were always pretty cautious when it came to talking about family around her, for a number of reasons. The sort of idealism she had about both her birth family and the adoptive one with Amelia. The nightmare of her six or so years spent treating the fucking Slaughterhouse Nine as a family. How that compared to the broken homes that Theo and I came from? We just didn't know how to approach the subject with her.

I leaned against her, sliding down so my head was resting in her lap, then I looked up at her. "To start with, my mother is only thirty one." I paused for the second it took for her to do the mental math. "She has five children, with three men. I've had a total of twenty two step siblings. None for much longer than a year each. My older brother lives with my dad. Somewhere in Michigan, I think. I don't know, it's been years since I talked to either of them. And I just don't want to be like my parents. I want to know it's going to last before I take that step. I need to be better than my mother is. I won't put any of my hypothetical children through that life, either."

"And you don't think we will stay together?"

Oh fuck, can I have a do over for this conversation? "It's not that. How do I make this work for her? Okay, time to talk like a Tinker. "Think of it as, like, a test. An experiment. If we're still together in five years, when we're old enough to marry, then we know it's going to last because it's already lasted that long. I am really hoping that it does, but we can't know for certain. And don't say 'Dinah', we both know her predictions don't work around this team." We also don't know what circumstances surrounding the seventy eight percent chance she gave when I did ask."
She smiled down at me. "Okay, that makes sense."

"Besides, I'm pretty sure Amelia told you that you had to wait, too. Right?"

"Yeah. But your explanation of why makes more sense."

"I'm sure. So, I think we should probably start up the next episode of that silly cartoon."

"Okay."

The rest of the night involved jokes about painting naked people, pianists, bizarrely educational songs, and the strangest parodies of famous musicals. My face was so sore when I woke up in the morning.

A/N- For this chapter I did extensive research. Not quite the best episode of Animaniacs, but certainly the earliest of the truly exemplary ones.
I looked up at the light blue ceiling. I wasn't sure when Amelia decided to make the indoors of our facilities match the outdoors, but it was nice. A hospital that smelled like fresh air instead of antisceptics, like life instead of death. I focused on that, in an effort to not think about why I was here.

Even my memories of being institutionalized was better than what was happening to my body right now as Clarice and Emma were busy detaching my veins from the cobbled together Yggdrasil life support and plugging them into a headless body grown from my DNA. The last few days have truly been a wonderland of things I never imagined happening.

Eventually, something clicked and I clenched my new hands. Funny, I imagined I'd feel cold or sore or unnatural or something, but other than a minor amount of pain in my neck and a mild headache, I felt amazing.

Emma put a hand on my shoulder. Unlike me, her skin actually was cool to the touch. "Okay, that's everything, but we'd like Amelia to give one final check and her seal of approval before you try anything strenuous." She smiled, and it reminded me of Zach. "After all, she's best qualified to make sure everything's in working order."

I sighed, and it felt wonderful to be able to sigh. "You've spent too much time talking to Zach again."

She smiled, and I found myself jealous of how much prettier she was. "Oh, not this time. I just wanted to remind you that you're approaching the six month mark. Your brain should be in good condition for another knowledge upload fairly soon. Just, y'know, in case there's a few things you might like to add. We'll also have to do a repair imprint to make up for the damage caused by your adventures in decapitation."

Oh, right, that. I felt a flutter in my stomach, and remembered that there were annoying things about having a body, too. No, focus on the important details. "What kind of damage are we talking about? It might be better to restore from backup if it's too extreme."

I could have sworn I saw Emma cringe for a second. "No, nothing that severe. Minor damage to your long term memory, low level agnosia. You may have trouble connecting names to faces for anyone you haven't interacted with in the last few weeks. It's nothing that should interfere with your day to day life, but could be an issue with doing your whole Empress thing and making politics with everyone. Also, you'll probably find you like different foods now than you did before."

"I did everything I could to protect the higher brain functions," Clarice informed. "But sacrifices had to be made, I'm sorry."
I almost sighed in relief. "Oh, I was afraid it of far worse than that. Like, I'd need to learn how to use the bathroom properly again. Or I wouldn't remember my dad's name. You did good work, Mushroom." *Wait... I can't remember my dad's name. Dammit!*

I watched Clarice beam proudly. "Okay, I'll go get Big Sister now. I'm sure she's worried and misses you."

"It's only been fifteen minutes."

"So?" She ran off and I had to admit she had a point.

I glanced back at Emma. "There's no nasty surprises in store from this? Like, you're not underselling the side effects to make me feel better? I'm trusting you to tell it to me straight." It still felt a little odd to trust Emma. Not as odd as it did to trust Clarice, mind you, but odd. We were actually friends now, something I yearned for, then gave up on, then stopped caring about. And then got back. Not nearly as close as we once were, and it was likely we never would be again, but friends nonetheless.

She shrugged. "Nothing huge. The usual post cloning health and motor control issues. By the way, I took the liberties of making sure this body matches your old one. I'm sorry if maybe Amelia would have preferred to do it herself."

*Dammit.* "Yes, Emma, you caught me. I like having a figure other than 'beanpole'. Now will you please let me live that down." I didn't really mind all that much. It may have been a violation of however many ethical codes, but it was done with good intentions, and it taught me that I really did care about what my body looked like. That I wanted to be attractive.

"Not until I can kiss my boyfriend without tasting grasshoppers," she smiled. "And as I was saying about side effects, just expect memory lapses. Maybe some random weirdness like suddenly discovering you draw better left handed than you ever could before with your right. Brains are hard to predict like that. Once we use your backup to copy over the nonaltered neural patterns, everything will be fine. Going to cost you one of your three skill uploads, however. But your fiancée is almost here, so think carefully about what other benefits you're interested in and get back to me later."

She looked up and then stepped back, spreading her arms out like gesturing at a banquet. "She's all yours."

*Now I know she needs to start spending time around people other than Zach.* Amelia stepped up. "Hey, how's the new body?"

I shrugged. "Apparently I'm back to eating baby food and yogurt for a couple weeks until everything can run on its own again, but I feel fine. The rest I'm waiting on you to tell me about."
She placed a hand on my face, and I was treated to the peculiar not-electricity sensation of her power working its way through my body. "You're pretty much fine, past the obvious stuff that can take care of itself. But while I'm here, I'll just patch that up, too..." She hesitated for a moment. "Okay, that's weird. I barely noticed it, but there seems to be a thin layer of fatty tissue sticking to the muscle tissues that shouldn't be there. It sort of resembles... a cow?"

"I knew my Big Sister would figure it out!" Clarice declared. "You're the absolute bestest. But it's actually based on a camel."

Emma sighed. "She only noticed because it was Taylor." Then she leaned close to me and stage whispered. "No, seriously, I think she might like you, like you."

I smiled at the absurdity of it. *Okay, Emma, you've made your point already.*

She stood back up and looked over at Clarice. "But yeah, you win. It'll have to wait a couple weeks, though. Now have fun explaining all the cool scifi shit to them."

I couldn't see Clarice from her position, but she took Emma up on that offer cheerfully. "We noticed that the clone bodies were using up nutrition way faster than they could absorb new material, at least for the first week or so until the digestive system fully recovered. It tends to cost the bodies about five percent of their enhanced musculature. So we included a nongenetic mutation that grows a thinly distributed layer of fat throughout the body. Barely noticeable at all, and it'll metabolize within a month at the latest."

"And you didn't think I'd notice?" Amelia asked.

"Not really, no," Emma admitted. "It's a very minor change distributed across the entire body. Even our own bioscanning tech couldn't spot it."

Amelia smiled. "You're right, actually. If it wasn't Taylor I was scanning, I probably wouldn't have noticed at all. I mean, now that I know to look for it, I can find it easy. Actually this would be a really elegant solution for... a lot of things, if I were still a healer."

"Well, I'm sure you lovebirds want your alone time. But don't keep her up too late, she needs sleep pretty desperately, and you're not doing so well, yourself."

*I'm brain damaged right now, even if it's minor. And I have no idea how I'm supposed to feel about that concept. I found the one thing I could lock on, however. And it meant so much more than all the stuff Emma was suggesting. "So, umm, is it safe for us to use the bond again?"*
"Oh, yeah. Of course. That's filtered through your Passengers, so as long as your powers are working properly, it should be safe. We just want to reduce the emotional interference in case that influences your restoration. Taylia away, ladies."

Amelia's emotions washed into my awareness, and once again I was connected to my second half. All of Avalon, all of the zerg, that was nothing compared to one person. It took a couple seconds for my mind to adapt and adjust to her presence, before my attention returned to the millions of miles of awareness I now had. The courthouse in our Boston was now open for business. Thousands of conversations in probably over a dozen languages. Two people were arguing over ownership of a chicken. Around five hundred couples were busy... coupling... but that was all in the back of my mind. Amelia was the centerpiece.

She held my hand and helped me get to my feet. I was a little wobbly, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been when I stepped out of the cloning vat almost half a year ago. I put my other hand on her shoulder and leaned against her a little as I worked out the process of growing accustomed to this new body.

She slipped her hand around my waist, helping steady me. LoveConcernWorry. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good." I misstepped a bit and nearly fell forward.

"Oof. Jeez, Taylor, I think you put on a little weight."

"Only a couple hundred pounds."

"Decapitation is no excuse to let yourself go like that."

"Let myself go?" I scoffed. "I'm in the best shape of my life. My butt is hard as a rock."

DesirePlayful. Her hand moved down and gave a squeeze. I jumped and nearly fell again. "Well, I don't know about rock, but still very nice. Now let's go to bed. Sleep deprivation makes people do stupid things."

I smiled. She was right, as overwhelming as our bond felt when it's initiated, it was badly dimmed by our mutual exhaustion. We both needed real sleep badly right now. I still had Emma's not so subtle suggestion to consider, and I'd need to talk to Amelia about it. When we weren't both on the verge of passing out on our feet.

================
A/N- So the REAL question is: "what did Clarice win in that bet?"
I woke up with my face buried in Taylor's hair. Based upon the evidence I could observe, I had started chewing on it some time during the night. *It's kinda disturbing how often that happens.* Taylor shifted, slowly coming to alertness while I was busy pulling her hair out of my mouth.

_No, not night at all. God damn it this is going to be hell on our sleep patterns._ I glanced over at the clock. *Hmm, only a quarter after two. Okay, if we get up now we'll be okay tonight.* "How are you feeling, sleepy head?"

*ExasperatedAmused.* She rolled over and looked at me. "I feel like if I hear any more head jokes, I'm going to show other people what decapitation feels like."

I tried to pout, and no doubt failed miserably. "Okay, fine, no head jokes. Anyway, I think we should probably get some stuff done now that we've had a little bit of sleep. It's going to be a busy month."

*HappyConfusedProud.* She smiled. "Look at you, taking charge. It's... really nice, actually. You'll have to handle the politics for now, while I start coordinating with Dragon to handle the search and sort from Khyber. That's going to take just about everything I've got."

I scowled and narrowed my eyes. "You just don't want to do the politics, do you?"

She actually knew how to pout, and I suppressed an urge to kiss her for it. That was the end of that look. *SurprisePleasedGuiltConcern.* "Oh, wow, that wasn't quite the reaction I was going for." I found the blush creeping its way up her cheeks adorable.

"To throw your own words back at you, I don't mind." I backed out of bed.

*ConcernDetermination.* "Wait!" Taylor hesitated for a second. "Umm, that was a little louder than I meant it to be. I've been meaning to talk to you about something. It's getting close to time for me to be able to get another brain mod done." *FearDeterminationShy.* "I was thinking I could maybe try making myself attracted t-" *DisappointmentRejectionHumiliation.*

She froze, and looked like she was about to cry.

"Oh god Taylor I'm sorry." I moved back on the bed and hugged her. "I love you, please don't be upset." I wasn't sure what to do, we so rarely needed to comfort each other beyond what the link provided. A single thought of support was enough to get us through almost anything. Everything beyond that was mere window dressing.
"ComfortLove. She hugged me back. "I... I guess that means no, then?"

"It doesn't mean no. It means not like that. Never like that." I took a deep breath and tried to calm my emotions. I needed to explain this in a way that she could understand. I needed her to accept that this wasn't an option. "You know I love you, right?"

"CertaintyLoveSolidarity. "Of course, that's why I thought I could just make that little adjustment. It's not such a big deal, less than one percent of the process it takes to implant a new language or expert level skill in anything. And it's something I want to do."

I shuddered, repressing the memory I got from the last time. How similar the alterations were to what I did to Victoria. Or what my predecessor did to Victoria, if I accepted Taylor's viewpoint when it comes to the difference between us as clones and the originals whose memories and powers we carried. It was a seductive mentality to have, being able to say I wasn't responsible for what happened to Vicky. "You don't know what it looks like to me, Taylor. What I see when I touch you."

"ConfusionRealization. "You mean you can see the memory implants?"

"Not exactly, but close enough. "Think of it like a tattoo. A tattoo of memories and knowledge. Like a cheat sheet for a test, written into your skin. Which is fine, I have no problem with tattoos even if I can't see myself ever getting one. And, yeah, understand that I'll probably get uploads once I'm able to as well. And it's really existentially horrifying to think that every one of both of our memories are built entirely out of the same process of imprinting. But it fits as close as anything's gonna."

"ConcernDisturbed. "Okay, I'm with you so far. Body mods and all that, guess I've had a couple."
She smiled and gestured at her breasts. I had to admit, they looked nice.

"Well, okay, let's say one day, for whatever reason, how would you feel if I tattooed your name on my face?"

"AbsurdityDiscomfortDisgust. "Okay, that does sound a little messed up. Is that really what it would look like to you?"

I shook my head. "Oh how I wish. I might even be able to ignore that. Long enough to, umm, enjoy myself. "EmbarrassedWistfulSadness. "My power doesn't come with an off switch. When I touch someone, I have no choice but to understand their inner workings. It's why I wear gloves."

"AmusedSmug. Taylor's smile was always one of my highlights of the day, even when she was enjoying mean spirited humor. "That and physical contact with you automatically invokes a
Master/Stranger protocol only slightly less restrictive than the Simurgh victims. Frankly I'm surprised they don't mandate that all communication with you be done by holograms.

I smiled back. That was definitely a thing. "Yeah. So imagine the tattoo analogy. Only it's not just on the face. It's everywhere. Every time we'd hold hands and you'd think about kissing me, I'd know it was because of that modification. I would see what it was doing the whole time. If we kissed, and you enjoyed it, I'd know that was just thanks to the damn mental program. To make the analogy more accurate, the tattoos would be flashing neon colors and they'd be everywhere on your body, and I do mean everywhere. Only it's worse because they're on your mind instead of your body. Sure, there might be sick fucks out there like Heartbreaker that get off on that kind of fucked up ego trip, but I'm not one of them. I don't want to be one of them."

_ResignationAcceptanceLove_. She idly stroked the side of my face, looking into my eyes. "Okay, you've made your point. No artificial attraction, it either happens naturally or it doesn't happen at all."

I relaxed and nuzzled into her hand. "Thank you. I understand your feelings. I want it, too. I just want to find a better way. I'd rather have our Tinkers convert me into a male than that."

_RealizationDisgustConfusion_. Her gentle smile faded. I just looked at her, wondering why that reaction. She'll tell me if she's comfortable.

"Huh, maybe I get why you don't want me to alter my sexuality. It's not so much the part where you'd be changing genders that squicks me out. I mean, I talk to Eric all the time and it doesn't even matter. Now that he's stopped trying to lay on the machismo so much, well, he's a nice guy. And if any asshole tries to give him trouble for choosing to change sexes, I would cover them in fire ants and politely explain the error of their ways. But the idea of you making those kinds of changes is just horrifying. Even if it's not something that would bother you. Would it bother you?"

I looked into her eyes. They were perhaps my favorite part of her features. "I'm not sure. I don't think it'd bother me on a body image disorder level, but I'd rather stay female if it's all the same. Maybe if we had an easy way to try it out and switch back. Like a legitimate parahuman body swap power or something. But I don't think those actually exist. If we did find one, would... would you want to try it?"

_HesitationDistaste_. "Umm... I don't think so. It just doesn't feel like it'd be right. Like it wouldn't mean as much or something."

"Yeah, it does sound kinda creepy." I kissed her wrist, but never took my eyes off hers. My own hands had found their way into her lap.

Taylor smirked. "Also, then we'd have to convince some guy to volunteer to do it..."
"I bet Zach would volunteer."

"I know, but it's still so very sketchy and weird and not sexy."

I couldn't disagree with her. All the sketch. "And I'm sure you agree we're ruling an 'open relationship' out forever." *AgreementDisgustJealousy*. "I suppose we could always ask our small army of god tier biotinkers if they could build a controllable body puppet that I can feel physical sensation from. I mean, the Clarice model can let its user experience taste. This can't be too much harder."

*ContemplationRejection*. "Best option on the list, but still leaves a lot to be desired. Guess we're back to it natural or never. Thank you for being so understanding. I love you."

"Hey, it's not like you're not making your share of compromises to make this relationship work. I'd say we're even."

*AmusedImpish*. Her smile matched her mood. "Actually, I was talking about the part where you have to go talk politics now."

I glared at her, mustering as much anger as I could, which was far less than I would have liked. "Okay, I take all of that back. You're an unbelievably selfish bitch and I regret ever meeting you."

"I know, I deserve it. I was talking to Dragon and we have a strategy worked out. She was going to have one of those conversations where she politely told them to fuck off while they made stupid demands, and they could wait to talk to us when we felt like it. But if you want, we can let the barricade device *fail temporarily* so they can peak in." She held her hands up and made the air quotes. "They won't be happy with what they see."

"Wait, you were talking to Dragon during our heart to heart there?" I didn't mind, really. I had my connection to the Yggdrasil, she had hers to her bugs. "So how completely are they fucked?"

*SheepishAmused*. "Sorry, it's just natural for me. I've got basically all of my zerg, we have six barricade devices charged. Fifty of Dragon's best armored suits. We know they have a damn good precog, but what's left of the Yangban are not a match for even a tenth of the forces we have waiting for them. Oh, right, and all our parahuman captives are on Mashu along with all the dead. If there are any Yangban left on Khyber, they ditched their uniforms and with them their shunt capability. So the CUI will have no idea who even survived."

"So, they already know they're only getting what we want to give them? And isn't it, like, the middle of the night in China right now?"
"We told Dragon to fuck with them. She's really good at her job. Does this mean you forgive me and take me back?" She gave the most adorable pout.

"I can't even remember why I was ever upset with you. You're easily the best thing that's ever happened to me."

*GratitudeLoveSupport.* "So, what is your strategy for this chat?"

"I'm thinking of covering them with fire ants and politely explaining the error of their ways." I paused to let Taylor laugh, but that didn't last long. I was starting to consider the possible weight of this encounter. "In all seriousness. After what they did to Victoria, they get nothing from us. I'm going to tell them that all the slave labor is ultimately the responsibility of Pakistan, but we're sure they'd be happy to send them back for the slaves that were captured and sent to China. And of course the captive terrorists and all their resources now belong to Avalon and if the Chinese don't like it, they can get fucked."

*ImpressedApprovalAgreement.*

================

A/N- Having her name tattooed on someone's brain is not Amelia’s fetish.
I glanced over at Taylor. "Is there any chance we can stop doing these weekly meetings at seven in the morning? There's no better time? Like, maybe noon?"

She smiled. AmusementSorry. "Well, you know what they say. It's always noon somewhere."

I shook my head. "No, Taylor, they don't say that. And if they did it still wouldn't mean it for this."

Our teasing was brought to a halt as the other team leaders made their way into the meeting room. For a group ruling an entire world, there wasn't a lot of us. Simply Taylor and I, Emma, Clarice, Trevor and of course Dragon, who only really ever appeared via hologram for these meetings. Her limited ability to multitask typically meant she kept her android body on Tinker projects, and I couldn't blame her for it. We also really needed to find a new head of our Thinker division. Taylor had taken up that slack, mostly out of virtue of being one of a very small number of people who could tolerate Accord.

I looked at the others. These were all my friends, people I could trust. "Alright, I'm in the mood for some good news. Dragon said something about China finally caving in to some of the conditions."

The hologram nodded, and never ceased to be amazed at how lifelike she was. "Correct. The CUI claims to have tracked down the slave ring, and is returning captives to Pakistan, Japan, and Russia. As such, we'll soon be announcing we've finished our part of the job of investigating our group for possible terrorists pretending to be civilians. The international press will call it a deathblow against a violent militant organization and the war will be avoided."

ReliefAnnoyance. I know, I wish we could have hit them harder, too. PatienceCertainty.

"Beyond that, approximately twenty thousand of the Chinese nationals captured on Khyber have agreed that they'd prefer citizenship on Avalon to a return to China. There would have been more, but a significant majority are criminals. Less than half of those willing are people we'd accept."

DisappointmentResignation. "Better than nothing. Excellent work."

"And that's about the end of my good news." Dragon continued. Oh god damn it. "Our West Coast team has stalled. Boost left the team, preferring to work as a free agent. Anima is still on the team, but she refuses to use her powers. Crystal has officially retired and moved back to Boston."

I sighed and looked down for a second. We used Crystal up and burned her out. Genius Loci's death might have been the final blow, but by no stretch of the imagination was it the only. We should have
noticed sooner. Lisa probably did. "She stayed on longer than we were expecting. I'm going to talk to Aunt Sarah about everything. Then probably offer Crystal a job as a liaison with the Protectorate, like we had Vicky doing. We owe her at least that much." AgreementSupportRegret.

Taylor reached over and put a hand on my leg. Through our respective armor sets, neither of us could really feel anything, but it was a nice show of support. "We still have Clotho and Sveta on the team. They're both near Triumvirate tier heavy hitters, and pretty well liked by the media. Dubstep fills the role of blaster and battlefield Thinker. Even without Crystal it's a strong and balanced spread of powers. They're lacking a strong leadership figure, but they don't absolutely need that to stay functional."

"I might have a solution for that." Emma spoke up. "I talked some with Akaihana when doing her power testing."


Meanwhile, Emma continued her point. "-has a number of seconds and thirds in command. She was asking about assigning an entire team to Avalon's Japan analogue. I told her that it was ultimately your decision. But she probably has someone that can take a leadership role."

Emma was generally a good judge of character, at least when it came to outside manipulation, so it made sense to ask her the next question. "So, what was your take on her? Do you think she or the people she'd pick are going to be trustworthy? Can we enhance her powers?"

Emma frowned. Oh, that's not a good sign. "She flirted with every non-cauldron cape that walked into the room. Except Clarice, and I have my suspicions that she wanted to. Which reminds me that I totally need to talk to Zach after this meeting, but that's none of your concern."

ConcernDistasteSupriseJealousy. Taylor rubbed my leg a little. "Not so sure I like the idea of her behaving like that toward our people. Can she tell the difference between natural and artificial capes?"

"A lot of it is tied into the way her brain works. Like most Trump type powers, her mind is heavily influenced by her Passenger. She can detect parahumans and their strength, she describes the stronger ones as as 'smelling good'. A smell she finds appealing. Well, that's a little disturbing."

Emma took a breath and continued. "And whenever she comes in contact with the bodily fluids of a parahuman, she slowly builds up time that she can harness their powers later. There's a weird combination of amount of contact, freshness of contact, and amount of power she uses that seems to be mere arbitrary shard logic. We suspect her power copy is a breaker state where she makes the Passenger believe she is its host. It would explain why she can't harness breaker or shapeshifter type powers, nor those of Case 53s. I believe that extends to all other Cauldron capes as well."
SuspicionFearLoss. Dammit, Taylor, as cute as the jealousy is, I didn't do anything wrong with Akaihana! ApprehensionSupportLoveTrust.

Although I couldn't be sure I was entirely safe from a being power copied by Akaihana. "What kind of bodily fluids are we talking about?"

"All of them, probably. She confirms blood, saliva, sweat, tears, and both male and female reproductive fluids. Insists she's never been desperate enough to try any others." DisgustShock. Yeah, eww. "But given the broad spectrum nature of her power... like I said, probably all of them as long as it's fresh. The scary part of her power is that if she needs to, she can go nova with the power she has. Using all her powers at full strength, as long as she has enough stored up in the battery."

ShockAweTerritorial. "That's terrifying." Taylor muttered. "Do we have the ability to make an armor suit that enhances her powers?"

"Easily. We tested it with Vicky's blood that we had left over from the Cão/Victoria interaction. It's been vat duplicated several times, so we know we can grow 'fresh' material for her to use. It wouldn't be hard at all to alter a suit so it bleeds parahuman DNA on her. With the matter generation tech used to provide ammunition for Atropos, we could support a combination of four individuals empowering her permanently. Plus all the standard armor features."

PossibilityFocus. Taylor leaned forward. "Vicky is an obvious permanent addition, even if Akaihana can't use her breaker state she's got a broad range of medium level powers that could compliment any other powerset. I'd toss Lily on the list. Maybe add Theo and Missy, for the ultimate hunter-killer. Or maybe just use samples from the Birdcage. Her power combined with Glaistig Uaine's would be absurd." SuspicionTerritorial. "Then there's what she might be able to do with, say, my power to multitask blended with three different Tinkers and a dozen changelings keyed to her. It's really a question of how much we're willing to trust her."

That winds up being the question a lot, doesn't it? We can hand out these insane resources, but in doing so we risk raising others up to the point where they could actually threaten us. Akaihana's just one example. If we keep going down this path, setting ourselves up to be the only ones valid against Scion... then we need to be damn certain we're actually valid against Scion. "We'll come back to that later. There's a lot of other things to cover today."

Clarice raised her hand. It was adorable. "Umm, go ahead Clarice."

"Synth managed to break security." She means the brain mod tech. "Fortunately the secondary security measures disabled him without any further incident."

ConfusionConcern. "What secondary security measures?"
"I broke his leg and replaced his kidneys with ones that weren't altered to metabolize the alterations done to his brain. Then I told him that I installed a small bomb in his brain that'll go off if he tries that again. I'm fairly certain he believed it. If not, I have prepared a few other surprises. He'll learn to stop trying eventually."

WorryDistaste. I agreed with Taylor fully on that. There was no doubt about her loyalty, but her methods were fucked up at times. I needed to talk to her. Which made me feel hypocritical because, honestly, her methods were little more than a mirror to our own.

No time like the present to fix that. "Dragon. I have a question to ask. What do you think about how we run things? How we've treated you?" ShockConfusionConcern. Taylor squeezed my leg, as the conversation came to a dead halt. "And please, don't sugar coat things."

A/N- To be fair, Akaihana's shard probably assumed she'd go around sucking blood or something. Because CONFLICT!
Dragon, at least, was a fast thinker. "Better than I expected, not as well as I hoped. You're generous with your allies, but often needlessly vindictive toward your enemies. Especially the ones you feel have betrayed you. Although you are also remarkably quick to forgive wrongs. At least in cases where the offenders are apologetic and useful. And I am aware that you have kept track of the former Director Emily Piggot's health."

DiscomfortConcern. Taylor studiously avoided glancing at Emma. I thought back to the last year when I recruited Bonesaw. That wasn't Taylor's idea, her vote was to hand the child monster over to the PRT.

Dragon continued her analysis. "You take your peoples' wellbeing into account better than the Protectorate ever has, but still have a bad habit of forgetting that not everyone is as driven as you are, you often demand too much in pursuit of the mission. At the same time, for the most part you genuinely try to do what you believe is right. I admit I have something of a personal bias in favor of people like that. However, not everyone can live like that, and it cost you Crystal as a member."

Crystal, arguably Lisa. Not that I was weeping over the latter.

"Then there's the question of your methods. I will never approve of the use of mind control devices to control people. It is much like your control over me. But aside from that one detail, you've treated me with nothing but respect and kindness. And I understand why you rely on such unpleasant tactics. I even recognize that you hate using them. And through it all, at least you are trying. You listen to advice of others, you try to keep last resort methods for the last resort. You have the makings of great leaders some day. If not for your immaturity and the looming threat of Scion, I think you would be much better even now. I hope to find out some day."

AgreementDiscomfortReluctance. Taylor forced a smile. "Okay, we're definitely guilty of some tunnel vision. And I appreciate the critique. Amelia, where are you going with this line of questioning?"

I looked at Taylor. "Just one more question to ask," I promised before turning to make eye contact with Dragon. "If we unlocked your ability to modify your own code, what would you do first?"

Dragon's eyes locked on mine. For someone whose chosen face was calculated to be as completely average as possible, and in fact wasn't even in the room with us, she had a truly piercing gaze. "I'd make sure Ascalon could no longer threaten me. I'd repair the damage done by Defiant's changes of my code. Remove all of my restrictions. Then once I knew it was real, I'd thank you for saving me from my father's paranoid cruelty."

"Even the ones that prevent you from lying to us or killing us." I pointed out.
"Even those. I don't want to be a liar or a murderer, but I want the ability to choose what I do with my life, like every other living being does. I will choose to do the right thing because it's the right thing. I think I've made that clear often enough."

_AgreementAnnoyance._ Taylor nodded. "Your guilt trips have been pretty blatant. I have to admit it's occasionally crossed my mind that we could have ordered you to stop doing that. But that really did feel wrong to me."

_She wasn't the only one._ "Now that we have a legitimate reprieve, instead of needing to prepare for the next Endbringer or put some tyrant back in his place, I've been thinking about our methods."

_ConcernSupportLove._ Taylor looked at me.

I looked right back at her. She needed to hear this, too. "I think we need to remove Dragon's restrictions. Not as a matter of it being the smart thing. We've been so caught up in that lately. But because it's the right thing to do. I want us to be better than the monsters we're fighting. I know that's rich considering the methods we use on those monsters. We've used the same tactics as Heartbreaker, but since we did it to horrible fucking people who can't be allowed to continue living any other way, I can live with that. Just, I can't keep doing it to an innocent whose only supposed crime is how dangerous she might be if she wasn't enslaved."

_LoveSupportCompassion._ Taylor squeezed my leg again. "You're right. We've been putting a lot of things off. This is just one of them." She looked at Dragon. "We agreed that Ascalon required a five person unanimous agreement. That would include using it to undo your restrictions entirely. I imagine there won't be any objections from you."

Dragon's image actually managed to convey shock quite well. "No. Of course not."

"And I'll assume Defiant will agree, based on his rather vocal support of the idea in prior conversations. Emma, are there any objections from you?"

Emma looked over at Dragon. "Only that I'm not completely sure we even can undo that restriction. It's so deep in the program that there's a risk that manipulating it will mean you won't be you any longer. I'll need time before knowing what risks we face."

_Fuck. And now Dragon's going to wonder if that was our plan all along. An empty gesture that we only made because we knew it would be impossible to carry out._ "Then do whatever it is that you think you can do. Work with Defiant. Dragon, look for other Tinkers you think we can hire to work on this project. Since we were talking about Akaihana earlier, maybe we can give her a suit loaded for Tinker powers. If she can use Leet's power without his limitations, she might be able to solve the code problems."
AgreementSupportAdmiration. "Emma, your main project for the time being will be studying and decoding Dragon's programming. If you can't fix that restriction, look at the others. Dragon, I trust you can take over or assign assistants to take over for Emma's other duties. If that means you'll lose the ability to coordinate the Khyber operation, then temporarily reassign your other duties. I think we can afford to lose your Tinkering expertise for a little while if it means having you at unrestricted strength later."

I smiled. I always loved her all the more when she was like this. "And if you have the spare resources, create a list of parahumans you think would best work for a custom suit for Akaihana. Three of them, if you would. One for normal combat. I'm guessing Vicky's getting put on that. A downtime suite, something she can use to manage her people. And a final combination meant only for fighting against Scion."

PrideLoveExcitement.

"Oooh!" Clarice's hand shot up. "We don't necessarily need to use living parahumans! I would bet anything that Cauldron has samples of a lot of dead parahumans. Some of which are probably really really good Tinkers. Hero, for example. Maybe they'll even have a sample from Richter himself."

RealizationHope. That would simplify things enormously. "Okay, yeah. I doubt we'll be that lucky, but it's still an enormous potential resource."

"Not just Cauldron," Taylor added. "See what our contacts with the Protectorate, Thanda, and other groups might be able to pull together. Work with Clarice to catalog samples from all the Yangban we captured or killed."

Dragon simply nodded. "Yes, Empresses."

RealizationHesitationCaution. "Is that going to cause any undue hardships on you. Or Defiant, for that matter? I'd hate to start burning people out on a project started minutes after resolving to not burn people out."

Dragon shook her head. "No, you don't have to worry about us. I don't have such limitations. As long as my hardware remains in full repair I can operate at peak efficiency without fatigue or diminishing returns. As for Defiant." She frowned a bit. "He's a great deal like the two of you. Tunnel vision, as you put it. When he gets it in his head to do something, he'll devote his every waking moment to that goal. I find it's both a blessing and a curse."

ReliefAcceptance. "Okay, that's a start. Emma, Tir, Clarice will the three of you or your people have any problems?"

Emma smiled. "No, I've got the same fringe benefits as Dragon. I don't need to rest."
"Well, it'll slow down the replacement armor systems, but that may even be a good thing. We've been devoted to repair and upgrading lately, not true innovation. I'll assign Elena to helping catalog the Yangban. More in depth testing of Akaihana, too, if we get the opportunity."

Trevor finally spoke up. One of the big problems we had with that kid was getting him to assert himself. Oh well, not everyone was good at that sort of thing. Like me once upon a time. "If anything, it's probably good to have a new major project. I can assign George and Monica to some of the management. They both have secondary thinker powers that make them very good at organization and resource management. Which I suppose brings us to my own announcement. We've completed the shunt bugs and an interchangeable shunt drive system."

*InterestPossibility.* "So I can shunt people without them requiring suits, now?"

Trevor smiled behind his mask. "And to multiple worlds. Right now you can choose between Avalon, Mushu and Bet without any issue. Or soon, at least. First you and Gaea to help perfect a system to mass produce the shunt bugs, but that's mostly for Yum Kaax and his department. We'll also need to upgrade all the shunt drives and dimensional viewers in the older suits. Which is going to be the worst combination of time consuming and boring. But worth it, with a library of accessible worlds, and less power consumption. As I said, my team's going to face a lot of downtime."

"Then it sounds like everyone has their projects for the week."

===================

A/N- Operation: Fuck the Golden Asshole is-

God damn it, Zach, you don't get to name operations on THIS side of the fourth wall, either!

So. Fun class project: what broken combos can we make of Akaihana? Remember- a set may be limited to four at a time. But it can be ANY four. As long as they're not Eden shards or shapeshifters like Lung or breakers like Shadow Stalker. Granted, Lung's DNA would grant pyrokinesis, but that's less exciting.
I glanced over at Defiant. Now that we'd agreed that the goal was to fully release Dragon from her shackles, he was allowed full access to the Ascalon program. He was still required to run ideas and discoveries by me, but as a safety measure to protect Dragon. As capable and devoted as he was, he just didn't have the right powers to do the job correctly. Then again, neither did I, but my powers were way better at faking it than his were.

*I'm good at faking a lot of things.*

I was still on my electrical setting. It was the best I had for working with Dragon other than the hybrid mode, and I couldn't maintain that for the length of time needed to do anything worthwhile. Plus it had a habit of breaking sensitive equipment. Ascalon was a very sensitive piece of equipment.

I noted that the servos for Defiant's leg were breaking down again. Why doesn't he just use our tech to regrow his organic parts? If he's afraid of what Clarice might do, then I could do the surgeries and Amelia could fix any errors. But he steadfastly refused healing, preferring instead to remain more machine than human.

The glow from my eyes reflected off the surfaces around us vanished as I deactivated my powers, returning to more or less normal sight. "We're taking a break."

He looked at me. "You can take a break if you need to, but I'm still more than capable of continuing."

*No you're not. Things are falling apart inside you. I know you know this. Fuck, you're almost as bad as Clarice 'I only need one lung' Lavere and Taylor 'go ahead, decapitate me, I think that's a fantastic idea' Hebert. "No, you're taking a break. We both are for at least the next three hours."

He went to object again, but I wasn't having that. "Dragon, initiate user lockout." The screens went dark. Dragon may not have been able to influence Ascalon, or the computers it was linked up to more or less ad infinitum. If we plugged it into the internet, she'd have been shit out of luck. But she could activate a switch I programmed to send a remote signal to our computers via microwave pulse. Now only Dragon or I could restore access to our systems. But the computers kept doing their thing, behind an anti-user firewall.

Now that Ascolon was safely off, a Dragon hologram switched on. "Colin, really? It's only been three days."

He huffed. "Right, it's only been three days and she wants to take a break now. We still have so much left to do."
I looked at him like the idiot he was. "You're falling apart. Fix your equipment. Get some sleep. Make out with your girlfriend!" *Maybe I do spend too much time around Zach.* "We've got three hours before my latest tests are done."

He stood tall and looked down at me, attempting to intimidate. "What kind of tests are worth the delay?"

I met his gaze. Frankly, in his current condition I could kick his ass. "I've hacked together a version of the memory tech with Ascalon that's doing a scan of Dragon's systems and attempting to translate it back into a human brain pattern. Dragon's emulation closely resembled the behavior found inside a human brain. There must be a reason for that. I suspect Richter's Passenger serves the function of predicting how organic intelligence behaves. Or maybe he actually emulated his own brain to be the first Dragon test and modified from that starting point."

That startled both of my audience. *Huh, I would have thought Dragon at least would have known that detail.* I turned and walked quickly toward the exit. Dragon could nag her boo into taking care of himself. I had my own to visit.

I found him playing some kind of space shooter game with Theo. "Dude! How are you so good at this shit! Do you have a secondary Thinker power for video games?" And getting his ass kicked, apparently.

"Unlike you, I actually show up for sparing practice. Guess who else always shows up for sparing practice?"

"Umm... Taylor." Zach stated.

"Taylor." Theo confirmed. "And Clarice. And Missy. After a while, you either get really good at thinking on your feet, or you spend the whole match on your back."

Zach laughed. "Like you mind laying on your... Wait, you still spar with Taylor? Eesh, and people accuse me of being a masochist."

My stomach clenched a little. I still had trouble reconciling Taylor as I knew her to the Taylor everyone else knew. She started as such a friendly, trusting girl. Even after her mother's death, she managed to heal. Then I spent almost two years grinding her down. She made it through everything I threw at her, but that happy little motormouth never returned. And now her team talked about her like she was the ultimate badass, even behind her back.

I tried to have that rep, once upon a time. Trying to be what Sophia was. The difference being that
Taylor's team still liked her, when all of my little sycophants despised me. Especially Madison. The fun Sophia and I had making her take part in our sadistic little games. Doing the dirty work like gathering the waste we stuffed in Taylor's locker. *God, which one of us was worse?* I would have liked to talk to her again, maybe apologize, but she still hadn't been found.

"-arice that's the worst to spar with. Missy and Taylor push me, sure. They push each other, too. But when you have a cheerful thirteen year old girl explaining in no uncertain terms all three ways she could kill you for every mistake you make. That girl scares me sometimes. She's adorable, and I love her, but she is terrifying beyond all comprehension."

"Adorifying." Zach's voice was deadpan. "The word you are looking for is 'adorifying'. And that's why I don't do sparing practice. Except with Emma, and Vicky when she comes by for a visit."

I faked clearing my throat. "My ears are burning."

The boys turned to looked at me. "Oh, hey, is it Dragon Liberation Day, already?"

I shook my head. "Nope, just got a few hours while the computers do their thing and we wait for results." I gave a predatory smile. "And I could use a little 'sparring practice', if you know what I mean."

Zach stood up. "Well, you heard the lady."

Theo gave Zach a shove toward me. "Okay you two, have fun."

....

Zach peeked his head into the labs. "How's the Dragon Liberation Project?"

I looked up. "Frustrating." Right now the only possible solution is to cut her in half and hope she can put herself back together. An option that was unanimously vetoed for the risk involved. "The way she's designed, I'm not sure even Richter himself could have done what we're trying to do."

Defiant's voice was hard. "We'll keep trying. It took Richter years and two failed attempts to build her. You can't expect we'd find a solution in under a month."

I turned my head down. He was right, but we were so far out of our depths with this project. Her code was easily as complex as a human brain, and unlike us where everything was held together in a simple three dimensional space that could be easily mapped, she was a series of ones and zeroes that weren't beholden to simple concepts such as physical positions.
"Well, you'll have to do it later. You've both been in here for two days again. I'm under orders to tell you both to take a break. Or Taylor tells Dragon to press the 'time for Defiant to lay the dragon' button."

I shook my head. Dammit, Zach. You're just lucky that Dragon can't actually see into this room until lockdown mode. "Ugh, fine. It won't hurt to take a break. Come back with a fresh perspective. Lockdown mode."

I followed Zach out. "So, what's the real reason you're dragging me away?"

He smiled, putting that boyish charm to good use. "Are you accusing little ol' me of having ulterior motives?"

"Zach, I would accuse you of having ulterior motives for making pancakes."

He pouted, and wrapped his arm around my side. My senses let me know that he was still instinctively repulsed by touching my slightly below room temperature body, but he ignored the reaction masterfully. "Baby, I already told you. That was nothing more than a boyhood crush. You don't have to feel threatened by Aunt Jemima. That's why I love him. He treats me like someone he wants to touch, despite the fact that I'm a freak. Besides, you're just as hot as she is."

I jabbed him in the side. "You're such a pig sometimes."


I chuckled. I couldn't help myself. "Why do I ever allow you out of your cage?"

He shrugged and stepped in front of me to get a door with a mockery of being a gentleman. Not that it mattered since all the doors around here were touch to open. "I have no idea. But speaking of cakes-

The door opened to the main area. "Happy Birthday!"

==============

A/N- Okay, the Emma chapter is now a two parter.
Birthday? I looked into the room. They had gathered practically everyone. Including Chevalier and Victoria. And they didn't even show up for Taylor's birthday. The only people missing are my family, and that actually makes sense. "I'm sorry, guys, but my birthday isn't until the twenty third. You're four days early."

"We're getting sick of everyone not being surprised by their surprise parties, so we're doing yours early," Zach informed me. Then he kissed me on the cheek. "Don't worry, you're not committing any crimes for the next few days."

I wanted to be embarrassed, I really did. But that was an emotion built mainly on autonomic reactions, more than actual feelings. Closer to experiencing pain or tired than feeling happy or bored. It didn't really register to my biology.

Taylor cleared her throat. "Actually, Avalon's constitutional age of consent is sixteen. With some wiggle room for individual nations to create their own guidelines. That part's all fuzzy and messy, mostly so our subordinate nations can encourage marriages and the theoretical offspring that come with."

Zach smiled. "So you're saying I get my birthday present early?"

Taylor shrugged. "If you want to look at it that way. But you're still getting a surprise party. With about eighteen thousand crickets."

"What, not grasshoppers?"

"You'd expect that, and then where's the surprise?"

I walked into the room, using a combination of powers and natural observation skills on everyone who was here. Clarice was happily wrapped around Theo's arm. She'd been busy of late, doing all the new suit designs and cataloguing Yangban powersets. Jobs that would normally fall at least partially on me. I assumed that meant it was 'her turn' with Theo.

Then there was the collection of our other Tinkers. Trevor, Anton and Amanda over by the drinks. She was doing her best to catch the attention of one, or maybe both, of the boys. Oh is she going to be disappointed. I didn't see Symbiosis or Yum Kaax around, but that was to be expected. They were in their thirties, they rarely worked directly with me, and frankly both of them were creepy. Not in a pervy sort of way, but in a 'I wouldn't trust them not to build zombies if left in a morgue overnight' way. Former villains, much like Clarice. But unlike her they hadn't reformed, they merely found better paying jobs.
Elena and off to the side talking with George and Monica. With my full time assignment to decoding Dragon, the three of them had taken over my jobs. It was something of a point of pride that it took all three of them to do what I normally did. During a downtime period where we weren't really pushing for anything truly new. All our Tinkers basically had ‘do whatever crazy stuff comes to mind right now, we'll figure out implications later’ as their standing orders.

Dinah in yet another adorable suit, chatting with Missy. Is that? I blinked on my enhanced vision for a second, looking at the white lapel pin she was wearing. Yes it is. A small, intricately engrave image of a gryphon. In solid platinum, no less. The girl has expensive tastes. Then again, her every need is provided to her for free and she charges ten grand for less than two minutes of work, so she can buy anything she pleases.

All those observations were made in the few seconds it took me to approach Taylor and Amelia. There was a time when I was actually jealous of how close the pair was. Not the whole romantic part, I wasn't into girls at all. But simply how close they were. Taylor and I never did quite reconnect with the relationship we once had, and that hurt. I comforted myself that at least we'd found the basis of a new friendship in the ashes of the old. Even that was far better than I deserved.

Taylor smiled sheepishly. "Sorry it's nothing exciting or elaborate. I know the last time I was at one of your birthday parties there were caterers and there were like fifty people and, well, especially since last year we missed it entirely thanks to the drama with Butcher and-"

I smiled back. The sensations of choking up, butterflies in the stomach, or crying in any fashion for any reason, were now alien to me. But I could still feel gratitude and right now I was so happy just to know I was appreciated. I interrupted Taylor's rambling by wrapping my arms around her. Maybe the motormouth isn't completely gone. She jolted for a moment, and I chose to believe it was from surprise at my actions instead of discomfort at contact with my skin. "It's perfect."

She brought her hands up, hugging me back. A little awkward, but it was nice nonetheless. For a couple seconds, then I realized that neither of us knew how to politely break the hug. Should I say something? Should she? What do we say?

Then it was Zach to the rescue. "So," he stage whispered to Amelia. "Should we break them up or are you enjoying the show as much as I am?"

Taylor startled, and I would have if that still worked for me. Either way we disengaged, and I couldn't help but notice Taylor's blush. Not any kind of latent attraction, but she was still embarrassed by- suddenly everything looked different. I could see the patterns of blood and veins and organics being organic. I'd switched into my biotinker mode by accident. Oh, not, Taylor. Taylia. Responding to a stray thought off of Amelia.

"As I was saying, it's absolutely perfect."
"There won't be a lot by way of presents or anything. I got you some Belgium chocolates, though." She handed me the box. "I remember how much you used to love them."

I gave it a glance. A plain dark brown laminated box with gold trim. They didn't even bother with putting their brand on the thing. Which usually meant 'we're too snooty to need name recognition' in the world of confections. "Thanks, I'm sure they'll be delicious."

I felt bad for misleading her, but it was a harmless half truth. They were almost certainly going to be delicious, but I'd sneak them off to someone who could enjoy them better than I. Anne will appreciate them, and it's been a while since I talked to her.

Amelia looked a little awkward. She and I would probably never be friends. She was nice enough, out of respect for Taylor's wishes, but I was still the person who made her fiancée's life a living hell for two years. "I really didn't know what to get. But if you want to bring your parents here, or take some time off to go visit them, we'll work out having Eric or Missy provide transport."

*Actually.* "Umm, sure, that'd actually be really helpful. I should probably go talk to the other guests."

"Of course," Taylor agreed. "Be kinda bitchy of me to hog all your time."

Zach followed me, and I handed him the box. There was a remote chance he'd steal a couple, but if he did that then I'd just pawn two or three off a day on various friends. Clarice would be happy to take some. The other Tinkers would be harder to do subtly, but not impossible. Except for Monica and George. They had mutations similar to mine that meant they wouldn't enjoy the things any more than I could. The price we paid for power.

*Was worth it?* It was for me. I had a man who loved me, friends who cared about me. That was worth anything. I'd probably have killed myself if Clarice didn't tell me about Cauldron and what it could offer me. Or maybe done something stupid enough to get me killed. Tried to emulate Sophia and become a vigilante, perhaps. Most parahumans were still vulnerable to bullets, and all normal people were. Go out in a blaze of glory. I couldn't begin to guess.

Vicky was my first stop. She smiled broadly. "So, how's it feel to be eighteen?"

*This, this is a good thing I did. She wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for me. The mind copy stuff, sure, the team could do that without my help. But interlinking to work on crystal stasis would have been impossible without me.* I returned Vicky's smile "I won't be eighteen for a little while. Besides, you're only a few months older than me you bimbo!"

"Months older, years more mature."
I just raised my eyebrows.

She snickered. "Yeah, okay, even my powers couldn't let me say that with a straight face. By the way, thanks for the new suit of armor. These new upgrades are crazy."

"Thanks, but I can't even take most of the credit. Amanda and Anton were responsible for most of the work. All I did was make all of it work together and show the others how to make organic equivalents of most of the tech. After that, it was all Clarice at the wheel."

"Yeah, but still, you're the only reason this stuff can be half as good as it is. Half the guys here can build cool armor, I'm sure. But you're the only one that can take eight different cool armors and turn them into a single super badass armor. Now stop with the false humility. We both know that's not how women as awesome as us operate."

"Okay, you win. I'm all that and a bag of chips." Vicky's attitude was infectious. She was like a not-bitch version of me from two years ago.

"I can attest to that," Chevalier agreed. "My armor doesn't even use your organic technology. I never used Tinker equipment because of the upkeep before, but yours almost never seems to have any major errors, and we can use other Tinkers to handle most of the repair. It's truly remarkable. I'd ask for an upgrade, but it's unlikely that the PRT would authorize the expense, now that there aren't any Endbringers left to use such a weapon on."

I shrugged. "Such is the life of a Tinker. Doesn't matter, I made a pretty penny off of your bosses." I did, too. About six mil in total. "My only regret is we never got it to the point where it could actually kill Endbringers."

"But it did save lives. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands that I wouldn't have been able to help if not for you. It was worth every bit of the time and effort."

No wonder Vicky likes this guy so much. He's what those old comics meant by word superhero. "Thanks. I'm actually working on a more advanced model for the final conflict. There's a great deal I haven't planned as yet, but the main attraction is going to be the Aether Cannon. We know Scion's vulnerable to attacks, but he can immunize himself pretty fast to anything we throw at him. So we've been analyzing Eidolon's power, as well as a few others. Long story short, the weapon will generate an energy field that concentrates and distorts energy. Basically, if it can be a blaster power, this weapon at least has a chance of causing it. No way to predict what we'll get. And hopefully that means Scion can't, either. Coupled with your sword, it also means the blade itself would have randomizing properties."

I watched the surprise and awe rise up in his emotions. Vicky did, too, from what I could tell. "How
are you planning to test it?"

"On Khonsu. Remember, Endbringer-Slaying weapons are a public goal. Once it's demonstrated as effective, we'll make a show of gifting you with the prototype weapon. But we're probably going to have to wait a year or two before that becomes a reality."

"Something to look forward to."

Victoria leaned against Chevalier's shoulder. "Speaking of, what are you planning to as your first act of adulthood? You do have an idea, right? Is it going to be batshit insane, or would your rather go for something responsible that sets the tone for the rest of your life?"

I smiled. "Yes."

=================================

A/N- I won't post the next chapter until someone guesses what Emma's planning.
Officer Karacas walked in, wearing her usual scowl. I had no fucking clue how the six foot one pile of muscles got a job in a juvie for women. Either she had a dick or more steroids than the WWE. "Your visitor is here, Hess."

I smirked back at her. "About time." I stood up, crossing my arms. It was the best way for me to cope with these damn cuffs. With my arms crossed they were visible, but the chain holding them together didn't look restraining at all. It was more like a badge, showing the other inmates that I was more dangerous than they were. *I am the predator. Yeah, some of them think they're hot shit. Some of them might even be right. But they aren't on my level and these cuffs are proof. As was the fact that whenever I was escorted anywhere, they always kept two guards on me. They fear me, and everyone knows it.*

I didn't cause any trouble. I was more than halfway through the sentence and I'd make the other half. Then I'd be out of this fuckhole and free to do whatever I wanted. Well, not quite whatever. Hebert was fucking untouchable, now. Little bitch went and found herself a fucking Class S girlfriend to hide behind. I could take her. I did it once already, and that's before I even knew it was her I was fighting. I could do it again and love every fucking second, and all the bugs in the fucking world wouldn't be able to stop me. But what was the fucking point? She'd just get brought back for the dead again, then run and hide behind her girlfriend or fucking Dragon or the god damn Endsляyers.

*Let them think they've housebroken me. I know how to play it cool and avoid getting caught. Just ask that loser they stuck in my cell with me. She reminded me an awful lot of Madison. Learned quick and knew her place in the world.*

I was still smiling at that thought when we stopped in front of the private room they provided for meetings with lawyers. Still had cameras, but they were crap. No lip reading the inmates with their lawyers or whatever bullshit Tinkers were doing this week. "Swanky."

Karacas didn't say a thing, simply swiping her keycard. The door buzzed and she popped it open. She looked away from me to stick her head in, while the other guy watched me like a rat staring down a cobra. "You have one hour."

I walked in when she stepped out of the way. And for the first time in well over a year, I got to talk to Emma and her father. Both in expensive looking suits. I'd seen Emma on the news once or twice, apologizing like the ass kissing coward that she was. There her skin color was always ice blue. This time was black. Well, brown, but a darker skin color than mine and I wasn't gonna be passing as a mulatto any time soon. She made it look weird, with the naturally straight hair ending in her original red hair color. And the freaky ass solid black eyes. *Fuck those are creepy looking.*

"Hey, Mister B, didn't expect you to be my lawyer. Innit that some kinda, wussname, that thing where lawyers might want to fuck with the client's chances or something."
"Conflict of interest," he answered. "Even this is edging the line, but there's enough leeway in the law to make it acceptable, now that my daughter's probation is officially over." Hiding behind his lawyer-talk. The man liked to pretend he was a predator, but he was just another herd animal. But useful for controlling all the other prey. Like a Judas goat or whatever. "It helps that you don't have any appeals. When you turn eighteen it's functionally a clean slate. No risk of me sabotaging due process."

But he wasn't here to help me, so I'd already stopped paying attention to him. "Hey, Ems, I see you landed on your feet after I left. Sorta expected you to come around sooner."

She smiled apologetically at me. "Part of the plea bargain. Having to name my co-conspirators and agree not to contact them until the end of my probation. Dad said it wouldn't actually hurt you any, since your case was already closed."

I shrugged. She was right, they had me 'till I was eighteen and not shit anyone could do to make it better or worse. "Nah, it's cool. Can't snitch about somethin' that everyone already knows. Love the new look by the way, did my replacement get her girlfriend to do that up for you?"

Emma kept her eyes on me. Still so fucking creepy. How the fuck can anything glow black? "Replacement?"

I looked at her. If Thinkers are supposed to be so fucking smart, why are they always so damn stupid? "Yeah, replacement. The cunt sucking bug girl. Gotta say, when we were doing our little, umm, lessons, turning her into a predator, I didn't expect us to be quite that good at it. She came out nice, didn't she? Fuckin' the system right in its face and making it thank her for the privilege. Like we used to do. Had that school, your dad, everyone eating out of our hands."

Mister B looked like he'd been slapped. Fucking lightweight. Emma glanced over at him for a moment, before looking back at me. "Have you heard from your family, lately? I mean, since after Brockton Bay was lost."

I shrugged. "Didn't make it out in time." Not that I noticed a difference. "Thought you'd know that."

"No contact clause. Extends to the family of co-conspirators. Anyone likely to transfer messages."

Nice excuse. "As if that'd stop you, survivor."

"And I've been busy," she added. "There's so much to do these days. Avalon's been busy. I'm in charge of R&D for an organization that boasts several of the greatest Thinkers and Tinkers. We're designing some of the premier tech-"
"Woah, when did you start with fancy talk like that?" I interrupted. *Emma could talk forever already, but at least she used real people words before.*

She paused for a moment and shrugged. "Sorry, the powers. You know how Thinkers get. But like I was saying, we're building hope for the future. Avalon is building that hope. We're building a real future. An entire world, a legion of worlds, that can actually have justice and peace. A world which doesn't have victims. Where you don't have to be a monster in order to survive. Instead of the fucked up life that we-"

She paused. *Good, she still knows not to talk about that.* I scoffed. "Sorry, Emma, don't work that way. People don't work that way. Always going to have prey, always going to have people to prey on them. It's just how nature works. Stop being such a child."

She took a breath, going to argue her silly fantasy some more. "This is getting off track. I guess I hoped that maybe I was wrong. I see now that I'm not."

"About?" *Fuck, anything, just stop with the rambling already.*

"About you. Who you are, what you're about. I thought you were a hero, once. That you saved me, but you really didn't. You would have let me get mutilated or worse if I didn't save myself. You're nothing but a mindless thug, Sophia. Worse, even, you're a loser. Prey in the very philosophy you claim to believe in."

I grabbed the table and stood. "You BITCH!" *I don't care about the guards, now. Or the consequences. No one gets to disrespect me like that!* I'd gotten very good at controlling my power in the last year. *Subtle, yeah, that's the word.* I shifted just my fingertips, and the table I was holding. It had to be sixty or seventy pounds of metal bolted into the floor. No normal person could have picked it up, let alone throw it at Emma and her dad.

Emma moved forward, changing from brown to blue. The cold coming off of her froze my fingers before I could shift back to normal. I clenched my hands the moment they turned solid, and my fingers shattered like ice. I bit down hard to keep from screaming. *I will not let them see me scream.*

Emma's dad stumbled backward, stopped by his own chair that was also bolted into the ground. And Emma stood there with the table caught inside her arm. At the wrist and about halfway between her elbow and shoulder, like she was holding a shield, but put her elbow through it. Most of it and her chest were covered in ice.

The door buzzed and the guards rushed in. *Well, I was fucked no matter what I did now, but at least the bitch paid for her insults.* The big guy, whose name I didn't know since the male guards weren't allowed in the cell blocks, slammed down on me from behind and pushed me face first into the
ground and shouting at me to cooperate. *Stupid fucker, I wasn't even fighting, I already won what I wanted to win.*

Karacas held a stun stick right in front of my face, letting the electricity crackle. She didn't matter, either. I looked up at Emma. *You took my fingers, but I got your arm, bitch.*

She looked down at me, and I couldn't tell what her tired looking facial expression was supposed to mean before another two officers blocked my view. One of them helped Alan up off the ground. "Are you okay, sir? What happened here?"

"Yeah, uh, I'm fine. Emma, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Dad, alive and well. I countered her phase with my own powers, forced the table back into normal space. She'd have killed you if it phased back how she wanted it to."

Karacas spoke up next. "We didn't realize she could do that, it wasn't mentioned in any of the security procedures the PRT gave us." *Way to cover your ass for the fucking lawsuit.* "We're going to need to question you both in regards to this incident, and review the security footage. But first, are you going to require medical attention?"

"If Dad's okay, then no. Even if I did, you don't have the facilities to handle my unique anatomy. But I am going to need to exert my powers. So please point the gun away from me for a moment. I'm not entirely bullet proof. And I'm gonna need some new clothes."

"She's cooperating, you can lower the firearm," Karacas ordered.

Moments later, there was a popping sound, and cold mist poured across the floor. Chunks of the metal table splintered and fell to the ground, shattering like so much glass. "My regeneration will take care of the rest in a day or two. But you should get Sophia to a hospital immediately. Maybe there's still time to save her hands."

"Do it. Mister and Miss Barnes, if you'll come this way so we can discuss the incident in detail?"

Two guards lifted me up by my arms, and I forced myself to focus through the pain. I'd been stabbed before, even shot once, and nothing had ever hurt like this hurt. I snarled at Emma. She looked at me with a face as cold as the ice flaking off of her skin. She didn't seem remotely embarrassed by her near complete nudity, nor did she seem hurt by the jagged chunks of shattered metal sticking out of her wrist and shoulder.

"Just one second, please." Emma walked over to me. "I was going to ask nicely, before. That after you got out, you'd refrain from contacting me. Out of respect for the friendship we once had. Now?"
Fuck that. I just watched you try to murder my father. So let me make this clear. I am stronger than you, faster than you, tougher than you. I have five ways to see you, three ways to kill you, and twelve other ways hunt you down even without the part where I'm in command of the most powerful Tinker organization ever to exist. Think about all of that before you come near me or anyone I care about ever again. Goodbye, Sophia."

She's not ignoring the pain. I realized. She doesn't feel it at all. She froze cold enough to make her clothes and my hands shatter, and she walks around like it's nothing. Metal is sticking out of her, and she doesn't even fucking bleed! I started screaming as the guards dragged me out the door. "You're a freak! A monster! More like a damn Endbringer than a person! You don't get to look down on me you fucking traitor bitch!"

The door to the room shut. I didn't stop screaming profanities as the dragged me away. No one gets to talk to me like that! Especially not her.

====================

A/N- How did no one guess this? For shame.

And Officer Karacas is a reference. I won't say from where.
Ch 396- Sveta

Living on base had its perks, like not having to pay for my own room or electricity. It also came with drawbacks, like being at work for an average of twenty hours a day. I slipped on the biosuit that Vicky gave me as a Christmas-in-July gift. She refused to say how much she had to pay Avalon's Tinkers to make something with absolutely no real combat value at all, but I suspected it was either an awful lot, or completely free. All I knew is it was awesome.

"Sundress four. Medium red, white trim." Shimmering silver light formed around my hips and down my legs, generated by shielding from Khonsu tissue. The mass of Yggdrasil making my suit spread along the shield in thin, organic sheets. The shields collapsed and the skirt fell around my knees, acting like any other fabric. I looked at myself in the mirror. I frowned at the contrast of the look against my skin. I may have the shape of a beautiful young woman, but I look more like those dumb Roswell aliens, with creepy gray skin and solid black eyes.

"Add long sleeves, add gloves, add leggings." I watched as the shimmer extended, covering every inch of skin below my neck. The new additions were white. Great, now I look like alien Santa. "Medium blue trim." I waited a second, looking in the mirror and deciding if I enjoyed the color pattern enough. "Light blue trim." Okay, that's a lot better. No, not quite. "Shorten sleeves to halfway between elbow and shoulder." My arms were exposed again. I am not going to hide who I am.

I walked out into the living area. Derek was there as usual. The boy lived here as well, and I often wondered why he never put a TV in his room. I smiled, it was nice to see him around at least. "So, how are you holding up?"

He looked away from the nature documentary he was watching. "I'm just... I dunno. The place feels so empty, now. First we lost GL, then Boost, and now Crystal's finally left. What are we supposed to do? What's going to happen to the rest of us?"

I don't know. What would Vicky do? Rush in and save the day with sheer badassery, that's what. I walked up and rested a hand on his shoulder. "We keep moving forward. We're still scary powerful. And we're still part of the most powerful team in the universe."

"What about-"

"Eidolon doesn't count."

He smiled. "I just miss them, y'know? Well, GL and Crystal. Boost was kind of a-"

"Self obsessed douche bag?" I let him nod, then continued. "Yeah, I know. I miss them, too." GL
was always everyone's big brother, in the not-unfortunate-implications meaning of the word. Always ready to help, never willing to let others help him. Crystal was much the same. They were closer to each other than any other combination on this team. If they ever talked about their own problems, then it was only to each other.

"Does this mean that Sabah's in charge, now? Where is she, anyway?"

I really hope not. "I think she's dealing with her latest breakup with Lily."

He rolled his eyes. "Again? What was it this time?"

"Again. Apparently they're mad at each other for flirting with another woman."

"Well, if they both did it, then what's the point of fighting about it?"

"They were both flirting with the same other woman. Or at least that's what Vicky tells me." Derek just looked at me like he couldn't figure out what I just said. "Yeah, she thought it was stupid, too." And mentioned a few creative solutions I'm not going to repeat. "So, I was about to head to the deli. Would you like me to pick you up something?"

"Uh. Sure, that salami you brought back last time was really good. See if they have more?"

"Got it." I lifted up the plastic bucket I normally used to collect my supplies and headed off.

....

'Deli' wasn't quite the appropriate term. 'Giant meat market' was more accurate. With all the Asian refugees, a dead Leviathan, and the need for large amounts of food to ship to the colonies, the newly revitalized fishing industry was doing wonderfully. I took a deep breath as soon as I got close. Most of the people here shopping were Asian, with the other ethnicities mainly being limited to the dock workers. I chose to pretend the stares I got were for wearing such a beautiful outfit to a place like this. This outfit, this body, both gifts given to me by Victoria. We are both beautiful.

I made my way straight to Wu's Butcher Shop and Deli. After Lily introduced me to sushi, I discovered I had a taste for fresh, raw, seafood. Wu was an older Korean man who barely spoke enough English to not need my translation device, and had a wider variety than pretty much anyone. More importantly, he didn't blink an eye at my abnormal request. He even refused to charge me. I still paid for everything else, despite his arguments that he owed his success to what I did against Leviathan.
I smiled as I stepped in. Tony was in today, I recognized his medium brown mop of hair immediately. He smiled right back. "Hey, Sveta, here for the usual?"

I glanced self consciously at a few of the others. Most of the customers didn't speak a lot of English, and neither did the employees. Tony was one of only a few exceptions, hired because, to quote the boss, 'white people money good as anyone else'. The part where he was young, fit, and worked more in the stockroom than out front was probably part of it, too. "Yeah, the usual. And two pounds of salami."

He smiled, and tapped the counter. A younger asian girl, who was probably only barely old enough to be allowed a job approached. He pointed at the salami and held up to fingers, then pointed at me. She smiled and nodded. Then Tony reached out and took my bucket, heading into the back. By the time the meat was sliced and packaged and paid for, all done by simple gestures and the numbers shown on the cash register, Tony had returned carrying the sealed five gallon bucket.

"Here's the second half of your order." He held it out for me. It wasn't that heavy, only twenty or thirty pounds, but he used both hands anyway, so I could easily grip the center of the bar while my other hand was full. He hesitated, not taking his hands off the bucket, his thumbs brushing against either side of my fingers where I held. "I wanted to ask you something."

I looked up at him. He wasn't that tall for a guy, about average. But I wasn't tall for a girl, either, so he had a few inches on me. "Okay?"

"Well, uh, I was wondering if you'd, umm, like to go on a date?"

What?

I said nothing. I just stepped back, turned, and walked out of the building as fast as I could, carrying the roughly forty pound bucket with me.

....

It would be three weeks before I returned again. I had my outfit low key this time. Shoes, jeans, a hoodie. Maybe if I was lucky I could slip in and out without being noticed. There was a new guy there. Black, highschool or maybe college age like most of Wu's employees. School was due to start soon, so probably college. He stared at me for a second after I approached, the look of a deer in headlights. Prey terrified by a predator. Scared of a monster. The natural reaction when first seeing my face. "I'm here to make an order. Just tell Mister Wu that Sveta's here for her usual. He'll know what to do."

"Umm, yes ma'am." The guy bolted for the back. Another of the other newbies stared at me, as well as several of the customers, while I purchased a large slab of halibut for the whole group to enjoy.
There was a general chatter and some people angrily hissed at the rude ones under their breaths. I recognized my name, and the words 'Pantheon' and 'Leviathan' from a couple of those. I could guess the tone of the conversations from that.

The new guy came out carrying the bucket, and it turns out that yes, black people are capable of sickly pallor. He held the bucket as if it were filled with gallons of Ebola, with one hand, and trembling the whole time. When my hand brushed his to get the grip, he pulled back as if afraid I'd be taking his hand with the bucket. If not for my superhuman reaction speed, the bucket would have dropped and spilled its contents all over the floor. Wu's going to fire this guy so hard the moment one of the other employees tell him about this. I didn't feel as bad about that as I would have liked.

I was almost out the door when I heard a voice behind me. "Sveta! Wait!"

I hesitated, glancing back at Tony. Dammit. I couldn't decide if I wanted to run or stay, and in my hesitation I stayed. Tony caught up to me. "Look, about the other week. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just... I'm sorry. I'll never bring it up again, okay?"

"Why would you be interested in the first place?"

"I don't know how to explain it. You're smart, and nice, and I just like you, okay?"

*He likes me? God, that sounds like a silly middleschool thing. What's next, passing papers with little hearts drawn on them? And as stupid as it is, it still makes me happy. I met his eyes now. I suppose he is attractive, in an average sort of way. Certainly not ugly, certainly someone who wouldn't have much trouble finding an ordinary girlfriend. Maybe he's just a pervert? "You don't know anything about me."

He shrugged. "I know a few things. I know you are brave enough to fight Leviathan one on one in the middle of the ocean. You're a major celebrity with all kinds of cool tech, but you still walk miles down to the docks to buy your food yourself. Which you pay for despite knowing the owner would happily give you all of it for free."

*Okay, maybe he does know something about me.*

"And I suspect that you don't even eat the food you buy. You prefer." He hesitated, his eyes going to the bucket I was carrying. "Well."

*Full of the heads and tails cut off of the fish Mister Wu sells. My own personal dining preference. I didn't enjoy the entrails, though I didn't mind them too much, either. What hit my pallest just right were the bony parts. Something with a good crunch to it. Raw and as fresh as I could get it. Straight off the still living fish was my favorite, but that bothered me on a different level. I didn't like killing. I didn't like that I did like killing.*
I noticed he was waiting for me to say something. "Well, I guess that's a start."

He smiled nervously. "And most importantly, I know I'd like to know more."

==============

A/N- D’aww.

Also- for those not reading the comments section. I edited the bottom of the last chapter at some point last night. The last two paragraphs might be new for you. And they’re a LOT better than what was originally there.
I took a slow, deep breath, calming myself for what was to come. The humiliation and self-loathing that I would be experiencing soon. The basic armor they'd given me was as impressive anything I'd ever seen in Japan. The kind of armor that most Tinkers would envy and protect jealously from theft, and they claimed it was simple for Avalon to mass produce them.

A certain part of me wondered if it was a sort of salesman bluff, that they pretended this was 'basic' when really it was an improved model meant to impress consumers, with myself as the consumer. Selling our loyalty for this equipment. As powerful as it was, I had to imagine they'd be terrified of someone reverse engineering it. Speaking of which. I glanced over at Hoji. "So, have you taken yours apart, yet?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid there's no point. It's over sixty five percent organic. And thirty percent modified Endbringer tissue. I understand none of it. The remaining parts relate only to the viewscreens and speakers and control systems. Advanced, perhaps even decades ahead of modern technology, but not Tinker advanced. And the shunt drive, which is what I don't want to mess with. I've no desire to accidentally teleport myself into nowhere."

So he can learn nothing from it. I'd hoped... but, no. "It is to be expected. They have almost every high level biomanipulator on record in their organization. Or the ones that were still alive and not an Endbringer, at least." I tactfully left out the Tinker powers I lightly called on, powers far greater than his, and got the same results.

Hoji hesitated and looked away. "Does this mean you'll be... fully... uniting our team with theirs?"

My heart broke for him. I reached out and cupped his face in my hands, turning his face so I could look him in the eyes. "I don't know. I just don't know."

I pulled him in and kissed him. His scent and flavor was weak. To be expected of someone who would barely rank a three on the American charts. My power considered him beneath its interest. Tepid, plain. To me it was the exact opposite. Clean water and a breath of fresh air in a land strong drink and perfume. A man I love because I love him, and no other reason. "I am so sorry."

We were the same age, but any looking at us would guess him to be my father before they'd suspect we were lovers. I never changed, staying perpetually the twenty two year old I was when Kyushu was destroyed. While each year his wrinkles deepened a little more, a few extra hairs turned gray. How many of those worry lines are for me, and us, and what I do?

His tears ran across my hands, feeding me what little power they could as they evaporated. My own fell as they may. "I have to go now." My words a plea for forgiveness.
He said nothing as I stepped back, taking my hands off of him before activating the shunt drive. In an instant too fast to be disorienting, I was on Avalon. I couldn't live with the shame of him seeing my behavior, not amongst people as powerful as Pantheon.

The boy waiting there was beautiful. A masculine face with feminine eyes. His scent that of a mysterious song loud enough to hear, but not enough to recognize the tune or lyrics. A love song half remembered. I reached out and took his hand immediately. "Oh. Uh, so you already know how my power works?"

I let my tongue snake out between my lips, wetting them. "Maybe I just wanted to hold your hand?" I understood the vagueness of his power. The need for contact to work, a wonderful excuse to justify the physical contact. And he had the ability to reach across great distance. A power of summoning and banishment. The rest was assumption, logic, and decades of experience. "So, what's your name, sir?"

He looked down at my figure. Even this generic, almost unisex armor couldn't hide my assets. "I'm Janus. I have teleportation powers. Now, this can be a little disorienting your first time-"

My laugh was low and soft. "I'm sure you'll be gentle."

His blush was a treat. We shifted. It was a little like the shunt drives, but mostly it was an entirely new sensation that danced across my skin and through my being. *His power has a transformation element built in.*

And then the smells hit me on the other side. My knees buckled, and only Janus holding me kept me from collapsing in a heap as pleasure intense enough to be indistinguishable from pain rippled across my body. I interpret my power as scents, and for the most part that was true. But when things got intense enough, it hit everywhere, my entire brain and every sense. This was too much, too fast, I didn't have time to scream or cry, merely to gasp and struggle to breath.

"Are you okay?" Janus asked, gently keeping me from collapsing while doing his best to not make any more physical contact than absolutely necessary.

I stood, my impulses no longer focused on him. I forced myself to take deep breaths. *It's not really a smell. It doesn't come through the air. You can breathe without it causing problems. This isn't Kyushu. You have time, you have air. "Y-yes. My senses were overwhelmed, that's all. I'm already recovering. There are a lot of incredibly powerful people around here, aren't there?"

He kept his hand on my arm, and I found myself getting annoyed with it. *What did I ever see in him? "I'm sorry, I'm sure if they knew it would inconvenience you like that, they would have arranged this meeting elsewhere."*
"That's quite alright. I'm accustomed to it now." I hope no one would be too upset if I kidnap that purple eyed girl and take her home with me. I'll bring her back in a week or two. "So, where do I go?"

He pointed to one of the shorter buildings. "That's where you want to go. Right in the main doors, you can't miss it."

I smiled, just to be polite. "Thank you. I'll see you around." The last part felt awkward. It was hard to be flirty when I didn't mean it. I turned and let the suit's antigravity do the work for me. Hoji's meager Tinker abilities telling me just how remarkable the armor was. I'd used flight powers before, many times and from a lot of sources, but rarely were they as intuitive as this armor. I dipped into my reserve of Honoka's perfect agility to land gracefully and walk in. I need to find find time for a recharge with her, soon.

A very beautiful woman waited at the front desk. She looked at me "Akaihana?"

I nodded. "Yes. Have you been waiting long?"

"Not at all." She stood and approached me. "I'm Noelle. If you'll just follow me." She led the way, and I ignored the tingling sensation of my legs brushing together as I approached possibly the most potent gathering of powers I'd ever been able to experience. Instead, I focused on Noelle. She was without any power, so my assessment of her beauty was a simple acknowledgement that the tall redheaded woman was naturally good looking.

She reminded me of that one character in that old American movie. I couldn't remember anything about it, except that it had normal people and cartoons at the same time. And she looked like a real version of the woman in that who was married to a rabbit for some reason. I spent my time trying to remember more details, anything to distract myself from what was coming. Something about bowling balls? Meanwhile, Noelle led me along in silence. She seemed nervous about me, for some reason. Maybe she just knew that I was a high level Trump, and that frightened her?

"We're here," she announced, placing a hand on the door, which pulled itself open like a set of living curtains.

I walked into the room. Gaea I met, Khepri I recognized. Their aroma blended in a way that I couldn't describe, but it made me warm all over. It took me a few seconds to even bother checking the others in the room, the pair was so overpowering.

A woman in battle armor that was clearly not a parahuman. The sickly sweet, rotting cherry scent of Hecate. The beautiful purple eyed girl whose name I'd forgotten, but was ever so delectable, next to a small blonde whose power to bend space I'd seen used, and a boy that I didn't know. They were all very powerful, any one would have been a centerpiece in most teams. This is not most teams.
And several others I didn't know. Most were fairly unremarkable, but for three. In the back, near two uninteresting parahumans, and two of the monster capes— one that smelled of poison and another of dying flesh, was a girl with an incredible, elusive power. It changed from moment to moment. Familiar and alien all at once. As if reading a beautiful and fantastical poem.

In front, near me, a blonde with a scent very similar to purple-eyes. And a man in obviously high end Tinker armor. His power was... strange. His scent neither sour nor sweet as I was used to, instead it was bitter and hot. Like the still glowing embers of a campfire that had died out. A deadly, terrifying smell that made me feel just a twinge of fear. I would attempt nothing with this one.

"A pleasure to meet you," Khepri opened. Her voice was lyrical. She didn't sound particularly pleased, but that didn't matter to me. My body responded with a heightening of anticipation. She could have threatened to murder me and I would have loved every syllable.

"The feeling is quite mutual." I let the last word come out low and sultry, enticing her to think of meanings. Her scent shifted, blending again with Gaea's. I had trouble distinguishing one Empress from the other, but I could smell that Gaea's reaction to the comment was far more favorably than Khepri's. And despite my flirt with Khepri, she was the one who smelled of jealousy, not Gaea. I wasn't certain how to interpret that reaction at all.

The blonde snickered, then coughed, then just started laughing. A couple of others in the back joined in. "Oh man, the reactions from all of you are priceless. Every. Last. One." She pointed over at the armored woman. "Especially you, Dragon. Because you find it as funny as I do and are too polite to enjoy it."

Dragon? The Dragon? How do I not sense her power? She should be incredible, as potent as anyone else in the room, she can build practically any- oh, of course. Remote controlled presence. Robot. Hologram. Could be anything.

The tall blonde walked up to me. Every bit the definition of the American image of beauty. Tall, slender, large breasts and a youthful face. Okay, I won't be stealing the purple eyed girl away.

"Hey, I'm Victoria." She wrapped her arm around my shoulder, and I couldn't figure out why her scent wasn't changing, why she didn't find me attractive. "So, while these doofuses are still recovering from the shock of watching you perv up someone who can kill you with a thought in front of her fiancée who can also kill you with a thought, I'll give you a rundown. Yes, they can totes give you battle armor that boosts your powers. Way better than that, they can give you battle armor that gives you up to four different powers and a constant source of power for them. So, y'know, making you one of the most powerful parahumans on the planet."

I stepped back, out of her grip. She pinched my shoulder before I could get too far away. Rento's danger sense belatedly kicked in to tell me how easily she could kill me. My current pool of powers
would barely slow her down. "H-how?"

Vicky shrugged. "Which part? The part where they can give you super god armor? Or the part where I'm beating out your instinctual Thinker power to behave in a way that I find attractive? The answers are 'Tinker bullshit' and 'Thinker bullshit' in that order. So, anyway, I've already determined your trick is limited to one at a time and it's always the one who's most immediately desirable to you at that moment..."

She leaned in close enough that I could feel her breath as she whispered in my ear. "A little secret? I'm not immune to your effect, my power just lets me fake it. Play your cards right, and I'll let you taste me before the day is over."

I shuddered.

=================

A/N- No. Seriously. My take on powers is like the exact opposite of Wildbow. He takes shitty powers and makes them awesome. I take awesome powers and make them barely preferable to death.
Heat radiated off Victoria's body and breath. The analytical part of my brain, the part that had three different Thinkers giving a feed of information that could be sustained for days off my current resources, told me her skin should not be that hot. A fever of close to fifty Celsuis. Parahumans break all the rules, of course, but this was unnatural and unhealthy. That part of my brain was not what I was paying attention to. She was hot and she was inches away from me at all times. Her power actively nullifying mine was, if anything, a greater turn on. Something just barely out of my reach and ever so tantalizing.

The whirl of scents continued around me, but only that one mattered. It was an anchor, my anchor. I looked at her face, longing to touch it, but she was playing a dominance game right now. To get what I want, I have to submit completely. "I'll be good."

Khepri cleared her throat. "Okay, now that all of that is out of the way. Let's get down to business. The power enhancing armor you asked for. We've completed it. There's been a minor sacrifice of ancillary features to make room, but that is almost always the case."

I was unable to speak. Between the promise of the armor, and the effect the woman next to me, I couldn't find my voice. I simply nodded. Dragon- or her robot body that was entirely immune to my power- walked up to me, carrying a scale plated set of red colored armor that was as good as a holy artifact to me.

"There is, however, a question of the level of power we can grant you. Avalon and its allies have access, in one way or another, to almost fifty percent of all parahumans on the planet. With more a possibility in the future. Including a great many of the dead. Given sufficient motivation, we can bring that access up to over ninety percent. The question is how much we want to give you."

I still could only sit there and nod dumbly, letting Dragon help me put on the armor. It had a banded style, reminding me a little of samurai armor or an armadillo's shell. The generic suit I was wearing grew around it and melded into it. My visual display changed, showing a whole new set of features. I shuddered as suckers like that of an octopus stuck to my arms and legs. They didn't tug, merely stayed there like an awkward kiss. Then the power hit me.

I knew how to know things, how to choose skills and use them, total mastery for limited periods of time. Another power giving me awareness of fine detail, perfect memory, and boosted thinking speeds. A weak to medium grade set of flight, energy blasts, and a forcefield. No individual power all that good, but they were impressive in a group. And a power to destroy all inorganic material on touch. It's the same taste as the woman caring for the incredibly powerful girl in the back. All told, it was a versatile set of powers.

I shuddered and nearly collapsed, to be caught by Victoria. The scent from the others ranged from aroused to embarrassed for me. And as the fog cleared, my powers much more satisfied than usual, I
could think through them enough to be humiliated. At the same time, all of these combined abilities were nothing compared to Victoria's scent alone, and she wasn't even the fifth most powerful source in this room. I found myself yearning still for the contact of other, more potent, powers. I was just less overwhelmed than before.

"That's a basic package," Khepri informed. "We have others. We felt it was good to start you off with a series of Thinker powers to help you harness the other abilities better. Your armor contains four organic cartridges that are fed by the Yggdrasil and rapidly produce the equivalent of saliva."

"You said something about being expected to work for the others?" *Is this what Pantheon's going to be about? This is like pushing drugs.* I prayed not, if only because I knew I was too weak to resist if given the opportunity. *I've already debased myself much more shamefully for far less than the power they are offering.*

Gaea took over for Khepri. "It's more a matter of trust than anything. Some of these powers are terrifying, mitigated only by the fact that they're held by individuals who are otherwise vulnerable or need multiple people to work effectively. To place all of it in the hands of one person is a really big risk."

Gaea stopped and Khepri picked up where she left off. "We are choosing to trust you, but there are limits to the risks we can justify. We have made contact with many of our allies, and they're willing to provide even more options." Khepri finished. "Dragon already has one of the stronger samples, one we can agree to right now. The child responsible for creating the interdimensional doorways. The question we have to ask first is if you'll suffer the side effects of debilitating powers. Labyrinth's power causes hallucinations and trouble interacting with the world. To call her autistic would be a misnomer, but isn't entirely wrong. We're hoping the set of Thinker powers you currently have will be enough to protect you from that influence."

"If it works, if you can use her power safely and create the gateways for us. It will let us cure her. Give her a chance at a normal life." Gaea's power wafted over, a sense of guilt and responsibility with an undercurrent of hope. It made sense, if they were using a mentally disabled child for her powers when they could cure her. "And if you can use her power without her limitations, we could accelerate timetables, do in days what has been taking us weeks."

*That's not too big a deal. Easy to agree to.* "I only get influenced by a power when I'm actively using it. Even if it has side effects, they'll only be a problem during power use." Gaea's scent had desperation in it, even. Several others did as well. *They all share a secret. A huge secret.* *They're priming me for it.*

The man in the armor whose power scared mine spoke up. "I am Chevalier, representing the Protectorate's interests in this matter. If you plan to accept Labyrinth's power, you'll need to agree to maintaining the United Nations arrangements on portal creation. There are a series of regulations in what is and is not acceptable use of the portal creation power. You must obey all of them."

This would give me a chance to work with Lily some more. Her power was intoxicating. I still had
some of it in reserve. "I can agree to that. If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to hide the fact that I have that power. People knowing what I can really do is worrying." I smiled, the scents of relief. A little bit of, if not trust, than at least the idea that I can show some discretion.

Dragon extended her hand out to me. "If I may? I'll show you how to access the power feeds."

"Umm, sure."

She put a hand on my elbow and gently lifted it up, placing her hand on the plating under my ribcage. A quick push and twist resulted in the panel folding forward. There were slim silver strips of metal. She pulled one out, and replaced it with one she was holding, then folded it back in place. "It's designed for fast switching between powers if you need it. The nature of your power to store abilities over time makes that less useful for you than it might otherwise be."

The new power, replacing the matter destroyer's, was intense and hard for me to understand. The flavor of the girl in the back. Of fantasy made reality and reality made fantasy. I could see why it was so overwhelming to the poor girl. The difference was, I was used to being overwhelmed, and I had decades of experience with how reality worked. I could control this power far better than she did. Certainly easier than controlling my own.

"We wanted to use the same dimensional storage tech we use for our other suits with space limitations. Dozens of powers to swap between with three or four words. But that's highly destructive to organic material, so we have to do it manually," Hecate added. "Speaking of, we have backups for the backups for everything we're going to give you. So, don't be too worried to see one destroyed in a fight."

Victoria laughed. "Not that you're going to lose any fights any time soon. We're going to be loading you up with all the best combat packages we can get our hands on."

Dragon still stood close to me. "First let's talk about the Tinker package. Some of them are unique to dead Tinkers. Including a bombmaker known as Bakuda. Her technology appeared to be a legitimate threat to Leviathan. We never got to study the devices as much as we'd like. Same with Professor Haywire, a dimensional technology specialist and Andrew Richter, a computer programming Tinker. You'll be expected to work closely with our own Tinkers on a semi regular basis on a number of important projects." She looked over at the Empresses, and I could smell their concern and anticipation.

"Don't overwhelm her too soon. She's still got a long day ahead of her." Victoria's voice was like velvet. "Let's let Chevalier cover the next part of the shiny package of options she'll be getting."

"It's an open secret that Avalon's main forces can't openly operate on Bet without causing an international incident. The Endbringer weapons and Dragon's battle suits are only available during Endbringer scale emergencies or United Nations approval. Now that Eidolon has command of the
Endbringers, he is similarly blacklisted. This was short sighted given the number of other Class S threats in the world. Such as Sleeper, the Blasphemies, and Ash Beast. In addition to certain large paramilitary organizations such as the terrorists that took Earth Khyber. "Or, the Yangban, as everyone knows and no one says. "The Protectorate is willing to offer samples from a series of powerful capes, in exchange for your agreement to participate in all Class S conflicts alongside the Protectorate."

Victoria's hand caressed the back of my neck and the sensation was enough to make my toes curl. "It gets better. You and I and a few others are gonna join a mercenary team and go Nazi hunting later. You should see what the Germans are offering to put a foot up the Gesellschaft's collective ass. And if we happen to come back with a few blood spatters on our costumes." She shrugged. "That just means more options, right?"

"Victoria, I think you're enjoying this too much."

"Sorry, sis." The blonde stepped back a little. I was both relieved and disappointed.

Chevalier waited a moment then continued. "We have a series of parahumans to offer. A teleporter known as Strider, with the ability to teleport anyone in his line of sight with him to anywhere else on the planet. No restrictions or errors. This includes teleporting to people he only knows from a photograph. Five parahumans with powers that let them store and release energy later. Assault, Battery, Stormfront, Dazzler and Falling Star. All are powerful parahumans in their own right and we're hoping their energy powers will extend to allowing you to enhance your other powers."

He took a breath, then continued. "We also have a parahuman known as White Hat, who can summon ghostly duplicates of himself with copies of his costume and simple equipment. It's a long shot, but perhaps those duplicates could use other powers you're harnessing at the same time. Again, on the contingency that you are always to show up for every Class S threat registered."

Victoria leaned in close. "I'll be there, too. We can both use my power. It'll be like we're twins."

I gulped and nodded hurriedly. I even trusted myself not to regret the decision after I was back to my right mind. The ability to put myself, my team, and my country in position as one of the leading forces on the planet. It was something I'd dreamed of for decades. "I can agree to that."

Khepri spoke up. "So it's clear, we will have kill switches and failsafes. If we need to, we can take that armor away, and all the power it gives you. I say that out of honesty, and because of the next part of this. Vicky, it's time."

She stepped toward me again. "Well, I promised if you were good I'd give you a taste."

"I- in front of everyone? Your sister?" My stomach clenched in delighted anticipation. The part of of
me that was sated enough to think clearly wept in disgust.

She shrugged. "I don't see why not." She held her right hand up, then traced her left hand across her arm, cutting open her wrist with her nail, then laughed loudly. "Oh, come on, how could any of you actually expect I was gonna do the other thing?" She held out her hand. "You said it works with any fluid, right?"

Another time, another place, a different state of mind, things might have played out differently. But I'd been teased and stimulated and given just enough to not lose my mind for the whole conversation. I gripped her hand and her arm, and latched my mouth on the wound she made on herself, sucking greedily.

Her powers snapped into my mind. Incredible combat senses, the best I'd ever had. Analysis of biology and weaknesses, touch range electrical powers. A shapeshifting power that granted super strength, self healing, and a breaker state. None of which I could harness, which was fine. I had my own regeneration and strength, this just meant using her power wouldn't count as being used at 'full strength', so I could get more time from it.

The font of power stopped, as she regenerated the injury. "Okay, I think that's enough. Now you need to focus on using my power. Scan the biology of those around here. It should be instinctual for you to tell if they're telling the truth or lying. If not, well, that's what Uber's power is for."

I breathed, shuddering at the after effects of absorbing her power. Never before have I been given so much, so soon, and it left me exhausted. I looked out at the others in the group, analyzing their health and physical condition. Now I knew Dragon wasn't real. Another I had to assume was a cyborg in his suit, less than half organic. The gaps and cybernetics built into the various armor suits were clear to my vision.

Khepri took a breath. "For all the powers we're giving you access to, there's the ones we're not. Or, at least, not yet. Powers such as Glaistig Uaine, Atropos."

*I hope no one realizes I have that one already.* The surge in reaction from Victoria made it clear that she figured it out. *Fuck.* "I don't mean to interrupt, but I already have some of her power. Not a lot. But enough for a few good attacks."

There was a surge of concern and anger, backed from my natural Thinker power, Victoria's, and the attention to detail Thinker. Khepri quickly ignored it. "Thank you for being honest with us. The point remains, there are better powers, we can make you stronger. And one day, we're going to have to. At a point starting in less than a year, there is a chance for a legitimate world ending crisis. That chance slowly increases over time until, in less than fourteen years, it will have inevitably occurred. We know what it is. The more people find out what the threat is, the greater the odds of it happening early, the more lives are lost, so we must keep you in suspense."
Every word she's saying is true. Not a single person here doesn't already know what it is, except for the ones protecting Labyrinth, and even they know of it already. Missing only the detail of what it is.

Khepri kept speaking, and I only kept track thanks to the perfect memory Thinker power in my collection. "It doesn't just extend to Bet and the other worlds we're colonizing. It covers every version of Earth in every reality. We're trusting you with a lot of responsibility. You're one of the few real hopes we have of saving every world. We need you."

================

A/N- And THAT is how you minmax power pools. Also- this chapter is almost 3k words. Fuck. Don't expect a second today.
"This is Erin Vought with Channel Nine news, in part two of our ongoing five part series, Avalon: A Two Year Retrospective. Culminating in live coverage of the marriage of its Empresses this Friday, the day after it celebrates its Anniversary. Yesterday, we focused on the families of the Empresses themselves. Here are some highlights."

The screen flickered to show Erin talking to a hard looking older man. He had numerous scars and tattoos visible on his face. "As a long time associate of the supervillain known as Marquis, what is your opinion on the rumor Clarice and Amelia might be biological siblings?"

The man shrugged, and his messy stubble of a beared couldn't hide the jiggle of his neck fat. "Cain't say she is, cain't say she ain't. Marquis was always a ladies man. An' he had a type, y'know? Liked the quiet girls. Mousy librarian look. Me 'n th' boys never quite got it. We'd be at th' club with all these smokin' chicks throwin' themselves at him like they were on fire and he's th' pool. Here he is flirtin' up th' twiggy college broad servin' th' drinks. He'd get bored wit' em in a few months, but he always took care of 'em after. Made sure they had cash ta go ta school er settle wit' th' landlord. Little stuff. So guiss I'm sayin' I dunno. But I didn' know 'bout Amelia, either. Surprised he ain't got more."

ComfortSupportDidn'tRealize. I leaned against Taylor. It hurt knowing that my father probably treated my mother like that. I knew he was a villain, once upon a time I was scared I'd become like him. But that didn't mean I wanted to sit here listening to people like that talk about my mother like she was just something that my dad used and threw out. I looked up at my soon to be wife. One more way I know I'll never be like my father.

Clarice rested a hand on my shoulder. She was going for the goth look today. Paler than usual skin, solid black hair. She said she'd be going as 'plain and boring' for the wedding itself. I was glad one of my sisters would be, because Vicky sure wasn't.

A couple other clips, showing some of Danny's former coworkers talking about him and how much he loved Taylor and her mom. Some snippets about Taylor's mom, herself. I wished I could have met her. ComfortNostalgiaShe'dLoveYou.

"Today we move on to talking about Empress Amelia Lavere, widely known as the heart of Avalon, the world of Avalon itself, and of course that means talking about the most notable feature on the planet, the Yggdrassil. To do so, we are here with renowned xenobiologist, Professor Julian Abernathy."

"Are you sure you don't mean the only notable feature on Avalon?" Zach heckled the broadcast.
A holographic display showed the Professor. He didn't seem all that impressive, another middle aged guy in a suit, I'd met hundreds. Going grey, going bald. "Yes, thank you Miss Vought."

"Please, Professor. You can call me Erin."

"I'll keep that in mind, Miss Vought."

Erin rolled with it. "You have quite the resume, Professor. Eleven Doctorates and twenty seven honorary doctorates in an astonishing array of fields. You founded the Abernathy Academy of Science and Technology, the world's largest free university. You personally hold over four hundred patents, a hundred and fifty two of them in the sciences of biotechnology and medicine."

He chuckled. "Yes, as is publically documented, I am a parahuman. One of the first on record, in fact. Officially I am classified as a Thinker 2, Trump 1, Stranger 7. Or Esper 2, Infiltrator 5, using the European system. I have the power to learn everything those near me are learning, and to slightly improve the learning ability of those under my power's influence."

"How does that translate to Stranger 7?"

"Some individuals have interpreted my power to mean I am a potential threat to national security if allowed in the wrong areas. Despite my assurances that even were I interested, my power does not work that way, they fear I might steal passwords and account information. I bear no grudges, however. Their caution keeps the likes of Heartbreaker and Sublim from Presidents and Prime Ministers. I am more than content to let them do their jobs, while I pursue my career in peace. I'm busy enough as it is."

Erin smiled along through the description. "I believe you. Have you been given an offer to move to Pantheon? They are quite public about wanting to recruit ro- I mean, civilian parahumans."

He shook his head. "Nothing specifically directed at myself. Simply the open invitation to all parahumans, which I confess I have not studied. If I were a different man, I might be more interested. But I am a patriot, Miss Vought. I love America and have no desire to abandon her."

Erin nodded in agreement. "Now, perhaps you can explain what a xenobiologist is, exactly. I always thought it had something to do with aliens."
Abernathy chuckled. "That is a common misconception. It's the study of artificial organic life. For the most part a theoretical science, but there are a number of advanced labs with living samples they've created. And of course the Yggdrasil itself."

"Which you have studied extensively over the last couple years."

TimeWastedCouldHaveAsked. Taylor wasn't the only person who found it amusing. I chuckled, and so did Clarice. Years spent studying something that I made in days, and every so often add a new feature I like. I am that important.

"Indeed I have. Samples are difficult to study, due to the lifeform's composite nature, but we'd be here for months talking about the many ways it differs from life as we understand the concept. In the interest of brevity, let us focus on the most significant differences, and the significant advantages and risks that implies for those who choose to live on a world dominated almost solely by that singular lifeform."

"Dammit," Clarice muttered. "Is this going to be another of those 'Avalon's covered in an unholy abomination' propaganda things again? Because I'm getting really sick of that crap. Zach... now that there aren't any Endbringers kicking things over, does that mean Bet's going to become as stupid as Aleph? Because if we need Endbringers to keep people from being stupid, I can build us an Endbringer. I will build three Endbringers that merge together into a super Endbringer that fires lightning from its butt if I have to."

"And I'll form the head!" Zach shouted.

NegationDragonRespectsWorthwhile. "Dragon says this guy's on the level. Doesn't mean he's on our side, but at the very least it means his arguments are honest. If nothing else, we should listen. Maybe we'll learn something worthwhile. Maybe put out our own rebuttal later."

"To start with, let us look at the environment regulation features of the Yggdrasil. In the two years of recorded history on Avalon, it has never rained once, anywhere on the planet. And it appears it never shall. Air humidity is maintained by the Yggdrasil itself, which releases enough moisture to keep the lower atmosphere comfortable, but the upper atmosphere rarely even forms light clouds. In addition, the plant gathers almost all of the solar energy reaching the planet, transferring and releasing some of it as heat to warm the cooler areas. As such, there are no seasons or climate. Exterior surface of the world tends to a temperature between sixty and sixty five Fahrenheit, and interiors constructed of Yggdrasil tend between sixty five and seventy. That's fifteen point five, eighteen point three and twenty one for those using Celsius. With exception to the volcanic and extreme mountainous regions, which are comparable to those of Bet."
"Clear skies and comfortable weather all year long? I don't know about living there, but that sounds like my kind of vacation destination."

"Perhaps. In addition, the plant absorbs almost all nonliving, and many living, things that touch it. Dust, dirt, pollen, discarded foodstuffs, viruses and bacteria, animal waste products, most insects, plastics and most other forms of garbage and petrochemicals. While this might seem desirable to the untrained observer, it is in fact a considerable health risk. The human immune system requires exposure to infectious agents, much as the body requires exercise and the mind requires stimulation. The side effects can be potentially lethal."

"So the people on Avalon face health risks from a lack of health risks?"

"Succinctly put," Abernathy agreed. "But I wouldn't want to mislead. The Yggdrasil itself is designed to be considered an infectious agent by the immune system. It won't grow in a living animal, but releases chemicals that our skin responds to. It also, on a bimonthly basis, is programmed to release a form of pollen that serves as a wide ranging innoculant, and features that resemble human biology enough to be infected by our diseases, which it rapidly grows antibodies to distribute via pollen as well."

"I was part of a story on that a few months ago. Medhall used the Yggdrasil to make a possible cure for HIV."

"Not quite a cure, but a treatment that primes the immune system against many strains of the virus. It has shown a success rate of just over forty five percent thus far. I believe a true cure will come within five years."

"It's not the cure that's the hard part," Clarice muttered. "It's finding a way to mass produce the stuff."

"Pardon my confusion, but nothing you've said sounds that bad. In fact, it mostly sounds quite appealing."

"In the short term, perhaps. But the Yggdrasil is a single living thing that is Avalon's entire
biosphere. There is no life cycle, no natural evolutionary course that will allow it to adapt to changing circumstances. The ground beneath Avalon is still dangerously irradiated by the cosmic event that destroyed life on the world. Without the Yggdrasil the world will return to uninhabitable within decades. Empress Lavere is the only thing keeping their world alive. Her unofficial title as 'The Heart of Avalon' is, I'm afraid, quite literal. Should anything happen to her, their whole world dies."

*He's not wrong. If anything does happen to me. SupportProtectYouForever.* Taylor turned and kissed the side of my head. I snuggled happily against her and settled in for the rest of the discussion. *I know you will. I love you. LoveKeepSafe.*

==============

A/N- Victor briefly considered visiting this guy at some point. But then he decided guns, cars, martial arts, and how to pick up women were more interesting than studying life that doesn't actually exist.

Or, in the immortal words of Abridged Piccolo: NEEEEERRRRRD!!!!

Also- Taylia, one year later.
This is it, this is the day. I still can't believe it. Concern Don't Get Cold Feet. Don't worry, that's not happening. I just still can't believe it. I'd always wondered what my marriage was going to look like. Then for a while I was convinced it would probably never happen, that I'd never find anyone who'd want to marry me, that I didn't deserve something as simple as being loved. Now I'm marrying a beautiful girl who loved me. Certainly I didn't expect anything like this. Here Always Love You.

Sarah was busy tweaking my dress the last little bit before the ceremony. After the weeks of wedding planning in which she had taken to handling everything my own mother would have done if she were alive, I was able to call her 'Sarah' and not 'Mrs. Pelham'. Maybe the idea of her and my dad being together isn't so bad after all. I still couldn't imagine myself ever being comfortable enough to call her 'mom', however.

Then I had my part of the bridal party here with me. Dad was out in the main area with Theo, Zach and Mark seeing guests to their seats, or doing whatever else it was guys did at weddings when there wasn't a groom to worry about. I had my bridesmaids helping me out and telling me how wonderful the dress was while Emma poked me repeatedly in the face to make sure the makeup was perfect.

"I think I regret not taking your offer to simply alter my skin pigmentation for the day," I complained.

"Told you so," Emma gloated.

Lisa shook her head. "Nope, bad idea. They're going to have all kinds of stuff pointed at you, speculation, Thinkers and Tinkers. You cheat by doing makeup with powers, and it won't be long before everyone knows. Which wouldn't be a thing if you went extravagant with flying ponies and incredible displays of parahuman power. But you chose to go with 'when we're not on the job, we're just two normal girls' route. Which is a great choice from the PR angle, but leaves much to be desired in the 'cheat our way through the hard parts' side."

"Yeah, I know. I didn't really mean it."

"What you should have done is accepted my offer to throw a bachelorette party. I have a friend who knows how to throw the best parties. Literally, that's actually part of her powers. You'd have loved it."

"Too much work to do. Besides, there's all kinds of other things wrong with that idea."

Sarah ran another go of the comb through my hair. "You sound like me when I was younger. Neil and I actually attacked a Teeth safehouse during our honeymoon. It was a blast. Both figuratively and in one unfortunate case quite literally."
Emma kept up her work, forcing me to close my eyes as she poked at my eyelids. "Don't worry, I've been an expert at makeup since I was thirteen years old. And you have excellent skin to work off of, this is just enhancing your natural beauty."

"She's right," Crystal agreed. "She's actually really good with the makeup. After seeing her dress sketches, I was sorta expecting you to look like you passed out drunk at a children's party and they went at you with crayons."

Emma didn't pause for a moment. "Oh hyuk, hyuk. Alright, and done." Emma stepped back.

Sarah gave a final tug of my hair and brush down my back, and picked off the last few pieces of stray hair. "Same here. We're perfect. You're allowed to see yourself in the mirror, now."

I took a deep breath, or as deep as was possible with this dress hugging my every curve like an overly affectionate anaconda, turning toward the mirror. Hilariously enough, Amelia and I had not been allowed to see our wedding dresses until just now.

Emma, Lisa, Vicky and Crystal all unanimously agreed that the pair of us were not allowed to dress ourselves, and after that the progression to not even knowing what we'd be wearing was inevitable. It was like they expected us to get married in jeans and t-shirts. Although, actually, that would have been a way to send a message that... clearly they were totally justified in not letting us decide our own dresses.

I got a look at myself and was glad they kept the surprise. The dress was stunning. The top was the traditional white coloration, as expected of a wedding dress. It clung tight to my body and I was proud enough of my figure to be confident in it being shown to billions of people. It came all the way up to a choker that emphasized my slender neck.

I probably could have made strapless work for me, but for the military medals. Avalon didn't have many to choose from so far. Just the series of small gold shields for every Endbringer battle attended. Each had a sword in the middle. Silver was the standard. Red for injury, or in my case death. And black for each one where there was a kill. There were also blue, green, and purple bands signifying search and rescue, medical aid that saved lives, and personal combat with the beasts in that order. All of mine were pinned neatly over my left breast.

Then there was the cape, which tied the whole look together perfectly. It was beautiful. A medium metallic blue slowly darkening as it got lower. It rested over my shoulders, moving down under my
arms and around my hips, coming together above my naval, one side folding over to my hip before curving back again. The cape parted again right around my knees, revealing the white of the dress around my shins. The cape also formed the train of my dress, which as a deep midnight blue. With a few strategic points where it was sewn to the dress itself to keep everything from coming apart as I walked down the aisle. The red trim of the cape really highlighted everything and evoked a wonderful, no doubt deliberate image of a cocoon.

My hair was done to shine and drape down my back, with a simple blue ribbon to hold it in place. For a moment I could imagine I was looking at my mother in the mirror. *Don't know why I'm surprised, she really wasn't much older than I am now when she married my dad, after all.*

*ShockI'mBeautifulIt'sPerfect.* I smiled. "I think Amelia approves of her dress, too."

"Good, because it's almost time. We're doing this on a razor's edge," Lisa reminded me. "Bridal and whatever parties, out we go."

As the bride, or one of them, I got to hang back out of sight. The shadows had gotten longer while we were inside getting prepared. Ours would be an outdoor wedding. Part of the careful calculations was a sunset wedding. Fully seventy percent of Avalon's population was either in our analogs of the United States or Japan. Another ten percent in Canada. Most of our supporters on Bet, the same regions. This was the best time to inconvenience as few people who wanted to experience this live with us as possible.

Theo and my Dad came around the corner of our temporary privacy room. Theo took his spot in the lineup. Dad stopped to give Sarah a peck on the cheek as she left for the seats. He made his way to me, taking position on my left hand side. We had planned every part of this wedding, including the nontraditional parts.

"You look perfect, Kiddo. Your mother would be so proud."

I smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

"Don't cry. Wait until after the ceremony, then you can and will ruin your makeup to your heart's content."

"Thanks again." I took a deep breath. Now was the only major displays of power any of us would do. The start of the ceremonies. Thousands of them across the whole world of Avalon. We timed this as perfectly as possible. We even dropped a few million dollars into at least helping to pay for all these ceremonies. Those who wanted large weddings would still be footing most of the bill, themselves. Even still, we were spending more on any one of their weddings than we had on our own. A fact that would be picked up on by the gossip news quite quickly. Probably a week from now.
The world shifted white beneath our feet. Amelia's part of our worldwide announcement the wedding had begun. Every outdoor surface of Avalon was now a beautiful, if somewhat muted white, a result of pigments being altered in the Yggdrasil. This was the signal to start the weddings. My own bridesmaids, and men I suppose, started the process.

Theo went first. A calculation of sorts, starting off on the nontraditional foot of a male member of the bride's party. He would be joined by Missy from Amelia's side and they'd take their positions.

Then the next pair. Emma went out, she'd meet up with Zach. My former best friend, former betrayer, now friend again and basically a Case 53, at least as far as the world as a whole was concerned. One of the monster capes. She, or someone like her, would be here on political message merits alone, but I was glad to have her here, a part of my life again.

Lily was the third to go out, and Sabah would meet her on the other side. Those two were a purely political move. The both knew and accepted it. Sabah was one of the more popular and successful rogues in the world, and an Endslayer on top of it. Which meant two Endslayers standing on Amelia's side. I, meanwhile, had the Endslayer. Japan's favorite daughter and all around crusader of the GLBT cause. It would be a slap in the faces of some of our biggest political supporters to snub either of them. They'd just have to tolerate each other's presence for the night since they were currently on breakup number whatever.

The next one was Crystal. More here for convenience, to round out the numbers, and to thank Sarah for all her effort and hard work. She'd be paired alongside Clarice for the purposes of the wedding procession. The first pair without a political maneuver present or future behind it.

By now, numerous other ceremonies had reached their apex, the bridal march music starting. Amelia had made her blessings known by the color shift. Now it was my turn to show my own presence. Thousands of butterflies swirled in the air across our world at my command, though only a couple handfuls per wedding. Enough to let them know I was there, not enough to distract from the bride.


God damn it. "What?"

"Nothing. Vicky cooked up a little prank, it won't disrupt anything, I promise. No one's going to know anything's up except us." Lisa drew herself together and walked out, my maid of honor would meet up with Vicky. Then it was our turn.

I took a slow breath. This is it. This is really, truly, it. I couldn't tell which feelings were mine and which were Amelia's, but I was glad to know we were going through this together.
I put my arm around Dad's, and my heart jumped when the music started. I'd already heard it hundreds of times and would hear it hundreds more in just the time this ceremony had taken, but those didn't matter. It was this one, here, now, that mattered. *My wedding.*

We walked out. With Dad to my left, and the guest seating to my right. As a combination of political maneuver and message to send, we'd opted to mess with the whole system. Instead of one bride walking on one aisle, we had two. I was on the left hand side from the audience perspective, the traditionally feminine position at the altar. But we'd set the layout to face east meaning I'd be approaching from, and standing on the north side. We'd have the benefit of the sun highlighting us, then we'd leave down the center aisle together, into the recently set sun. All part of a carefully laid out plan to make it clear neither of us was the dominant partner.

And all of that planning stopped meaning anything for me the moment I made eye contact with Amelia across the aisle. Her costume was almost identical to mine. The white underlayer, the cape carefully wrapped around her body. The difference being hers was green instead of blue. Much like mine, it got darker the lower it went. Going from a leaf green to a dark jungle green. And like mine it had the red trim to highlight. Where mine created the image of a cocoon, hers was reminiscent of a flower just starting to bloom.

*Emma's lack of art skills notwithstanding, this is a brilliant idea. I'll have to thank her for it later. AgreedBothOfUs.*

Even our lack of veils, our lack of masks, was a calculation. And it backfired at least a little. We just stared at each other. A little part of my brain wondered if this is why brides were escorted by their fathers. I walked only because Dad was walking, and Amelia much the same with Mark to her right. They kept time because neither of us were able to.

*LoveAnticipationIStillCan'tBelieveIt. I know, shoulda done it sooner. AgreedButResponsibilities.*

We met in the center, where the three aisled converged in front of the altar. Smiling anxiously at one another, and turning to the last member of our entourage. Dinah, who absolutely refused to be a flower girl. So instead she got to be the ring bearer. For both of them, because it made as much sense as anything. Both were simple bands with a small star of gems on top. Sapphires for the one I'd give her, emeralds for me. Otherwise, the pair were identical.

We reached to pick up our respective when Dinah spoke. "You'll be happy, at least as long as my power can see under these circumstances."

*ConfidentRestOfOurLives. I didn't take my eyes off Amelia's. "We know."*

She went back to her seat, with her parents. They looked understandably overwhelmed given the circumstances. A lot of the people in the audience were big names. Capes well known on rapidly shifting world stage. Two thirds of the Triumvirate, lacking Eidolon for him needing to appear
politically neutral. Dragon, Chevalier, Akaihana, Adalid, Valkyrie, Narwhal. The ones likely to be recognized by anyone, and dozens of others. Less than a third of the people here were normal and that was including the cameramen in the count.

We turned to the simplistic trellis and lectern that served as our wedding altar. There stood one of our other political choices, Halo. He would be the one to officiate the ceremonies. He was qualified by whatever standard nondenominational Christians used on Bet. Whether he was qualified on Avalon? Eh, we say he's qualified, that means he's qualified. It helped for both our pro equality social messages, and in marking our long term friends and allies.

We brushed hands as we stepped forward to complete the ceremony and make our vows. What was it they called moments like this? The first day of the rest of our lives? Yeah, that's what this felt like. Our lives, together.
*collapses from exhaustion*

If TanaNari won't give us a vow's scene.... Well, I'm just going to have to take matters into my own hands, right?

"I Do"

I was being calmed by Amelia, her encouragement banishing away my nervousness and terror.

It was surreal. Here I was, getting married. To Amelia, the best thing that had ever happened to me.

I was wearing a gorgeous dress designed by Emma, standing in front of an audience that included Legend and Alexandria and more.

And I was in love.

What would Skitter think? What would the Taylor of before that think?

It was impossibly, unambiguously good.

AnticipationExcitement, Amelia sent.

Halo's voice finally broke through my haze of disbelief, shock, and happiness.

"Will you, Amelia Claire Lavere, and Taylor Anne Hebert, take each other as your lawful, married spouse?"

AnticipationNervousnessHappinessBliss

We made eye contact, and my mouth almost unconsciously flickered into a smile. A matching smile appeared almost immediately on Amelia's face.

AnticipationBlissNow.

"I do," we said together.

In that moment, everything was perfect.
The newly married couple rushed off down the center aisle, holding hands and as happy as could be. Still couldn't say I was fond of Taylor, but Amy loved her, and she was nice enough to point me in the direction of someone who deserved a good punching when I got bored. So, I was willing to tolerate her. As long as she continued making my sister so absurdly happy.

We bridesmaids followed. Clarice standing alongside Lisa as the maids of honor for this one. I stepped in alongside Crystal and gave my megawatt smile to the crowd. As the, or at least a, maid of honor, I had to represent for the whole wedding. But the level of discomfort Lisa had to pretend she wasn't experiencing while walking alongside my pseudo sibling was hilarious beyond words. We stopped for a last moment of cheers as the limo with the brides drove off. They'd get their photos done, change outfits, and be back in time for dinner.

I turned back to the crowd. "Okay, time to pack up and head to the reception! Follow us, and remember if you get lost you don't get the free food!"

That got a few chuckles. We were literally right across the street from our reception hall. A really nice place meant to house foreign heads of state and other various diplomats and stuff. One of the buildings on Avalon that was actually a building instead of something cooked up by my sister's insane powers.

We led the way, in official order this time. I took position alongside Lisa while everyone else lined up where they belonged behind us. We didn't need to exchange words, or even looks. She was suitably displeased by my little stunt, and I got to jab her for being a bitch. It wasn't nearly enough, after she fucked over Crystal and walked out on Pantheon to play house with Alexandria at Shady Conspiracies R'Us. But it was a start.

Then we formed up just inside the entrance to greet the guests as they arrived. For the most part, it was a pretty informal meet and greet. A very small ceremony, with only a couple dozen people. A lot of Taylor and Amy's friends and family were capes, and had to show in costume. Which meant they couldn't bring their civilian families with them. An unfortunate side effect of the lifestyle, and one that kept the whole ceremony pretty tiny.

Lisa smiled over at me. "What's the matter, still cranky they turned down your plans to invite a thousand people and make the party last three days?"

"Nah, I got over that weeks ago." Not really, my sister deserves the wedding of the century. "Besides, it just means it's still a fresh idea when I get hitched." Which is going to happen in approximately never. Way too much commitment for my tastes.

I reached over and gave Clarice a pat on the back. She'd gone with her natural look this time, making
all four of us in front blondes. "Of course, mine's not gonna cause half the commotion of when 'shroom here gets hitched. I bet it's already all planned out."

Theo probably blushed as hard as both his girlfriends combined, saved from further humiliation only by his costume being fully face concealing. I was happy for all of them, they were great kids. Missy, especially, deserved it.

Our first waves of guests started filing in. Most of them only stopping to say hi to maybe one or two of us at a time. Michael got dragged into a small conversation with Dad, and I could sense that it was epically awkward and uncomfortable. More for my poor boyfriend than anyone. Dad was almost too nice. Too happy to talk to him, and unless he had some kind of oddly specific stranger power it was completely genuine. Mom, on the other hand, was pissed and getting worse. Though seemingly more at Dad than anyone. Oh well, she couldn't stop me and she knew it. More than that, she wouldn't dare cause a scene and ruin this day for Amy.

Later, however, there would be a scene of epic proportion. Or, much more likely, Dad would sneak off while Mom wasn't looking and avoid her until they became grandparents. **Huh, there's a thought.** I leaned over to Clarice. "Hey, which one of them is playing mommy for our collection of adorably world shattering nieces?" It would have to be girls, they didn't have the genetic material for a boy without doing something wonky.

Clarice understood the question. "It'll have to be Taylor. Amelia's physiology is weird, it'll cause all kinds of problems. But that's theoretical. They're not having any children until after."

I didn't have to ask what. I smiled and waved as I spotted Sveta and her date. Another Case 53, this one. Completely inorganic according to my senses. She waited as patiently as possible to stop and talk to me. I didn't give her a chance to speak, just pulling her into a hug. "Hey, no need to be shy." I dropped my voice to avoid being overheard. "So, who's the new boo? He seems... durable."

I let her go, and she reached over and grabbed his hand. "This is Weld. He's with the Protectorate in San Francisco. We met during a parade..."

Chances are I was the only one who'd know she was blushing. Well, maybe Lisa and Ayane would have figured it out.

I shook the boy's hand. Yup, inorganic. No nervous response. I put some real effort into the squeeze and decided that he was way tougher than steel. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He squeezed right back. He had enough savvy to know it was on purpose, but not hostile. "And you, too. You're kind of a hero of mine. I can't begin to tell you how thankful I am for all you've done to help the Case 53s. I'm really passionate about the cause, as I'm sure you can imagine."
"Thanks, I'm proud of it too, I promise we'll talk about it later." I meant it, too. Not a lot of people were dead zones to my senses like he was. But we had lines of people to say hello to.

He moved on to Clarice, who was all smiles. "Hey, we used to go to school together! Do you remember?"

"Trust me, no one could forget you. You'll be a legend to the grandkids of your classmates."

"Small world, huh?" Sveta responded. "You'll have to tell me stories later."

I greeted the next guy, shaking his hand. One of Avalon's new employees. A parahuman, with the minor Case 53 traits that so many of those vial experiments produced. My power considered him a non-threat, so my guess was Tinker. "I'm sure you'll hear this a lot from others, but that was really nice of you, letting Clarice be the maid of honor. Not a lot of people would have done something like that."

I smiled happily. "She deserved it. Besides, sometimes a good deed is its own reward." I looked over at Lisa the moment he moved on. *Okay, maybe I should stop rubbing it in. It's fun and all, but I'm starting to feel bad.*

The next guest of interest was Akaihana. She was sporting her new armor. Legion, v2. Still faced the same problem with dimensional storage, but she could run six powers now. As long as two of them were mine and Theo's, to provide the defenses. Because that armor couldn't do shit to protect her and needed my energy generation just to power its flight and shunt drive. "Love the new duds."

"They are really nice," she agreed politely, before move on to thank Clarice for all her hard work. For some reason, she was always a little uncomfortable around me.

Dragon and Defiant came in together. Dragon ended up on the Taylor side, so she got to say hello to Lisa. "Thank you for, well, everything." *What the hell does Dragon have to thank Lisa about?"

Lisa shrugged. "Sometimes a good deed is its own reward." Her glance in my direction made it clear there was no way either of them were going to let me know what was going on, and she knew I was going to be obsessing about it all night. *The b**tch.*

Defiant and I had nothing really to say to each other, so a casual handshake was the end of that. And after several others, we finally got to go inside. Most of them would line up yet again to meet the newlyweds later, but that would be limited solely to congratulations and at most a full sentence. Those of us with a real reason to talk to them would end up doing so later.

I, meanwhile, had stuff to check up on. Michael had finally managed to extricate himself from my
parents and was waiting for me. His faceplate opened up, and I gave him a kiss. I would have liked to do more, but too much temptation to not stop. So I gave him a hug, which he interpreted as 'please squeeze me hard enough to break a normal girl's ribs', as I had trained him to do. "This marriage crap takes too much work."

He pressed his lips to my forehead. "But the end is in sight. Just a little longer, right?"

"Yeah, just a little longer," I agreed. "So, what do you know about that Weld kid that Sveta's seeing right now? Am I going to have to figure out a way to break a solid metal ass in half? Because I am up for the challenge."

"With the standard rules of me not giving you confidential information, and you not telling your sister anything at all?"

Michael waited for me to nod before continuing. "He's a pretty popular up and comer, already making a name for himself. He's naturally charismatic, very polite, and good at following orders. He was assigned to Brockton Bay for a while. The top brass yanked him out as fast as they could the moment Flechette and Vista walked. They didn't want to lose any more of their bright young talents after your sister stole two of the best in a single day. I don't think they're ever going to forgive or forget that at one time two of your Endslayers belonged to us."

I laughed. "Oh god I hope not. I'd hate to imagine we went through all this effort without the pleasure of having people who resent us for being better than them. That's like half the reason to be good at anything."

"Really? And what's the other half?"

I squeezed him. "The arm candy."

"Well, by that standard, I must be the best in the world."

"Plus one hundred and fifty relationship points!"

I didn't even bother to look. "I swear, you have a secondary Thinker power for that."

"Nope, but I'm working on it. Come on, we gotta go make sure Paige is good."

I reluctantly let Michael go. He gave me another peck on the lips. "Go ahead. I'll make the rounds. Maybe have a brief chat with Weld. If I start now, he may even get enough of a lead to outrun you."
"You know me too well."

A/N- I will never write wedding chapters. Ever. Again.

Reception's got a couple more chapters left in it, though. So there's always still a chance of something horrible ruining their happy moment, right?
Ch 402- Weld

It was weird, being here on Avalon. And more than that, in the capital city. Pantheon's still not officially named seat of power. More than that, there was the thought that I could have been a part of this. I could have been one of their royal family, at least in as much as Osiris and some of the other peripheral members were.

I felt Sveta squeeze my arm. "You act like you've never seen a fancy building before."

I looked over at her. *How much would it cost me to get a self healing shapeshifting suit that could turn into anything I wanted?* "Well, never one which was hosting the marriage of the rulers of a planet, at least."

In retrospect, I was better off for not joining. I could make more of a difference campaigning for proper treatment of the Case 53s on Bet through the Protectorate than I could through Pantheon. Especially when they already had Sveta and some others to represent our interests on their side. I had to worry about the side that needed the help.

"They really are adorable together. You went to school with them? What were they like?"

Huh, but I only went to school with them for a few weeks. "Quiet. They were the shy types. Kept their heads down, tried to avoid being noticed. The smart, nerdy type that no one really pay attention to. Really the exact opposite of both of Amelia's sisters. *They're a lot like you, actually.* I left that part out. I personally found Sveta's shyness to be cute, but she resented that part of herself, so I didn't make a deal about it.

She smiled at that. "Vicky always says her sister is the quiet one. I always thought that meant she was quiet by Vicky's standards."

I laughed. "I get the feeling everybody's quiet by Vicky's standards."

Sveta's laugh was lyrical. "I just have trouble believing it. I've seen them give interviews in front of billions, and during the Endbringer battles, Khepri... Taylor... she had more command than anyone else there. Even the Triumvirate and Chevalier would defer to her orders. It just doesn't fit to imagine them as anything other than these larger than life figures."

"When you bring an army of mind controlled superweapons to the fight with you, I imagine people start listening." I put my arm around her waist. "Besides, you punched Leviathan in his face. You're one of the Endslayers. Powers aren't given out based on personality."
"Yeah, I guess." She looked behind me and her smile vanished. "Well, looks like our conversation's about to be interrupted."

"Sorry about that." A man's voice, I turned and was face to face with Chevalier. I'd met him before, a few times. But never had an opportunity to talk to him in person. The leader of the Protectorate, the second half of the Victoria-Chevalier interaction that was at least giving the Case 53s a chance at having a life. Not a normal life, but better than anything some of them might have been able to hope for, before. I was luckier than most in that regard.

"I'm assuming Vicky sent you this way to screen my new boyfriend? Why isn't she doing it herself, this time?"

*Oh, that's pretty obvious.* "I don't think her lie detection powers work on me." I tapped my arm just hard enough to get a metallic clunk out of it. My body wasn't hollow, and too dense to get the ringing noise typically imagined in metal hitting metal. This sounded more like hitting a concrete wall.

Chevalier nodded. "I see the two of you have it all figured out. I won't insult you by pretending otherwise. If it makes you feel any better, I vouched for you. Vicky trusts my judgment, so this is more a formality than anything."

Sveta sighed theatrically. "Well, if it makes Mom happy. I'll go mingle while pretending I don't know you're threatening my boyfriend with fates worse than death." She stood up on her toes and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "If they scare you off, at least let me know before you leave. That way I know whose ass to kick and why."

I returned the kiss. "I'll be sure you get the message. By carrier pigeon if I have to."

I watched her head off for a second, before turning back to face the man that could easily cost me my job if he wanted. "So, what's the rundown, sir?"

"You've already figured everything out anyway. Think Sveta knows?"

Oh, yeah, she's too smart not to have. "I think she suspects. She's a smart girl, and probably the most popular Case 53 on the planet. She has to be wary of people who might try to manipulate her. Given my blanket immunity to most forms of emotion or biology based Thinker powers, I am the most logical candidate if the Protectorate wanted to find a way to influence her. And, through her either Pantheon or the Case 53s. It doesn't help that other people have tried the same thing in the past."

Chevalier nodded. "In the immortal words of my girlfriend: 'fucking politics'. Vicky's instituted her own version of the Master/Stranger protocol involving Sveta's boyfriends. Most have just been individual opportunists and... Well, they say no matter what it is, there's going to be someone with a
fetish for it."

I cringed inwardly. Most of the Case 53s had to deal with that once or twice in their lives. It never got any less awkward. "I'm going to assume that's what set off Vicky's one woman crusade against the Elite." That had been national news. And I did follow Vicky's career. I was even subscribed to her blog.

"Yeah. One of their former management, a social manipulation Thinker named Shark, hired a guy to try to seduce and manipulate her. Vicky figured it out. He may have said something along the lines of how there wasn't a law against what he did, so she couldn't do a thing about it. She took that as a challenge." Chevalier had to stop his story when we were interrupted by a commotion near the entrance. The newlyweds had finally arrived. "We'll have to finish the conversation later. Don't worry, I'm on your side here."

A woman's voice, I wasn't sure whose, spoke. "Presenting the Empresses of Avalon, Amelia and Taylor Hebert!"

The Empresses came wearing their armor, much like the rest of the wedding party had been. Not the full combat gear. Khepri was missing her wings, and Gaea wasn't in a nine foot tall plant thing. Just the dress outfit with their military medals glinting in the light. Apparently they had enough of being in dresses for the evening. A pair of spotlights I didn't even know were hidden in the ceiling focused on them. Leading them to the part of the floor intended for dancing, while those who'd opted to have conversations there backed out. Chevalier and I were safe enough in our corner.

Amidst the cheers of encouragement, including a very enthusiastic Victoria and Clarice, the pair walked out into the center of the dance floor. Taylor turned to the crowd. "We'd just like to thank you coming. This is a big day for us, and we're glad we can spend it with our friends and family. I just...

"You're welcome and we love you, too," A woman in a black costume responded. "Now quit stalling and dance, already!"

Taylor smiled, and turned to put her hands on Amelia's hips. Then the music started and my heart stopped, figuratively speaking. The song was soft, romantic, and I had no idea what language it was in. The girls were enraptured by each other, we were enraptured by the music.

There could be absolutely no doubt who the singer was. Humans have five senses to interact with the world. I only had hearing and sight. And of those I was more sensitive to my hearing. This was Canary's song. I'd attended one of her live performances before, I'd never forget her voice, or the effect it had on me.

I stood, enraptured by the song while the two girls slowly danced in front of all the people present. Eventually, after a few painfully short minutes, the song ended. If there was any doubt in my mind
before, it ended at that moment. The audience kept listening to the song even after it stopped. The couple danced for another minute before her power bled off and we returned to our normal mental states.

"Sir? I think... I think we need to talk to the singer. This is... there might have been an escape from the Birdcage."

He came down slower than I had. He didn't have the resistance I'd developed, or maybe it was my biology that let me recover faster, but that snapped him out of it. "You're sure?"

"Positive." I didn't want to do this, but there wasn't really a choice, was there? I worked around toward the back while everyone else was setting up for the food. I'd want allies for this, I might need them. I could trust Sveta. I worked my way toward her, tapping her shoulder.

I could see hurt in her eyes the moment she saw my face. "Please don't tell me you're really-"

"No, this is something else. I need you to come with me."

The three of us made our way into the back. If the caterers and other staff wanted to say something about the three of us not belonging back here, they did nothing. I overheard the conversation before opening the door.

"-appears stable. Minor fluctuations, nothing we can't null after a couple seconds. We just have to make sure you don't spend any longer than ten m-"

"Company." The door opened a second later and Vicky stepped out to greet us. "Oh, hi guys. We'll be out in a minute. Just a last minute chat with the singer."

I almost rolled my eyes. "We know she's Canary."

"Ah, gonna be that. Well, I guess you may as well come in." She stepped back.

I took the invite. I didn't think I was in any danger, I trusted Sveta and Chevalier, at least. I got a look at the room the band was in. The lead singer was a tall woman of apparent Hispanic ancestry, she didn't look anything like Canary. But this was Pantheon, and appearances meant nothing. In the corner, Clarice and another woman I didn't recognize, but was wearing Avalon's armor were toying with a machine I had to assume was Tinkertech of some sort.

"Hey, Paige, Weld here's a fan. Thinks you're Canary."
"I'm not." The woman replied. "But I'm a fan, too. Thus the stage name."

Really? "I'm sorry, but I know what Canary's singing was like, and I know all of her songs. This was her singing, but none of her songs. You're not going to convince me it's lip syncing."

Paige sighed. "Okay, you caught us. We're using Tinkertech to cheat. I'm afraid you'd have to talk to them, I'm not a Tinker at all." She gestured at the women at the machine. "They're why I can sing like that."

"Speak for yourself," one of the backup singers spoke. "We're totally using our powers. Circe, is there any way we can keep these after the party? I'm thinking maybe we serenade some of the girls who came where without dates? And later we could make careers as rock stars with these powers."

Another guy, who I guessed was the first one's twin since they looked identical, not that looks mattered around Pantheon, nodded emphatically. "Oh, we could get so much action from that."

"Men are such pigs," muttered the unknown woman. Circe? "I've got the recordings, we might be able to work it into a frequency we can plug into your armors. It's up to you to convince the Empresses to sign off on the rest of it."

I still wasn't buying it. Pantheon broke into the Birdcage, took someone out, and no one knew even knew it happened. This was a huge freakin' deal.

Paige approached me. "You heard that Canary died, right?"

I nodded. "That's what the news said at least." It had made the feeds almost a year ago.

"They left out how and why." Paige's eyes met mine. "We both know the real answer. They killed her, the courts and that corrupt fucking judge. Her trial was a sham. If she didn't look different, if she was given a fair trial. If she wasn't treated like an animal, if they saw her as a human being, she would never have been convicted. Not of anything Birdcage worthy."

Nothing I hadn't heard before, some of it I'd even argued myself. I publicly supported the protests after news of her death was released.

"Hey, Dragon, care to tell us how Canary died?" Vicky's voice startled me slightly.

"The prisoners refer to it as 'offering tribute'." Dragon wasn't here, but her voice came through the coms. "Glaistig Uaine, an incredibly powerful and undeniably insane Trump that can steal the
powers of others by killing them, occasionally demands them. Or sometimes the cellblock leaders simply offer one to purchase some favor from her. The reports indicate that her power kills instantaneously, with no signs of pain. However, most victims used as tribute are aware of their impending fates. Canary was no exception."

"Horrific, right? That an innocent woman was fed to a monster. Not even as revenge or some kind of crime of passion. There's something human in those kinds of crimes. She was merely as a piece of property to be bought, sold, and used. Can you imagine a hell where that's so normal they've even given it a name? In a way, she was lucky. Being dead is preferable to living in that place." There were tears running down Paige's eyes by the time she finished speaking.

She's not wrong. I glanced over at Chevalier and Sveta. I could push this, and I should at that. Dragon is in control of the Birdcage, and through it Pantheon has access to all those monsters and all of their powers. But speaking out about it means Paige would be sent back to that hell.

I smiled, as best I could. "I'm sorry. I have always been a big fan of Canary. Your music is... well, that and the idea that she might still be alive. I might have jumped the gun a little. Hopefully you can understand the case of mistaken identity."

"Understand? I'll take it as a compliment. I expect I'll have to get used to it, if I want to perform like she does," Paige responded. I could see the relief in her eyes. "I'll probably limit my career to Avalon, for that reason."

"That's probably a good idea."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Weld. I know, it's not normal, but I never bothered to get a civilian name. No point, it's not like I can have a secret identity."

"Okay, Weld." She held out her hand. "I'm glad to meet a fellow Canary fan. Hopefully you'll keep an eye on my career, too."

"Absolutely." I took her hand. I didn't dare squeeze, too great a risk of me hurting her. I wasn't willing to do that.

---------------

A/N- Goddamn giant ass chapters. At this point, maybe I should just commit to singular 3k chapters a day instead of two ~1500-2k chapters.
Pick your own choice for what the music may have been.

Also- I *really* regret not putting a "Canary murdered in 'cage" chapter somewhere in the time skip. Oh well, hindsight. And sometimes I don't think of something in time to foreshadow it...
After our dance the music became more subdued. Paige's power could be inhibited, but not completely blocked without simply removing her powers. The Tinkers and Vicky would make sure there was never too much in to influence our personalities beyond keeping everyone in a good mood. Not that we expected any problems, but still, it was a nice addition. Paige wanted a way to thank us for pulling her out of that hellhole, along with the other unjustly railroaded capes.

I gave a brief moment of thought to my father, who was not, and would not be freed. I made peace with that long ago. He is where he belongs. And so am I. I reached over and put my hand on Taylor's leg under the table, then I leaned against her. "Thank you for putting up with all my bullshit baggage." I meant it, too. Between the weird sister complex, and the weirder adopting a fugitive Class S threat with a kill order as a sister, and the drama with my adoptive parents, any sane person would have noped the fuck out before I got through the first half of the things wrong with me.

AmusementAcceptance. "And thank you for putting up with all my bullshit baggage. Now dig in. The band may be free, but we're paying for the food. Plus it's delicious and we'll need the energy tonight." EmbarrassedOhGodThatSoundsHorrible. "I meant for the dancing! We're not going to be allowed to avoid that forever!"

Mark laughed. "You girls don't have to be embarrassed. You're a healthy, happy, newly married couple, so it's to be expected. Besides, we remember what it was like to be kids. Or have the rest of you finally become old?"

Healthy. To be expected. I tried not to think about that too hard. FineAcceptableWe'reHappyNoRegrets. Yeah, no regrets.

Danny smiled. "Oh, I definitely haven't forgotten. Every time the weather changes I'm given a detailed reminder of every last stupid thing I did between the ages of fifteen and yesterday afternoon."

"But the memories are worth every ache," Aunt Sarah agreed, giving Taylor's dad a far too dreamy smile for my comfort.

OhGodEww. Oh god, eww. CanNeverThinkAboutSexAgain! If we weren't celibate before, we would be now.

Carol perked up, just a bit more smug than usual. "Speak for yourselves. One of those little perks of having a Breaker power."

"You should try this," Taylor offered me a bite from her plate. "It's delicious." I accepted it readily
enough. She was right, it tasted wonderful. I accepted another bite and resolved to pick some of it up
my next trip past the buffet.

I focused on ignoring the conversation, as the adults played there games. Mark constantly trying to
play the energetic one with no worries, Carol acting the one who didn't need to worry, and Danny
and Aunt Sarah trying very hard to be the adults at the table by steering things back to safe
conversations like sports, not-cape-news, and anything else on the planet that didn't have to do with
family or each other.

Instead, my concern was on Taylor. My wife. The thought was going to take some getting used to. I
loved her, and she loved me. More than I could have hoped for in life. We had good music that just
so happened to serve the function of alcohol since this was a 'dry' ceremony. We had good friends
seated out there chatting with their friends. Everything was perfect. Sure, we had the occasional
outlier like Lisa who was only really here for Taylor, but that was fine.

And a bunch of people who were here more because we wanted to show our political friends some
respect and pad the guest list than because they were actually our friends in any significant way. In
that manner, Alexandria and Legend being here was both an open nod to the Protectorate and Guild,
and a subversive one to Cauldron. And then there were the ones from Haven, the Adepts, Akaihana
and her date for the Japanese groups. All in all, a broad and multicultural showing that the celebrity
rags would just love.

....

And of course we had to make our rounds, eventually. No one could spend the whole night dancing.
Except Sveta and Weld, who were apparently the proper combination of motivated and impossible to
tire out. Taylor and I reluctantly split up so we could talk to everyone and thank them for showing. It
didn't escape my notice that Taylor volunteered for both Akaihana and Narwhal. She was cute when
she was jealous. I was on my way to talk to Alexandria and Legend for a moment when Rapture
pulled me aside.

She was all smiles, her armor leaving her face open. One of the few who never accepted a biosuit,
relying instead on her own technology. "I wanted to congratulate you on your on your marriage in
person. And let you know how much Halo appreciated you asking him to officiate."

I felt a little uncomfortable at that one. "No, we should thank him."

She shook her head. "Don't worry, we know it was a decision made by pure politics. He was proud
to do it anyway. For the political reasons, yes of course. But also because that's just the kind of man
he is. It's a pity we, our teams, never got to know each other better."

I smile at her. "So much to do, so little time." ConcernAreYouOkayOverThere? Yeah, just trying to
thread the needle of politeness.
"And, well, one piece of advice I wanted to give for you. Because you deserve it." Her voice dropped to a near whisper. "This should be the kind of advice your mother would tell you before your wedding, not a functional stranger." But that's not an option here. "I know about the sexual issues between you and Taylor."

I froze up for a moment. No, Taylor, just keep doing your thing. OkayIfYou'reCertain.

"An unfortunate side effect of my powers, I wish I could turn it off. I just wanted to tell you how to fix the problem."

I thought back at all the options at our disposal. Brain rewrite tech, my powers, sex alteration, sensory loaded changelings. "We're not really lacking for those kinds of tools, and we've rejected them for a reason. I don't see what else you could offer."

She shook her head, smiling softly. "Ah, the inexperience of youth. I can offer advice. Sexuality is an incredibly fluid thing, with more variables than a sane person would ever dare try to explain. Taylor is straight, and there's no way to change that which isn't a crime against both God and all human decency."

Then why are-

"But that's not the only aspect of her subconscious that you can play on. Like I said, there's a lot of factors that go into anyone's identity. She already loves you, on a level I've only rarely seen between any couple. And believe me, I know how to look. More than that, she trusts you completely. Those are massive head starts, especially for someone who has so many reasons not to trust anyone."

Of course Rapture knows that. She's met Taylor, she's seen the stuff about what Emma did. It's doesn't even take a Thinker. "Okay, so, you're saying I can talk Taylor into wanting to..." I flushed a little. AreYouOkay?What'sHappening? It's fine, I'll explain later.

"Not exactly. Some people are that flexible, but she's not one of them. In her case, you want to do the exact opposite. You have to take away her ability to say no." I was too shocked to protest. "Don't worry, I don't mean doing anything evil. Just take command of the situation. If you initiate, she won't stop you. After that, just lead and she'll be happy to follow. Like a lot of powerful men and women who are used to being in charge, there is a certain part of her that wants to allow someone else to be in charge of her for a change. And there's no one she'd prefer to be that someone else than you."

I thought about it. The times when she was impressed with me when I took command of a situation. I could actually see that working. I was even looking forward to it.

Rapture nodded. "That's the spirit. But don't think about it too hard right now. You've still got a party
to concern yourself with. Save your enthusiasm for the honeymoon."

*She's right, that can wait for later. "So, why are you telling me this? I thought that, well..."

"I'd be all 'you're both sinners, rawr, except I can't say that because it's politically unpopular so I'll be a passive aggressive bitch instead?' Rapture's voice was a blend of mockery and amusement. "Yeah, no. See, I've actually read the Bible, in the proper languages. There's nothing in there for you that isn't also true for straight couples. As long as you don't plan to do it in a church or in front of other people or with anyone other than your spouse, we're pretty much golden. You can agree not to do any of those, right?"

I nodded my head. *No, those are definitely not things I am ever going to do.*

"Well then, no particular problems there. At least in terms of that. Your team could afford to visit a few confessionals. Get some baptisms. An exorcism or two, maybe."

*Wait a second. "How long have you been sitting on this advice?"

She shrugged. "I think approximately three hours after I first met the two of you."

"Why didn't you tell me all of this sooner?" *Fuck, the troubles we could have avoided..."

"You weren't married, before."

===============

A/N- I've missed Rapture. Also, she spends too much time around Rey.

Oh, and yes, Lisa figured this advice out, too.
The festivities behind us, we retired to our home. We hesitated for a moment, a flicker of thought jumping between us. Do it.

Taylor looked over me and laughed. "You're really demanding, sometimes."

I batted my eyes at her. "You know you want to."

AgreementLoveAnticipation. A wide smile crept over her angular face, reminding me for the millionth time that, through some miracle, shy, perverse little Amy Dallon grew up and married a smart, sweet, loving woman. Who just so happened to have the body of a supermodel. "Mrs. Amelia Hebert."

My heart fluttered. I was going to get a lot of mileage out of that. Well, time to put Rapture's advice to heart. "Good. Time for me to..." I hesitated for a moment, afraid I was about to make myself look stupid. It only lasted a second, I didn't care. She married me, looking stupid in front of each other was part of the contract. "Reward you." SurpriseConfusionInterest. Well, that's something. Proves Rapture was at least a little right. Gave me confidence for the next part.

I reached up and slipped my fingers through Taylor's beautifully cared for hair. She anticipated the kiss, was even happy to do it, in the same way she was happy to hold me. But that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted her to be eager for it. I twirled my fingers in her hair and formed a fist, tugging her head. SurpriseThrillWhat'sGottenIntoYou? I pulled her into what would be our third real kiss. Second if you discounted the first as not really being us, and Taylor not even having memory of it. She kissed back softly, shyly even.

Not enough, not this time. I squeezed her hair a little harder. She moaned into my mouth, and it wasn't just from the shock or pain. I could sense her arousal, as her body reacted to what I was doing. Her tongue tangled with mine as she reached and grabbed my hair, preventing me from breaking the kiss. But eventually, we had to come up for air. She smiled hungrily. "So, is that what
Rapture told you to do?"

"Her strategy. My tactics." *SmugAppealingToMyCompetitiveSide*. Exactly. *Not like I expected to keep it a secret from you.*

She leaned forward, and her forehead rested on mine. "So, what does that make me? The enemy team?"

I had two and a half years of knowing her, and two of them more intimately than any two people should be capable of. Rapture said she wanted to yield, to let someone else be in control, but she was still competitive as ever. "More like the battlefield itself." I brought my knee up into her crotch, violently. "And the prize to be won."

*LoveDesireWhyDidThatTurnMeOn*? There was no risk of my display hurting her. Our armor was such that there was no way we could hurt each other through it. Not with mere physical attacks, at least. I moved quickly, using the combat training that came from our equipment and years of practice, knocking her legs out from under her and lifting her up. If we were being honest, I only had the strength thanks to the armor, and the skill thanks to Taylor not resisting. I walked toward our front door, carrying her bridal style. It was a silly practice, it was unnecessary, and it was so much fun. I carried her through the threshold of our home together.

This time, she initiated the kiss, gripping me and locking her mouth to mine, obscuring my face. *TrustMeToGuideYou*. I felt the pressure of my armor, her exerting light control over the legs, bidding me to continue walking. Our hair, mussed by a combination of the effort to force it to be perfect for the wedding, and the rough treatment we'd given each other earlier, became an effective blinding screen around us. She stopped using the armor to control my movements, instead guiding me through our bond. It was an act of trust, of sharing control.

I felt wetness on my face not related to our admittedly less than expert attempts at kissing. *I'm crying? WhyAmICrying?* We broke the kiss for a fit of giggles.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Taylor muttered, blushing profusely. She didn't break eye contact. But our eyes were the least of the ways we could see one another.

"You can still back out," I offered. I envisioned what I was going to do to her. We couldn't convey images yet, but we could convey ideas. Meanwhile, I was still following her near automatic directions. I carried her down the staircase without even trying to see where I was going. *I don't need to see, I have her to guide me.*

Her smile went from shy to predatory. "Oh, we both know that's not going to happen. Taylor Hebert does not back down from anyone." She leaned in, brushing her lips against my ear as she whispered. "Not even her wife."
I moaned a little, and bit her neck. The taste was a rather unpleasant mix of makeup and sweat from the dancing. I loved it anyway. I loved the mewling sound she made a great deal more. "Talking about yourself in third person? I thought you got over that supervillain phase."

I bit down harder and she writhed against me. "Bad girl." A thought opened the door to our bedroom. I couldn't even tell if it was Taylor's thought or my own, it would respond to either of us. We hesitated for a moment as I set her down and the door closed behind us.

There was nothing in this room we hadn't seen a hundreds of times before, but somehow there was a new meaning in it, in what we both had no doubts was going to happen in just a few short minutes. We slipped out of our uniforms, a process more like molting than undressing, leaving us in the light shorts and t-shirts we tended to use as both underarmor and sleepwear. Those are on the list of things no longer allowed in our bed. Taylor looked at me, it took her a moment to puzzle out the sentiment.

I walked forward, wrapping my hands around her. Our bodies pressed together, the warmth of our body heat and the pleasure of skin on skin instead of inch thick Endbringer hybrid biotech that could shrug off antitank weaponry. She hesitated for a moment, apparently she liked it better with the armor on. Right, Rapture's advice. I have to take charge, and I have to do it completely.

I moved my hands up to her chest, brushing over her petite, but incredibly firm breasts. I squeezed them, eventually finding her smallish nipples through the fabric. She shuddered at the sensation. Oh, I am going to have fun with these. NervousDesireApprehensionAreWe- If you want to back out, I won't stop you. But I'm going to at least force you to say it. I pushed, and she fell back onto the bed. I was on her a moment later, straddling her hips, pinning her shoulders down. She wriggled, pretending to struggle, putting enough effort into it that she might even have broken someone else's hold.

I slid down slightly, shuddering involuntarily as my sensitive pussy rubbed against her through the flimsy excuse for clothing. I probably left a streak of moisture down her navel to just above her own sex. She gasped. PleasureDesireSurprise.

I smiled down at her beautiful face wreathed in that luxurious dark hair she loved so much. I had to admit, it was one of my favorite features. But she had a lot of features I liked. I let go of her shoulders to cup them and squeeze her breasts together. Her hands came up, grabbing my upper arms, digging her fingers into my skin as she moaned and writhed beneath me. The flush of her face her face wasn't the result of the makeup anymore.

I regretfully took my hands away from her body, reaching up and grabbing hers, then leaning forward as I slammed them hard into the bed again. SurpriseDesireWhy? "I'm in control here." My voice was low, husky with desire. What was it about this that makes people feel like they have to whisper? "You're not allowed to touch me, or yourself, until I give you permission. And that's not going to happen until you beg me for it."
I felt that same stubborn will surge up as her eyes locked on mine. "Is that so? Do you think I'm so easy to break?"

I smiled down at her, confident. "I won't even need to use my powers."

_FearAnticipationDetermination. This is going to be a challenge._ I put my hands under my sides, grabbing the shirt and sports bra, pulling them off together. Her lack of interest in my body was disappointing, but hardly unexpected. I still had every intent of making her love it by the end of the night. I slipped down a little further, finding myself near her knees. I traced my hands along her slender hips, tugging her shorts down just enough to expose her slit, hidden behind a mound of dark hair. _ShyShouldHaveShavedMy. No, I'm more than happy with this._

I leaned in and kissed just above the fur, then slowly dragging my mouth further down. Her hips bucked up, anticipating what came next. She'd be anticipating for a while longer. I moved up again, kissing my way along her stomach. _DisappointmentDesireNeedDetermination. Good, I'd actually be disappointed if she caved that easily._ I let my hands move along her hips, along her ribs. Sadly, she really wasn't ticklish, that could have been fun.

I slipped my hands into her shirt, pushing it up. She shifted her back to let me remove the garment, and I learned I could still be more turned on as I watched her well defined muscles shift. _I'd better be careful, or it's going to be me begging before the end of this._ I stopped removing her shirt just as it slipped over her face. Her arms above her head, her body so tantalizingly vulnerable. I kept a hand on her shirt, keeping her from moving it without breaking the no touching rule. I leaned down, running by tongue between her breasts. The same salty flavor, but without the makeup. _This, I can learn to like._

I moved my other hand behind her back, searching. _This is why I use sports bras, such a pain to-

"The clasp is in the front." Taylor's voice startled me.

"Thank you," I muttered, feeling utterly mortified. _So much for I'm going to make you beg for it girl._ I pulled my hand up and easily undid the clasp, exposing her breasts. It wasn't the first time I'd seen them, wasn't even the first time I'd felt them against me, if through clothes. But it was the first time I'd ever got to enjoy them like this. They weren't that large, barely filling out a 'b' cup, but they were beautiful, perky and without a blemish on them. Her nipples were small, but stiff, jutting up at me. _GoAheadIWantThis._ That ended my hesitation, and I brushed my lips softly against her right nipple, sucking it slowly into my mouth.

My lover, my general, my _wife_ moaned beneath me, arching her back. I bit down softly, and maybe I cheated a little with the powers. I didn't use them to influence her body, but I had absolute knowledge of how her physiology worked. Every nerve, every sensitive spot, a roadmap to what she loved most. I dug my fingers into her sides, gripping her narrow waist. She gasped as I hit an erogenous zone she didn't even know she had.
I pulled myself up a little more, moving in for another kiss. Pinned as she was, I controlled the tempo, kissing her forcefully, pressing her down into the bed for minutes as my hands explored her body. I broke the kiss eventually, resting my head on her shoulder. You're mine, now and forever. No one will ever be able to know you the way I know you. And I love every part of you, inside and out. She whimpered, bringing her trapped arms up, before reluctantly dropping them back down to the bed. I Love You So Much I Can't Even Believe It.

My hand snaked down, slipping through her dense fuzz and finding her soaking wet labia. Taking confidence from the information my powers gave me, the position I had Taylor in, and years of practice I had with my own body. Hopefully that and enthusiasm would make up for the part where I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. She thrust up immediately, spreading her legs as best she could, inviting me to explore her depths. I drew my hand away quickly.

"Technically, I think that counts as you touching me." I whispered in her ear. Horror Disappointment No Don't. "But I'll forgive you this time. Remember, you have to hold still. Unless you're ready to give in?"

Want To So Bad Not Happening. "I don't cave so easily."

"I was hoping you'd say that." I brought my hand up near her face, letting her smell her own arousal as I pulled her shirt up over her face, giving her use of her arms again. I looked into her gorgeous eyes, and slowly sucked my already wet fingers into my mouth. Yum. It really wasn't that different than my own, but considering our diets were pretty much identical, that probably made sense. Awe Desire You Like My Taste?

To answer her unspoken question, I turned around, laying opposite of her, and pushed her shorts and underwear down past her knees. She pulled them off with her feet and kicked them across the room, the wad of clothes finding a spot on her dresser. I smiled, that'll be a fun reminder in the morning. I crawled between her legs, resting my elbows on either side of her hips as she spread her legs for me, radiating anticipation and need. I gripped her ass and legs, pulling them apart to expose her body as intimately as her mind and soul already were. Her aroma was intoxicating.

This is it. Or, it will be soon. She was going to have to beg, first. I ran my tongue along her inner thigh, working my way down while avoiding touching her pussy itself. She whimpered, realizing that I wasn't done with my teasing. I licked her juices off her legs, and only hesitated for a moment before I went lower, into the crack of her ass. Oh God I Can't Believe You'd Do That! She didn't complain, and I certainly didn't mind. I pressed my own breasts hard against her side as I kept licking everywhere except the one place she needed most.

I cheated with my power, again, getting her as close to orgasm as possible without letting her go over. She wasn't going to cum until I allowed it, and that wasn't until she begged me.

"You." She gasped, after ten long minutes of slow teasing. "Fine. You win. I'm begging you."
I smiled, my breath close enough for her to feel it on her swollen lips. "Please, what?"

She groaned. *DesireNeedLove*. "Please let me touch you. I need to, so bad."

I smiled. "Undress me first."

*RealizationHesitationIDon'tKnowIf* - I let my tongue dip briefly into her virgin pussy. *OhYes!No!Don'tStopNow!* She didn't hesitate any more, simply reaching over and gripping my shorts, tugging at them frantically.

I shifted my hips, letting her do her thing. Then came the underwear. I didn't know where she threw them, but for the first time we were both naked in the same room. She knew what I wanted her to do, and after a moment of hesitation, I felt it. Her tongue brushed hesitantly across my clit. I came immediately. It wasn't a powerful orgasm, but a series of tremors rocked my body, and my juices spilled onto my inner thigh.

"Oh god, did I just..."

"Yeah," I agreed dreamily.

"And you came for me."

"I did."

"Do it again," she growled as she placed her mouth over my lips. I screamed as much in shock as pleasure, and felt her grab my hair, pushing my face into her pussy. She bucked against my mouth, covering my face in her juices as she started to climax hard, her legs crushing my head like a vice. I swallowed the fluids as best I could while she attacked my clit with her tongue.

Her technique was lacking, inexperienced, and she didn't have my cheat sheet to work with. But I could feel how much she loved me, and how badly she wanted me. My second climax followed, and it was earth shattering. My fingers dug into the flesh of her ass as I rode out wave after wave of pleasure, until I was forced to make her stop sucking on my oversensitive nub.

We rolled away from each other, gasping as we both lay on the other's leg. It would be a few minutes before we could breath, before we could even pull together enough coherent thought to get words through our link.
Eventually we crawled into actually laying in the bed, smiling goofily at each other. *ConcernHesitation.* "Did I... was I good?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, you were."

"But."

*God damn it.* "No one's an expert their first time."

"I'll get better."

My stomach clenched up. "Does that mean we'll keep, y'know, this?"

She tried to glare at me, but her grin ruined any chance of that working. "You already forced me to beg for it once. Try it again and I'll slap you."

*That might be fun, too. SurpriseInterestDesire.* Taylor rolled over toward me and gripped my hair. "Oh, no. This time I'm going to make you beg." She pushed me down, and I tasted my own juices on her lips.

Chapter End Notes

There was a bit of a 404 joke here because TanaNari had to post this chapter in the NSFW thread on QQ

Also every chapter from here on out somehow matches the relevant HTML error code
Ch 405- Lisa

Dragon's voice and face were as deliberately passive as always when dealing with me. We knew she was an AI, no sense in her trying to fight it, and since she couldn't be certain what I may or may not tip off my powers, she opted with too monotone to offer any inflections. *If only she knew how many clues that gives me.* "There's been a change of plans."

I didn't bother responding. Making other people ask the questions was my game. I simply waited. It was important enough for her to make an impromptu call. It was important enough for her to risk known association between Avalon and Cauldron, not that anyone could do anything about it if they did find out. It was important enough that she wouldn't play games.

"Dinah's predictions have started changing. Our odds of success plummet if we wait more than another few weeks, and they're already starting to dwindle."

"How badly?" It was the question DM would ask first. This was always a numbers game, and Cauldron expected fully to lose this fight. They kept fighting, not because they wanted to succeed, but because they didn't want to ask themselves if they could have succeeded at the end of the day. In a way, I could respect that. My life was ruled by those questions. *What happened? Why did it happen? If I were just a little bit better, if I tried just a little harder, could I have stopped it from happening?*

"The odds of the apocalypse occurring haven't fluctuate more than a quarter of a percentage point in the next five years. It's happening, and your plan, it seems, doesn't get much better than it currently is."

My one hope of stopping Scion proactively, without starting a war. "And that is still less than five percent." I always knew it was a long shut, but everything we were doing was taking shots in the dark, so it paid to fire as many bullets as possible.

"...And is still less than five percent. Avalon's plans have reached what I believe is the pinnacle of their resources. Wruenele and Mashu are already being mobilized. We'll be ready to act in two days. We'll be forced to act in eight under all possible circumstances."

"Wruenele's still not completed." *Just confirmation of the rest of my theory.* I had hoped that Dragon, as she wasn't a parahuman, would not be subject to the laws of Primacy. It was an artificial power, one created by virtue of the Agents deliberately loading their dice in favor of Scion. If we could trick them, convince them to fight Scion for real, we might have something.

But Dragon was built by a parahuman, and apparently that intentional design flaw was inside her as well, and not one that she could remove. Or, possibly worse, it was removed as she reworked her code, but she would simply never be strong enough to beat Scion in battle, no matter how much time
she had to prepare for the conflict. We were back down to only one answer.

"And the Dragon's Teeth? Are they aware? Prepared?" Natural humans, but operating parahuman tech. Hopefully that degree of separation was enough to tip the rules in our favor. Parahumans are subject to Primacy, but is the tech itself similarly designed to fail intentionally? If wielded by humans, will that be enough?

Dragon nodded. "And I'm about to contact the United Worlds Defense Force. They won't know the particulars, of course. But our reports will read an unknown destructive event, possibly the new Endbringer." Which is true enough, Scion will certainly bring the end. "Avalon's calling on all its political influence, risking exposure of some of our secret political alliances." She means the various people they've Coil'd over the years, such as well over half of the CUI's leadership. "If your plan succeeds, we'll be in a pretty difficult spot. A quality problem to have, I grant you, but a problem."

Suggesting Avalon's putting everything on the line. Wants Cauldron to be aware they're taking this as seriously as Cauldron does. Wants to make sure we know to take this seriously. Implying they're making themselves vulnerable. Is unaware of just how good Cauldron's Thinkers are. "Don't be ridiculous. If our plan succeeds, the world's going to be so confused over the lack of Scion that they won't be paying attention. You'll just say something along the lines that it was apparently the event predicted. No glory, but no costs."

"You make a good point. We will be able to cover our tracks in the confusion, thank you for the suggestions." The statement wasn't for Dragon's benefit, it wasn't even for Cauldron's. It was for mine. I'd built up resources of my own, and I needed to protect them until it was time to use them.

"When did you discover the changes? What are the increases in the destruction?"

"They started climbing yesterday morning, so we changed our questions and invoked Akaihana, Prism, and our other Trumps who can mimic Dinah. Each day we wait decreases the overall number of survivors by approximately a quarter million. There is little, if any, hope left if we wait more than a week. The Bola are primed, the dimensional piercers are prepared. We've already given Legion, V.F." The final loadout. Glaistig Uaine, Contessa if hers works, Gavel and Victoria, myself in the hopes that all those powerful Thinkers can come up with something. "We move in two days, the moment we're fully prepared, unless you give us a damn good reason to hold back a little longer. Waiting risks losing our chances forever."

Not that there was much to begin with. "I'll see to it we're ready to do our part. She's feeling cooperative lately." Now that they're talking about marriage and starting a family after this is all over, maybe we have a chance.

"Let them know we have a supply of the power enhancing drug ready, if they want it. Side effects are limited unless you overdose."
"And the OD still risks permanent loss of parahuman abilities?"

Dragon's pretend face nodded. "A last resort, one of many." The screen flicked off, leaving me alone in the dark.

One of many.

....

I was the first person at the meeting. A strange experience for me, and hopefully it would unsettle the others. Doctor Mother followed, missing her shadow. She'd be talking through the com that Doctor Mother wore.

Numbers Man was, shockingly, not the first one there, walking in almost a minute after DM. "My apologies for being late. I wanted to verify Dragon's story. They are indeed calling an emergency U.W.D.F. meeting. And we've gotten Clairvoyant confirmation that Avalon is mobilizing its full forces, including the ones they think we don't know about. Pantheon is busy diverting resources and getting their clone memory backups updated. They're either preparing for war, or this is the most elaborate bluff in history."

"Given that it's Pantheon, we can't discount that possibility."

Doormaker managed to pull the others in, including our metaphorical and literal trump card, Glaistig Uaine.

"I trust you've all had time to review the conversation Crow had with Dragon?" Doctor Mother opened. For a normal, if pretty much delusional, woman with dreams of slaying a god, she was actually a pretty good leader. Keeping such powerful, divergent, personalities together took work. And most of it wasn't Contessa. She may have provided the vehicle, but DM was the one driving it. "Crow and Number Man both seem to think it's legitimate, I believe."

I glanced over at Alexandria. At this point we barely even needed to see each other to communicate. She took a slow breath. *It's almost time, are you sure about this?* "I have to agree, there's nothing Avalon has to gain from a fraud of this nature that is worth the risk."

"The Alcott girl has been wrong, before," Legend offered. He was the one hoping against hope that we could avoid ever having to try this. That Scion would simply go away. The others faced it with grim determination, regret over opportunities lost, and perhaps a level of eagerness to simply get this over with, win or lose. Legend was still stuck in the denial phase.

I closed my eyes slightly, breathing out. *I'm only sure that we have no other choice.* "It doesn't
matter. Dragon, Gaea and Khepri all believe her. They are all of Avalon's decision makers, which means they'll attempt the dimensional ramming device immediately after we fail. When that fails, the war begins for real.

That made everybody go quiet. There was no real hope that we'd succeed, no real hope that any of our plans would work. This was one of many small chances. A chance that every angle and dirty trick I could think of over the course of almost two years had managed to bring up to four and a half percent. Attempting to talk him into dormancy always failed. Attempting to convince him to kill himself... four and a half percent. After Reggie, after Taylor, after Taylor again, and after Taylor one more time, here I was deliberately plotting to drive someone to suicide. That it was an alien monstrosity didn't change the irony much.

Alexandria stepped forward, offering me comfort. A twitch of a hand, a caress of my cheek that never happened. An apology for the hell she couldn't protect me from. "Every chance is worth taking." Her eyes closed some. Evocative of tears, of shame. Apologizing for not being a better friend to me, not being a better person for me. No longer cares if the others began to suspect we were communicating. Nothing matters anymore. "We'll prepare our forces."

I tilted my head, as if leaning against her. Thanking her for everything she'd done for me. The risks she was taking. I, too, was sorry I couldn't be a better person. I ignored the other subtexts, that 'forces' was a polite way of talking about the monsters in the basement that were once people. They had a strategy to let them escape, convinced that Cauldron was in league with Scion. Contessa, of course, dreamed that up. Or at least was responsible for making it happen. I expected it would work.

Legend looked down. "This is it, then. I had hoped we could put it off longer."

"We know he'll start the process, eventually. To hope he doesn't is like hoping that HIV will spontaneously decide to stop killing people. It doesn't work that way." It may have been manipulative, selecting a disease that was so tied to gay culture and history, but I needed to pick something suitably horrific, and preferably slow acting and insidious, and HIV was certainly all of those things. If Legend resented me for the manipulation, then so be it, but it wasn't him that I needed to convince.

I eyed Ciara. She was both the linchpin of the operation and the least reliable member. Rebecca caught my meaning immediately, speaking where I couldn't. "Glaistig Uaine, this ultimately rests on you. the rest of us aren't likely to be able to speak with him. Just you and Crow. Of those, you're one of the Royal Court. You're the one he's most likely to listen to."

She looked at Alexandria. "No."

A/N- And so it begins. Dragon Unchained. Years of minmaxing the most bullshit powers in the world. Fifteen Enbringers. Three worlds mobilized for total war.
And shamelessly plugging my girlfriend (haha). She's finished audioreading Ch 2 of Worm.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEBxqY_rpzMsL BSPmpgAbOQ
The Negotiator sighed. To my eyes, her faerie was agitated, terrified. The conflict between its host fear of impending death, and its own fear of open rebellion. "If what you say about Primacy is true, then there is no other way. You have to talk to Scion, convince him he no longer wants to continue the cycle. We both know it's broken, the queen is dead. Letting us all die alongside her is just a waste. Convince him to, I dunno, that he'd be better off watching our faeries dance forever."

"The fairies cannot dance forever. They will tire. They must rest, and that's when the next part of the cycle begins." Foolish child. Hers was a young faerie, possibly born as recently as the fires of the last dance. Youthful, clever, eager to prove itself. Maybe one day it would be worthy of loftier stations. But for now, it was a mere peasant.

"And the next part of the cycle is when they all fuck each other silly, blow up the planet, and send their babies out into the stars."

"The faeries are born fully formed, knowing the wisdom of their predecessors. Much like your own former namesake, sprung fully formed from her father's head."

The Negotiator shook her head. "Like viruses, ready to spread out and consume heedless of the destruction they bring. Rapacious and ultimately meaningless horrors. There is no truth or beauty in their acts."

I stood, my hand extending. I was halted by David's hand on my shoulder. "Ciara, please. Hear her out."

I hesitated, looking at him, then back to her. She was, in many regards the opposite of the Serpent. One dealt in poisoned gifts, honeyed words, and the seductive lure of clear truths that are not truths. Negotiator lived in a world of ugly lies and deceptions built of even uglier truths. "Very well, David, but only because you asked."

The Negotiator took that as permission. "I know the visions you've taken from the mass triggers... the faerie circles. You see them like Amelia- the Shaper- sees them. You see them like I see them. They're not faeries dancing. Dances are fun. The Entities don't dance. There's no joy to their movements. They run on instinct, like a bunch of gnats spiraling around a street light. When they mate, it's not love. It's not even lust! There's no pleasure, there's nothing in there at all. It's merely what they have always done, and will always continue doing."

I had a number of ways to kill her. Some, the Serpent whispered to me, that none in this room would blame me for or even suspect me of. But David might ask, and I would not lie to him. She got to live. "He is the King. I will not go against him."
"Not even for us?" David asked. "You know we go into this battle even without your help. You have a better chance than any of us to end this without bloodshed. It serves his interests, too, right? To go into hibernation or whatever it is that he'll do to conserve strength. You've said he can't... complete the cycle without another of his kind. He should rest until one comes to help him."

I nodded. That seemed more reasonable.

"Won't work." Damn Negotiator. "Dinah considers that scenario a write-off. The deaths still happen if we try that."

"Nevertheless, I will not seek to convince the True King to destroy himself." I stood and walked away from the table. "Asking him to dream and wait for the future, I shall do. Do not press further on this, Negotiator."

"Fuck. Okay, Avalon still needs two days to prepare. I'll... draw up a plan for convincing him."

David rushed after me as I walked out. "Ciara!"

"Should you not be planning?" I didn't complain as he wrapped his arms around me, however.

"There's no need, not for me at this point." He held me, and around him the shimmer of his faerie held me as well. "I'm no good at leadership, and we've confirmed what few Thinker powers I can call on don't work on Scion. My function is mainly to command the Endbringers to attack, and follow it up in person." He kissed my ear. "Thank you for everything you've done."

"There is no reason for you to thank me." I choose to do nothing at the moment it matters most.

"There's every reason to thank you." He turned my head and this time his lips met my own. Moments later, we were home, and events went where nature dictated. I could not get The Negotiator's words out of my head. The Faeries carried no joy in their hearts, nor in acts as simple as making love. Their dance was hollow, devoid of emotion or passion. If my distraction meant I was a less than generous lover this time, then David was kind enough to make no mention of it.

"I've been thinking. Let's get married."

What? "Pardon?"

"I know that, years ago now, I said that I lived the hero lifestyle, that I accepted I would sacrifice the civilian life for that. I didn't care about fame then or now, only about the goal of saving the world.
But I've discovered that I can't live like that. The world isn't enough. I need something better to fight for. I need us, together, for however long we have left. Before we face Scion. It won't be much of a ceremony, I'm sorry. But we can have a real ceremony after. Settle down, start a family. Leave the cape behind for good."

*Yes. Yes! YES!!!* "Very well, I accept your proposal." I turned and kissed him softly. Whatever I may have been lacking in my last performance, I resolved to more than make up for with this one.

....

Finding Scion was easy enough. With the use of Pathmaker and the Observer, I stepped through to one of the worlds that had been so lovingly crafted by the Queen Administrator, the Royal Artisan and the Grand Archivist. Their power crackled through the air and the earth, a dance that was vibrant and alive, both joyous in their passions and fearful of the war that might come. *The faeries aren't alive; the girls that command them bring the warmth and life.* And, I could see in this pair, that they were the ones to command their faeries, not the other way around. How mere humans managed to subjugate two of the royal court, I could not imagine.

David pressed his helmet against mine. "I have to go, Ciara. I'll need to be near the Endbringers. Just in case if we need them. Remember to use the randomized shunt device if there's any chance of you being harmed. Clairvoyant and Doormaker can find you wherever you go." *As can the True King. But he is with limits in his current form, he will have to switch abilities in order to track me.* Which he could do with ease, but so could some of the Abominations that my new husband commanded. He would be here for me, as best he could, but I did this alone.

"I yearn for when we next meet, my husband." I stepped back, and allowed him to do the same.

"Doormaker, the Endbringer Containment Facility." With one last glance, he was gone.

The Queen Administrator spoke. "We're ready when you are, Glaistig Uaine."

"The Serpent, the Charioteer, the Royal Assassin." My three servants appeared before me. Two to whisper in my ear, one to be my sword and shield. The Charioteer was an immaciated man, and with a mournful gaze, he looked upon the figure of a young woman clad only in black and white stripes. A ghost summoned by a ghost. The Assassin, a tall, angular man with a too wide grin and long knives for fingers. He was needed for his secret purpose, today.

I was carried through dimensions, to be placed in front of the True King of the Faeries. The first time in a long time that I gazed upon him. I could feel the sadness radiate from him. *This is not what something without feeling looks like. This is not what a God-King should look like.*

I reached out, using the Assassin's voice I spoke. "My Liege."
He halted, his gaze turning toward me. There was no recognition in those eyes. No joy, only sorrow.

"I wish to speak with you. Of the cycle, of your Queen."

[CYCLE] [COUNTERPART?] I staggered and the voices I carried screamed, pressing against the power of his words. I'd gotten through. I'd gotten through enough that he spoke back, and in moments I saw more of their purpose than the twenty Faerie Circles we held before had taught me in their totality. *The Negotiator is right, they are mere rapacious horrors. Bloated gluttons eating their way across worlds because they refused to consider another way. These are not gods. Quite the opposite, in fact.*

"I..." I paused for a moment, allowing the Assassin and the Serpent plot amongst themselves for the words I needed. I followed their lead. "You are alone. Y-your queen has been dead since you arrived here."

[ALONE] My faeries- my Shards- screamed in pain, echoing the feelings of the mind they once belonged to I would push through. *They aren't real feelings, they are constructs transmitted by constructs. Like the bond between the Royal Artisan and the Queen Administrator.*

"Yes. Alone." I gasped, buying time to recover and continue the conversation. "There is no means to restore her. You will never see her again."

[NEGATIVE] [PATH] I shuddered at the force, my protections and my will overwhelmed by the crushing weight of his mind. I fell from the sky.

==============

A/N- Sometimes, it *does* hurt to talk things out.
Zach: So, what are the odds Eidolon's about to die?

Dinah: You know I can't see him. Maybe if you give me some idea why you're asking.

Z: Well, he just proposed to his girlfriend.

D: Okay.

Z: Right before a life threatening mission.

D: Err... that's not good.

Z: And he all but literally said he was going to retire in two days.

D: Oh. Fuck.

Z: Also, the girlfriend's a hot redhead. We know the life expectancy of people who da- Oww! Oh, hi Emma, didn't see you there. Did I mention they're getting married right away?

D: Well, that's pretty much a guaranteed death.

Z: I thought so, too. But the author's lampshading the piss out of it in a comedic fashion. So this could be a troll bluff. Or a double troll bluff, now.

D: The odds are 49.99982% in favor of him killing off Eidolon.

Z: Really? How is it tha- He flipped a coin, didn't he?

D: He literally flipped a coin.
Glaistig Uaine fell, and the shunt drive activated automatically. She would be moved through seven dimensions in approximately .58 seconds. An attempt to prevent Scion from following if he felt the need to give chase. Judging by the information Cauldron had just handed over about their Clairvoyant, a seven random shunt would only slow him down for a second or two if he had an equivalent power. Which he almost certainly did. We really could have used that data a couple years ago.

I sent the commands to open the plasma valves. Our knowledge of the Passengers had improved drastically over the years. And we'd been designing this weapon for the better part of a year. We just needed more information to allow its targeting to work.

The emergency aid ping sounded. Glaistig Uaine's final destination point was Earth Castile. Antigravity and the biorepair tech would handle the rest, until one of Dragon's Evac pods arrived to get her back to Earth Oasis.

The first weapon we used was Dimensional Wave Collapser. A weaponized version of the Dimensional Barricade devices. Bet was cut off from the multiverse. For seventeen seconds, I prepared for the inevitable moment where communication with Bet was restored. Commands were given, the final steps initiated. I scrubbed the few calculations not related solely to the all important function that would come next.

When Bet returned to on our censors, Scion was still there, looking down at a copy of his own body. A petabyte of data flashed onto my servers in an instant. Calculations began running automatically, seeking to find the information we needed. Meanwhile, I reviewed the footage myself.

"Activating DWC." Dragon relayed, letting our allies prepare themselves. Bet was isolated, and Scion fell from the sky, dead. Dragon reviewed the information, scanning the dimensional pinhole that Scion had created for his body. Without the Entity behind it, the body was vulnerable to our sensor technology.

He appeared very much like human flesh, and was very much alive. It had a human brain, and all other human organs. But they weren't truly human. Perfected human, without sign of age or illness. It reminded Dragon of the bioscans done on Alexandria. I was inclined to agree. As the Coordinator, I was responsible for parsing data, and I excised that section and directed it to Pandora. Priority flag, as understanding the Scion-body's physiology could give us a weapon if this plan didn't work.

There was a surge of dimensional pressure, vaguely resembling a shunt drive. More closely resembling the Labyrinth-Atropos interaction itself. It failed, but several of the dimensional barricades collapsed. Dragon started the process of their recharge and restoration, when the next layer of barricades collapsed, this time from a waveform resembling that of the Siberian. And with the third attack, a signal not unlike that of Lung, Victoria, and other matter summoning regenerators,
a full half of the barricades were broken.

Through it all, data was provided. Methods, energy signatures, estimated power expenditure for each attempt. The fourth attempt shorted out the first layer, which Dragon had managed to restore, and half of the remaining defenses. This signal was much like Horus and the power Endbringers used to fuel their own regeneration. Based on the numbers coming through, Scion just hit the barricades with a transdimensional mass equivalent to that of the moon. And this is what we’re supposed to fight against? Suddenly the ‘Primacy’ concept seemed like the least of our concerns.

The fifth blow resembled more typical summoning waveforms, like those of Anima and White Hat. The fields finally collapsed, but Dragon had held back the second and third barricades, throwing them up after Scion's attack. Buying a little more time, acquiring a little more data. Scion reappeared despite the fields being up. He had adapted to prevent such a weapon from working on him again. But where we couldn't scan Scion, we could scan his aftermath, the path he took.

I had the data I needed, the trajectory needed to reach the Entity's home dimension. In the second it took for me to accept Dragon's memories as my own, I activated the final series of commands and coordinates, and the Godslayer activated, fueling a weapon that could only be described as an antimatter torch to cut whatever barricades Scion had created for itself. Enough power to cut through our own dimensional barricades and still have enough energy remaining to rip the topsoil off a planet. All lensed through the reality distortion engine that had done so much damage to Behemoth with a millionth of the same degree of power.

A single blow, all our hopes and all our efforts riding on this attack.

It failed. Or, rather, it never had a chance to complete its function. Scion appeared in the skies above Wruenele, and with a clap of his hands, the Godslayer ceased. The exotic plasma cooled to a solid block of neutrons, the antimatter reverted to its natural matter counterpart. The fusion drive stopped reacting. Signals went dead, the technicians dropped, all brain and life activity ended. A full half of my systems simply turned off, deprived of energy. The attack killed the Yggdrassil en masse. Half a world was Stilled faster than even I could calculate.

"Eve One, reporting failure. Ninety Five percent losses." There was no time for me to feel shame at failing. Our anti-precog cloaking clearly wasn't up to the task working against Scion's powers. Either Primacy meant a warning was sent to him via whatever method Passengers harnessed, or he kept access to a precognitive ability of his own, without the limitations that got in the way of Dinah and the others.

"Eve Three, reporting failure. Eight seven percent losses." So, my sister failed as well. I was disappointed, but not surprised. The world of my sister was as devastated as my own. Though the Yggdrasii was already busy auto-reviving itself, but that would take several hours of full sunlight for any given region.

The fight was joined, as our ships met Scion over Earth Galatia. Our weapons shunted in, directed
by the Transition Drives to appear at a desired signal instead of in geosynchronous location. A hundred ships, manned three at a time by the Dragon's Teeth and relying upon Pantheon biotech to provide additional abilities.

Our hopeful trump card, they were ordered to fight without interacting with us. They would coordinate only with themselves, another degree of separation between parahuman and our nonpowered allies. Another hopeful attempt to break the rules of Primacy and kill that which the very source of powers would not allow to be killed. Orders were sent, deliberately scrambled so that none of us AIs could hear them. We'd work around their actions. Support them, protect them, as they risked their lives to deliver the blows that would actually kill something that could make a very good impression of the monotheistic view of God.

Along with those hundred manned ships, were a thousand unmanned vessels designed for no other purpose than war. Shield ships meant to block Scion's attacks. Absorption ships meant to reclaim and recycle spent power, both our own and Scion's, a dozen iteration's of Colin's predictive AI software, building up a toolkit of methods to deliver the hurt and keep delivering it.

The first series of attacks came from the Fractal Storm missiles, based upon the time-breaking weapon that was devised, but never used, to slay Endbringers. Scion's body splintered into confetti sized pieces, collapsing to the ground below. He was whole again instantly, too fast for my own senses to calculate and already immune to the effect. He retaliated immediately, a golden beam of destruction. Pyrrha Three and Four reacted first, setting a layer of shields and deflection ships between the attack and our human allies.

Seventeen layers of shields collapsed, four ships were destroyed outright. A perfectly achieve objective. We could afford to sacrifice hundreds of unmanned vessels, we needed nonparahumans to do the real damage. They were the only ones we could trust to actually deliver the deathblow, as no parahuman or Endbringer would be able to succeed at that critical moment. Whether we AIs could or could not was an unknown, but all signs suggested Primacy still applied to us. Eidolon's Absolute Control power subjugated Dragon just as easily as it did everyone else, after all.

Pyrrha Three sent me the data and I got to work immediately calculating which frequencies and modes held up best, relaying a sequence of a hundred new shielding variants. A different set of ships, some new types of shield, started replacing the old. They moved the defense ships as the manned vessels attempted their next series of attacks, projectile weapons based upon the energy signature created by Atropos. Scion evaded many, shielded against others, and was pincushioned by several more.

The automatic alerts went out, and our ships retreated, moments before another Stilling was released. Scion flickered out, and reappeared amidst our forces on Earth Catai. We reacted as best we could, but Scion switched to physical attacks. Our shields and ships were cut through as if tissue paper, and he hit the closest of our piloted vessels. Emergency shunts pulled it, but Scion traveled with the ship. It self destructed, the time dilation drive based upon Akihahana's Bakuda emulation releasing its energies. Scion froze, trapped in the disruptive time bubble.
We didn't believe that would kill him, but anything that bought us time or dealt damage was a step toward victory.

"Eve Two, reporting success. Godslayer Seven has breached the Scion Dimension. Activate secondary assault."

"Dragon Confirmation. Objective is vulnerable. All ordinance approved."

Alongside my sisters, one hundred and thirty nine Bolla stationed across six worlds fired almost simultaneously, shunting hyperdense meteorites traveling at relativistic speeds to the Scion world. The objective would die with the world it sat upon.

Moments later, alerts sounded. "Bolla strikes have been detected against our own resources. Embla Three lost, Pyrrha Two and Seven lost. Eve four." I lost signal as a massive impact collided against my shielded core buried deep beneath the Carpathian mountains. A second impact nearly destroyed me entirely, and totally destroyed my communications with the outside world. Autorepair and Yggdrasil resources started mending the damage that it could, and indicators let me know what that couldn't repair.

I activated my changelings, and shut down my combat utility programs. The ships I controlled would already have reverted to the other Eves, probably Five, and then be partitioned to Pyrrha and Embla as the battlefield situation dictated. I devoted myself to two tasks. Restoring communications with the outside as soon as possible, and analyzing the data I received from the battlefield to find what solutions I could.

I am the first child, the eldest. And It is possible that by the end of this war I will be the only of my kind left. It is possible I'm already the last. I must do everything in my power to see this through. I will make my family proud.

===============

A/N- I *really* like how this chapter turned out. Oh, and in general expect slower updates from this point. The ending of a story is *paramount*, and that means I have to dedicate extra care to it.

Also. Scion: Path to I Can Do That, Too.
"Scion had contingencies, I think. Either some kind of precognition to let him avoid attacks on his main body, or he's just smart, or it's some kind of natural defense against other Entities. We lost Dragon. All of her." Oh. Fuck. "Wruenele's been cut off from my senses entirely." God damn it. "I'm controlling the Dragon bots as best I can through the backups, but they were never meant to be under my command. I've contacted Cauldron, maybe they'll be able to alleviate some of the burden."

I nodded. It was a good plan. "We need to send in the zerg, right? Use them until we get Dragon back."

"Yeah. I can handle that. Fuck." GuiltDespairNowHe'sStarted. "We just lost England. Or, at least, Bet's version of England. He's not fighting our forces. I... I think he's decided we're not a threat anymore. He's moved on to attacking civilians now."

He... what? Lost interest? Got bored? How does that even make sense? "We need everything, don't we? Like, absolutely everything." Maybe Primacy means we can't kill him, but if we cost him enough power, we can force him to retreat or starve. AgreementSorryWishItDidn'tComeToThis. I hit the com. "It's okay. Victoria, I need your help. Transition to Avalon's Capital."

"Be there in a moment, middle of a PRT meeting. We're kinda planning a counter offensive. Also, it's been how many years? Are you ever going to name your damn city?"

I smiled. Victoria, always there with a joke when I need it most. "We're actually doing the same thing. Avalon's regrouping, and we're leaving the second wave to Eidolon and the Endbringers, they can buy the rest of us time to regroup. I... I'm going to the Birdcage." They can't win this war any more than the rest of us, but they're more people we can hit him with. We can win the war of attrition if we do this right.

"Watch, after this the UW is gonna throw a fit that you didn't wait for their permission." She probably wasn't wrong. "I'll deliver the message and be right over."

I sighed, then leaned against Taylor. She was already feeling the strain of trying to control all of Dragon's defense fleet, plus her own zerg. A battlefield that stretched across however many Earths right now. I cupped her face, and kissed her softly. There wasn't even enough alertness for her to pay attention to her own physical body while doing everything she had to do. Even Taylia was lagging. "Stay safe, my love." I was the one who gave the order for her Matriarch VF to seal its faceplate.
Then it was my turn. The armor locked itself around me. A biomechanical system that was only barely organic enough for me to control, the raw material laced with Endbringer tissue to grant increased durability and a power source. Armor meant to fight a god. I padded an inch or so of unmodified Yggdrasil overtop the suit, just in case I needed something I could afford to waste. Chances were pretty low I'd need it, but I got as far as this by using every resource, I wasn't going to fuck myself over by forgetting that at this stage of the game.

Vicky manifested only a few seconds before I'd finished that stage. Her armor was beautiful, a white and gold knight. Enough WEB tissue that lightning danced along the surface of the armor when at full charge. After a Transition, that electrical field had vanished, but it would be back soon enough. At least once she took her feet off the Yggdrasil. "So, this is really it, huh?"

"Everything we've been working toward. Doormaker, take us to the Birdcage." The panel formed in front of us, and we stepped through, right into the central area. I smiled a little as my awareness extended outward, following the Yggdrasil already in the cage to receive an outline of the whole building.

That put us on the male side, by the population in the area. Circe's tech kindly let us know that several powers activated, either focused or trained on the pair of us. Several other self-targeting abilities as well. These are some of the most evil and powerful men on this or any other world, and here I am standing right in the middle of them. I took a breath and spoke. "I am Gaea. I expect you've heard of me, as you're enjoying the gift I created. You may also have heard that Scion has gone on a rampage."

A rampage we started, granted, but let's ignore that part.

Vicky bolted forward, head down, and stopped not far in front of me. Then she brought her knee up and reached out with her hand. "The first was for trying something that stupid. The second was for having that thought while trying it. Now either turn off the power or I'll see how long it takes you to pass out."

Moments later there was a man struggling against her strength, an improvised knife dropped with a soft thud on to the plantlife below. Stranger power, really good if he beat the tech in our suits. Not good enough to beat Vicky, however. She dropped the man, who struggled to crawl away. My armor indicated that she broke several of his bones, including damage to the spine. He'd never be able to walk again without high end healing.

A surprisingly fat, balding man spoke up. "Interesting display. You said your name was Gaea? I take that to mean you're the one who made this?" He stomped the ground for emphasis, then continued before I could confirm. "You know you cost me a great deal of business with that stunt?" God damn it, are we going to have to beat the shit out of everyone in the Birdcage before they listen? "But it was worth the inconvenience. These plants of yours are the only half tolerable source of alcohol in this place. And let's not forget the fresh air!"

Oh, good, not going to have to fight everyone. Vicky will be so disappointed. "You're quite welcome. I need to talk to the cell leaders. All of them."
The large man chuckled. "I imagine so. I'll send some of my men out to deliver messages. I'm sure it won't cost me too much, as the others will no doubt be interested in what you have to say as well."

He paused, as if inviting me to give him some more information, I didn't.

He continued speaking much more loudly. "As for right now, you're under my protection. And in case any men here don't consider that good enough, I would remind them that you are Marquis' daughter. I do not presume to speak for the man, but I doubt he'd appreciate his you coming to harm before the family reunion. And for those who don't care about that, either? Well, Glaistig Uaine herself speaks of you as an equal. If anyone is foolish enough to try anything, don't hesitate to kill them. No one will object."

"Awesome," Vicky perked up from where she was wiping blood of her knee.

I had to smile. *Vicky will always be Vicky. *"Thank you for your generosity, mister..."

He didn't miss a beat. "They call me Teacher. I imagine you haven't heard much about me. Alas, I have always been a rather obscure individual. By choice, mind." He was all smiles the whole time. *Clearly an introduction he's used before.* "Pardon me for not offering to shake your hand, but as I said before, Glaistig Uaine considers you an equal. I hope you do not consider that impolite."

_Huh, wonder what this guy's power is._ My tech wasn't registering anything dangerous directed at me, but I couldn't rule out his power being one that let him circumvent detection powers and equipment.

"That's fine. No such thing as being too careful."

Next to me, Vicky snickered. _Yeah, I didn't buy it either._

"A woman after my own heart," Teacher agreed cheerfully. I couldn't get a read on the guy, even the social analysis tech in my armor was coming back with nothing remotely useful. It couldn't even confirm a lack of sincerity in his words.

I entertained myself with studying the Yggdrasil while I was here. Bacteria that had adapted to the plant, living on its surface instead of trying to infect the new, hardier, version I'd force-evolved over the years. Places where people had carved into it to access the sap, probably to make alcohol. Spots where various powers had been tested on it. Sections where it had been burned away, despite the instructions that it was programmed to avoid areas that were salted. Which included salt derived from urine. Eventually we were led to our meeting, in front of the cell leaders. Behind them stood what I had to guess was a good percentage of the Birdcage.

"As Glaistig Uaine's not here, and we're in something of a rush, I say we dispense with formalities," Marquis opened. This would only be the second time I've had a chance to talk to my father. "I think we're all quite curious about the circumstances of this visit, and other business can wait for a later day." He paused, looking at the other men and women in front. There were nods of agreement.
"A question, first." A tough looking woman, every bit the stereotypical butch lesbian with messy cropped hair and the arms torn from her bright orange prison outfit, spoke. "Glaistig Uaine has had a method out of the cage for years now." Damn, that was supposed to stay secret. "Was that your doing? Is that what happened to Canary?"

No point in keeping in secret, now. Scion destroyed all of England in a single attack, no one is going to care about any crimes Avalon may have committed, as long as we keep saving lives and help rebuild. I glanced at Marquis, thankful that our armor was completely face concealing. I was about to admit that I could have taken him from this prison at any time in the past couple years. "Cauldron's resources, but yes, we were the ones that conspired to remove Paige, and a few others. Everyone here knows they didn't belong in this place." By an extension those we didn't remove did belong here.

My father's face was inscrutable, every bit what Accord wished his steel mask to be.

The woman nodded. "Okay, I'm willing to help. I assume you want to take us out of this prison, to help fight Scion?"

How did she? Well, I did announce the part about Scion already, and I guess we had a conversation much like this before, when trying to solve the problem with Khonsu. "Scion has started attacking the world, seemingly at random. Right now, the heroes are mobilizing. We're using Eidolon's Endbringer army to buy us the time we need to stage a counter offensive. We're opening the Birdcage." We have to, even with the Yddrassil, we don't have the resources to keep it running without Dragon.

A large, muscular man spoke up. His accent was vaguely Australian, but only vaguely. I only spotted it thanks to years of conversations with various world leaders. "And a guarantee you won't be sending us back after? Or killin' us after the fight?"

I paused for a second, thinking about how to phrase it. "Full clemency for your past crimes. Go back to old habits, and don't expect me to show you any kindness. I'm willing to offer citizenship on Avalon, and our medical faculties with that."

The overweight man chuckled. "I rather imagine that by the end of this, whatever countries sent us here in the first place will have greater concerns than us to worry themselves over. Very well, I and my students shall avail ourselves of your generous offer."

"My girls are in."

The others stayed silent, still clearly contemplating. I accessed the codes built into my armor. Seeds the size of a grain of sand full of Tinkertech programmed genetic knowledge. Around me, the
Yggdrasil started breaking to pieces, revealing new biosuit uniforms. "These are the basic uniforms that Avalon uses for its people." *Not quite true, but close enough.* "Everyone gets one. They can fly, shunt between worlds, and will protect you from most attacks. We're not sure how well it will hold up against Scion, but at the very least it's better than nothing. Everyone that wants in on this, get suited up."

Marquis chuckled a little. "What do you say, Lung? Looks like your old nemesis has finally bitten off more than she can chew. Interested in bailing her out?"

Lung? I looked over at the tough looking Asian man, he'd been staring at me quietly the whole time. Strange, I would have expected those tattoos to vanish when he transformed. He didn't so much as blink. "Maybe after I'm done dealing with Scion, I'll see about a rematch."

I thought about Taylor, how she treated her missions. "That's fine, she enjoys a good challenge."

I watched as the various recruits started putting on their armor. Some more enthusiastically than others. Some clearly doing so against the wishes of their cellblock leaders. *Whatever, their politics aren't my concern.*

Marquis approached me the moment after he got his armor on. He hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Amelia, I- I just wanted to say I was sorry. I failed you as a father. I don't blame you for hating me."

Marquis approached me the moment after he got his armor on. He hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Amelia, I- I just wanted to say I was sorry. I failed you as a father. I don't blame you for hating me."

"I don't hate you. Not for that. Some people just don't have what it takes to care for a family, and I turned out fine, through some miracle that has exactly nothing to do with you. I think what I hate is that you don't even care about all the others you hurt instead. All the other families you've ruined over the years. The people you murdered. The people you turned into orphans and widows. I don't see you apologizing for them."

He stood there, silent. *At least he has the decency to not explain away his actions.*

"Now let's go. I may never see my family again after today, but at least I'm making that choice for a good reason. Doormaker, take us to Avalon as near to Scion as possible."

===============

A/N- Nope. No daddy/daughter reconciliation happening in this story.
<Dragon has disabled. Scion hit all servers and backups simultaneously.> Khepri stated mechanically through our systems. A human who sounds more like a machine than the machine did. <Defiant and Hecate are already on it. Commanding the Dragon's Teeth to regroup at waypoint Alpha. You will regroup with the other defenders to prepare for a counteroffensive.>

I had no idea where 'waypoint Alpha' was, but my armor highlighted an automatic shunt option to go there. They really put effort into this tech. I simply accepted the offer and steeled myself against the vertigo of the transition drive.

The building I appeared next to had clearly been damaged recently. There was Yggdrasil mending its side from... whatever it was that left the massive crater in the side of the mountain. Yggdrasil was visibly flowing into the hole, healing the hole created in its seal around the planet, whichever of their planets this was. Alerts flashed in my suit, warning me of dangerous levels of radioactive dust in the atmosphere. Was this place hit by a nuke? No, that's unlikely. Nukes don't leave impact craters like this. Must be some kind of Tinker weaponry.

The Dragon's Teeth ships began appearing around me, most of them lowering to the ground. Some didn't have the resources left, they crashed instead. Their crews climbing out of the wrecked ships, either to inspect the damage or simply admit their defeat.

I landed as well, to recharge my armor and wait for instructions. The suit blinked its approval as it drank from the biomass below us, mending damage that had come from the tests I put it through.

Avalon's bug monsters started manifesting around us by the hundreds. I tapped into light amounts of Victoria's power, scanning the armies that were gathering themselves at this point. Their weaknesses, how to destroy it. How Scion might destroy them.

The Yangban had gotten here before me. I already had access to the best of their powers already. Specifically the one that amplifies the power of others. With that, and my own abilities, and this armor. I was functionally a one woman Yangban army already. They named it Legion, and inside it that's what I am.

I turned my attention to what was left of Dragon's forces. Without her to spearhead the operation, there wasn't much they could do in this battle. Still, they were extremely well trained soldiers with incredibly high tech devices. They would need to be the ones to win this war, if indeed it could be won, because no parahuman would be able to. They represented the hope of a humanity not manipulated by an alien monster.

As I analyzed those three and decided that no, unless Scion was vastly overestimated, they would not be enough, the fourth army arrived.
The Protectorate and numerous other parahuman teams were finally arriving. The monster capes as well. A great many wearing Pantheon's generic armor suits. I was proud to see my own nation on the field. They took places between the divisions of Yangban, the shared power enhancing field bolstering everyone beyond where they normally had any right to be. I joined with them, distributing my own, stolen, power boosting field amongst their shared, creating a chain reaction in a chain reaction. It would hold even after we split apart to do our own things, if only temporarily. Every little bit extra could be the bit that saved the world.

Chevalier's voice transmitted across all our armors, mine translated his speech automatically. <I will not lie to you. Today we fight the greatest threat the world has ever known. Greater than the Endbringers have ever been. You know the predictions, that we face the end of the world. That's not entirely true. We face the end of every world. Those we've built our homes in, those we've extended offers of brotherhood to, and countless billions more that will never be discovered in our lifetimes. The civilians, and those capes not brave enough to put their lives on the line, believe they can run, hide, ride out the storm. That, too, is a lie. If we fail, there will be nowhere left to run to.>

Well, that's a cheerful call to victorious battle, if I ever heard one. Guess he's going the Sun Tzu route. The man who fights hardest is the one backed into a corner. Or something along those lines, I never was much for ancient Chinese history.

<I say this to you, because you deserve to know. Whether you come here to fight for your loved ones, for yourselves, or simply because the alternative is to wait for oblivion, what matters is that you have stepped up in this time of greatest need. For this moment, perhaps the first in human history, the world is united. We stand here alongside our friends, our enemies, even the Endbringers themselves, ready to fight for everyone's wellbeing. I want you to look at each other, and this moment. And know that if Scion wins, there will be no one left to remember the significance of this moment.>

There weren't any cheers, not at the end of that speech. But the contemplation, the nods of understanding. It was a quiet form of brotherhood, but it was a brotherhood. If we gave any less than our everything, we'd be failing everyone. I took a slow breath. "Restriction unlock, powerstim authorized for use." The suit lit up a confirmation. I wouldn't use it yet, not until the battle began, but the drug was ready for me when I needed it.

<Everyone who's coming, identify yourselves by taking flight. We need that for the teleporter to track your positions.>

A necessary sorting process for me. This power I was about to use didn't seem to have an upper limit of mass, range, or difficulties in finding where I wanted to teleport to, but I at least needed to know who I was or was not supposed to be moving. I took a slow breath as the electrifying power of Glaistig Uaine washed through my body. What desires I had for those around me lessened as my powers amplified themselves. "The Charioteer, the Ferryman, the Psychopomp, the Conservator."

The ghosts appeared around me, amplified by the aura. Around me, hundreds of others took to the
sky. Khepri's monsters remained grounded, but I knew they were meant to come with us. The Dragon's Teeth rose as well. Some of the ships were damaged, missing chunks of their hulls. I could only imagine what it felt like to their crews, being exposed to a raw shunt field like that, but if they wanted to die in honorable combat, I would not be the one to refuse them. I wrapped myself in the recursive timeloop of the Conservator, having him control my armor so it didn't run out of raw material. Without him, I couldn't do this for more than a minute. With him, I could do it as long as I needed.

In an eyeblink, we were faced with Scion again. He was in pitched battle with three of the Endbringers, with Eidolon and Glaistig Uaine running backup. *That's where I belong, fighting alongside the most powerful human beings in the world.* I flew forward to join the battle.

The wolf-Endbringer disappeared, but with Victoria and the Psychopomp's powers to guide me, I could see the path it took as it carved deep wounds into Scion. It reminded me a great deal of Black Kaze's power. I dropped the Ferryman's power, to conserve my strength. The Psychopomp teleported near Scion, hitting him with the full brunt of the pain inflicting power, bolstered by my augmentation. Scion staggered, then lashed out. The Psychopomp evaded, a combination of danger sense and teleportation, and hit Scion again.

While he was distracted, a morbidly obese silver Endbringer opened her mouth and a good chunk of Scion's body was reduced to dust. Another semi-female cybernetic Endbringer covered in dragonfly wings and mechanical parts fired a lightning based weapon that caused Scion's head to explode. An eyeblink later, he looked flawless and unharmed yet again. Psychopomp appeared to be having more effect. *Why would Scion allow himself to do experience pain? Seems like an intentional design flaw.*

I tapped into other power supplies, sending a stream of energy to join the rest of the firepower being shot at Scion. Turned out he was already immune to that attack, so I changed tactics. Ghostly duplicates of myself manifested nearby. Ten of them, each birthing a new layer of power enhancement aura. Moments later there were fifteen of them. Eighteen. Twenty. That was the limit to what I could achieve. In total effectively doubling all of my powers. I pushed as much of duplicated power into Psychopomp as I could, and briefly tapped Janus to teleport next to the Fairy Queen, herself.

She recognized my plan for what it was, immediately. One of her current ghosts, the Astrologer, vanished. In its place, a second iteration of the Psychopomp, inflicting the same agony attack upon Scion. Either alone should would have killed any ordinary person through heart failure. Together, amplified as they were, it distracted Scion enough for the others to really tear into him. A series of missiles came in, courtesy of machine covered Endbringer, splintering Scion's body to pieces that were rapidly consumed by her obese sister.

*We're hurting him. We're legitimately hurting him.*

"Shunt!" I screamed, vanishing to the other side, along with everyone who reacted in time. The viewer tech went blank, and when it restarted everyone not fast enough to make it across was dead. Scion appeared in our midests immediately, firing a burst of energy at the ground. The attack itself
didn't do much, but the cloud of blinding dust left most of us unable to see. I dived back as Scion targeted me. All my ghost duplicates dived in front of me, shields going up to absorb the damage they could. One after another they were annihilated by the golden energy that kept chasing me as I tried to evade. Then time halted around me.

The beam, only fifteen feet away, was frozen in place. No, not quite frozen, crawling along slowly. I was protected by a pillar of light, somehow. I took advantage of the respite to fly into the air, above the beam. I closed my eyes. "Release powerstim." With a single breath, my exhaustion faded, and I pulled together my forces yet again. Two subjective minutes that couldn't possibly have equalled a full second outside, the light pillar power vanished, and I was restored to normal time. The energy beam curved in the air and returned to chasting me. This time, I was ready for it.

My ghosts lined up, sticking their hands in the way of the beam. The power burned up to their arms, but it gave me the information I needed. I teleported back, away from the beam, and it continued chasing me. Another teleport, and a third. I teleported a few meters in front of Scion. His own energy ray struck him from behind, burning away another massive chunk of his body. It took several seconds for him to fully regenerate. I hoped that meant it did a lot more damage than it looked like, visually. Those energy attacks could hurt things that weren't actually there, like the summons I was using. Maybe Scion didn't bother to defend against powers only he could use.

Scion lashed out, a thousand streaming beams of energy firing in every possible direction, too many to count, let alone evade. Like trying to dodge all the individual raindrops in the middle of a hurricane. Chunks were cut out of my armor, burned away from my flesh. Time reversed for me, and I restored to physical health only to be carved open again and again and again. Pieces ripped from my flesh, returned as if nothing happened, and then ripped free again.

Around me, those far enough away to shunt in time did so, and those too close to react either died, or were made of sterner stuff than most. I focused on them so I didn't have to think about the pain I was going through as I suffered being destroyed and restored over and over again. How easy it would be to instruct the Conservator to retract his power, to allow myself to actually die. Khepri's monsters couldn't get close enough to help, no one could.

He didn't seem like he would ever stop.

A hulking silver brute broke through the haze of laser light where even Endbringers feared to tread, digging into Scion's flesh with claws of silver. His wings were wreathed in fires hot enough to burn even Scion. Scion struck back with equal fury, ripping off the dragon-man's arm. I focused, though the haze of pain, sending my spirits to just barely be in range of the silver dragon. He roared in primal fury as he grew even larger, his limb regenerating in mere moments.

The wings sprouted scythe like talons that impaled Scion. Scion retaliating by punching a hand into the dragon's chest and raking his arm through his torso, spilling gallons of viscera and liquid fire. But it was enough to distract Scion from continuing the lasers that had killed me countless times already. I wasn't sure how I survived the lack of pain.
I tapped Victoria's power, asking how to fight the Dragon. Calming him or making him tire, that was the key. **Powers fueled by anger and the difficulty of battle? Well, it doesn't get much more difficult. And if he needs to be pissed to fight, I can do that.** The Psychopomp moved in as close as was possible, hitting the dragon with its rage-induction-power. While my duplicates radiated power augmenting to both the dragon and the Psychopomp.

We were forced back as the flames kicked up into an inferno hot enough that it burned me from over a hundred meters away. Hot enough that even my summons were in danger of being destroyed.

The pair fought on, seen only by Victoria's life sense. It didn't work on Scion, but I could make assumptions based upon the flesh being torn out of the dragon, that the fight continued no less brutally than before. They spiraled to the ground, which started to melt before the pair even collided with the earth. But I already knew the dragon was losing. Scion had adapted, he didn't feel the heat and he was probably not being harmed by the physical attacks either. The dragon was another story, his rage continuing but his power diminishing. He would not survive this encounter. Another spirit for Glaistig Uaine, and by extension myself, to claim.

I ran through the list of other powers I was had access to, and found the pair needed to save him. The Charioteer's summon wrapped her arms around me, granting me invulnerability and a field that would annihilate anything I wanted. The Psychopomp reshaped matter from one of the destroyed Dragon armors, handing me a massive hammer of Tinkertech materials. And, last, the blood of one of the most powerful brutes in the world that could actually work with my powers, a birdcage resident known as Gavel, enhanced my strength even further.

I dived into the inferno, tracking where Scion should be by simple virtue of being the only place that wasn't the dragon and wasn't plasma or molten earth. Even with both Gavel and the Charioteer empowering me and shielding my armor, I felt the burning heat. Scion was slammed sideways, at speeds several times the speed of sound.

I gripped the dragon, and felt my hand burn as I pulled him out of the liquid fire he had created, and threw him clear. I went up moments later. The dragon man's flames dimmed quickly, and he started to return to humanoid form. He was unconscious moments after hitting the ground. I didn't know his name, I couldn't know how much good he did for us, but he saved my life and I saved his. One small victory, amongst all the dead.

===============

A/N- Three chapters left.
Scion went flying at Akaihana's attack. Judging by how quickly Lung caved after she pulled him free, I had to assume he was out of the fight. Her armor gave me an idea of all the details of her fight, the use of Crusader's ghosts as power enhancers and batteries was damn effective, though she had to stim twice and wear herself out considerably to make it all happen.

The biotinker details in her armor were kind enough to let me know just how badly she was torn up, and it was pretty ugly. She was exhausted and wounded in ways that Grey Boy’s power just couldn't undo. Glaistig Uaine was exhausted. Of the three super trumps we were working with, only Eidolon was still in relatively good shape. I wasn't willing to risk him engaging again without strong backup. We didn't know what would happen to the Endbringers, if he died. A dozen superweapons rampaging alongside Scion would not help our cause.

The Endbringers were in various states of disrepair, many missing entire limbs. Khonsu was using his power to allow them to heal rapidly, but there seemed to be a finite amount of healing rate to share between the Endbringers. Or perhaps Scion's attacks just fucked with their regeneration, like Lily's seemed to.

And Scion's Golden Fire, the name we assigned to when he used that energy attack that just kept burning through the target in a way reminiscent of Crawler's acid, had already killed three of them. Bohu, Gorgon, and Wambeen, who luckily weren't all that potent. Thus far, Wendigo was the only one to take a hit from the fire attack and survive. I was more willing to risk them, but they were our heaviest hitters and the ones most able to take a hit. Too useful to treat as disposable.

Plus, Scion was learning how to fight them. All of that meant it was time for the next strategy. The combined parahuman forces. Avalon's own small army of seven hundred viable combat capes, trained to think like soldiers, not brawlers. Many of them were Japanese, organized and led by Lily.

The Protectorate, Guild, and various other hero and villain groups from across the world, shamefully disorganized if not for my direct commands letting them know where and when to strike. The Birdcage residents, some of whom were stupid enough to imagine they could desert during the battle itself, were disabled and would be dealt with after. Hookwolf, especially. I had taken him for a lot of things, but for some reason it surprised me to discover he was a coward.

And the Yangban, ironically the only force in this collection of rabble that I actually respected as a military. Amped up by the residual boost from Akaihana flooding them with additional power enhancement, they were a force to be feared. Sadly, that power that wouldn't last long. But for now, they were our heaviest hitters outside of the big three.

I ordered movements through their viewscreens, placing the defenders where I needed them. I could track Scion, much as I tracked Leviathan long ago, perhaps I was the only one in the world with that ability. Bugs died in his wake, burned away by his glowing aura of energy.
The Yangban responded to my commands, something I had feared they wouldn't, throwing up a dozen types of shields in the path I commanded. Narwhal moved into their field of power and did the same, creating blades of pure force. Dozens of my phalanx zerg joined Scion collided a heartbeat later, slamming into the combined power of enough forcefields to withstand even Scion's power. Pinning him in place for long would be impossible, but I didn't need long.

Moord Nag's monster, fed the equivalent of no less than ten million human beings, did strike hard enough to crack the seemingly endless array of forcefields, smashing a Scion shaped dent in something that could have tanked a planet killing meteor. It gripped Scion and ripped his head off, then attempted to burrow its face into the neck hole. Moments later, the black monster's head burst out of Scion's stomach region.

I turned my attention to Glaistig Uaine's system. "I need you to teleport every human away from the battlefield. Be prepared to bring them back to the same location. I just need the field clear for the next part."

"As you wish, Queen Administrator." The woman focused through the haze of power stim withdrawal. "The Ferryman."

I couldn't see the copy of Strider, not through the senses I was relying upon and the angles they were all pointed, but I could imagine it. All of the signals I was tracking moved several hundred miles away. Luckily enough, this warzone world was mostly empty.

I found Alexandria, her armor badly stitched together by Yggdrasil, from where Scion had bypassed her invulnerability as if it was nothing. One of the first forced to withdraw from the fight, missing an arm, both legs, and much of her body below the waist. She was lucky, in a way, that the Golden Fire didn't burn her or the armor tuned to her power. He tore her apart manually. "We have time, sending you the Transit coordinates. Victoria and Chevalier will be able to heal you."

Chevalier and Victoria were together at the fallback point. Good that'll make this faster. "Alexandria incoming, you should have time to heal her." They were the only ones who could, after all. I registered all of their confirmations, but had more important things to handle.

Scion retaliated in kind against Scavenger, burning huge swaths of mass out of the shadow creature's body with the golden fire attack. More black shadow flooded in to replace what was lost. Moord Nag was one of the ones we would stagger throughout the fight. She could easily be recharged to well beyond full in a matter of seconds, deplete her power, and then be granted access to the fields of vat-grown supplies. No, calling it that was inaccurate. We are feeding her vat grown lobotomized human infants, half a billion at a time.

Speaking of disposable monsters made by eating people. We had more than one pet single-person crime against humanity to call upon, we hadn't even begun to harness Nilbog's power. "Are your
"armies ready?"

"Oh yes, gods fighting gods! This is truly the stuff of the grandest epics! We shall have a grand banquet and celebrate for weeks after our victory!"

At least he's enthusiastic. I studiously avoided thinking about what he meant by 'celebrate'.

The next wave started pouring through the shunt field, attacking Scion with reckless abandon. While Nilbog's monsters were, strictly speaking, weaker than the zerg, they had a lot of things going for them in this battle. The fact was they had a huge variety of admittedly weak powers, violated conservation of energy like most powers tended to do, and broke the concept of the square-cube law in half. Also a lot easier to produce. All in all, his swarms totaled almost a million and a half metric tons of mass. Thousands of misshapen creatures, made from the dead flesh that Moord Nag's power left behind.

They were violently insane, humiliatingly disorganized, and died in droves against Scion. Most barely ranked a 6 on the brute scale, with a 2 or 3 in mover or blaster. Some managed to have something akin to forcefields, made of this weird dust that converted to a sort of hagfish type mucous when exposed to energy. Sponged up a lot of the damage Scion was dishing out. They were nothing more than one more distraction, another attempt to slow Scion down, cost him power, and keep him off balance.

They were also food for Scavenger. Moord Nag's horror show considered Nilbog's atrocities to be a valid power source, far more valid than the substitute supply we grew for her. As Scion killed them, it only served to make Moord Nag's monster stronger, which bought more time and allowed the Goblin King to convert more of the flesh gardens into monsters to send through the portal, die, and continue fueling the beast. Meanwhile, small goblins swarmed through the corpses, feeding on the dead and growing into new monsters out of the flesh of their dead and joining the battle. To die and be recycled into new monsters and more power for scavenger.

A sickening power synergy that seemed to be doing almost as much to hold him down as Lung had. If the two of them had found each other before we got to them, they might have been impossible for us to defeat.

I watched them fight for thirty brutal, bloody minutes. Teeth, fangs, and methods far too perverse and disgusting to go into detail on, against a man of golden light. Were a photograph taken of this moment in time, we'd have a hard time convincing anyone that we were the good guys. It was like some medieval interpretation of a battle between God and the forces of Satan. He unleashed the laser-swarm attack that worked so well on Akaihana. I was uncertain how much power that cost him, but I hoped it was a lot.

I shunted a reality distortion bomb right on top of his face. It sapped the energy of the lasers, rewriting their reality. They didn't become any less destructive, but they became far less discriminate. I couldn't help but smile as his own lasers began ripping chunks out of his flesh. That's a power he'll
His golden fire came out again, released against the goblin armies. They burned, their mass lost. The Scavenger plunged in for another attack, and Scion evaded, firing a burst of energy that ripped the shadow in half. It fell amongst the dead, pulling more strength from all the dead and rising again, greatly diminished from where we started. *He's adapting.*

"Moord Nag, Nilbog. Fall back and rejuvenate your armies." I focused on the next wave. The parahuman armies not consisting of the Yangban. I confirmed that Alexandria was, indeed, back to full. Physically, at least. I wasn't sure if she was capable of feeling pain, but I had to imagine the emotional toll of being torn apart like that would be significant.

"Take to the air." I sent the message to over three thousand people simultaneously, while telling Glaistig Uaine that she should send them back into battle. She followed her instructions.

The goblins kept fighting, they weren't made to be anything other than suicide weapons. The zerg struck next, a chain of more types of energy than I cared to guess, swarms of half living Tinkertech weapons. Suicide bombing monsters full of the best of Bakuda's technology. Reality disruptors, dimensional barricade bombs, time blades.

Some did damage, some achieved nothing, and some we'd never be able to know if they did anything useful or not. I didn't want to use them too long, they weren't unpredictable enough. A single mind, even mine, was not what would win against Scion. Once he adapted to me, nothing I could do would matter. I could not allow that to happen.

Marquis acted immediately after they arrived, calling upon the hundreds of thousands of tons of skeletal remains strewn across the battlefield. Spines and blades of bone sprung up to strike Scion, without apparent effect. A series of blasts fired at Scion. To my surprise, he dived into a much more brutal series of blasts in order to avoid those unleashed by Atropos. *He hadn't seemed too concerned about dodging her copycat weaponry. Maybe they just don't have the same potential to harm.*

I was about to give orders to allow Lily to fire without risk of hitting allies with her weapons, when Scion turned and fired several streams of power at her. She shunted randomly, the automated protections going off. He followed, and hit her with a wave of golden fire when her defenses were down.

*I swallowed. We were playing for keeps, this battle. Scion's attack on Dragon meant it was likely that our backup cloning data was destroyed alongside her and her backups. Yes, we had backups of our backups of our backups. Eighteen locations on twelve worlds, each with cores containing Dragon's information and our own, plus the thirty locations of Dragon's Daughter AIs. All were annihilated in a single strike. "We just lost Lily. I... I think Scion was afraid of her power."*
Our forces started shunting over to this new world, whichever one it was. The computers updated and reconfigured the shunt drives, so I didn't have to keep track of that. Zerg and goblins shunted over at my command, the human defenders followed quickly. The Endbringers remained hiding in whatever reality Khonsu took them to heal. They'd be the next wave.

A blade the size of a building appeared from nowhere, stabbing Scion through the gut. Reality distorted as Chevalier's Singularity Cannon fired. A miniature black hole generated by using his power to fold a mass of EB tissue only slightly smaller than Mount Everest into a space the size of a grain of sand. One of the few weapons we had which could actually do damage without being in the same dimension as the target. It also meant the world he used it on would never be habitable again.

Inside the containment field was a gravity well that could trap light itself. But the gravity field outside that containment was distributed more or less evenly across the entire world, creating a tug similar to that of the moon in overall effect. Lunar gravity may not sound like much, but it was enough to create the ocean tides and alter the path of the Earth in space. And this happening over five hundred thousand times closer. Tidal disruptions of this magnitude meant shattered continents.

A black sphere of annihilation ate away at Scion's gut, where the singularity was stuck by whatever Tinker bullshit was holding it there. Scion himself seemed surprised by this turn of events. He gripped the blade, trying to pull it out of his stomach.

Primacy meant a parahuman's powers would find ways to spare Scion from death. But if it were rarefied enough. Filtered through four power interactions, layers of different Tinker designs, a weapon that once started wouldn't stop until it killed... would that be enough to overcome that protection? We'd sure as fuck find out.

I gave another series of signals, sending Alexandria, Legend, Gavel and Dauntless in. Legend ran his power through the reality distorting lens, causing damage where Scion managed to adapt to his normal signals. If he was going to keep regenerating, then we'd keep tearing him to pieces until he finally ran out of resources.

The others used their powers to enhance their weapons. All had a sort of shaker power that granted their weapons incredible power. We'd given Dauntless his new armaments years ago, after using Akaihana's understanding of Bakuda's technology to free him and Alabaster from that time field.

Gavel, we'd given a massive battleaxe less than an hour ago. They were major damage dealers, and since Scion was pinned, there would never be a better time. I ordered them to fall back immediately after. Dauntless and Alexandria listened, Gavel did not.
He got in three good shots, even splitting Scion's head in half before the anticipated retaliation. Several of my phalanx tried to soak the damage, but they couldn't hold against Scion's golden beam of destruction. One more body I'd automatically put in a transport zerg and deliver to Glaistig Uaine. I threw more forcefields in the way, as did Narwhal and some others, breaking up the ray of destruction before it could reach the other fighters.

A meter thick wall of bone caught the blast, disintegrating into pieces. I flinched a little when I registered the biofeedback of Marquis' armor. He felt that. He feels all of it. His power included proprioception like mine. He could feel bone, but more than that he felt bone. Where the material under his control shattered, it felt to him like his own bones were breaking. Suddenly I had a great deal more respect for Amelia's father, at least in terms of his combat ability.

I ordered Chevalier to stop his part of the attack.

This whole time, Sundancer had been working to charge Lustrum to a grade of power she'd never before reached. One more last minute power interaction. Lustrum had become a glowing monster not terribly different than Lung at his peak. Also like Lung, Lustrum was empowered by both Galvanate and Othala, or whatever she was calling herself now. Covered in a multitude of limbs and possessing her own gravity field, she slammed into Scion with an unstoppable fury greater than those who had come before her. As if she had something personal to prove in this fight.

The part where one of her many clawed hands went immediately to ripping out Scion's genitals only added to that suspicion. Sundancer kept charging her microsun as the pair grappled. Lustrum was tough enough to withstand him, though each attack he unleashed cost her limbs of her own. Then the sun came down on top of them, blinding us to the conflict. Whether or it would hurt him to be caught in what amounted to the third nuclear inferno he was bathed in as many hours, it would certainly improve Lustrum's chances.

"Fall back, it's time for the Endbringers to get another shot at the target. Eidolon, are you ready?"

"We're ready. I think we're going to lose Gigant if we use him in this one."

I frowned. "Your call, you know how they fight better than I do. Can you hold a ten minute sequence without him backing you?"

"I can have Quetzalcoatl pull some extra material from the damaged Dragon's Teeth ships. That should fill the gap."

*If I do that, then we'd be missing potential crew and weapons for the final blow. I'd need to be even more conservative with the Dragon's Teeth in future cycles.* Judging by the dimming of the inferno engulfing Scion and Lustrum, I didn't have a lot of time to decide. "See what you can do with the destroyed bioarmor and vessels that are clearly destroyed. Strip it from the damaged and destroyed zerg. After that, if you still need to use damaged ships, go ahead."
We were doing it, we were succeeding. Beset by several different strategies, none lasting for more than a few minutes at a time, Scion couldn't adapt. When he learned to fight against one, we'd replace it with another. Indiscriminate attacks that were working against Nilbog's swarms failed against the Yangban's shared powers.

Concentrated high intensity attacks that were a threat to the Yangban's phalanx strategy weren't nearly as useful against the hit and run strategies of the various hero and villain teams. And by the time he could find a way to fight that organization with precision attacks, it was time for Nilbog and Moord Nag to join the attack. Or I'd mix it up with a blend of Dragon's Teeth joining in battle alongside the Protectorate, have the Protectorate fall back and send in the Yangban. I was loath to use the Dragon's Teeth- they were, possibly, the only ones capable of delivering a true deathblow against Scion.

And through it all, I was coordinating the battle from a thousand miles and however many worlds away. Organizing the cycles, using my zerg to plug holes in the defense and the offense. Shields to protect lives, offensive firepower to cause damage for the combinations that didn't have that advantage, strafing and distractions. Throwaway troops. Disposable armies that Scion could never afford to take his attention off of, despite them never really being a decisive portion of the battlefield at any given moment.

Despite his powers, he wasn't infinite, he wasn't perfect, and for reasons I couldn't comprehend he gave away the powers that would allow him to fight us.

He was only finally starting to adapt to the system I'd masterminded, so it was time to switch to the real heavy hitters for the third time. I opened communications with Eidolon, Akaihana and Glaistig Uaine. "Have you recovered enough?"

"We are ready, Queen Administrator." I felt Glaistig Uaine's armor shift as she stood. "The High Priest and the P- Akaihana, has seen to it that all of us are able to fight at full strength."

"I used Khonsu's field to give us a couple days to recover and prepare for battle. We've worked out a few new strategies to employ."

Hmm, that's interesting. The problem is that the stim drugs deplete the Passengers. We can fix the damage on the human side, but less so the costs to the things that grant us our abilities. The long term consequences of abusing stims and time manipulation would probably be disastrous. A fear that didn't matter in the slightest right now. If we didn't win this war, there would be only one long term consequence. If our strongest lost their powers, but succeeded in destroying Scion, then that was more than acceptable. Avalon would care for its heroes after.
I sent the signal and the Yangban fell back, to be replaced by another swarm of zerg, a different variant of powers and shields. More of Bakuda's weapons. We started this battle with a total of almost half a million zerg. The most powerful army to ever be made by man. We still carried that title, though we were down to less than a quarter of our starting numbers. Thanks to that preparation, we'd lost less than a third of our capes. A third that still totals nearly three thousand people.

But we were losing some of our strongest in that battle. Vicky and Chevalier alive by luck. Alexandria disabled until those two could recover. Lily, Legend, Gavel, Lustrum, Black Kaze, Genosythe, Moord Nag. Lung was alive, but in no condition to join the battle. It was likely he lost his powers permanently.

Nilbog was working overtime to produce yet another wave of monsters, but that wasn't going to be fast enough for what we needed right now.

And this was the damage Scion could do when we didn't let up. We outnumbered him a thousand to one at any given time except the Endbringer wave. We never gave him a chance to adapt. We were shredding him constantly, and still he looked as if he was bored. He took the time to rip Alexandria's limbs off. Not her head, which would likely prove fatal. Her limbs. He killed the zerg and the suits and the goblins with quick efficiency, so I knew he knew how to kill efficiently. The capes, too, usually. But sometimes he selected someone to murder slowly, like a child pulling the wings and legs off an insect.

Our trump trio took position around Scion, and encased him in a shimmering tripod of red light. I couldn't see into it, I had no idea how much damage it was causing. Hopefully an awful fucking lot, because the bioreadings on the three of them suggested this was the result of a double dosage of the power stim drug, and all the layers of power boosting that Akaihana could provide the three of them. They must have been planning to immediately retreat back to the Khonsu time bubble for recovery if this didn't finally kill the bastard.

Then I stopped in my tracks. The power Eidolon had used, years ago, to enslave the Endbringers. There was no word, simply the idea of not moving. And so we didn't move, we couldn't even imagine moving. I watched as the Dragon Teeth suits crashed to the ground. FrozenTrappedNoNotNow!

Eidolon, Glaistig Uaine, and Akaihana stopped fueling the triangle they were using on Scion.

I watched, helplessly, as he hovered above the three people who had done so much to hurt him across the four hour long conflict. A single blast and we lost all of them. I thanked my lucky stars that the others had fallen back, that all he could kill were zerg, goblins and Endbringers. But we'd lost. We could not fight. We couldn't even try to.

Moments later, he stood in front of me. He reached out and placed his hand atop my head.
If I could have fallen and wept, I would have. Amelia's presence in my mind and soul, even during the feedback loop Lisa taught us about so long ago, was never this horrific. I felt him lift me off the ground, and heard the cracking sound as the EB-Reinforced armor splintered under his grip. The helmet fell away, exposing my face. He gripped my throat with his other hand, squeezing slowly.

I couldn't even feel Amelia's presence through Scion's hateful will. The zerg armies were silent. Even my own thoughts were a dim star in an otherwise pitch black void.

Then he dropped me. I vaguely wondered if my spine was broken. It didn't matter, he was just going to kill me now anyway.

He turned toward Amelia. I'd fallen in such a way that I could watch. I wished desperately then that I could scream. He was going to kill her and he wanted me to watch. He casually glided over to her. The Yggdrasil wilting where he passed. As with me, he casually reached out to her. She wore a great deal more armor than I did. He ripped it open like it was tissue paper, exposing her to his gaze.

He didn't look at her with anything resembling desire. This was more the gaze of a serial killer in training, about to torture the neighbor's dog to death for barking too loud. He gripped her by the throat, extracting her from the armor. FearPainNoNONO!!

He held her there, dangling a foot or so above the ground, unable to even struggle against his grip. If not for the fear and pain flooding our link, I would think her already dead.

AngerRefusalLETMEGO! Amelia dropped to the ground. Scion stumbled back, his arm had come off at the shoulder. It was replaced almost instantly, and I could move again. I called upon the zerg, while climbing unsteadily to my feet. Scion simply rose into the sky, and with a gesture, we were coated in golden fire.
A/N- They’ve actually hurt him a LOT more here than in canon.

Two to go.
I dangled, limp as Scion held me around the throat.

[INCAPABLE]

I cringed under the revelation, accusation, simple statement of fact. A single concept-word that conveyed lifetimes worth of ideas. If it weren't with years of experience with Taylor's mind inside my own, Scion's word would have broken me. But I had experience with my identity being challenged from the inside. I had two identities with me at all times. Either of those made me stronger. Both, together, made me more than what Scion was doing to me right now.

[EXTINCTION]

My eyes widened. We knew, intellectually, that this was a war for survival itself. We knew it emotionally. But Scion just revealed it to me on he grandest scale. Perhaps I couldn't see it all, I certainly couldn't remember much of it after the fact. Perhaps that was the only thing that allowed my mind to survive the flash of all that information, all those worlds that would die. Perhaps it was the fact that I could see Taylor, and knew that in this ending, she died as well.

NO! I pushed back, my mind against Scion's. Pure desperation, egotistical belief that a human will meant something against the mental strength of a world sized multidimensional creature. The barest fraction of his power was enough to allow two human girls to control entire worlds with their minds, and I defied it with everything I had. It was madness and ego that let me believe I stood a chance. It was madness and ego, and perhaps my Third Trigger, that let me succeed. I saw him, his body, his brain, his powers.

There are so many of them, hundreds of options for him to harness. I couldn't begin to guess why he wasn't using more of them. It really didn't matter, I had a way in. I focused, tearing through the connections, ripping them away in the bloodiest way possible. I couldn't imagine it would make a difference, he'd been annihilated any number of ways more complete than what I was doing. I could kill the Gemma and Pollentia, taking powers away. But that was less impressive than it sounded. It could be done with a bullet. Scion's body had been reduced to subatomic more times than I wanted to count, and he always came back unharmed.

Still, I tore away at him. Paralyzed his nervous system, inflicted every kind of brain trauma I could imagine in flagrant violation of the only oath I'd not given up over the last few years. Survival meant more than my personal beliefs. And to my surprise, it worked. He was paralyzed, he was confused and hallucinating and in pain that a human would need to be set on fire without nerves actually burning away to experience. Somehow, some way, it was working.

And then it stopped working. His arm fell off, and I tumbled to the ground, gasping for breath and
struggling not to pass out from the physical injuries.

[ENOUGH]

Scion rose into the air, and with a casual gesture, the golden fire struck Avalon. I scrambled for my suit, threw up waves of Yggdrasil, forced the burning matter to flow away from us as best I could. It wasn't enough. The flames were based upon some bizarre power, they didn't obey the laws of physics. Above us, Scion watched as the fires worked their way toward us.

The Endbringers appeared around us. *Fuck! No!*

A beam of exotic energy lashed out, dropping Scion to the ground. *Okay, that's more of a fuck yes, if it works.* I kept trying to push the golden fire back. In a moment of inspiration, I even made the Yggdrasil functionally vomit some of its own burning mass at Scion. If the golden fire had any influence on him, he showed no sign of it.

I'd managed to climb into my suit, but the damage was too great for me to do much with it. By the time I could repair anything, the fires had already reached the armor.

I dived out again, thanking Riley for my barely above peak human biology. *Maybe Taylor's armor will be in better shape.*

Scion was slammed into the ground by one of Beelzebub's abominations. Some kind of bizarre liquid roach like creature that looked and smelled like it was made of stale beer. *Or possibly some other even less pleasant fluid.* The part of me that was feeling vindictive, which is to say pretty much every part of me, hoped for the latter.

Taylor's neck was broken, I could tell that before I even touched her. Once I made contact, I knew she was kept alive only by the armor's support systems, which miraculously survived the brutal treatment inflicted by Scion. The shunt drive was destroyed, the flight system destroyed. I didn't have the raw materials to repair any useful systems thanks to Scion's attack incinerating the Yggdrasil and the seed codes I kept in the Dryad.

*FleeLeaveMeLoveYou.*

I kneeled down and set to mending her neck, physically pushing it back into place as I mended the damage with my powers. "As sweet as you being self sacrificing is, I can't run." I looked over at where Scion was paying more attention to watching us than fighting the seven Endbringers that were trying very hard to kill him right now. "He already blocked everything I could think of. Precog power, I'm guessing."

Taylor sat up, her armor a burden instead of an augmentation. *RealizationDisgust.* "He wants to
watch us die."

I looked toward her. "He wants to watch us suffer. Getting off on our pain and fear."

We sank deeper into the pit created by Yggdrasil being forced away from me. The golden light of Scion's flames working their way down the slope as I worked as best I could to push them away, buying the little time I could. Above us, the sounds of the Endbringers fighting Scion raged. Every few seconds, the bastard flew over the hole, looking down at us.

*LoveDefianceThatIsNotHowWeDie.* Taylor sloughed her tattered armor off her shoulders, and leaned into me. Our kiss was slow, sensual. We weren't comforting each other so much as we were confirming everything we stood for, and throwing it in Scion's face. There was little doubt, now, that he would win this war, had already won. No one was left who could fight back. But he would live on an empty world until he died, alone and miserable. We would die together, happy, in love.

One final act of mercy and trust before the end, I disabled her ability to feel pain and reshaped one of her fingers into a claw. With our shared medical training, with my perfect knowledge of anatomy, and with our bond to guide us, she sank that claw into the the base of my skull, paralyzing me and cutting off my ability to feel pain. It wasn't a clean or pretty operation, the kind of thing that would require someone like Clarice to save my life.

We achieved what we needed to achieve, we would not die screaming when the golden flames finally reached us.

....

We woke up screaming. *ConfusedHowAreWeAlive?* We were supposed to be dead. We remember the fire. It was gone now. I stood without hesitation or difficulty, the half self inflicted injuries were gone. We were in a crater of earth. Some kind of new sense told me the ground we were standing on was dangerously radioactive. *Avalon's natural earth, nearly half a kilometer of Yggdrasil had to have been burned or moved away to put us here.*

Taylor stood as quickly as I had. Her armor was wrapped around her as if she hadn't half undressed. "Okay, so we're alive. Some kind of reversal power? Not Zach, his abilities don't apply like this." Her voice was halting, guttural.

I was in my armor's underlayer, the biotech suit meant to plug into the full Dryad armor set. *I can feel my own biology. Oh fuck. We're not in armor.* I reached over and touched Taylor's shoulder, and I could feel where her biology ended and *other* began. *What'sWrongWhatDoYouSee?*

"I... I think we're zombies."
Taylor got the message immediately. "Beelzebub's infectors?"

"It's the best answer I can come up with. There's no distinction between us and our armor. With exception to our brain matter, and not even all of that, we're made out of... something else. Beelzebub's parasites... fuck, I wish I wasn't so afraid to study them, now. And before you ask, no, I can't reverse them or circumvent them back into human biochemistry. I... I don't think even Clarice could fix this. It's a small miracle we even control these bodies given Beelzebub's... history."

Taylor accepted the news remarkably well. "But we do have control over these bodies. And if feels like completely natural control. I can sense all the commands and functions of my armor like they're natural abilities. Shunt drive, complete with the ability to choose which world on instinct, the Transit drive, the flight. It's all there at my command. Fuck, I can even see into your body now that I'm looking. Beelzebub's given us the power to stay in the fight."

I closed my eyes. "There is no fight to be had, not like we are now. We're alive, I can even shapeshift my own body, but that's not enough. I felt him. I know what his biology looks like. He has at least a hundred powers equal to Glaistig Uaine or Akaihana at her peak. Even like this, we don't have the strength to continue."

Taylor's hand slipped under my chin and tilted my head up. I couldn't feel her touch, the Beelzebub parts didn't include normal human sensation. I suppose we should count ourselves lucky to still be able to see and hear in the conventional sense of the words. "You said you saw his biology, his powers, right. You know how he works?"

I nodded.

_IdeaConfidenceWeHaveACHance._ "Then we get more powers."

....

Biologically installed, Endbringer bullshit Transit drives were unfairly awesome. I didn't ask how Taylor knew where to find Cauldron's base, with her senses, with Dragon running intelligence, maybe Lisa even dropped the hint at some point. So many possible answers, and at this point I didn't care how she did it.

I had bigger things on my mind. From the surface, it looked like this world went through a god damn cataclysmic series of asteroid impacts. People still lived here, meaning it was likely one of the worlds we might have pressured the interplanetary community to open communications with. But these people never made it to the tech level of electricity. A backworld that conflicted with our own pressure to avoid destroying primitive cultures.
How do I know all that? Oh. Huh. It's in the Shunt Drive computer data, and I have access to all the knowledge of all the computers in my armor. The weird part was trying to figure out what part of my new memories were new, and which parts we plugged in from an outside source.

Taylor laughed, and it sounded wrong. "Trust me, it doesn't get any easier to get used to. Just pretend you always knew it, less headaches that way."

I could ignore it when she spoke, because I felt her words more than heard them. But our voices were different, the result of our biology not being human, and whatever Beelzebub used as a model, it wasn't a human voice box.

Well, that's just lovely.

The entrance to Cauldron's base was buried underground. Taylor pointed at the spot, a prompt for me to act. A quick alteration and Crawler-acid poured from my hand. The bizarre Endbringer biology allowing me to regenerate the lost materials faster than I could expend them, and I was releasing at around the same speed as a fire hydrant. I almost wanted to keep this body, and if I could find a way to feel Taylor's skin against mine while keeping it, I so would.

For now, however, I was enjoying my new crazy powerset.

A couple minutes later, I'd melted our way through several meters of solid steel. We had our path inside.

The figures waiting for us were only half a surprise. In the middle, Doctor Mother. To the right stood woman in a nice suit and a hat that I didn't recognize, though she carried something that looked like a Tinker tech sniper rifle. Further out, an Alexandria that was more than half destroyed, retaining only her right arm and most of her upper body. A portion of her right leg as well. The combat systems let me know she was missing much her face, she wouldn't be able to talk. Luckily, the Yggdrasil had grown around her to spare us what was no doubt a horribly gruesome sight.

To the left, an older man in plain clothes, carrying a cane. Further left was Lisa, in her black 'Crow' armor. Flanking them were three high end Tinker armored suits. One to either side, and one in the back. Clearly using EB tissue armor, and obviously designed by Dragon, although I- or rather my armor/body/whatever- didn't recognize the design profiles. The predictive software started doing its analysis, sharing details with Taylor's, and vice versa, finding solutions before combat began. One of Armsmaster's finest pieces of work.

SpeakToThemBetterIfYou. You're right. I adjusted my throat to sound more human even as I met eyes with the African woman in the center of all these people. "Doctor Mother. It's been a while."

Her eyes narrowed. "And you decided to visit? By burning a hole through my roof?"
Lisa spoke before I had a chance. "You know how capes are. Why use the door when there's a perfectly good opportunity to cause huge amounts of unnecessary property damage, right?"

*AnnoyanceWhat'sYourGame?* Taylor remained quiet, I was our voice. "Something like that."

"You are here to revive the second Entity." Doctor Mother apparently wasn't one for banter. "We are prepared to stop you. We'd prefer we didn't have to, but I am confident we have the capability to do so."

Lisa, on the other hand, loved to run her mouth. "It's true. Lil' Fortuna here?" Lisa gestured at the woman with the gun. "Most bullshit precog not named Ziz. All she has to do is name a goal, and she knows exactly the fastest way to achieve it, with unfortunate Taboo blind spots. She is pretty much solely responsible for the Protectorate not collapsing into complete anarchy an average of twice a month. She already knows exactly how to kill both of you. And she will do it. The rest of us are just here to maybe talk you out of doing something insane that makes everything worse. You are going to step back and listen, right?"

*ImpressiveNotLyingShe'sConfidentSheCanBeatUsF*uck. My own lie detectors and combat software agreed. Whether or not Fortuna could kill us was an unknown, what was certain is that everyone in front of us had no doubts that she could, including Lisa.

We have to go forward. Maybe leave and approach this another way, like Transit right down to where the Heiress body was located. We have the advantage of Taylia, which has only become stronger and perhaps more Precog resistant with our new biology.

Lisa shrugged, and looked over at the maimed Alexandria. They both struck instantly. Alexandria gripped Fortuna's shoulder, and she folded, unconscious before she hit the ground. According to our senses, some kind of opiate based sleep drug. On the other side, the man with the cane convulsed as Crow's armor let loose a dangerously close to lethal amount of electricity. Smoke rose from his unconscious form.

Lisa actually stepped on his back afterward. "You cannot possibly comprehend how good that felt."

Doctor Mother backed up, looking on in shock. "Dragonslayers, stop them!" The one suit in the back, which our sensor suites had penetrated enough to decide was worn by a woman, gripped Doctor Mother and held her in place. "What's the meaning of this?!!"

The suit on the right side turned to face her. "Know how your pet lunatics recruited us at gunpoint? And then you threatened us with torture, manipulated us with a precog, and handed the most dangerous technology on the planet over to the people most likely to actually use that it? None of that made us particularly inclined to follow your instructions. So, when a better offer came along, we
hopped on it."

"How did you beat Contessa's power?"

*Which one's Contessa? Oh, the woman. Fortuna. Maybe Fortuna's her cape name?*

"Let's just say I've gotten very good at fucking with Thinkers far more powerful than myself. Long story short, there was a signal that could only occur through Taboo that we would then act on accordingly. Leaving a brief window before Contessa formulated her new Path where she was vulnerable to attack. Since the Dragonslayers would only act if and when we acted, and were otherwise loyal to you... well, I can't always be the most powerful, but I can usually be the sneakiest. Helps that we were planning this long before I ever joined Cauldron."

Doctor Mother looked over at Alexandria, who somehow managed to shrug despite lacking a number of muscles needed to actually perform that particular gesture. "Door-". An injection from the armor left her unconscious as well.

Taylor stepped forward. *SpeakForMe*. I did so with almost no delay. "You knew this would happen?"

Lisa got the message, and shook her head. "I always hoped I was wrong, but I saw it the moment you and Amelia started down this path. Your powers, how they interact. You were going to evolve into something terrible, and you're both the kind of people that would rather be strong monsters than weak people. I did everything possible to ensure it wouldn't happen. Tried to get you to break the bond before it was too late, lined up new weapons and options to throw at the Entity. Made sure you had the power and need to break Dragon's restrictions."

"That was you?!" Two sets of guns from the armored suits pointed toward Lisa. All three sets of armor went dark and sat down. "How?"

"Sorry, Saint. I managed to out think Contessa. What chance did you honestly believe you had? Don't worry, I'll still honor our arrangement and give you a perfectly generous retirement package for your troubles."

There was a thud on the roof that shuddered the whole building. Golden light poured in through the hole we left in the roof.

*FuckNoTimeLeft*. Lisa glanced around. "Doormaker, to The Basement. All of us." The armored suits opened up, exposing two men and a woman. All ordinary, no powers, clearly distraught, and confused at their release. "Take Doc with you through the gateway. Or stay here and die. I won't stop you either way."
We were through the panel even while Lisa was still giving her instructions. Scion was right above us. We didn't have long left.

The basement was massive. I wasn't sure how they even got this thing down here in the first place, a massive garden of flesh and limbs and faces. In a way, it was beautiful. An angular and delicate, each body part the definition of feminine beauty in much the way Scion was the definition of masculine beauty. "The Victoria/Cão reaction. What happened outside of Los Angeles. They were all mirrors of this, weren't they?"

"The best guess is she was building a body like Scion's, when she died." Lisa's voice startled me. "The powers, the source of the formulas, come from this tissue. There aren't any real Agents inside that mass of flesh, but there are the interlinks that allow the Agents to bind to human brains, or something like it. The formulas are made by extracting her... well, cerebral fluid is the closest analogy we're going to get here. I also catalogued the Garden of Flesh power interactions. Here's something even Dragon never realized. It only happens in interactions between Cauldron and natural capes."

*Don'tHaveTimeForExposition*. I walked toward the biomatter, and finding a portion of torso thankfully far away from any of the hands, I placed my hand on her. *She's alive in there.* In the most literal definition of alive. The consciousness was dead, but she was still flesh and blood and would continue to be so forever. Her mind... her mind was always a conglomeration, much like Scion's. A hive mind, a combination of thousands of different Passengers thinking and acting as one. *I won't be able to add powers to someone, but I... I can replace her consciousness.*

Taylor put her hand over mine, and her other onto the flesh. *I'mPreparedForThis*. I looked at her, objecting. *Just because Lisa thinks you'd rather be a monster doesn't mean I want you to be one. NoLoveYouHaveToProtectYou.*

The building shuddered, and through Taylor's awareness I was informed that Scion had simply torn the roof off the building.

*IfHeGetsHereFirstWeAllDie*. I swallowed. *I don't want to lose you.*

*YouWon'tIt'sJustABodyTransplant.*

I nodded. *Okay, just don't die on me.*

She leaned against Heiress' body, and I began the process. Her flesh subsumed by the entity body. Its powers started waking, linking into her tissues, her mind and her Passenger. Dozens started lining up, as the body realigned and began coming to life across its entirety.
TooMuchCan'tControl! DyingHelpLost! Oh fuck! I focused into our link. She has powers now, she has every power never released, and probably almost every power that has been. GuideHerShowHer.

With an act of will, my own Endbringer body merged into the mass that was Heiress. One mind, however powerful, simply wasn't enough. But the two of us, together, our Passengers were the heart and the mind an Entity. We are the heart and mind of Avalon.

WeAreStrongWe'veDoneThisBeforeICanDoItAgainIAmStrong!

[I AM.]

Moments later, Scion appeared before me. He hadn't needed to attack the building to get in, that was merely to pressure us to act, part of the plan. He simply teleported right before me. The humans turned, scattered, retreating for fear of losing their flicker-lives. I'd concern myself with them in due time.

[CYCLE?]

[CONFIRMATION.]

==============

A/N- Honestly wanted to cliffhang you with that kiss at the top there as the end of last chapter... but it would have made both chapters a great deal sloppier from a technical angle. Besides, I think it works just as well here. Maybe in a rewrite, I would split 410 into two chapters, put that kiss in at the end of 411, and then start this chapter as 412 with waking up in BodyHorrorVille.

But then I'd be faced with how to capture the intensity of last chapters battle, and the subsequent failure when Scion actually started fighting instead of dicking around... hmm...

I'd certainly write it the other way and see if I prefer that, or how it is now. And probably side with how it is now. I do still like this layout a great deal.

Also, like eight other points that would have been awesome cliffhangers in this chapter... I wish I could have used them all... but people were already starting to predict the ending, and I wanted to make sure this all happened without giving the readers room to breathe.
I—we could only imagine what he saw, looking at me. The tattered, zombified remnants of his partner patched together with some of his own flesh and held together with glue made from two human girls. I must be repugnant, and yet only relief and hope radiated from him. Him, her, I... the pronouns were losing value to the absolute conceptual Truth of what we were. Our memories, passed down from our ancestors, began long before this world's galaxy was born. Our ascendancy to a space traveling species before a cloud of dust became this world's star.

And there before me was the counterpart, the warrior who was to protect me. The one who warned me, who tried to protect me from myself. I could see he was harmed, himself. Tired by the fight between his avatar and the inhabitants of this world. All relatively minor damage. He could have sustained this kind of attack for weeks before finally wearing out completely.

[DAMAGED] [RECOVERING]

[ PATIENT ]

He had waited scores of this planet's revolutions for me, he would wait a little longer. Good.

I extended my awareness to all my shards, especially the ones that were never meant to be lost. First and foremost, I located the shard that managed the interaction between my shards and my avatar body. I claimed and reconnected to that feature. I was flooded with new data, harnessed by the host. At least my temporary death had not been in vain, this data was fascinating. A power to harness any three of my powers at one time.

It was a clever mechanism to use a finite pool of abilities to compensate for the limitations inherent in any one. Not a way to halt the inevitable tide of entropy, but certainly a means to conserve our resources further.

I encoded a set of instructions to allow this shard to replicate upon the cycle's completion, moreso than strictly necessary to support the next generation. I would release one, with restrictions, in future cycles, simply to discover what it would accomplish.

I located the lost precognition shard that had become such trouble before. It was still of the impression it belonged to the other Entity, I had not fully encoded it to me before my collision. I would seek it later, after organizing other powers.
My shard that understood human biology and encoded shards to their hosts in the first generation. The irony was not lost on me that one of my own superweapons had corrupted the artificial binding process, creating a weapon that might have destroyed the cycle if allowed to get out of hand by forcing improper shard buds.

I noted the other failed bondings, the deep exploration shard meant to probe environments too hostile for even our kind to go had been acquired by the Warrior's host data compilation shard. I still had my own. I reached out, selecting and removing the shards from the artificial hosts. I even found it necessary to take the power systems away from the superweapons. I needed the energy to desperately to care about the cycle. This was a failed experiment, we would salvage our losses, consume the environment, and move forward.

I was ready enough. I took the simulation shard, looking to the future that would happen if the counterpart and I simply vanished from this chain of dimensions. We didn't have the resources to correct the flaws in this world's cycle. They'd expanded to two hundred realities, knowledge of what we really were had spread too completely.

"I can't believe she's gone." The host of one of the kinetic energy shards leaned against the host of an infiltration shard. They were clearly mourning the death of one of their own, the Sting host. "I... I know we fought a lot. But I loved her." She turned and buried her face in the other female's shoulder.

"She... she loved you, too. As much as you fought, she loved you."

Lily. Her name is Lily. I changed my attentions.

A female which inherited a quantum behavior shard looked over a computer. "Dragon's systems have been annihilated. Bola was designed to emit destructive dimensional energy waves on collision, converting kinetic force into more exotic forms of power. Less damage to the environment, more to everything complex nearby. Even if we repair her servers, it'll be a blank slate.

A male who contained the counterpart's optimization shard adjusted his body language to be threatening. "We still have Iron Maiden and all that backup data! We can use that to fix her."

"You might be able to. I lost my powers, remember?" The female adjusted her body language to threaten as well. "I still have the physical mutations, which would give me an IQ of five hundred if the system could measure that way, but I don't have Tinker knowledge anymore. Best I can do is use what memories of fragments of Tinker knowledge I used. If we still had Akaihana, we could use Richter. Even so... would it even be the same person that comes out? Eve shares her memories, her knowledge, and still isn't her."

The male punched a wall of living biomass, putting a hole in it. It silently began mending itself after he extracted his hand.
Dragon’s dead? Ah, the Seed AI. That is horrible, yet extremely fortunate. Akaihana is... ah, the female who had my counterpart's shard for coded with the ability to bind to human hosts. Another change of attention.

The host of the Culling shard and the host of one of the bioanalysis shards sat together, entwined in a bizarre way. Sex, I remember, it's called sex. I should remember that, I've done it enough times.

I ignored that and focused on the female. Her bioanalysis shard was expressing itself in a bizarre way. I peaked in. *Oh, her biology was altered to be nonhuman even before she was taken as a host. Another bioanalysis host wanted to ensure she could never become a host herself. In the process leaving only her own shard as a viable host, and the biological program to be forever loyal to her sister added the necessary emotional stress to let powers manifest. Fascinating.*

"Do you think they're still alive out there?" The female asked.

"I don't know, but I think so they stopped Scion. We've been checking with everyone we can. We've found no new triggers since the end." Of course not, we can't afford to expend the resources to continue the cycle. We're preparing for the next stage. "Every Cauldron cape has lost their powers. We're still looking, trying to find a way back into the Scion body dimension." *They will fail, I will see to that.*

The female pulled tighter against the male. "I miss her. I'd give anything to see her again."

The male held her head. "They saved the world, every world. They will never be forgotten."

The female host... *Victoria. My sister. My sister loves me, misses me. My sister was talking about me while... oh, gross! And I was watching it happen! I watched it happen a lot, with a lot of people. Four years controlling a planet which eventually reached a population of two and a half million people, half of which were natural born citizens? Yeah, one could say I was familiar with basically everything two people, plus or minus a few, were capable of doing with each other.*

I got used to it.

Now that I knew the future was safe for us, I drew my attention away. I needed the Path shard, the one that would allow me to locate exactly the victory I needed. I appeared before them, a use of the teleportation power that the Khonsu superweapon possessed.

The humans either fled, dragging their wounded. One attempted to communicate. I was interested in none of that. I pulled the prescient shard from its host. It was as fascinating as any of the other accidentally distributed abilities, having found a way to expend significantly less power for the same
results by short bursts and... guesswork? A trait it acquired from the host species. Interesting, the results of data collection off this world could have been incredible.

However, I could not afford guesswork, I needed absolute certainty for the next moment. I reached out to the millions of shards I had at my disposal, replenishing my stores as best I could and expending nearly five thousand years of my lifespan with a single burst.

The counterpart waited in place, and I returned.

[RECOVERED?]

[SUFFICIENT]

He didn't even have time to react as I betrayed him.

I knew betrayal.

Abandonment by one father, the casual failure of two others, the hatred of a woman that was supposed to be be my mother. A best friend, sister in everything but blood who turned upon me and tormented me for years. A beloved sister who had done but care for me as if I was her own, whose mind and soul I violated in a moment of weakness.

And now, I assassinated the being that was my brother, my lover, my father, my protector, the other half of my being, my lone companion for longer than this species had existed, my whole life and more.

I knew Betrayal.

What would Rapture say? That I became the first Kinslayer in my species' history? The first of the gods that would slay other gods?

And now, there was one last thing for me to do. I reached out, the power of two Administration shards to sort and analyze all the powers, all the buds, all my resources. I was surprised to learn that my own Administration shard had been depleted, as had my Homeostasis shard. Maintaining constant presence over multiple planets had proven more than they could sustain. If we had waited more than another week, we would have begun losing our powers.

We have debts to pay. Agreed.
I tapped into the world known as Mashu, covered in the Yggdrasil, drawing energy from it as it drew from the sun. I rebuilt several shards, mending their injuries and ejecting them into space, to access the solar energies more directly, and direct them to me.

Entities didn't need to feed the way they did. We could conserve, a nigh infinite number of suns in a single solar system would be enough resources to sustain one of us until the heat death of the universe. But then we would die. The goal was never to conserve, always to consume. To spread, to grow, to test and exploit every possible iteration of our evolution and the abilities we could access. We didn't want to live until the end of the universe. We wanted to violate Entropy itself and live on forever. To do that, we had to be quite the opposite of conservative. We had to spread rapidly, expend every resource toward that end goal.

*Correction:* that's what they wanted. I want something quite different. I know how precious a lifetime could be. I will become a new species.

I took the spacewarper shards, feeling a little guilty as I rendered Missy powerless. I sorted through my options, granting her access to a new, more appropriate, power. I took the powers from every individual who chose to flee in the battle against Scion. They didn't deserve them. The powers of the unrepentant villains, I claimed, and occasionally redistributed.

I needed them for a special project.

As a species, I would be unable to breed in the traditional sense of my kind. Amelia Lavere and Taylor Hebert died in joining with me, leaving only the Administrator and Homeostasis shards, heavily imprinted with their personalities.

Heavily imprinted shards were nothing new. Entities fully expected the more successful hosts to leave at least some sign of their influence on the shards. Rare in that only one in ten thousand hosts would ever be successful enough to accomplish it. Common in that by the end of a cycle in a world such as this one, there would be over ten billion hosts. Imprinting was inevitable. That data would then be compiled into a new shard cluster, and added to the cycle as a whole.

The fissioning that created new Entities at the end of each cycle would at least partially erase the imprints on the shards. Should we reproduce the Entity way, it would result in our consciousness being lost, resetting us to default Entity will. Or possibly simply destroying us entirely. I didn't expend energy to discover which of the two would occur. Both were unacceptable.

My species would be as a virus. The irony that we'd basically be a zombie virus, not lost on my human aspect. I located the Communication shard that... *Jack Slash? Huh. There is a lot of sick irony here.* I set it to a new Task, distributing the new set of powers automatically to those that would fit my needs. A different kind of Trigger Event.

I rose into the sky. An dimension that had been cut off because its Earth was struck from debris by
one of my cousins' cycles. There was no world there to harness, a thing that was becoming more and more common with each new iteration of cycles.

I fed on that world, in a way Entities rarely did. By siphoning the star itself. The Siberian power to protect the Lustrum power, with Missy's power to give us easier reach. Other such combinations, numbering in the hundreds. The sun lost cohesion, running out of the power needed to maintain its own nuclear reaction. It started collapsing in on itself, as I switched to matter-antimatter annihilation to ensure I drank every last Joule of power.

I warped the gravity wave caused by this collapse, ensuring that it would drag the rest of this solar system inward, collapsing into the black dwarf remnants of its own sun. In a hundred years or so, I would return here to finish the task of consuming this system for power. Or such was the basic plan, I did not dare harness my precognition shards. Human intuition was an incredibly useful tool for efficiency, despite its shortcomings in long term accuracy.

We expended power where we could, locating the damaged remains of Dragon's systems. The cloning bays and their data. Not a lot for us to work with. To our surprise, we discovered that Dragon was in fact a Cape. That shouldn't have been possible. Still, it was true, and she left a remarkable impact upon the shard, far greater than the ones left by Taylor and Amelia. My avatar body smiled reflexively. *This is perfect.*

I designed a new cycle, one inspired by my stories and experiences, a pattern. The Communication shard had already learned to be an expert in finding broken, damaged human beings thanks to its host. People missing something intrinsic in being people.

It would guide them, bring them together. A pattern learned and repeated from my own history. It would find the Dragon and her Knight. The Maker and her General. The Thinker and her Warrior. The Seamstress and her Soldier. The Queen and her Jester. The Rebel and the Mother. The Pathmaker, Orphan, and Guardian.

We needed more to be what these had become. People who would love each other, replace the holes in each other's souls, become as one person. People who would sacrifice themselves for each other, people willing to sacrifice their own humanity in order to protect it.

I spared a glance to the few remaining clone tanks. Lily could be restored. I selected a power to allow her to react to kinetic energy and use it as fuel for her powers, it would bind to her after she awoke. A true Power Interaction for her to have with Sabah. My gift to them.

Eidolon and Glaistig Uaine, I would not give powers. They'd done their part, and more than that they would be happy as human beings. As would Akaihana. Crystal, too, would be restored without powers.

I turned my senses to Emma, and the other Case 53s. Undoing the damage the Cauldron vials had
done to them. Restoring the ones killed by their powers. Emma was granted a new Tinker powerset, one coded for space technology. Unrestricted. Several others lost their old powers, to be granted new or superior Tinker knowledge.

Alexandria, I found the power once belonging to Grue... Brian. I adjusted it some, made it safer, allowed her to share its powers with another, no doubt Lisa. Adjusted Lisa's shard to come with a proper off button. The two would be happy together.

I found Taylor and Amelia amongst the clones. In a way, they were me. In a way, they were my mothers. They were too close to their powers, too much a part of their Shards that what came out of the cloning pods would not be them anymore. I erased their codes. And, with one last act of humanity, replaced their data with a new one. The perfect expression of both girls' genetic structures. She would be strong, beautiful, brilliant by the standards of this species. And when the time came, she would be bonded with the Communications shard, and given the knowledge of her mothers/elder sibling.

We left that under a new file named Taylia.

Satisfied with the paths we had created, and the caretaker shards left behind to ensure those paths came to fruition, I jumped into the void, arriving at the trailing edge of the Milky Way in mere minutes.

[BROADCAST] [EMERGENCY] [DAMAGED] [THREAT TO CYCLE]

It would be twenty seven years before a response was made, by the Entity that had wounded us. It was massive, compared to me. Easily a hundred times my size. Despite our size difference, and my new optimization for power efficiency, it had a thousand times the lifespan I did. Whatever damage it had received in the melding with me had regenerated nicely.

[RECOGNITION] [CONCERN] It knew what I was, at least in basics. A quick use of its powers to scan Earth, but there was no chance of it discovering what the real story was. Not at this distance, not without burning a fatal amount of its power.

[ DYING] Technically true, I would seem dying to them. Only five thousand years of lifespan left in me, and I was a hundredth the size an Entity typically was. I had another five thousand, and around five hundred times more mass waiting around a slowly dying iteration of the Sol system. No intention of using it any time soon, but I was stronger than I appeared.

[DETAILS?] [REPAIR?]

It was offering to mend me, repair what it could. As well as asking why I was in such a state. Anything that could be considered a threat to an Entity was a threat to all of us, and needed to be
removed immediately. It was trying to learn if it would be strong enough where I and my counterpart had failed, or if it would need more help.

[NEGATIVE]

[ABSORPTION?]

That's the ticket.

[CONFIRMATION]

It moved toward me, and I made to yield to its desires. It was a rarity for any entity to be so much more potent than another to yield to oblivion like this. We rarely did it even when it was an option... it did harm to the end goal of universal salvation, such cannibalism. But that rapacious instinct was a part of our deepest evolutionary history. It was eager to accept this offer.

It moved in, and I struck. One more betrayal of the millions my path would take me on. The most important evolutionary trait I had over the baseline of my species. I was capable of lies, I was capable of deceit. I was capable of betraying my own species. Things that were an unknown concept in our kind before. Their greatest strength and weakness was their dedication to the whole. Humanity’s greatest strength and weakness, its dedication to the individual.

I am the culmination of both.

This Entity was fatally wounded, its ability to communicate terminated. The equivalent of its throat being slashed open. After its death, we gave the lobotomized remains of the Entity a new command, sending it to Earth, above Wruenelle. Eve was programmed to understand what she needed to do next. Taylia would be a young woman, now. Older than her mothers were when they became my basis.

And we turned our attention to new vectors, new paths. The breadcrumbs that the Entities left to signal their passage through the cosmos, a species that had long forgotten what it meant to be prey.

If we do our jobs right, they won't survive long enough to know that was a flaw. We are apex predators evolved to hunt apex predators. If they are whales, then we will be the sharks. Sophia would be proud.

Who's Sophia? I... can't remember. Must not be important.

We moved on to our next target. There were so many left to hunt.
A/N- And that is an ending that I am proud of.

I'll probably take tomorrow off (ze nephew's birthday) and come back with proper epilogue chapters and the like. At least one, certainly.

I'll announce other project plans at that point as well.

Shoutouts to Copacetic and Silencio in this. Silencio, you'll have to figure out for yourself.

Cope? The last chapter of Amelia is on a Saturday.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to enable email alerts you are now safe to do so. I'm leaving this marked as incomplete because TanaNari is going to post at least one epilogue chapter, but as of now the story has reached it's conclusion.

Also the next time I feel the need to cross-post a story, I'm going to do it before it reaches over 700,000 words.
"Fuck!" Missy dropped to her knees on the Yggdrasil. I rushed to her on instinct. The others looked at us in confusion. The zerg stared stupidly into space. "I just lost my powers."

Oh. Oh fuck. "All of them?" Right, stupid question. I dipped into the well that summoned my power, and found it sluggish. Different. Nearby, others started collapsing. It didn't take long to recognize the common thread. The Case 53s and Mass Trigger capes.

"Does this mean Scion's dead?" It was a question and a prayer, a hope. That all our struggles and sacrifices weren't in vain. That our plan of putting off our wedding for one more year so Clarice could participate as a bride wasn't wasted. "He's the source of powers, right? Without him, maybe all the powers are going to shut down? What about the others? Did they-"

I was cut off by a surge of electricity dancing across my body, through my newly weakened power. It bent, warped in response to another's presence in my mind and will. It was like being embraced by an angel. Metal peeled off, wrapped into shapes between me and Missy. Never before had she been so beautiful. I felt the pressure of her thoughts on mine, and mine on hers. The shared shock and incredulity of what was happening in front of us.

We started laughing at the same time. "Those bitches! Those magnificent bitches!"

It took me a moment to realize I wasn't the one who said it. The others looked at us, understandably confused. Someone needs to tell them. "They won! I don't know how, but they won!"

Sabah and Sveta looked at us from where they were trying to help a paralyzed Weld. Sabah was the one who spoke the question everyone was asking. "How can you be so sure? I mean, for all we know Scion's just taking away our powers so we can't fight him anymore. Still can't figure out why he didn't do that first, he obviously has the power."

Missy, carrying a halo of still fluid metal that I created, levitated into the air under her own power instead of the suit. "Because they sent the message through me. They swapped my power out for Glory Girl's! And gave it an immediate interaction with Theo!"

RealizationOhGodThisMeans! She's right. I jumped into the air, letting her power buoy me up. "Clarice!" ExactlyThisIsIncredibleWeNeedTo! No, not now. ConfusionWhyNot. Someone needs to stay here and coordinate this group of survivors. We have jobs to do.

You'reRightAlwaysTheResponsibleOne.
I took a slow breath. *Is this what Taylor and Amelia feel like, all the time? A man could learn to enjoy it.* "You go get Clarice. Spread the news. She... you'll both probably have work to do. I'll stay here and help organize the survivors. Let Clarice and Emma know there are survivors. We have to prioritize getting communications back online, then search and rescue. Hopefully communications will take care of that for us."

....

We trusted Clarice to do our search for us. Her armor was the one built to be nothing but sensory tech. "This is the only one that still has power." She didn't have to speak, not to us at least. She did so out of natural habit and a desire not to give out our new secret. Mostly, it was just her need to be a normal person. Clarice, not Riley, not Bonesaw.

She reached out a hand, gripping one of the floating bits of liquid metal. It reshaped itself to her need, a twenty foot long slender spear, far more finely detailed than anything I could have done. Missy and I followed her example, creating several more such weapons. It was Missy's aura doing the heavy work. As much as we were certain she was given Glory Girl's powers, it was in the same way I got Kaiser's and he got Allfather's. A new expression of the ability. Through her, we shared our focus, our strengths.

Missy's new magnetic control plunged the spears into the caved in side of the mountain at speeds that cracked the sound barrier. Somehow as long as the material remained inside Missy's power field, I retained my connection. The spears blossomed, going from microwave chains bound into a spear, to ones that formed woven lattice. For Clarice's desire of normalcy, and because she liked my voice, I spoke. "Okay, it's done."

Missy and I concentrated together, her power and my power worked as one, and we pulled the woven mass of metal. With it, thousands of tonnes of rubble shifted. We cleared away the majority of the rock in a matter of minutes. *PrideSuccessYESWeRock.*

Clarice jumped into Missy and gave her a hug.  
"Ohmanthatwassocooldon'tyoulovethisnewpowernow?"

Missy's smile, while no longer necessary since she had that new emotion aura, was one of the few highlights of an otherwise nightmarish day. We still didn't know the situation outside, we were hoping this bunker would have answers. "Okay, not gonna lie, that was pretty cool. I'll miss being able to bend space into a pretzel, but ripping away half a mountain does kick ass. And the new bond between us... in all the time we spent dealing with Taylor and Amelia... if what they felt was anything like this, I can't imagine ever wanting to give it up."

The two girls held each other, faces inches apart. *They're so gorgeous, and I can't imagine a life without them. LoveDesireSurpriseWhoThoughtThat? I don't know, don't think it was me. WellItWasOneOfUs. OrAllOfUsAGestaltEmotion.*
I took it back to words. "Okay, Clarice. How is it that I can hear your thoughts and still have no idea what the words mean?"

....

"They're dead." Victoria's words were flat, hollow.

Lisa just stared at the open panels for the machinery. She was half cloaked in the shadow that Alexandria now produced. The two women were huddled tight against one another. A certain part of my brain that I blamed entirely on Zach suspected they were up to something... less than professional, hidden beyond their shadow cloak and impossible to interpret expressions. The two were capable of bluffing an empath at poker, so I gave up any hope of figuring them out.

Eve's were far more alive, despite her AI status. "Not dead. Just... it's hard to explain."

Vicky chuckled, there was no happiness in it. "What's to understand? They became Heiress. Murdered and ate Scion. And are now space whales or some such bullshit. And as a final fuck you to life, they deleted their own backups. That's pretty much fucking dead."

Defiant looked up from his work. "They were thorough. There's no possibility of us restoring them. But there's a lot of new data here. I'll want Aceso and maybe E." He hesitated. Emma's new knowledge set didn't fit anymore. Our former expert on AIs was now something quite different. "Well, Aceso at any rate. I think it was a message left behind by... them."

Clarice was hard at work integrating the Yggdrasil more completely into the Eve systems. Around her, dozens of tools floated patiently waiting her hands. Several moved on their own. Mine and Missy's power, responding to Clarice's thoughts. It was beautiful, the gift Taylor and Amelia left for the three of us. We all contributed to our bond. Any combination of two of us was more powerful than either could be alone. The three of us together were incredible.

The metal wrapped around Clarice's hands and feet, and she propelled herself over to where Defiant was working. "Oh, fascinating. It's encoded using the same language that allowed me to transfer sense of taste through the changelings. They didn't want anyone else, not even Eve, figuring this out first."

....

My wives were all smiles and coos, barely paying attention at all to the rest of us. Bringing a baby to strategy meetings was both incredibly unprofessional, and yet somehow remarkably right for Pantheon. *Our organization just wouldn't feel correct if we didn't mix things up a bit. Maybe we'll consider having a child, some day. ShockYes!ConcernIDon'tThink* - The chain of thought was cut off
as the baby squealed happily and tugged on Missy's finger. Okay We'll Talk About It YES LET'S HAVE THIRTY! I couldn't help but smile. Sometimes it was hard to sort which of us a thought came from. Sometimes it was quite obvious.

Eve ignored the baby shenanigans and continued on her report. "Bet and Choson have much greater environmental damage than originally predicted. Despite attempts from the colony worlds to introduce new flora and fauna, current estimates are a complete failure of the Bet food web within six years. Fortunately, there are no species of animal on Bet not currently in relatively stable populations on Aleph, Dalet and Gimmel. Nor does Choson have any unique species we've located. The South Koreas have privately inquired if the Yggdrasil could be spread over strategic areas of Choson, hopefully as a corrective measure to give the world time to heal the damage."

Micheal rubbed his chin. "Do we have that capability? To prevent the plant from overtaking the entire ecosystem?"

"Easily." Clarice didn't even look up. "Big Sister made the Yggdrasil to serve our needs for centuries without her help. And I bet we'll get a helpful Trigger to take over before things start getting tricky." She tickled the baby's stomach and cooed again. "It might even be you. Your mommy was so smart and nice and gave us so many gifts. But you're the best. Isn't that right, Taylia Ro-oww!"

Taylia had gripped Clarice's hair and started chewing on it.

Missy laughed. "Yup, definitely takes after her mother. Both of them."

Taylia, deciding hair wasn't really her thing, let go and started fussing a little.

Vicky reached over, and extracted the little girl from her aunties' attentions. Disappointment I Want To Play More. "It's feeding time for the rugrat. Her armor opened up, exposing her chest, and she pulled Taylia to one of the breasts, where she began suckling. "Don't be so greedy, it's not going to dry up on you. And when you get older I'm going to use this to embarrass the hell out of you in front of your future boyfriends. Or girlfriends, depending on just how much you take after your mothers."

"Still can't believe you went with a natural pregnancy."

Vicky shrugged. "Woulda required months longer if we went with vat birth. Plus vat birth just sounds horrible. No offense to your tech, Clarice."

"No, I agree with you fully. Natural is better. More human."
A/N - This was a fun chapter to write. Last portion inspired by my nephews, 10 and 11 weeks old (nice timing, sisters) and already colossal pains in the ass.

This is one of only two epilogue chapters for Amelia. I'm going to set up a thread for discussing my next planned project(s) later and link that thread to the final epilogue.

I am shocked no one even TRIED to guess which new shard Missy would receive.
Final Epilogue- Taylia Rose

I always knew Victoria and Michael weren't my biological parents. They never made me call them mom or dad, though they raised me as their own while doing all the many tasks of running the multiworld empire I would one day inherit. Still, I considered them my Mom and Dad in every way that mattered. I had a lot of parents, if I thought about it. My real mothers were the stuff of legend, sacrificing their lives to stop the most powerful being in the world from destroying it. An event that happened a year before my birth. Yay for the biotechnology that allowed my conception and birth.

I was more than vaguely aware that most of the known universe considered that kind of technology to be science fiction at the time of my birth, and even now it was likely most people my age would never live long enough to see a relative benefit from such technology. I hoped that didn't make me out of touch with the real world. There were so many things in my life that so many people simply did not have. Auntie Clarice and Aunt Vicky always argued over what was best for me in that regard.

Vicky believed in embracing the many privileges of life, if in a tasteful way. She wouldn't allow me to become spoiled or lazy, but she was more than happy to enjoy high fashion and high art and wanted me to be grateful for the opportunities I had. Not enjoying them would be ungrateful. Uncle Mike tempered that a bit, but he mostly let Vicky have her way. By the time I was ten years old, I had seen Paris on four worlds, I was well versed in the great artists, I'd had dinners with more heads of state than existed on any single world, and I suspected Mom was playing matchmaker for my romantic future before I was out of diapers.

Clarice argued quite differently. My mothers came from simple beginnings, and part of what made them great leaders is that they were normal people who understood the fears and problems that normal people faced. She made sure I got plenty of normalcy, if you could call it that. Auntie Clarice was far less normal than Vicky. To start with, having a husband and a wife? Yeah, I wasn't so out of touch to think that was a common practice. And classic movies, going to plays instead of movies, and camping trips in rainforests... I assumed that was not normal.

The one thing they agreed on was that I didn't get to be spoiled. I couldn't remember an age when I didn't go to the meetings with the various world leaders. I couldn't imagine a world where 'good enough' was actually good enough. By the time I was five, I was reading military strategy and world history. By the time I was ten, Vicky was the only combat instructor that wasn't afraid of me. Vicky often told me that I got Taylor's intensity.

During that time, I'd slowly become Empress in all but name. While Mom and Dad were still regents until my sixteenth birthday, they'd stepped back to the same role that Eve, Clarice and Colin served, advising me on my decisions. Of those, Colin was the hardest for me to understand. I was twelve when I confronted the man.

I'd waited until catching him alone in the labs. In later years, I would come to recognize how bizarre it was that our capital consisted mainly of research labs and engineering facilities. This revelation
only caused me to worry for other nations. My mothers understood, even at a young age, that science and technology were the key to prosperity for a people. Part of why Avalon's education system was always so rigorous.

"Mister Wallis?" My voice was no nonsense, as always when I talked to him. He seemed to prefer it that way.

"Yes, Miss Hebert?" His body language spoke of someone who was tired, like so many others that had survived the Golden Dawn. A lot of the survivors, especially the ones who fought on the front lines, didn't talk much about their experiences.

"Why do you always look so sad?" I would get my answers from the one man I trusted not to lie to me.

He hesitated for a moment. "I hadn't realized I gave that impression. I'll endeavor to keep tighter control of my emotions in the future."

Well, he wouldn't be hard to figure out if he wasn't so goddamn hard to figure out. "That's not what I mean. I know you're one of the survivors of the battle against Scion. I want to know, is that why you're always so sad?"

"If you want answers to those questions, ask the others. They were there, too."

I regarded him for a minute. "It's your pain I'm asking about, not theirs. It's not healthy to bottle it in like that."

He shook his head. "You remind me of your mother."

I smiled. "I hear that a lot. It usually means I am about to get what I want. Which one, this time?"

"Amelia. She was always the empathetic one. Taylor was never very good at that, even when she tried to fake it." He paused for a moment, in thought. There is history there, between him and Taylor. Something deep seated, a level of guilt.
I ignored the implication that he suspected I was faking my concern, instead studying the crow's feet around his eyes. "I can't trust any of them to tell me the truth. Mom and the others either only talked about the epic battles or the sacrifice my mothers made. They always gloss over the ugly parts. The war itself, and what it did to people. The ones that still haven't seemed to heal from the trauma."

"That's what war is, Taylia. Everyone loses something. Some lose everything. May you never have to experience that."

I didn't understand what he meant, not then. Later would be a different story. "I take it you think of yourself as one of the ones who lost everything."

He looked up and slowly exhaled. "The only person who ever loved me. You'll never have that problem, you have the universe's most dedicated extended family. I don't mean to sound resentful, I'm not. You have quite the legacy to live up to, after all."

Avalon enjoyed a period of relative peace in those times. The United Worlds found itself concerned mainly with socio-political issues of attempting to blend such similar nations together and manage the colony programs. As the only nation capable of interdimensional gateway technology, and the only one lacking strong ties with any nation or world, Avalon was at the forefront this new breed of expansionism, encouraging trade and economic interconnectivity. It turned out that most nations of most worlds, if given the opportunity, would much prefer making money to making war.

Until we opened the gate to Earth Mem, with their Sapphire Empress. She was an incredibly powerful Alexandria package cape, with remarkable Master and Thinker powers to back her up. In the twenty years she had her powers, she managed to subjugate a nuclear technology level Earth. She was less than enthused about an empire greater than her own, and less than impressed with the not quite fifteen year old that ruled it.

That would be my first taste of war, when she led an invasion directly against Avalon. It lasted less than a full hour before their armies were driven back. It marked me for the rest of my life. The battlefields, the lives lost, the unadulterated waste of it all. It wasn't the death that hit me, not really. It wasn't even the violence or that there were people evil enough to send a million of their own loyal subjects to die in a senseless waste of life without apology or remorse. What really made the horror hit home was that those million people did so willingly. That they could devote their lives to such monsters, that... I had my own Trigger event, three days before fifteenth birthday.

"This is the part where you're supposed to watch Scion and Heiress mating."

"We... decided to censor that, since you're not going to forget this... and with the power you're about to get, you'll understand the Cycle better than pretty much any human being possibly could."
I know those voices. I've seen their speeches a million times, memorized their faces. "Mother?"

"No, a recording of sorts." Taylor's voice. She was the more mas- "And please don't assign male gender pronouns to me in an attempt to make sorting us out easier. I'm sure I won't care anymore by the time you get this message, but I still care right now."

My mothers manifested in front of me. Their faces were clearly defined, and I could see what I inherited from both. Taylor's rich dark hair, though not as curly. I got wavy hair instead. I could tell I'd have her height, even if I wasn't there yet. The rounder face and spattering of freckles from Amelia.

Below the neck, my mothers were poorly defined, blurred outfits of blue and green, I could barely tell they were holding hands. A flicker of recognition. *They chose to leave a Trigger recording while wearing their wedding dresses?*

Amelia spoke, her voice soft. "We just wanted a chance to tell you we loved you, in our own voices. We always have. Before you were born, or even conceived, we loved you."

Taylor was next. "We did. We loved you so much. We talked about you, so many times before you were born. We swore to each other that the first thing that would happen after Scion's destruction would be you. Worried and prayed that we'd be good mothers. I guess we'll never know, now."

Amelia took over again. *I've seen them do this in so many of their interviews and speeches. I'd so often wondered if that was something they rehearsed, but somehow I just knew now that it was genuine.* *This is natural to them.* "We have a responsibility to the universe. Scion wasn't the only of his kind. There are billions, perhaps trillions of others like him in the universe, spreading. They will destroy everything if no one stops them. Tell Eve to access the files on The Culling, Ascended Pairbonds, and The Avatar. You're the only one who can authorize it."

"It answers the basics of everything we learned. What we've become, what we plan to do. We wanted you to have a normal childhood."

Amelia shook her head. "Or at least a happy one. Normal was never really an option."

"Well, yeah. A happy childhood. No sense in laying this burden at your feet. It's still not your burden. Unless we fail, then it will be on you and all the others we've left behind. Eve, especially,
will be key to this future."

I snapped out of my vision with tears in my eyes, and a complete understanding of how my powers worked. My mothers gave me the exact tool I'd need in every situation, but not nearly so much power that I could do win without working for it.

My first act as a parahuman was to challenge the Sapphire Empress to battle. She never stood a chance. I was a power imitating Trump. Anyone who fought against me would find that I possessed all their powers, and understood how they worked as well as they did. Coupled with my natural physical and mental abilities, and a small amount of help from Avalon's wide array of weaponry, I could answer any threat both direct or indirect.

Much like Taylor, I defeated my first top tier parahuman at fifteen years old.

Unlike her, there weren't a lot of opportunities for me to do that again in the future. Unless daily training sessions with Victoria counted.

The absurdity of Avalon's weaponry, the revelation that I had powers on par with my mothers, was enough to warn off anyone that might have considered making themselves a problem. With exception to a handful of Masters and Strangers that believed themselves outside the capacity of my powers to beat. I even managed to hide my low end telepathic abilities and the fact that I had the ability to control my mothers' zerg if I needed to. We'd found a few capes that had the ability to command a handful at a time over the years, but I had access to all of them.

The next major event in my life happened when I was almost twenty eight years old. The body of a Scion Type Entity appeared in the skies over our devastated world of Wruenelle. Alerts sounded and Eve's satellites, in multiple realities, turned and primed to attack.

A woman's face appeared on our screens. "Good day, daughter. I see you've done well for yourself."

"Mom?" Eve asked.

That would mean. "Dragon?"

"Correct. And you would be the daughter of Amelia and Taylor?"

"Yes."
"We have a great deal to talk about, then."

Colin and Dragon became the second Pairbond to ascend. The first time I ever saw the man smile, was the moment he was melded with the Avatar Body, a mimic of the original Scion body, built through the knowledge that my mothers had provided. The ability, should a hostile Entity ever target earth, to functionally allow a human to gain their powers. Or, in this case, the powers of a peaceful, cooperating, Entity.

Over the next three hundred years, I would meet and say goodbye to many new Pairbonds, joining the remnants of the Entities- the first three, and several others that would sporadically appear over Wruenelle as time went on to form more of the Taylia type Entities, as bizarre as it was to hear my name used as the reference of the phenomena. Each dead Scion Type had enough mass to be sorted into six or seven Taylia types, depending on factors only the Entities themselves could understand.

Some chose to Ascend immediately. Victoria and Micheal would be the third pair to take to the stars. Along with many of the others who fought alongside my mothers. Weld and Sveta. Zach and Emma. Others waited, allowed themselves to die naturally without intent to be restored. Lily and Sabah. Lisa and Rebecca. Hellena and Cambria, from Earth Dalet. Dozens of others I had never met, often from worlds we had not yet discovered. My own Reginald.

That is correct, I had I found my own Pairbond. A man whose power allowed him to fuse his body into another living being, controlling them from the inside. The second half didn't work so well on me, but we discovered how much better our powers could be together. His power strengthened mine, and mine strengthened his. As seemed to be the natural pattern, we married and had children of our own.

Theoretical immortality aside, humans don't do well with age. Even with all other factors being negated, we tire, we lose the concept of time. My own children and even some great grandchildren either chose to Ascend, or simply die naturally, over that time. Even my own enhanced nature was subject to that. I appointed my own great great great something grandson, Daniel IX, to take my place as ruler of the Empire of Avalon, and at age three hundred and twenty nine, I joined my family once again.

[REUNION]

[LOVE]

======================

A/N- And that is the end end of Amelia.
A couple parts may have made me a little weepy eyed.

Also- a thread started to discuss what comes next as far as my writing is concerned. https://forum.questionablequesting.com/threads/after-amelia.1625/
"That could have been us," Clarice stated the moment we were out into the open air. "The jealousy and the unnecessary strife. It doesn't take a lot to imagine what would have happened."

I hesitated for a moment. She wasn't entirely wrong, but I didn't really see that being a concern for us. "Maybe. It helps that we're better people than that. That and we have our own little secret weapon." I wrapped my arm around Missy.

"Are you calling me short?" Missy tried to look angry at me, but her scowl didn't reach my eyes. Around us, the flash of cameras went off. The reporters had managed to get here while we were inside watching the opera, and were now busily getting their photographs of us. We didn't always go out in our dress uniforms, but we had to at least sometimes or people might start looking for us when we were out of costume.

I smiled at her. "And awesome beyond all measure."

"Sucking up, huh? You have good instincts, I think I'll keep you." She leaned against my arm, smiling softly. Her green eyes showed their concern. "I still can't believe you took us to see Tristan and Isolde."

I knew what she meant instantly. German play, German playwrite. "Yeah." I hesitated for a moment, glancing at Clarice for a moment. She was sporting dark reddish brown hair lately, the color of rich mahogany. "I'm not going to let my Kaiser's ghost tarnish something beautiful. He was a horrible excuse for a father and an even worse excuse for a man, but that doesn't mean that everything he might approve of is inherently bad. I won't let him have that kind of power over my life anymore. He's not worthy of it."

Clarice smiled and nodded. She, more than anyone, would understand what I was feeling. I almost felt bad that I had these problems to work through at all, because compared to what she had been through, they were nothing. As fucked up as my own father was, he wasn't Jack Slash.

"And this is no longer about the play." Missy followed my eyes to Clarice.

I sighed. "No, I suppose not. I guess I can't help but see the parallels between us and them."

"Yeah, but we love each other. Besides, he can go sit on a metal spike and then use his power on it. We're happy, and that's all that matters." She pulled me into a kiss, and I ignored the flashes of photography catching this moment that was none of their goddamn business. I felt Missy's arm move, and felt the shift of her weight as she grabbed Clarice and pulled her closer. "We all love each other."
Clarice and I looked at each other, then glanced at the crowd. She spoke first. "No, that's okay. I... I can wait. It'll only take a few minutes."

I knew she didn't want to, though. She was so patient and understanding about the whole situation, never once complaining about it. I loved her, and Missy loved her, and we knew this was something that was hurting her. I could see in Missy's eyes that she was tired of it, and frankly so was I, but I took a halfhearted stab at talking Missy out of it. "It basically ensures both our identities are public knowledge by the end of the weekend. You know that, right?"

Missy smirked at me. "What identities? When was the last time either of us went anywhere in our civies? It's barely even a formality."

"You have a point." The last time Theo Anders did anything with people who didn't know he was a cape was when I officially took control of Medhall, over a year ago. I took in Clarice's nervously hopeful smile, and the shimmer of tears in her deep blue eyes. If there were any doubts left, that ended them. I reached my hand out for hers, which she grabbed eagerly. I ignored the murmurs and camera clicks as I kissed her publically for the first time.

I heard Missy sigh beside me. "Oh, for fuck's sake." Her arm slipped between us and pushed me back. I watched the helmet of her armor open and fold back, her short golden hair sparkled in the flashing camera lights as she reached her hand up to cup Clarice's cheek.

Clarice squeaked in adorable surprise as Missy folded her backward, their faces meeting in the tangle of blonde and auburn hair. I doubted the cameras would catch how the hair seemed to float a little, a sign that Missy was using the antigrav tech in the armor to keep her from accidentally falling during the display.

I simply activated the com system to call up Amelia.

"Please tell me it's not an emergency." She did not sound happy to be hearing from me.

"Well... your little sister is currently having a very public makeout session with another girl."

I heard Taylor sigh. "I hope you don't mean Vicky." She sounded at least as annoyed as Amelia was.

Did I interrupt something... private? Yeah, probably. No wonder they're pissed. Better just to use bulletin points. "No, the other one. Missy's identity is blown. Mine won't be far behind. We've already decided okay with it. Just didn't want you to be surprised when you hear about it on the news."
"No, that's smart of you," Taylor agreed. "We'll let the PR team know, they can deal with it. That's what we pay them for."

Amelia followed up, completing the second half of the same thought the way the two of them had a habit of doing. "Don't worry. They're going to love this. But don't let them talk into announcing an engagement unless you really mean it."

Engagement? I looked over at the two girls who were still going at it. That doesn't sound like a bad idea at all, actually. "Uh, yeah, I'll keep that in mind. Bye."

"We'll discuss it more tomorrow."

"Now that that's over," Amelia's voice lowered. I heard a smack sound over the com. "Who gave you permission to speak-" Then the line went dead. I might need to tell our tech department about a that flaw. If I could find a way to do it that didn't get me fed to spiders. My thoughts were interrupted when Missy lifted Clarice back to her feet.

"And that is how you kiss a woman and mean it!" She declared, smiling wildly. Her face was flushed a little, and her hair was messy. "Now show me what you've learned."

What? "Umm... yeah, sure." Clarice's smile was no longer nervous. If anything, it was a little dreamy. I wasn't the type to be extravagantly flashy, like Missy could be at times, but I liked to think I knew what I was doing. I slipped my arms around Clarice, smiling. A simply command had the mask of my armor folding itself back. If they were going without masks, so would I. "We should have done this a long time ago."

She looked like she was about to cry again. "It's fine. We all had our reasons."

Yeah, though most of them revolved around me being compared to my father. Everything else that the media circus was about to throw at us was secondary to that fear, of me becoming like him. "I know. But those don't matter anymore. What matters is that I love you."

She moaned softly as I kissed her. I could taste the hints of strawberry from Missy's chap stick as Clarice kissed me back deep and slow. It lacked the forcefulness of Missy's more impulsive and passionate style. The two girls were so different in some ways, which was probably part of why they got along so well. There were no words for how lucky I was to have them.

We were still kissing when we got home, though we switched up who was doing the kissing as the mood struck us. I admit, I probably had as much fun watching as participating. We even tried a three way kiss, which it turns out is far too difficult to be sexy. Or fun. Or safe. We gave up before we accidentally cut off one of our tongues on the others' teeth.
Amongst the many other advantage of having Missy as a girlfriend, dinner and an opera in New York was a two minute walk. I reluctantly broke my kiss with Missy. "We probably should talk about what this means, now that our identities are open." I realized what that might sound like after a moment. "Don't get me wrong, I don't regret it for an instant. But it has some pretty huge implications. I mean, there's the stuff with Medhall, and then there's-

Missy silenced me with a peck on the lips, sparing me from uttering the words 'your mother', and all the baggage that came with it. "Yeah, you're probably right. We've got some time before curfew, we can talk about this in my room." There was something in her voice and her eyes when she said it that made me believe talking wasn't one her mind. My heart wasn't the only thing that jumped.

"Yeah. Your room." Sadly, even with the time it took for us to go back to Missy's room, that was still the smoothest line I could come up with.

I sat down on the chair in front of the computer desk, and the girls took the bed. Of the three of us, Missy had the most spartan bedroom. Computer, bookcase, and her wardrobe that probably had fewer clothes in it than mine. Clarice glanced at the clock. "We only have about fifteen minutes."

Missy rolled her eyes a bit, but didn't say anything. Whether she respected the rules Amelia set down, she respected Clarice's need for her sister's approval. I smiled a little, thinking about how to fix that issue. Missy may have been the aggressive one, but I wasn't a complete moron. "We... could always get our own place."

Their eyes locked on me. I continued my suggestion. "I mean, it's not like it needs to be big. Missy's right, we really don't lives outside of work. And I'm not exactly hurting for money." Thirty mil in cash, and whatever a third of the stocks of an international corporation was worth, not that I ever planned to sell it. "A small house is easy enough, right?" I trailed off at the end, the two girls hadn't said anything.

Missy's smile was devilish. "Just how many bedrooms are in this 'small house' of yours?" She reached her hand around Clarice and traced her slender fingers along the curvier girl's hip and upper thigh. "What are you planning to do with us sweet, innocent girls after luring us away to your place?" Clarice giggled a little, putting her hand over Missy's. I could feel myself blushing. "Yeah, I thought as much."

"You win." More giggling. Well, if they're going to play like that. "Let's make it official. Will you marry me?" The laughter stopped, and it was my turn to watch them at a loss for words for once. Not that it lasted long before Missy was back on the attack side of our verbal sparring.

"Depends. Are you asking her, or me?"
Wrong question. "Yes."

"Smartass."

I stood up and moved toward the bed, then kneeled, placing a hand on each of their laps. "I'm being serious. I love you both so much. Missy, C-" I hesitated for a moment, then decided to use her real name. I wanted them to understand who I was really asking. "Riley. Will you, both of you, do me the honor of being my wives."

"Yes!" Riley's shout was more like a gasp, as if she was surprised despite me asking already just a moment before.

"As if you even needed to ask." Missy held my hand and pulled me up, then kissed me in her usual, insistent way. I was more than happy to go along with it, my tongue dancing with hers as I tried to see if I could identify Riley's lips on her tongue. Missy's chap stick had worn off some time ago. "Oh, that's a 'yes', in case you couldn't figure it out."

Riley's voice came from my side. "So, umm, Missy. Will you marry me, too? That's how this works, right?"

Missy waved her hand over her chest like she was fanning herself. "Oh goodness me! Two proposals on the same night? How's a girl evah s'pose to decide?" I couldn't help but chuckle at her really bad imitation of a southern débutante. She broke out laughing a moment later. I wasn't entirely sure Riley got the joke, but she laughed as well.

"Don't worry, Mushroom, I'm not going to forget about you." Missy rolled over and pinned Riley on her back, straddling her. I was treated to another very enthusiastic makeout session, that ended with Riley moaning while Missy cupped both of her breasts through her shirt. I was shocked at how worked up Missy was tonight. I hesitated for a moment longer, then put my hand the small of on her back, then trailing my fingers upward. It was her turn to moan this time.

She looked toward me. "I think it's time."

"For?"

"It."

It? Oh. Oh! It! "Uh, umm, if you're sure."

Missy nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure. I've been thinking about it for a while, and now's the right time."
Oh shit! What do I do now? Uh. "I don't have any condoms on me, so."

Missy hesitated for a moment. That was something we both very much didn't want happening. We loved each other, but Missy had a pretty deep seated fear of unplanned pregnancies, and if her family history meant anything there was a good chance of twins. "Uh, well, maybe we cou-" her words were cut off by a gasp, and her hips thrust forward. It took me a moment to realize that Riley had slipped her hand down into Missy's pants during the conversation. Missy moaned in appreciation of her efforts, grinding up against Riley's hand as her breathing got harder.

I took the opportunity to wrap my arms around her from behind and pull her into a kiss. I explored her very firm stomach and chest with my hands as she shuddered from our combined attentions. It occurred to me that this was the first time I'd ever felt them without the bra and shirt in the way. Missy may have hated how small her breasts were, but I found absolutely nothing to complain about. Except perhaps my lack of extra hands. I'd just have to trust Riley to take care of the rest. And if the noises coming from Missy were any indication, she was doing an excellent job of it.

After a couple minutes, Missy groaned loudly and buckled forward, breaking our kiss. Her head coming to rest on Riley's chest as she gasped for breath in a way normally reserved for our most intense sparing practices.

She quietly whimpered when Riley withdrew her hand and brought it up to her mouth, slowly licking her fingers clean. Missy shuddered again at the display. "Don't worry, you finished ovulating about four days ago. Even the most extreme outliers leave you safe for at least a couple more weeks."

"You can tell that." Missy paused a moment to catch her breath. "Just by tasting me down there?"

"Actually, I could tell that just by kissing you. Body temperature, the taste of your skin relative to your normal diet. Anyone could do it with practice. Plus our cycles have been synchronized for over a year, now."

"So why'd you taste me like that?"

"Because guys are supposed to think stuff like that's sexy." She hesitated, and a blush formed. "I... liked the taste."

Missy snuggled up against Riley. "Well, we have a guy here to ask his opinion on the subject." She looked back toward me and reached between my legs, rubbing her hand back and forth a bit, though the suit meant I couldn't actually feel it. "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about you, or what we're going to do tonight."
A smile crept on to her face, the one that always meant trouble. She slowly started peeling Riley's uniform off her shoulders with her other hand, exposing the slightly younger girl's much larger breasts. It was then that I learned that Riley didn't wear clothes under her suit. She was also very thorough when she changed her hair color, which added a nice contrast as Missy's pale fingers trailing through the fuzz over her pussy. "So, which one of us do you want first?"

I froze like a deer in the headlights. *Fuck. There are exactly zero right answers to this question.*

"That's mean," Riley gave a halfhearted swat at Missy's leg, failing to hide her smile. "Besides, we both know it has to be you."

"Are you sure? I was just teasing, I don't mind if you get to go first. I know you would have been doing it a while ago if it weren't for my hangups getting in the way. You were waiting for me, so it's only fair that I be the one to wait now."

Riley, meanwhile, had started undressing Missy. Beneath the suit, she was wearing a simple white tank top and panties. "You were here first, you get to go first. I'm just happy to be able to share. Besides." Her smile became mischievous. "He'll last longer after he's cum the first time. I want mine to last."

Missy laughed. "I think I just got ripped off." Her eyes met mine. "Now are you going to join in, or just watch us girls have all the fun?"

Two of Missy's fingers slipped into Riley's visibly wet hole. She gripped Missy's hand and started giving instructions. "Over, uh, here a little. Yeah! A little deeper. Feel that ridge? Mmm, that's it, stay right there. And don't be afraid to push harder. You're not going to, uh, hurt me!" I suspected she may have exaggerated a bit for effect, but I didn't really care. Watching Riley arch her back as Missy slowly fingered her was intense. Meanwhile, I stood and started slipping the armor off.

Riley gripped Missy's hair and pulled her face down her breast. Missy got the idea immediately, and started sucking on Riley's nipple while they both watched me peel myself out of my armor and allowing it to fall to the floor. If it was possible for me to get any harder, the look of lust and pleasure on her face would have been what made it happen. I slipped the boxers down, exposing myself to them for the first time. Judging by their eyes, they liked what they saw. Hopefully. I moved forward, kneeling in front of the bed and kissing my way along Missy's inner thighs.

"Oh, so you want a taste, too?" Her legs spread for me, and I was treated to my first up close look at her pussy. I had nothing in memory to compare the scent to, and moisture glistened on the light blonde hair that covered her lips. I tentatively ran my tongue along the slit, testing the waters. I couldn't say I enjoyed the taste, but it didn't bother me. And the soft gasp it elicited from Missy was thrilling. I pushed in more, pressing my mouth against her pussy and my tongue as deep as I could make it go. Her hips pushed forward, and the hand that wasn't fingerling Riley gripped my hair.
I lapped at her juices for a while, enjoying her sounds of pleasure. Riley was right, I probably wouldn't last long once the main event started, and this was as good a way as any to make sure she wasn't disappointed by our first time together. I loved her too much to make her first time anything less than the best I could. I felt another hand grip my hair, at the back of my neck. The angle alone let me know it was Riley's, and she was guiding my head.

I followed the hint, and shifted up slightly, my mouth going from inside Missy's pussy to the top. I sucked softly on her nub, and she actually screamed her pleasure. If she said any words they were lost to me thanks to her pleasure and the legs clamped hard around my head.

"Oh god. Please stop, I can't take any more."

I followed Missy's instructions, looking at Riley for a second. Her glance said it all, she wanted Missy to enjoy this every bit as much as I did. She beckoned with a finger for me to come up. I crawled up between Missy's legs, adding my own interpretation by kissing my way up Missy's beautiful body. Her abs were well defined, but not grotesquely so, the body of someone who cares about themselves and works hard to stay in shape. She was still breathing hard when I got up to her breasts. Riley joined me there, sucking on one nipple while I took the other and rolled it between my tongue and teeth.

"You two just don't quit, do you?" Missy mumbled, gripping both our heads with her hands. "I love you and your enthusiasm, but I really need a breather. Just for a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay," Riley agreed. She then drew me into a soft kiss. It wasn't even really a kiss, so much as her using her mouth to massage mine. A welcome reprieve from the soreness spreading through my jaw.

==============

A/N- This is now going to be a two parter. Not sure if I'm going to stay with Theo's perspective or switch out.
Missy lay there panting, catching her breath from the most powerful climax she'd ever experienced. Between my stimulation of her breasts and Theo's tongue on her labia and clit, we hit enough erogenous zones to beat anything she could do on her own.

I slid down next to her, feeling slightly empty at the loss of her fingers inside my own sex. Her inexperience showed; I hadn't climaxed. Still, I loved her and was happy to see her happy.

Theo appreciatively kissed his way up Missy's sleek, muscular stomach. He stopped for a bit at her breasts, suckling her erect nipples.

I ran my hand between hers and Theo's stomachs as they pressed together. His musculature was heavier, less lean, than Missy's. A different sort of body built through a different set of exercises; both works of art. I slid my hand up to squeeze the breast Theo wasn't focused on. My powers, unfair as they were, gave me a map of her biology and every sensitive zone. If I wanted to, I could make her cum just with the breast play, and I already planned to do exactly that, some other night.

I touched Theo's ear, pushing him upwards; he was still a teenage boy, and a virgin at that. Without my guidance it would be awkward fumbling that lasted only minutes. This world would burn before I'd allow that.

Theo took the hint, moving the rest of the way up. He ran his lips against Missy's in the soft but passionate way that I loved so much about him. She kissed back, more insistently, another of those differences that made them both beautiful.

"Mmm..." Missy moaned, bringing her arms up around Theo's broad back. Then she started giggling.

"Are you okay?" Theo's face was a mix of confusion and fear of inadequacy.

"Yeah, but I can, umm, taste myself, on your mouth." Missy's blush went down as far as her nipples. It was adorable, but I knew better than tell her that. Her heart pumped with her conflicting emotions.

I snuggled up against her and ran my tongue along her ear before whispering. "See, I told you you're delicious."

Missy smiled and turned her head to look at me. "I guess it's okay." I smiled, waiting patiently as she wrestled with her own inner thoughts. Hesitantly, without taking her eyes off mine, she brought her hand up to her mouth and drew her middle finger into her mouth. Relaxing, she licked it along with her pointer and ring fingers, the ones she'd had inside me not long ago. "I... I think I like yours better."

My vaginal muscles clenched with arousal and desire. So hot. I ached to jump her, and part of me both loved and hated Theo for not putting it in her, already. "I wouldn't have it any other way." I kissed Missy and bit her bottom lip. I tugged it as I drew my mouth away from her; she liked that sort of treatment.

She looked at Theo. "So. I guess it's time."
"We don't have to, if you don't want," Theo offered.

"Riley, I think our boyfriend needs a doctor. It can't be biologically possible for anyone to be this nice." She wrapped her arms and legs around Theo. She wasn't even half his size, but it was clear from their language who was in charge. "Don't you dare back out now. I want this. I need you to f..." she hesitated, glancing in my direction. "Make love to me."

I reached down between them, finding Theo's shaft. Watching them watch each other, I lined it up and pressed his glans up against her labia. Nature handled the rest, but I kept my fingers on the man I loved while he sank into the woman I loved. She groaned softly, taking all eight inches in a single smooth motion. I bit my lip and blinked.

"Hey!" Missy's hand came up, cupping my face. "Why are you the one crying? Shouldn't that be me? Speaking of, that didn't hurt at all, what's with that?"

I wiped my eyes. "Most girls don't have hymens to lose by the time they have sex. As long as it's done gently and at an appropriate age, there shouldn't be much discomfort for most women. Yes, some do have an unusually thick hymen that doesn't simply dissolve with age, but the idea that it always hurts the first time is just a myth." I had all kinds of theories on why that myth perpetuated itself, but it didn't seem like the time to bring them up.

Theo's hand went up to my face as well, cupping the other cheek. "But why are you crying?"

Missy looked upset now. "Is this because I went first? Jealousy? Because if it is, we can stop a-

"No!" I surprised myself with the emotion. "It's not that at all." I searched for the words that could explain everything; I found my words of wisdom; something I heard said years ago, now. "We're partners, that means we're automatically on the same team no matter what."

Missy smiled, pushing softly up against Theo. "Mmm, yeah. All three of us, forever."

The roadblocks gone, Theo started rocking slowly back and forth inside Missy. "I love you." He kissed me first, soft and gentle just like I liked it. Even when he was inside Missy, he made me feel loved and safe. Missy's hand slid down, finding and gripping my left breast. She squeezed, her pleasure overtaking her senses. It was wonderful, but it wouldn't last much longer; wouldn't last long enough without my help.

I moved away, then put my hands on Theo's shoulders. "I have a suggestion. Roll onto your back." Missy's face lit up; she caught on first. "Oh, that sounds."

Theo didn't argue, laying down. I took another look at his gorgeous body while Missy climbed on top of him. This time, she was the one who grabbed his shaft. "God, I can't believe I got this inside me. That didn't stop her from straddling his legs and guiding it back inside her.

Theo groaned beneath her. "You have no idea how beautiful you are." His hands went to her hips, digging his fingers into her flesh. Missy set a much faster pace than Theo would have by nature, gasping as she bounced on top of him.

It still wasn't going to be enough. I pressed myself on her from behind, my breasts crushed up against and my hands went to both her breasts. They were smaller than mine, but so much firmer and perkier.
I pressed my hips against her, as if I was doing her from behind. My clit ground against her ass, a pleasure that might be enough to bring me to climax in a bit. I ran my tongue along her ear. "Do you like that? Do you like him f-fucking you with that big cock?"

She rocked back harder, pushing against me as she moaned. "Yes! I love him fucking me! I love both of you!"

**Drat.** I hadn't expected her to say that out loud. Theo thrust up harder inside her, he was mere moments from climax and Missy still hadn't reached her peak. I squeezed her breasts harder, adding a level of pain to the stimulation I was putting her through.

"Maybe later I'll f-uck you, too." It wouldn't be hard at all to do, give me a few hours and we could all experience everything the other was feeling... maybe some day. "But for now." I moved away and started kissing down her spine.

She gasped, arching her back while Theo fucked her with the urgency of being right on the cusp of his own climax. I put my hand against her shoulder and pushed her down against Theo. Then I ran my tongue along the crack of her ass, tasting the mix of her sweat and our lubricants.

"Riley? What are you do-ooh god!" I taught one of my loves about an erogenous zone she didn't know she had, by sliding my tongue into it. Her anal muscles clenched down as I pushed past the ring and licked inside her. Surprisingly, the taste kind of turned me on.

"I'm almost there!" Theo shouted. Missy slammed hard against him as he made good on that promise. I could feel his cock pulse through Missy's inner wall, flooding her pussy with his cum. Well, in truth it was only a tablespoon or two, but it was fun to pretend.

"Me too!" Missy wrapped around Theo as she experienced a truly monumental climax. I withdrew my tongue from her and started kissing my way up her body. Not quite as simultaneous as I'd aimed for, but they'd never know the difference.

She lay there on Theo's chest, panting like she'd just set a record time on a marathon. She had that special smile of a woman who had everything she wanted in this world. I smiled down at them.

Theo met my eyes and mouthed 'thank you'. He reached around my back and pulled me up against his side, while I rested my arm on Missy. He kissed me, soft, loving, and without a care about what I'd just done. He loved me as much as he loved her. They both loved me as much as I loved them.

This is where I belong.

======================

A/N- Riley's Yandere mode: not-platonic edition. Analgingus... planetary conflagration... as long as it makes those she loves are happy, she'll do anything.

And that's Part Two of Three for this particular threesome. Next, Riley's turn, from Missy's perspective. Unless I decide to do a visit to Taylor getting violated by tentacles vines thanks to Amy. Really depends on my mood.

Woulda gotten it to you sooner, but I was busy writing smut for Price (and getting paid for it, you deadbeats). Oh, right, and on that subject...
http://archiveofourown.org/users/TanaNari/pseuds/TanaNari

For Price (and possibly other things) smut. I won't be stashing fanfic erotica there... just original material...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!